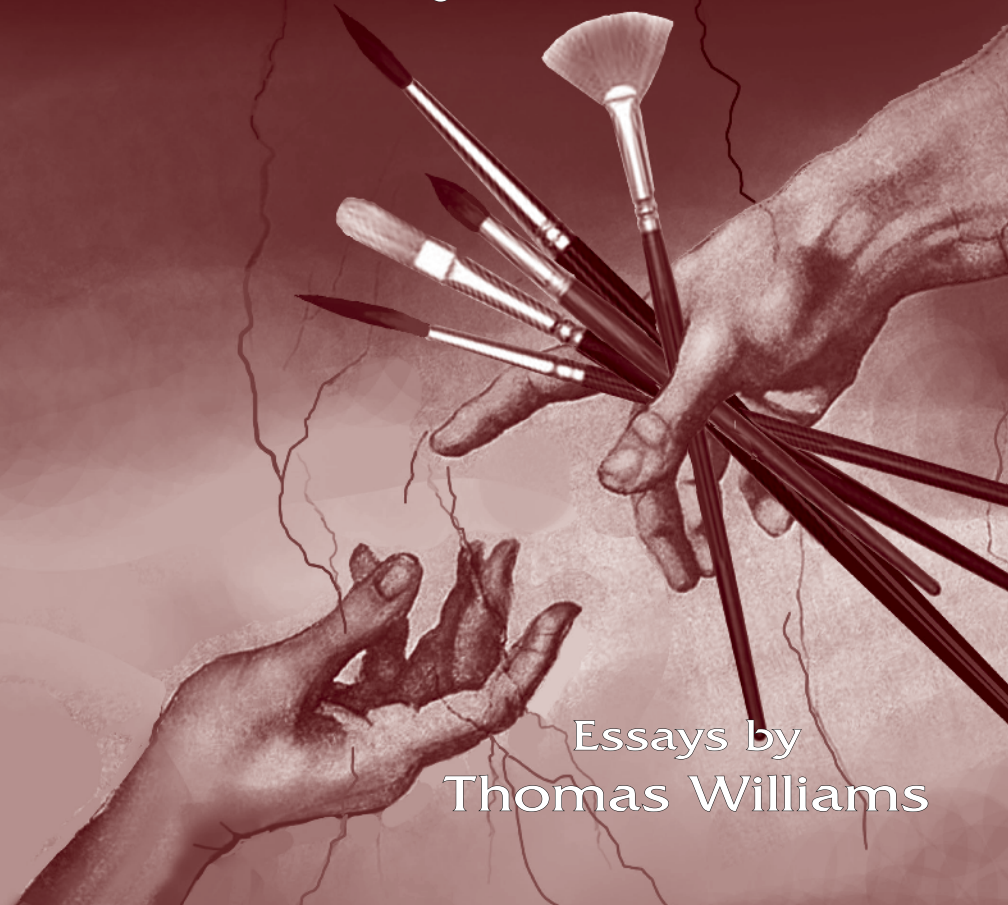


# Christianity and the Arts



Essays by  
Thomas Williams

**THE CHRISTIAN**  
**Appeal**



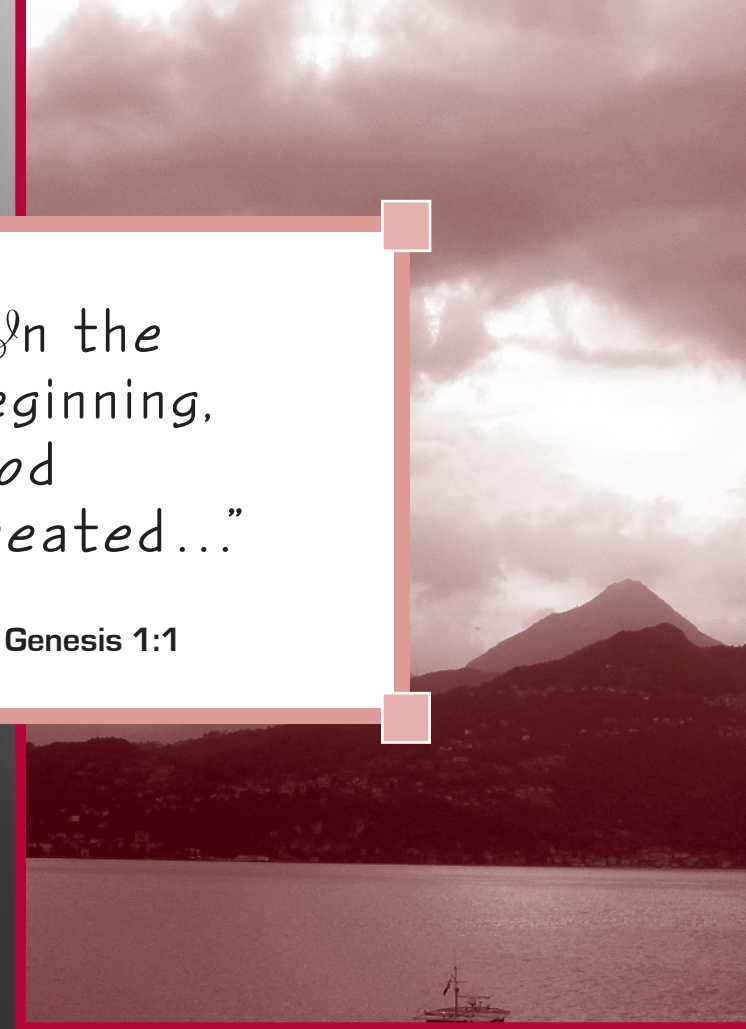
# Christianity and the Arts

**M**ost of us—even the most creative of us—have a single gift. We can make sweet music. We can write with verve and clarity. Some of us can draw or paint. But my lifelong friend, Tom Williams, who has penned the essays in this issue, has extraordinary talent in all three of these avenues of art. His paintings hang in prestigious places. His book cover art adorns hundreds of volumes, but his words fill dozens more. As amazingly creative as he is, Tom bids us in these essays to praise not him but the Creator.

—Senior Editor Gene Shelburne

“In the beginning,  
God  
created...”

✻ Genesis 1:1



John Gulley

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CHRISTIAN APPEAL

# Christianity and the Arts

## Art and Inevitability


A friend told me that he doesn't listen to classical music because it is "so predictable." I am convinced that he was mistaking predictability for inevitability. Great art is not predictable; it is *inevitable*. It's easy to mistake predictability for inevitability, but there is an enormous difference between the two. Let me explain.

I just listened to Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and realized that it would not likely be considered great if even one note was changed. Each is exactly as it should be, and to change even one would dilute the gripping power of the whole.

I would guess that as Gershwin sat at the piano searching for those just-right notes that make up the piece, he must have tried and rejected many as not quite right. He kept searching until he found the only one that would fit the space perfectly, like the hard-to-find piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Had he abandoned his quest for the perfect note and said, "Well, this note isn't quite what I'm looking for, but it will do," *Rhapsody in Blue* might have emerged as a fair piece of music that would reap its fifteen minutes of fame, but it would not have been the enduring classic we thrill to today.

This suggests that creativity is

more a process of discovery than of invention. Every serious artist, musician, or writer knows that this is what creativity feels like. We sense that we are not creating so much as discovering something already there that needs embodiment—an image, an idea, a sound, a story that already has spiritual existence but needs incarnation to be made tangible as a symphony, a novel, or a painting. Our task is not so much to create that piece from our own resources as to find it and make its form audible or visible.

This explains why "self-expression" fails so miserably as the wellspring of the creative impulse, and why it fails to inspire or display meaning. Creativity is severely limited when the artist restricts his resources to what he finds within himself. Meaning and inevitability are his only when he reaches for the infinite and grander visions existing outside the self within God's creation. When he reaches inward and strives to produce from his own resources something truly new and different, he merely displays his own creative bankruptcy. When he turns his face upward and opens his vision to existing glories waiting to be revealed, he may just find himself producing great art. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## If It's Worth Doing . . .

In 2006 a little church in a small West Texas town celebrated its 100th anniversary. They planned a weekend of services featuring past ministers who were still living. They invited me to lead the singing for these services. I was deeply honored, though I knew I would not have been their first choice had my father still been living.


You see, my father grew up in that dear little town and left to become a highly respected preacher, singer, and church music teacher. Then in his late sixties, he returned and preached for that church until his death, which occurred the year before its anniversary celebration. He would certainly have been the church's first choice as song leader had he still been alive.

The church called on me for the honor not because I am an outstanding singer, but because of my heritage. I am my father's son, and to have a man on the podium who shares his name was more important than to have one who shares his talent. In my younger days perhaps I sang adequately, at best, but the years have robbed me of range and led me to suspect that the tones I sound are not always precisely what the songwriter intended.

I hesitated to accept the invitation.

I love these people, and I didn't want to diminish their celebration with my less-than-stellar abilities. Perhaps less admirable, I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of them. But I did accept the invitation, and my reason was based in part on a quote from one of my favorite writers, G. K. Chesterton, who said, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly."

Mr. Chesterton was saying that the fact that you can't perform a task perfectly doesn't mean you shouldn't perform it at all. Too often when a work is needed, we let pride hold us back, fearing to expose our lack of expertise to ridicule or criticism. How many people warming church pews don't sing because they have less-than-perfect voices or a touch of tone deafness? How many don't visit the sick or comfort the grieving because they fear they might say the wrong thing? These tasks are not merely worth doing—they are commanded because they need doing. The fact that we're not experts doesn't get us off the hook.

When it comes to meeting the needs of our community of God's people, you will find joy in humbly accepting the task you are not quite up to. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## *Let's Pay Special Attention to the Music*

In a recent church service, the worship leader prefaced his song with a line I must have heard a hundred times in my lifetime: “Now, as we sing this song, I want you to pay special attention to the words.”

I understand why the denomination I worship with emphasizes words over music. We grew out of an early nineteenth-century evangelistic movement deeply influenced by the Enlightenment, which considered cognitive reason to be the primary path to truth. We are quite comfortable with that heritage. After all, it seems to line us up with the apostle Paul, who chided the Corinthian church for their excessive emotionalism when he wrote, “I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.”

Well, if it's sheer mental comprehension we want, why bother to sing at all? Why not just recite the words and eliminate the distracting complication of music?


The first answer is that God told us to “sing and make melody in our hearts.” Have you ever wondered why God wants music in our worship? Let me offer a possibility. Music adds another dimension to our devotional thoughts. It helps us to feel what we think, and when thought and feeling are blended,

worship involves the whole person.

In fact, music itself, even without words, engages the whole person—mind, emotion, and body—like no other art can. Melody engages the mind. It is what you cognitively identify as the song itself. It's what you hum when the song comes to mind. Harmony draws in our emotions. It adds layers of blended tones to enrich the melody, invoking joy, sorrow, exultation, or lamentation.

Harmony intensifies the impact of the music, making us feel in our hearts what our minds contemplate.

Rhythm—the pulse of the song—is music's heartbeat. It pulls one's body into the act. It literally moves you to tap your feet, bob your head, clap your hands, or dance. Music deeply enriches worship by drawing every aspect of our being into it.

If Paul had addressed a letter to our denomination, I suspect he might have inverted what he wrote to the Corinthians: “Yes, by all means sing with the understanding, but you also need to sing with the spirit.” But since he wrote no such letter, I look forward to the day when a song leader announces his song and says, “Now as we sing this song, I want us to pay special attention to the music.” 

# Christianity and the Arts

## *The “Feel System” in Art*

In the classic musical *The Music Man*, the fly-by-night salesman Harold Hill sells band instruments to students with the promise to teach them how to play. But Hill knows nothing about music, so he simply hands the children their instrument and tells them to learn by the “think system.” If they think hard about the music they're struggling to learn, it will eventually flow from their instrument.

It reminds me of an art critic's comment in *New York Magazine*: “There aren't any rules [in art], and there never will be. There is only taste, which is based in education.” But if there are no rules, how can our tastes be educated? You cannot educate without a body of knowledge or cultivate taste without a set of aesthetic principles.

Having discarded rules, art teachers now apply something much like Hill's think system to art. Let's call it the “feel system.” Don't give students stifling rules; just urge them to paint what they feel deeply, and meaningful art will somehow flow from their brushes.

We never teach any important activity by the feel system. We don't tell students to drive as they feel, ignoring speed limits, stoplights, and center stripes. We don't train pharmacists to mix meds in proportions they feel is about right. We don't let architects select materials they

feel will probably bear an upper-story load.

Composer John Cage, who disdains rules in music, is a mushroom connoisseur. But he doesn't pick mushrooms with the same freedom he employs in music. “If I did, I'd die,” he said. His art and his life are not integrated, which is to say, his art lacks integrity.

Christianity is the ultimate vehicle of integrity. Rules embodied in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount integrate our lives into a meaningful whole. But the feel system has infiltrated many churches, which have deferred to feelings and discarded chafing shackles of morality. Drugs, sex, porn, same-sex marriage, divorce, and abortion have become personal choices that should not be restricted.

To demand that any human activity be free of rules is to divorce it from life. To have meaning, all activity must adhere to a standard by which it can be measured. Discard the rules and chaos fills the void. Discarding rules does not bring freedom. It locks one inside the tiny prison of self, helpless prey to the cellmates of contentious desires.

As G. K. Chesterton said, “Art, like morality, consists of drawing the line somewhere.” 



# Christianity and the Arts


## Why Do Art?

I asked my friend, “Why do humans paint pictures?” To him the answer was simple and obvious: “It’s because we don’t like to look at bare walls.” I suppose for some, having a framed object hanging above your sofa that brings out the colors of the room décor is all the rationale art needs. But I think there are deeper reasons for doing paintings.

One reason is to broaden our experience. For example, artists paint pictures of historical events or people we could never see personally, say, a Civil War battle, a portrait of Washington, or biblical scenes such as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescoes. Or, a painting can capture an elusive moment of grandeur in nature, as does Bierstadt’s famous *In the Sierra Nevadas*. A painting may illustrate non-existent scenes of human imagination, as do the mythological paintings of Titian and Reubens.

A painting may also have a simpler, more humble reason for being. Perhaps it depicts a common object such as a bouquet, a stream in a field, a country road winding through rolling hills, a lawn dappled with spots of sunlight filtering through trees. The painting may say nothing more than “Look

at this. You’ve seen things like it a thousand times, but have you ever really stopped to look at it—to see how beautiful it is?” Perhaps this is the kind of art we see most hanging in our homes and offices—non-pretentious renderings of everyday objects that simply tell us to stop for a moment; quit scurrying about in our endless pursuit of endless pursuits and appreciate the beauty that saturates our world.

J. R. R. Tolkien said that we humans do art because it is a reflection of the image of God instilled into us. As he put it, when we paint, write, compose, or build according to the vision we are given, we become “sub-creators” acting on a deep-seated impulse planted in our souls by the great Creator of us all. Of course, we sub-creators can never be original in the same sense as God, who created *ex nihilo*—out of nothing with no pre-existing pattern. Our creativity is necessarily derivative, meaning our material and our subjects are derived from pre-existent materials and forms. We reflect our Creator as sub-creators when we use what he gave us to show the glory of his creation in fresh, individual ways that help others catch a new or deeper vision of the beauty he infused into everything he made. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## The Author as God

In the process of writing a novel, virtually every author learns something about God’s dealings with humanity. First, creating a novel parallels God’s experience in creating the world. Like God, the author creates a setting—his own little universe filled with places, things, and creatures.


Then like God, he creates characters to inhabit this world. And like God, he has an overarching plan for these characters, particularly the hero, which includes meaning, purpose, and destiny. If the hero will simply follow this plan, he will find joy.

Here is where almost every novelist encounters a surprising phenomenon. As he writes his story, he often finds that the hero resists his direction. He pulls against the author’s plan for his life and insists on going his own way, which the author knows will be disastrous.

I know that you readers of this little essay will think the idea of characters rebelling against their author is silly. They are mere ideas in the author’s mind, and everything they do or say emanates from his own thought. Granted. But I assure you from experience and corroboration by other novelists, the characters we create seem to take on a life of their own and often try to pull away from our plan.

When this happens, the author has two options: First, he can force the character to do what he originally intended. “I have a plan for your life, by gum, and you are my character and you’re going to follow it, like it or not.” Authors who do this end up with what critics call “cardboard characters” who lack depth and move stiffly through the story like puppets or wound-up mechanical dolls.

The second way to deal with a resistant character is to let him have his way. But because the author loves his character (authors do fall in love with them), he throws obstacles in his path to deter him, counselors to redirect him, companions to influence him, and finally if necessary, disasters to bring him to his senses. The hero may get knocked about a bit, but he will reach his goal and achieve the joy the author intended.

Frustrated with the writing process, I sometimes cry out to God, “Please, help me with this novel. My characters won’t do what I want, and I keep having to change up a perfectly good story to keep them from destroying themselves.” I can hear the sigh in God’s voice as he replies, “Yes, I know exactly what you mean!” 

# Christianity and the Arts

## Windows and Mirrors

My brother's car radio was tuned to a country music station, and we had just listened to Dolly Parton singing a song about a woman who had stolen her man. When I expressed my distaste for the song, my brother replied, "You just don't get country music, do you? It's all about reality. It's about what real people experience in the real world. That longhair stuff that clogs your ears is all meaningless head-in-the-clouds fancy."

Before I go further, let me say that I'm not a purist. I don't like all classical music, nor do I reject all country. My iTunes library includes both Tchaikovsky and Tennessee Ernie. I believe there is a place for *good* music in several genres. These differing types of music reach us in different ways and accommodate our changing moods.

When I want to hear something upbeat and fun, an Irish ballad like "Kilgarry Mountain" gets me hummin' and grinnin'. When driving across the West Texas plains, nothing sets the mood like the Sons of the Pioneers. When I want vocal inspiration, The Mormon Tabernacle Choir raises my chill bumps. When I need my spirit lifted to grand heights, there's no substitute for the ethereal power of Handel or Mendelssohn.

The difference between country and classical music is like the difference between a mirror and a window. Country music provides the mirror. Maybe musical reflections of hard-lived lives coping with temptations and weaknesses sung by workaday voices help one to make better choices as he faces everyday temptations and inevitabilities.

There may be some value in that, but it's not where I want to live. Hard realities and temptations must be dealt with, but not wallowed in. I want to see beyond the reflection of everyday reality. I want not a mirror, but a window. I want to draw back the curtains and gaze into the eternal reality where I anticipate living in the future. That's what the "Ode to Joy" climaxing the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* does for us. It takes us away from the mirror where we see dark things darkly and opens the curtains to glorious vistas of light emanating from beyond the truncated horizon of our earthly life.

Yes, sometimes I need a mirror. But it's not healthy to live one's life standing in front of it. I want to live soaring on those tones that open windows to eternity and sweep me into the vision of my long-anticipated journey.



# Christianity and the Arts

## The Banishment of Magic

One art piece in a museum exhibit consisted of nothing more than a potted tree. The explanatory plaque stated that a painting of a tree is illegitimate because it stands between the viewer and the experience of an actual tree. Another piece was a framed blank canvas. The explanation: Paint violates the integrity of canvas. The message is clear: realistic paintings are fraudulent because they force paint to pose as something other than what it is. It reminds us of Rene Magritte's famous painting of a man's smoking pipe on which he had written, "This is not a pipe." No, it's merely a painting of a pipe.

This new wave of art banishes the magic of realistic painting—a magic that consists of knowing you are looking at two different things blending as one. You are looking at pigments extracted from oxides, plant roots, and ground up bones, but you are seeing mountains, lakes, castles, flowers, ships, or people. Your awareness that paint brushed onto a flat surface can simulate deep vistas of reality is what gives painting its magic.

With the advent of modernity, however, the delight in seeing paint don a costume and masquerade as something higher than itself is unacceptable. The

rulers of the art scene now demand that we think literally. "That's not a mountain; it's just paint!" It's like attending a play and refusing to see stage sets as scenery but only as cardboard and framing. Or even to see an actress pretending to be someone she is not. According to the new wave, nothing can be other than what it is.

Where will such thinking lead? If paint violates the integrity of canvas, why stop there? Shouldn't we remove the canvas and frame because they violate the integrity of the wall? But then, doesn't the making of a wall violate the trees from which the wall was made? Shouldn't the wall be taken down because it violates our experience of nature?

The new artists demand a contraction of the mind that squeezes out symbol and metaphor. They are merely reflecting the trend of secular culture that demands a similar contraction of the intellect that squeezes the supernatural out of reality. They insist that the material universe is all there is—that there is no soul or meaning beyond. They have closed their eyes to the evidence of the master Artist whose every work is a metaphor that shows something of a glorious reality hovering just beyond the material universe.



# Christianity and the Arts

## *The Original and the Derivative*

In French dramatist Edmond Rostand's nineteenth-century play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the proud Cyrano asserts his independence, saying, "I stand, not high it may be—but alone!" It's the credo of modern age: "I stand alone. I'm not dependent on any external standard. I find within myself all I need to validate my existence."


Perhaps no one exhibits this self-referential independence more than the non-objective painter. He insists on cutting himself free from all external standards that have applied to art ever since man first scrawled pictures on cave walls. To render an object realistically as it exists in nature is to be *derivative*—and no insult stings these painters like that word, which they see as the opposite of creative.

To be authentic, their art must be original and innovative. To them, this means shunning any identifiable form and filling their canvases with blobs, masses, squiggles, dabs, and streaks that bear no resemblance to objects existing in nature. Resemblance to a recognizable form would evoke that dreaded label, derivative.

The problem is, when artists paint without a point of reference common to their viewers, they lose the ability to communicate meaning. By refusing to be dependent on the universal

visual standard of created nature, they unwittingly reveal what every God-fearing person knows: It is impossible for a human to create anything that is both meaningful and truly original. The best human artists can do is assemble, combine, and modify elements known to us through our experience of nature. Yes, an artist can depict a never-before-seen creature, but it will inevitably combine features of creatures we have seen—say, the head of a reptile, the feet of an insect, and the body of a mammal. We humans cannot even imagine things we have not experienced. Try it. Try to imagine a new primary color, a fourth spatial dimension, or a third sex.

The only way an artist can convey meaning on his canvas is to use existing nature as his language. Viewers of art understand the forms in nature, which means nature must be the universal language of visual art. When an artist claims to stand alone by refusing to be dependent on nature for his raw material, he steps into the void of meaningless chaos.

Denying nature as the standard for art is like denying God as the standard for life. It allows the ego the illusion of independence, but the cost is isolation from meaning. As George MacDonald said, "The one principle of hell is, 'I am my own.'" 

# Christianity and the Arts

## *The Lost Chord*

Sir Arthur Sullivan, the composer half of the Gilbert and Sullivan team that gave us such delightful light operas as *HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Mikado*, also composed some fine Christian music. We're all familiar with his rousing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and a few Christmas carols. But nothing Sullivan wrote touches me like his grand choral composition, "The Lost Chord."

In this piece, Sullivan musically pictures a weary composer sitting at his organ, allowing his fingers to roam absently across the keys. Suddenly he strikes an ethereally beautiful chord of music "like the sound of the great amen." The majesty of the sound moves him deeply. As he put it, the chord "leapt from the soul of the organ and entered into mine."

He anxiously tries to form the chord again, but to no avail. He finally realizes that it was not native to this world, and though its echoes will reverberate in his heart for the rest of his days, only in heaven can he hope to hear it again.

It's a story told over and over in many ways. We find a variation of it in Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by a Woods On a Snowy Evening," in which Frost pauses to watch a

lovely forest fill with snow. He feels an impelling desire to enter the woods and, like Sullivan, to immerse himself in idyllic beauty. But unlike Sullivan, he does not make the attempt. He knows that beauty in its fullness is not yet his to claim. He faces duties to others struggling in the fallen world before he can enter the perfect one. He must maintain his focus and complete his course. He moves on, sighing as he passes, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep."

Since mankind's fall in Eden, a heavy fog has descended over creation, obscuring beauty and demanding sacrificial loyalty to our fellows struggling to find their way. This is where the arts, properly handled, can perform a great service as we grope our way through the fog. Music, story, poetry, and painting pluck the chords of beauty in our hearts and set them resonating with the cadence of eternity. This foretaste of beauty draws us on, underscoring the promise that we can ultimately ascend to that dimension from which all beauty flows and reach the true object of all desire. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## Ending Worship Wars

When Hollywood remade the film *True Grit* in 2010, my wife and I took two of our teenage grandchildren to the movie. As we left the theater, I said, “Didn’t you love the way the composer turned those common church songs into orchestral masterpieces?” Their response: “What church songs?”

I was shocked. Surely everyone knew the two songs that dominated the film’s score: “Hold to God’s Unchanging Hand” and “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” Now, these grandchildren are not stupid. One was a National Merit Scholar and the other graduated with a 3.99 GPA. (As a grandfather, I had to get that in.) They were raised in a Christian home and are regular churchgoers. But they didn’t know those traditional songs because their church does not sing traditional songs. They sing “praise songs,” a newer genre of church music designed to appeal to younger Christians.

This new wave of music has cleaved a widening gap between church members. Groups demanding that churches perform their preferred music have ignited what is known as “worship wars” (an oxymoron if there ever was one). Worship wars have driven members from churches and even caused churches to split.

If I could get anyone to listen, I

think I could make a fair case that some types of music are superior to others and then clinch my argument with its natural conclusion—that we should worship God only with the best. But in this war, logic is an ineffective weapon against the ever-present shield of personal taste.

I know that no one is free from the influence of personal taste. Early in life, we are imprinted by the type of music to which we are consistently exposed. Whatever genre we hear most, whether classical, blues, jazz, country, or rock, will become our standard for what good music is. It’s the same in our churches. Some will insist on the great hymns, others on southern gospel, spirituals, Stamps-Baxter toe-tappers, or new-wave praise songs.

So, as a Christian with my own strong personal musical preference (backed by irrefutable logic, of course), what should I do when these upstart whippersnappers start pushing their newfangled songs on me? The answer is simple: Sing them with all my heart. As Paul said in Romans 12:10, “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another’s music.”

Well, Paul didn’t put it exactly that way; I added one little word. But I think he would endorse this minor elaboration of his thought. *CA*

# Christianity and the Arts

## Form and Spirit

My friend who loves non-objective art couldn’t wait to show me the Hans Hoffman painting in the university gallery. It consisted of vivid swashes and random splashes of formless color. When I asked why he liked the painting, he replied that it was the colors juxtaposed in ways that made them seem to advance or recede.

His answer didn’t satisfy me. Raw color advancing or receding didn’t seem sufficient rationale to justify the painting. But a solid rebuttal eluded me until the following week when I accompanied my wife to a fabric store. While she selected material for a quilt, I wandered aimlessly through the aisles until I encountered a huge rack displaying hundreds of spools of thread. I stopped short, wide-eyed and dazzled. Here was every hue in the spectrum and scores of shades and tints between. What a feast for the eyes!

Then it hit me. The thread display exposed the problem with the Hoffman painting. The colors in the display were not mere floating, formless blobs; they were embodied in meaningful forms—thread wrapped around spools—that had specific purpose. And because they had form and purpose, they had meaning. Hoffman’s colors had no identifiable

form, no stated, implied, or recognizable purpose, no rationale for existence, and thus no meaning.

In painting, line and color function somewhat like body and spirit. Without lines to give color identifiable form, color floats like a disembodied spirit. It retains hue, intensity, and value, but without form the eye cannot perceive meaning in it. Why did the artist place that red swash there? What’s the point of this pink blob? Here’s a mass of gold, but what does it matter? What is that blue blotch near the center?

But give these colors form by incarnating them within the lines of a woman’s face, and the colors take on meaning as red lips, rosy flesh, golden hair, and blue eyes. Color needs form to give it meaning, just as spirit needs a body to become visible.

That is why the apostle Paul calls Christ “the image of the invisible God.” God is a Spirit who can exist in all his fullness without a body. But by taking on physical form, he is no longer a hard-to-comprehend abstraction in our minds. His incarnation as Christ makes him vividly real to us. God knows, as many artists do not, that we who are created as physical beings need physical forms to give meaning to abstract or invisible realities. *CA*



# Christianity and the Arts

## *See What I Did*


“**T**hat painting looks more real than a photograph.” This is what visitors to London’s National Gallery sometimes say as they examine the fifteenth-century painting *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* by the Dutch Renaissance master Jan van Eyck. Van Eyck was typical of the Renaissance artists who had taken painting to an unprecedented level of realism, having learned to render form, shadow, color, and perspective with technical precision.

These artists took great pride in their realistic effects and textures. They tried to keep their brush strokes invisible, hiding the painting process to better display the subject they painted. They didn’t want viewers to see their brush strokes; they wanted them to see the objects in their painting. To them, the painting was more important than the painter.

What a difference a few centuries make! Somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century, artists deliberately began to make the act of painting more visible, reversing the intent of Renaissance artists by saying essentially, “Look at how I painted this. See my beautiful brush strokes. See how their boldness, confidence, and dexterity display my genius.” The focus has shifted from the painting to the painter.

We’re now invited to use the painting as a lens by which we view the artist. Read almost any treatise on Van Gogh’s art and the focus will be on how his heavy, thick brush strokes reveal his tortured soul. The what that he painted may hardly be mentioned except as a means of peering into his psyche.

That, I’m convinced, is why so many artists today present such eccentric personae, often referred to as “artistic temperament.” Artists are not supposed to be like ordinary people. They exist on an esoteric plane of being and are not to be judged by ordinary standards. They are free spirits, not to be bound by the rules that apply to mundane mortals.

Such affectations may serve to sell paintings, but they will not stand the test of the universal moral law that applies to every human being, whether artistically talented or not. In the Kingdom of God, egos must be killed. Self must die so that God can live within the human soul, redeeming it by his presence. What man does is doomed to decay or destruction. What man is, however, determines his eternal destiny. Paintings are not eternal, but artists can be. But only if they abandon the quest for the aggrandized self and become nothing so they can have everything. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## *The Little Leaf That Grew*


**M**all-time favorite of anything J. R. R. Tolkien wrote is his delightful short story “Leaf by Niggle.” Niggle is an artist of moderate talent who loves to paint leaves. In time, his vision expands, and he paints a tree. Then he paints a forest of trees, followed by mountains beyond the forest and then the light beyond the mountains that illumines everything. He becomes obsessed with his painting, working on it every spare moment and moments he shouldn’t spare.

Niggle has a lame neighbor named Parish, who often calls on him to run errands and help repair his house. Parish thinks art is nonsense and never even bothers to look at Niggle’s painting. Niggle always stops and helps, but he considers the deeds as interruptions to his art. Niggle is rushing to finish his painting when Parish knocks during a rainstorm, begging him to fetch a doctor for his sick wife. Niggle reluctantly braves the storm on his bicycle, but the exposure gives him the flu, and he dies. His unfinished painting is used to patch Parish’s leaking roof.

Though it may seem impossible, the story has a happy ending, and I encourage you to read it. But I must stop here and make my point. As

the story shows, art can be a seductive enterprise that demands more loyalty than it deserves. While art can communicate positive values in ways that touch us deeply, no piece of art is worth more than our neighbor. Our duty to help one another along the perilous path through this fallen world should be our highest loyalty, and art should always take second (or third or tenth) place. As Tolkien’s close friend C. S. Lewis said, “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

Does this mean Niggle’s painting had no intrinsic value? That it was right to use it to patch Parish’s roof? No, and the rest of Niggle’s story tells us why. (Spoiler alert!) When Niggle arrives at his destination in the afterlife, he finds that the heaven awaiting him is the country of his painting, perfected and completed but more glorious than his limited ability could conceive and execute.

Art is not the highest value, but it does have value. It can give us little glimpses of eternity. Dim and imperfect as these glimpses may be, they help keep our hope alive by planting in our hearts seeds that engender the forests of Paradise. 

# Christianity and the Arts

## Art as Fun

South Dakota sculptor John Lopez has a ball creating larger-than-life animals such as bison and horses entirely from scrap metal. From thirty feet away, his horse is beautiful and majestic. Walk closer and you see that it's an assemblage of discarded farm machinery—plows, rods, gears, bolts, and chains.

The animal sculptures of Jeff Utto exude a similar sense of fun. He creates his horses, eagles, and giraffes entirely from driftwood. It's fun to gaze at the mind-bending impossibilities of M. C. Escher's drawings, or the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't images hiding in some semi-abstract paintings. Framed assemblages of found objects delight us with their profusion of textures and colors.

In these articles I have asserted that art must justify itself not merely by displaying creativity, but by the values conveyed through the created piece. That value, however, need not always be rooted in profound or lofty ideals. It may consist of nothing more than the sheer delight the piece evokes with ingenious drawing, clever brush strokes, or unexpected combinations that dazzle the eye or make us smile. Some art is simply fun to look at and needs little other rationale.

Perhaps all creativity is a form

of play. Although we create out of necessity when making such things as houses, transportation, and clothing, in none of these endeavors are we content to limit ourselves to sheer functionality. We embellish, add color, manage proportions, and control the flow of our lines. We want our creations not only to protect, transport, or cover us, but also to delight the eye.

In striving for delight and beauty in what we make, we reflect the image of God in us. Not only do his creations exhibit functionality; they also display beauty. I'm convinced that God must have created some of his most exotic animals out of sheer fun. How else can you explain the basilisk lizard that walks on water, the male grackle's comic mating dance, the archer fish that spits bugs off low-hanging twigs, the fantastic shapes and luminescent colors of deep sea creatures we'd never see without divers' cameras?

I am not being sacrilegious when I say it's as if God cannot help himself. What he does flows from who he is and reflects his innermost nature. If creation exhibits fun and beauty, then those qualities obviously exist within God. And we who do art are created in his image.

So, remember as you create, the more joy you put into your work, the more joy will flow out of it. *CA*

*“The books or the music  
in which we thought  
the beauty . . .*

*was located will betray us  
if we trust to them;*

*it was not in them, it only  
came through them, . . .*

*For they are not the thing  
itself;*

*they are only the scent of a  
flower we have not found,*

*the echo of a tune we have  
not heard,*

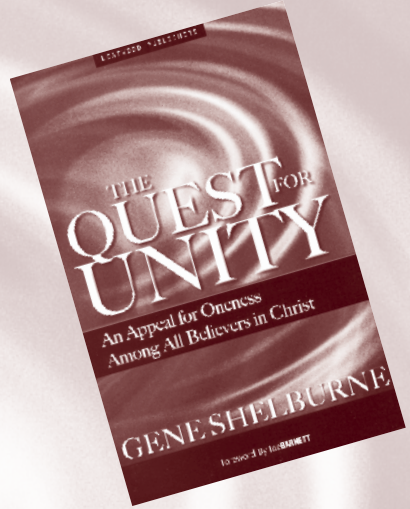
*news from a country we have  
never yet visited.”*

*—C. S. Lewis  
The Weight of Glory*



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