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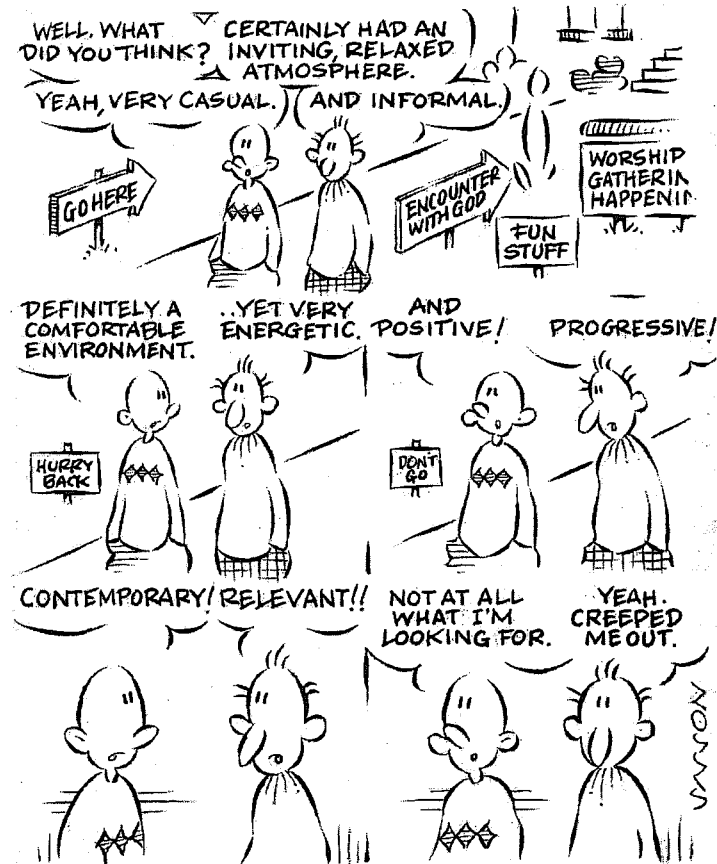
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Truth, Beauty, and the Gospel: When Will Evangelicals Get It Right?



Terry Yount



I am probably stepping out on a limb by writing about the arts in an evangelical subculture. Sincere Christians may ask, "What does it matter if people of one culture prefer Bach, and those of another, Madonna? And what possible value could there be in bringing all this up now, when people in churches are obviously getting what they want?" In a sense they are correct. It's a buyer's market as far as architecture, books, worship, and music are concerned. But there are some hidden cracks in the walled city.

Think seriously for a minute about the church of Jesus Christ—God's bride, placed in a culture intoxicated by instant pleasure, prosperity, and personal peace. We who are to be harbingers of the true gospel of Jesus Christ have before us a daunting challenge. Begin with a truth: the West is in decline. Pop culture since the 1950s has taken our culture by storm, and won. The long-range effect of this decline is chilling. No magical potion that gets children listening to Mozart will erase it. The major question is, To what degree has the church fallen in lockstep with this media-based, consumerist culture?

American evangelicals may think otherwise, but at times a casual attitude toward beauty, art forms, and artists is discouraging to the cause of the gospel. Here's how:

- Serious paintings: for museums
- Drama: for theaters, unless it is laden with clichés about “faith”
- Poetry: shallow verse and trite imagery abounds in hymns and greeting cards
- Music: best when familiar, or when emotions are drawn into it
- Architecture: buildings are best when plain and comfortable
- Public events: revolve around what “turns on” the most people

Why does the church marginalize the fine arts? Is it because most pastors are aesthetically immature, even in Reformed denominations? Some seminaries may have adopted what Jeremy Begbie calls a “stifling orthodoxy” in artistic matters. Begbie, a scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, has written *Voicing Creation’s Praise* (T&T Clark, 1991), presenting alternative ways of embracing the arts while remaining true to the gospel. Begbie characterizes evangelicals in this way:

It is all too easy to castigate totalitarian regimes for their repressive attitudes to the arts, and forget that some Christians have scored no better by insisting that beyond the confines of the liturgy, only a kind of artistic evangelical propaganda could ever qualify for divine approval. And in worship, especially in the Protestant West, the representative arts are frequently seen as a kind of ornament, a decorative substitute for what can be plainly stated . . . dispensable when the “real” truth appears elsewhere in the service. (usually in the sermon, 248)

Christians may in this way sadly miss appropriate vehicles for the gospel. Some examples are:

- Paintings whose aesthetic elements glorify God—light, composition, texture

- Drama that “connects” emotionally in a context of good over evil
- Literature balancing diversity with unity, integrity of craft and content
- Music that forms spiritually instead of coddling emotionally
- Architecture whose form functions in worship, community, and outreach

In their communal lives, churches can encourage Christian artists by inviting them to create in our communities as incarnate producers of beauty. One way of doing this is by embracing the artist’s natural ability, and encouraging him or her to move to faith-based media that enhance the gospel message without compromising quality. Begbie concludes his “new way forward” by calling for a new role for the church in a new century.

If the church is to play a significant part in the renewal of art in the years to come, perhaps this will happen not chiefly through a few highly trained performers—which can so easily plow into a new individualism—but through the emergence of new forms of ecclesiastical corporate art, in which the unique relationships generated and sustained by the Holy Spirit are allowed to affect the very character of artistic creativity itself. (Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, 224)

Sometimes the weak involvement in the arts by Christians may be easily remedied. When was the last time you had a concert violinist or pianist give a complete recital at your church? In subtle ways, have we excluded artists from Christian mercy and compassion? Does our gospel method limit our using the arts to reach the lost? Do we from ignorance neglect the sensitive writer, the poet, the gifted architect, or the dancer?

A discussion about truth, beauty, and the gospel is incomplete without all three. We are best known for our love of

truth (teaching and preaching); we might also move toward embracing God's gifts of beauty around us. Perhaps some of our larger problems as churches (covenant community, outreach, stewardship) could improve greatly if we evangelicals learned better how to cultivate the arts. For the sake of the gospel, we must. Being the church in a world whose artists sit outside our walls serving other gods is counter to our mandate. By embracing arts and artists in our gospel proclamation, we better minister to the total humanness of our community.

Author

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* Jeremy Begbie says, "Aesthetic excellence is measured by how effectively it serves the purpose of contemplation for aesthetic delight, and may thus belong to things which are not works of art—for example, a well-built skyscraper. It follows that a work of art may have artistic excellence without having aesthetic excellence, simply because it was not made for aesthetic contemplation" (*Voicing Creation's Praise*, 218–19).