

Why Art in the Church?

by Steve Hixon

“The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly above the heavens.”

Francis Schaeffer, Art & the Bible

The ancient Greek philosophers recognized that man longs for three things: Goodness, Truth & Beauty. They are the agreed-upon triad of philosophical ideals. As Christians we see that as well. While we are all fallen people, we are still created in God’s image, and we long for those things that we “lost” when we became spiritually lost. Even the British Goth band The Cure wrote:

*I've been waiting for the lies to end
Holding for the bad to go
I've been hanging for the ugliness to change
Waiting for a world too true
Holding for a world too good
Hanging for a world too beautiful.*

We long for goodness, but we are unable to be good. We seek for truth, but we live in a world full of lies. Of course, the good news is that God is reconciling people to a living relationship with Himself, bringing goodness out of evil, and truth out of falsehood. He bestows upon believers the righteousness of Christ, beginning the sanctification process; we slowly but surely see good coming from the inside out. We also begin to learn truth from the Scriptures, and our minds are being renewed and transformed.

And so as evangelicals we talk a lot about goodness and truth. But we don’t talk a lot about beauty, and historically the church, especially since the Reformation, hasn’t had a lot to say about it. Maybe that’s because it’s a bit hard to define. But God Himself is beautiful – just look at the descriptions of God (Revelation 1). He brings beauty into our lives; in Isaiah 61 he creates beauty where once there was ugliness, pain and hopelessness. And He is certainly the author and arbiter of beauty itself, just as He is the definer of goodness and the source of truth.

One of the ways we articulate beauty is through art. That doesn’t mean that all art is pretty, for art should portray a whole worldview, and the whole Biblical worldview includes the fact that people are highly significant, deeply fallen and greatly loved. When the entire body of an artist’s work shows the range of that, he or she can be said to have a Biblical worldview.

So – why art in the church? Because God has created us in His image. He has given us the ability and urge to be creative. He is beauty, goodness and truth. Our artistic expressions seek to express – always imperfectly! – our longing for beauty. And although we may choose to depict the eventual pristine beauty of heaven (or as close as we can get in a close-up photograph of a flower), we also show the sometimes terrible beauty of a flawed, fallen world. It is broken, as we are, but God has chosen to set his love upon it.

Don Hudson echoes this hope that we hold on to:

“Above all else, art is the remembrance that Beauty will come--through the messenger who will make all things right, the one who has made all things beautiful through the artistry of redemption. His beauty was fashioned not by the glory of heaven but by the cross of this earth. His death ruined the tragedy of this world. And art helps us wait faithfully for the second resurrection by reminding us that the darkness has not overcome the light, that death has not swallowed up life.”

Don Hudson, “Is Art Necessary for the Christian?” Mars Hill Review, May 1995