



Toward an Adventist Aesthetic for the Arts

By Daniel Reynaud

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The recent General Conference discussion paper on music (pages 46–49, above) raises an interesting issue: that of a specifically Adventist position on music. One of the greatest problems in the paper is its failure to draw a clear distinction between music as a means of evangelism and as a form of more general artistic expression. Unfortunately, the Christian tendency to view music specifically and the arts in general as mere extensions of evangelism typically clouds our understanding.

It is not just music that is so confusingly managed; the arts in general often lack a sound philosophical base in the modern Christian world. Art can be evangelistic, but that is far from defining its limits for the Christian. Music, and art in general, may be created by non-Christians, and may even embody anti-Christian values, and still be of use to the Christian, for art provides a powerful window into the heart and soul of a society.

When we define our engagement with the arts in narrow, religious, parochial terms, we run the risk of failing to understand the pains and concerns of the beating heart of this lost world that we are called to reconnect to the heart of God.

Hence, we need to step back and clearly define a sound Adventist philosophical base for the arts if we are to take an appropriate stand on any particular art form.

The association of the arts and Christianity is a long and honorable one. Christian rules and church officials patronized cathedral builders, composers, sculptors, and painters, and poetry and drama were regular features of church life through the liturgy and the cycle of mystery plays for major celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. Historically, Christianity has cultivated the arts, and rightly so.

However, evangelical Christianity in general, and Seventh-day Adventism in particular, have not usually been at ease

with the arts, even in recent times. We have often been suspicious of them, and critical of their pernicious influence. At some time or other, reform-minded Protestants have roundly condemned novels and other forms of fiction, stage drama, movies—especially when shown in theaters—television, popular rock music, and modern art. They have been variously criticized as bizarre and incomprehensible, if not licentious and corrupting.

The lack of an artistic tradition among Evangelicals is often reflected in the ugly architecture of many churches, where it has been labeled a sin to waste God's money on anything more than the strictly functional. Artistic innovation has been abandoned to secular culture, and many Christians ignore or even reject the arts.

This cultural impoverishment has come about largely due to the English-American Puritan tradition, and thus is far less evident in Protestant groups that have their origins in Continental Europe. From the time of the English Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, Puritan groups in England were keen to rid the church of Catholic practices such as kneeling for communion and the use of candles and crosses. Attitudes soon spread to anything associated with Roman Catholicism, including church organs and singing in harmony, stained glass windows, and drama.

The English Civil War in the 1640s accentuated the problem when Puritan groups opposed King Charles I, who, despite his many faults and weaknesses as a political figure, had probably the finest artistic tastes of any English monarch. In opposing the king's political and theological policies, many Puritans also rejected his patronage of the arts, the fine musicians, painters, and architects attracted to his court.

This attitude crossed the Atlantic with the refugees from the reigns of James I, Charles I, and Charles II, and became entrenched in particular forms of American Protestantism. Typically, Puritan tradition became so occupied with theology that at best it had little time for the arts, at worst seeing them as a distraction from urgent matters at hand. Many modern Protestant churches are descended from the Puritan tradition, and although some Puritan restrictions have eased, allowing hymns and organs back into churches, the maintenance of a strong interest in theology has often been at the expense of a development of the arts.

Although the Adventist Church is a self-proclaimed champion of restoring the fullness of the gospel, an examination of our philosophy can reveal some gaps in

this fullness. Theological concerns have relegated aesthetics to the fringe. The imperative of a Second Advent and the Apocalypse can make involvement in art appear frivolous, for this world's art will be destroyed in the hell fires whereas holiness becomes the deciding issue. But this line of thinking obscures the fact that holiness includes wholeness, and that God demonstrated in creation a deep interest in aesthetics, a quality with which he has imbued humanity and that he wishes to see developed in order to fully experience life.¹

The study of theology, which Protestants champion, belongs to an area that philosophers term *epistemology*, which is study of what is true and how we know that it is true. The Adventist Church has always been strong in the area of defining truth. Traditionally it is often stated in the absolute, as "The Truth." Christians like truth; it is concrete, objective, black and white, and simple. But truth is not everything. Jesus proclaimed that he was more than just truth when he said "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6).

The discipline of philosophy is made up of three major branches, of which epistemology is just one. Another branch is *metaphysics*, the study of what is real, arguably of what is "The Way." Science deals largely with this area. Again, Seventh-day Adventists are fairly comfortable here, even if historically the Church has had major conflicts with aspects of scientific theory. Although many conservative Christians argue with science's evolutionary orientation, by and large, Christianity is at peace with scientific laws and definitions of reality (and fascinatingly, most Fundamentalists find the absolutes of science more comfortable and comforting than the relatives of the literary/artistic world, even though it is science that is most responsible for shattering the Western world's faith in Christianity).

The third branch of philosophy is *axiology*, the study of what is of value, which we might equate to "The Life." This branch is divided into two parts: *ethics*, the study of what is right and wrong; and *aesthetics*, the study of what is beautiful. In ethics, again our Church has a fairly well-developed outlook, with a body of written codes and unwritten conventions and traditions that



carefully define right and wrong behavior—for example with regard to diet, Sabbath observance, and dating.

But in the area of aesthetics, the Church is unsure of itself, lacking clearly stated aesthetic principles by which to judge. Typically, when it tries to make aesthetic judgments, it does so by applying skills from its area of strength—epistemology—and turns to absolute, binary, black-and-white judgments for the arts.

We cannot do that. We cannot judge beauty by the rules for determining truth, any more than a scientist can solve a theological issue by applying the scientific

method in the whole person, not just the soul. Although various Protestant groups have rightly pressed for a more complete gospel that is also interested in people's physical, social, and material well-being, we have often failed to provide for the Christian's aesthetic needs.

A second biblical principle is that the creative element is a vital part of what makes us human. It was when God was at his most creative that he said, "let us make man in our own image" (Gen. 1:26). To reinforce the point, Genesis 2:9 emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of the trees in Eden, not just their functional

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method. Science can be used for many helpful purposes; it can even offer evidence in support of the existence of God, but it can never prove theology to be true. God refuses to be confined in a test tube for repeated experiments. Christian theology is dependant in part on divine revelation, a process that lies outside the proper realm of science. Now if theology requires theological processes, and science the scientific method, when it comes to judging aesthetics, we must drop theological criteria and instead use aesthetic principles to draw artistic conclusions.

The Bible outlines some aesthetic principles, but typically not in any systematic way. This is strikingly similar to its presentation of theology, which is equally unstructured. Systematic theology is the product of a more recent scientific age than that of the biblical era, and we should note that even the Bible's theology is most often presented obliquely through artistic literary devices such as narrative, poetry, and apocalyptic, further enhancing the status of an artistic perspective for the Christian.

Theologians are required to work their way through these literary expressions, distilling abstract theological principles from the mass of story and verse. We must do the same to understand the underlying aesthetic principles on which the Bible is built.

The first aesthetic principle is the wholeness of humanity—mind, body, and soul. Adventism rejects the division of the person into spiritual and nonspiritual parts, and insists that God is interest-

ed in the whole person, not just the soul. Although various Protestant groups have rightly pressed for a more complete gospel that is also interested in people's physical, social, and material well-being, we have often failed to provide for the Christian's aesthetic needs.

usefulness. By logical extension then, to be in God's image is to be creative, and to exercise this gift is to experience our full humanity. This implies that we recapture God's image as much, if not more, when we write a poem, or arrange a flower bed, or present a meal that is both visually beautiful and tasty, as when we preach or "witness." It suggests that to create beauty is itself a witness to God.²

It is evident in the Bible that God sponsors a variety of art forms. Despite the Second Commandment's injunction against the creation of images, the Tabernacle and Temple were in fact full of them: cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant (which to our best knowledge were the four-headed beasts of Ezekiel 1 rather than the plump babies of Western art or the anthropomorphized angels of Adventist paintings), flowers, almond branches, woven pomegranates in blue, purple, and scarlet (which are non-naturalistic colors), oxen holding up the laver, bas-relief palm trees, and chains. A literal translation of 2 Chronicles 3:6 is, "and he [Solomon] covered the house with precious stones for beauty," a statement that indicates that elements of the Temple were purely ornamental and aesthetic.

The literary diversity of the Bible is itself a testament to the value of the arts in writing. Jesus used parable and fiction as major parts of his teaching style, with stories of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and Lazarus and Dives. Poetry, dance, and music are all recorded in the Bible, used both for positive and negative ends, an indication that art forms have no inherent moral status. It is only the use of them that determines their morality.

A look at philosophy has shown that traditionally we have made artistic judgments according to epistemological criteria and have tended to judge art purely by how effective it is as epistemology. This is an abuse of the arts, for art should have an artistic end, not necessarily a metaphysical or epistemological end. It is the function of theology to testify to God's truth, and science to the realities of his handiwork. Art exists to testify to his beauty and wonder. Theology and science may point our head to God, but art points our heart to him.

It is important to remember that the largest book of the Bible is entirely made up of poetry, and poetry is primarily an expression of the heart. Although many psalms express wonderful theology about God, there are a number that are theologically woeful. The appeal of the psalmist in Psalm 137 to dash the heads of pagan babies against a rock may be interpreted theologically as a metaphor, but in its literal sense it indicates that Bible writers were allowed to express their heartfelt sentiments even when they contravened the mercy of God. In short, God wants us to express how we feel about him, not just how we think about him, and art is one of the chief avenues for doing this.

A key limitation of certain forms of Protestantism has been the almost total devotion to cognitive religion at the expense of experiential, emotional religion. No doubt, experiential religion, divorced from the Word of God or sound theology is a great danger, even an evil. Equally evil, however, is belief divorced from feeling. Anyone who has experienced the barrenness of legalism will testify to the need for heart as well as head in matters of faith. Surely love is the essence of God (1 John 4:16), and who would dare define love without including its emotional dimensions?

Of course there may be some crossover in art. The Bible is primarily a work of spiritual significance, but it is also a moving masterpiece of literature. There is no problem with art carrying powerful statements on truth and reality—indeed often the best art does both. But it doesn't have to. Art can qualify as art purely on the achievement of its form, even if it may lack profound epistemological insight.

One common Christian criterion for judging aesthetics has been Philippians 4:8, which calls on us to dwell on those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable. In the minds of many, this automatically excludes a lot of literature, the

media, and the art world, which portray the ugly, the evil, and the sordid. But a simplistic application of the verse would also cut out considerable sections of the Bible, including the degrading tales at the end of Judges and some of the immoral behaviors of David and other kings.

Unlike much Christian art, the Bible is not afraid to portray evil in its full horror. Good art, Christian art, will not just focus on the pure and the holy; it will also deal with the fullness of the real world, in which sin has the temporary upper hand. It will portray sin truthfully, refusing to whitewash or romanticize either good or evil. One of the greatest failings of much Christian art is its sentimental glossing, its refusal to represent the true nature of evil, and its limitation to the candy-floss world of sweetness and light.

Admittedly, this is often a reaction against popular music, literature, television and the cinema, which frequently portray violence, immorality, and greed to be free of moral consequences. Both extremes are inadequate and false. Good art shows evil to bring evil in its train, and good to result in good consequences; it will also recognize the reality that cause and effect may be separated by lengthy periods, so that the good are not always immediately rewarded, nor the bad punished.

How many psalms recognize this reality, and plead for God to correct this anomaly? The Bible robustly shows the world as it is, refusing any shortcuts in its representation of the battle between good and evil. When the arts follow suit, showing evil in the context of its ultimate evil consequences, then they are compatible with Christian values.³

We should recognize the value of artistic work, which helps us see truth, even if it is the truth about evil. George Bernard Shaw was right when he said, "you use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul." The Swiss reformer John Calvin, not noted for his tolerance of things that might be tainted with evil, argued in effect that all truth was God's truth, even when revealed by a "profane" writer, and that to despise it was to despise the Spirit of God. There are many products of the so-called secular arts that can be of benefit to the Christian, because they speak the truth, even if the artist was not Christian.

One problem for Christians, particularly from a



fundamentalist tradition, is that art involves taste. Whereas other areas of Christian philosophy often can produce definitive answers, art is not absolute, which creates a problem for those who traditionally think in absolute terms about absolutely everything. It is permissible in art to have a variety of opinions, all of which can be valid.

There are two aspects to aesthetic thinking. The first is appreciation, developing an understanding and a valuing of the quality of form and content. The second is liking, finding a personal rapport with a work of art. As Adventists, we should learn to appreciate as much art as possible, but we need only like what we like. Appreciation gives us greater insight into the heart of God, the Author of all aesthetics, and the process of appreciation often increases the area of liking.

In practice, the Church has associated certain artistic forms with right and wrong, ending up by deifying a form that is simply a mode of expression. Many of the older styles of painting, architecture, and media that have all too often characterized Christian products have developed sacred connotations through long use. The culture of hymn singing made the change to contemporary music styles unnecessarily painful for many churches in the past thirty years, and some people have still not understood that there is nothing inherently more sacred about hymns with organs than praise songs with guitars. Conversely, we need to recognize that praise can inhabit old hymns just as readily as modern scripture songs.

An unfortunate tendency to separate our spiritual and secular lives has created confusion over religious and secular art.* In the past, debate has raged over whether Christian singers should record “secular” music. It is a silly question. Do Christian builders only build churches, or Christian mechanics only repair the pastor’s car? Our confusion is in seeing Christian art as only evangelistic, in purely epistemological terms, for spreading truth. In reality, Christian artists need to talk about beauty, both religious and secular, for God is the Author of both.

In many cases a move to portray the totality of the Christian life—not just the “spiritual” parts of it—can in fact strengthen the epistemological impact of the Christian artist. When Christian singer Amy Grant toured Australia in the mid-1990s, a secular critic in a

Brisbane paper praised her artistic integrity (at a time when some Christians were accusing her of selling out to secular interests), while her move to a secular label put many of her Christian albums in secular record shops, where unchurched people could be touched by her message. Some of the finest (but not necessarily best known) Christian singers, such as Noel Paul Stookey and Bob Bennett, sing about all aspects of life—baseball, marriage, and gardening, an approach that enriches our lives.

This lesson is perhaps most needed in a Christian approach to things aesthetic. Typically we have approached the arts as either a tool of the devil, or as a God-given way of reaching the world with the gospel. Neither of these should be ruled out, but they should not be the end of our use of the arts. We need an appreciation of the artistic potential of literature, music, painting, and the newer technologies of mass communication to nourish the human soul and spirit.

Let us also not excuse aesthetic philistinism on the grounds of the quality of the message. Often, we are guilty of tolerating poor quality art simply because we admire the sentiments it expresses. We need to remember that good aesthetics can help a message, and that poor aesthetics can surely kill one. Furthermore, we need to remember that God is the Author of beauty, and that he delights in it for its own sake. He is as interested in beauty as he is in any other aspect of our lives, and he dislikes mediocrity wherever it manifests itself.

It is justifiable, then, for the Christian to use the arts for the sake of creating aesthetically satisfying works, without the compulsion to preach or teach. A testimony to God’s love of beauty is as much the responsibility of the Christian as an exposition of truth, reality, or morality.

Notes and References

1. John Oswalt, *The Leisure Crisis: A Biblical Perspective on Guilt-Free Leisure* (Wheaton Ill.: Victor, 1987), 51–123.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.
3. George Knight, *Myths in Adventism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1985), 156–57.
4. *Ibid.*, 128–31.

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