



Christians and art

As Christians, we cannot ignore art. It exists, and we are confronted with it. Painters, authors, and other artists want to show us something about the world in which we live. They use the techniques of their art to confront people with their world, with themselves, and with (their view of) God.

In Scripture, art is present in two different ways: it contains artistic work and it refers to artistic work. Scripture is not all written in an artistic way. A good example of very plain style can be found in the beginning chapters of Chronicles, where many lists of names are given. This does not mean that this part of the Bible is unimportant; it told Israel after the Babylonian captivity who belonged to what tribe, something they had to know when they had to build up life in Canaan again. It does, however, not cause literary enjoyment; in fact, it is rather "dry." The Psalms, on the other hand, are artful productions. Literary devices are used, such as metre (cadence) and alliteration. And the book of Esther, telling the story of God rescuing Israel from total destruction, is a very well constructed tale. The story line is used to bring out the tense situation from which God rescued his people.

The same applies to the New Testament. For example, Paul usually wrote in a rather straightforward style, though sometimes in long sentences. From time to time, however, he used literary techniques. In 1 Corinthians 13, he used repetition, and in Philippians 2 he wrote a poetic section. Such artistry is added to highlight the meaning.¹ God inspired authors to use art in writing the Bible.

In the second place, art is used in the tabernacle and in the temple. To give an early example, the description of the candlestick (Exodus 25:31ff) shows that it is intended as a meaningful and at the same time beautiful piece of furniture in the tabernacle. The same applies to the curtain in the tabernacle, "*with cherubim worked into them by skilled craftsmen*" (Exodus 26:1). In the later temple of Solomon, considerable artistry is present in the pillars of bronze, with their hundred pomegranates (1 Kings 7:15ff) and the molten sea, standing on twelve oxen (1 Kings 7:23ff). God showed that serving Him does not mean we have to reject all art. The worship of God can be combined with works of art.

Calvin on art

Calvin discussed the question how art can be produced in a world corrupted by sin. Since man is evil, how can he make artistic objects that are good and pleasing? His solution is to attribute the existence of art in this sinful world to a special work of the Holy Spirit. He wrote:

Meanwhile, we ought not to forget those most excellent benefits of the divine Spirit, which He distributes to whomever He wills, for the common good of mankind. The understanding and knowledge of Bezalel and Oholiab, needed to construct the tabernacle, had to be instilled in them by the Spirit of God. It is no wonder, then, that the knowledge of all that is most excellent in human life is said to be communicated to us through the Spirit of God.²

The Holy Spirit, according to Calvin, does more than renewing people so that they may believe the gospel; He also works in scientists and artists. As a result of this assistance of the Spirit, scientists are able to produce studies that contribute to the development of the world. Something similar applies to artists. Since the Spirit works in them counteracting sin, they are able to produce artwork that is good. Calvin attributes every valuable work of art to a special activity of the Holy Spirit.

What is the basis of this far-reaching statement? When we look carefully at Calvin's argumentation, we are disappointed. Only one text is given in support: the well-known fact that Bezalel and

Oholiab worked on the tabernacle under the guidance of the Spirit. This proof does not appear very convincing.

A careful look at what Scripture says confirms our first impression. To mention a few problems: in the first place, the Bible says that Bezalel was filled with the Spirit (Exodus 31:2; 35:31) but it does not say that Oholiab and the other skilled workers, as well, were filled with the Spirit. Rather, it says that God gave them skill (31:6). Secondly, the text says that God gave the Spirit for the making of the tabernacle, not for the making of artwork in general (Exodus 31:7f). Thirdly, the texts do not emphasize that the resulting work should be artistic, but that they should faithfully reflect God's intention (Exodus 31:11; 36:1).³

There is no biblical basis for attributing the good use of art to the Holy Spirit.

Art in creation and sin

What, then, is the scriptural background of art? In my opinion, art has a much broader basis in God's work than Calvin indicated. Art makes use of possibilities given in creation itself. God gave people the ability to speak. They discovered that alliteration of sounds is pleasant to the ear and helps remember what was said. They noticed that sounds have a different height, different tones. They discovered that these tones follow certain patterns; octaves, for example, match exactly. They could distinguish different colours, and they found that certain colours matched well, and others clashed and looked ugly if used together. In short, God created the world with artistic possibilities, and He created man with the intelligence and ability to make use of these possibilities.

Disobedience, sin and their consequences have caused upheaval in this world. It has also touched the world of art. Actually, artists are often people, who in their urge for self-expression, live a godless life. They can also express their rejection of God and his world in their work. That should not make Christians turn away from art, however, for art is no more than applying aspects of God's created world. Paul warned against this kind of asceticism when he wrote:

"For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

(1 Timothy 4:4)

How, then, do we look at art? Artistic products can be evaluated from the perspective of creation. Are the possibilities God created in the world of sound, colour, material, etc. used properly in a particular work of art? J.M. Batteau distinguished several aspects:

1. Is a high degree of skill displayed or is a technique well expressed? (The norm of technique.)
2. Is imagination or depth of perception present? (The norm of feeling.)
3. Is there vividness in communication or in transfer of emotion? (The norm of eloquence.)
4. Is innovation or a unique sense present? (The norm of uniqueness.)⁴

Depending on this, a product of the artist has succeeded or not as an artwork. This is a technical approach to works of art.

We should also evaluate artistic products from the perspective of obedience. Two sides can be distinguished, here: the message and the medium. It can be asked what the message of a book is or of a painting, of instrumental or vocal music? Does it want me to be obedient to God, does it make me thank God for his good creation, or does it want me to live for my own desires? That applies to the final section of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, as well as to the lyrics of a popular rock group.

Moreover, the means which are used should be considered. The biblical scene of God expelling Adam and Eve out of paradise can be portrayed in such a way that the painting entices to sin against the seventh commandment. And the beat of a drum can call up a rebellious attitude, leading one to unwillingness to follow God's will. Interest in art can become a stumbling block, causing people to sin. Then the rule of Mark 9:43ff applies.

In all this, however, art should be seen as a gift from God. God has created a world full of artistic possibilities. We should be interested in the variety of God's creation and thank Him for these possibilities. We should develop them and enjoy them as God gives ability and opportunity to do this. In obedience to God, we may look at and work with a world that reflects the power and divinity of its Maker (Romans 1:20).

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¹ This aspect of the Bible is discussed by B. Wielenga, *De bijbel als boek van schoonheid* (3. ed; Kampen: Kok, 1931).

² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, ii, 16. I used the translation of F.L. Battles, in the edition of J.T. McNeill.

³ More on this issue in my article 'De Geest in Bezaleel' in F.H. Folkerts (ed.) *Ambt en Aktualiteit* (Festschrift C. Trimp; Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1992) 25ff.

⁴ J.M. Batteau, 'Christianity and Art' in *Reformed Perspective* 2, 10 (Aug. 1983), 22.