

Christian and Modern Art (continued)

It seems to be the case that many Christians who do study art at college do not consciously think through where modern art is coming from or what it is communicating. Nor do they necessarily think through whether there should be any difference between art produced by a Christian, or Christian art, and the art that is generally produced in our culture. Should there be a conscious awareness of what is happening in the culture and of what we are producing as Christians?

One of the points that Schaeffer is really making is that we do not necessarily need to think consciously about what we are producing in order to be shaped by the culture in which we live. He was not suggesting that every modern artist has consciously thought about, for example, portraying an existentialist position in a painting. Those artists are simply children of the culture in which they live. They simply will not paint like Rembrandt. It is not that they consciously choose to say, "I am going to paint in a totally different style." Yet they are living in the twentieth century rather than the seventeenth century.

There is even more to it than that. It is not only that it is unconscious, because it is partly unconscious, but we also find ourselves living in a particular stream of history, thought, and civilization. So we do not stop and reflect ourselves about many of the things that are common parts of our culture. I would suggest, however, that the Bible insists that we ought to do so. Paul says in Romans 12:1-2 that in order not to be conformed to the world, the only way that we can be transformed is by the renewing of our mind. He adds in 2 Corinthians 10 that our minds can only be renewed as we consciously take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ and destroy every obstacle that is set up against the knowledge of God.

Let me backtrack to modern art. It is not simply that modern artists are children of their culture. There is more to it than that. Many of them consciously present a point of view that is radically different from the Christian position. If you read the letters, for example, that Van Gogh wrote along with his paintings, they reflect very clearly where he was as a person. It is the same with Gauguin. When you see his paintings of the noble savage, he made it clear in his writings what he was trying to do. He experienced the breakdown of modern culture. He tried to go back to the savage, the primitive, because he thought he might find something more pure, more free there. Yet he did not. After a while he became disenchanted. He realized that the same fundamental problems that he faced in modern Western society existed everywhere he went in the world. We do not have any idea who we are, where we are coming from, or where we are going to. This is consciously expressed in his painting. It is the same with the example of John Cage that I mentioned in a previous lesson. He is consciously expressing in his work that this is a chance universe.

If as Christians we are either going to study art or seek to be artists, whether it is in the area of painting or any other area, we do need to understand what is happening in our culture. The mistake that many Christians in the arts have made is to simply look at art as though it were in a totally separate category from the rest of life. This is a cultural phenomenon as well. Since the Romantic period at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, the arts have been put on a pedestal, away from the normal judgments that are made of people. Artists may do terrible things personally, but if they are great artists they are excused. That is part of the culture in which we live. The artist is considered to be somebody who is a sort of prophet or priest to society, who is outside of the normal canons of criticism. If he produces wonderful art, then his behavior does not matter.

I remember reading a profound article about Sylvia Plath, the poet who in the end committed suicide. She is one of my favorite writers. She expresses quite acutely the dilemma of the modern person of not knowing who we are or why we are alive. In the end she killed herself. I remember reading a critique of her poetry once that basically suggested that it did not matter that she killed herself because she produced such wonderful poetry in the process of agonizing about life. I think that is terrible, because the human being is completely lost in production. It would be better that she had not been such a great poet if she could have known what the answers were to the questions she wrestled with and in the end destroyed her. I am not setting the two things against each other, because hopefully if one does know what the answers are one can still produce great poetry or great painting. Art does not have to come out of a total confusion of life, although that is a modern Romantic misconception of art. It says that great art only arises out of the distress and conflict of the human soul. If you read Shakespeare, he does not seem to be a person who was in great distress and conflict. He was an ordinary kind of person who retired to a middle class life after he had written all his life. Stress and conflict are not necessary to produce great art.

The main idea is that as Christians studying art or doing art, we do need to be aware of what is communicated in the modern arts. We also need to be aware that the media have been used or developed to express the message of modern art. In order to express a fragmented message, fragmented forms have been created, whether in music, poetry, or novels. You can think of James Joyce and *Ulysses*. In music John Cage is an extreme example. In painting it is obvious with the breakdown of the human form. There is a breakdown of content that can be observed by the observer immediately in a painting. There has been a fragmentation of form to express the fragmentation of the understanding of reality. For the Christian to simply think, "I am a Christian. I am an artist. I will simply paint in this same way," is a serious misunderstanding. Art does really express what a person believes, unless it is superficial art, because all great art has wrestled with the fundamental problems of human life and the dilemmas, joys, and challenges that face the human person. Unless we are simply going to copy the culture and copy its forms, then we have not begun to think seriously enough at all as Christians. We need to think about what is being communicated, how it is being communicated, and that there is integrity of message and form.

Therefore as a Christian I cannot simply copy either the message, because I do not agree with it, or the form, because that form was developed to communicate a fragmented message. As Christians we are required in obedience to Christ to be much more creative. It is not that I have to set out with the intention of painting Christian pictures or writing Christian music or writing a Christian novel. That is not the point. That is not what Christian art is. Christian art is art that is produced by Christians. It may be good or bad art, like any other kind of art. It may have integrity in the sense that the form and message go together. For the Christian who is an artist, over the course of time the things that I produce ought to express my view of reality. Every artist would say that their art expresses what is most precious to them, what is deep within them. That is where artistic inspiration comes from. It comes from the laying of one's soul, one's person, one's passion, on the canvas, on the musical page, in the poem I am writing, or in the play I am producing. I think that many Christians have not thought this through at all. They think that Christian art means painting Christian subjects, such as lambs, choirs, and crosses in church bulletins, or it means writing explicitly sacred music. Of course it will include that. You can think of Bach, for example, who wrote a great deal of technically sacred music, but he wrote much other music as well, all sorts of music. Yet all of it flowed out of his understanding of reality, and it reflects something about that. Thus to be Christian does not require an explicitly Christian subject in a narrow sense. It ought to express who I am.

That does not mean it will always express something positive. Schaeffer later wrote some very helpful things about this, about the major and minor themes in art. The Christian who is realistic, like the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, will sometimes produce things that seem primarily negative. We, above all people, ought to recognize the brokenness of life and the absurdity of things apart from the grace of God. Sometimes the hope that we have as believers will come through more strongly and sometimes less so. Over the whole course of a life's work, however, it ought to come through at some point. It will not come through if my Christianity is only skin deep. If it more than skin deep, however, and it really shapes the way I understand everything, then it must be communicated in what I produce.

You can think of William Cowper, the hymn writer and poet, as an example. He had a miserable life. He was somebody who was subject to manic depression his whole life. He was always afraid that he was losing his salvation. He was acutely depressed, and he spent much time in a mental hospital. In those days the hospitals for mental patients were not at all pleasant. The hospital in England was Bethlem Royal Hospital, which was where Cowper spent some time. The name Bethlem is where we get our word "bedlam," which means "total chaos." Cowper was taken in by Newton, the converted slave trader who looked after him for the latter part of his life. He was always rather miserable as a person. His poetry certainly expresses that. At the same time, however, he wrote some of our favorite hymns that express the assurance we have in Christ. The hymn "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" is an example. As you think of the words of that hymn, you realize that they were written by a person who was despondent most of the time. Yet he could still offer a message of hope.

In the same way, any Christian who is writing, painting, or doing anything else, over the course of time will produce things that we really believe about reality. That is because Christianity is not some religious bit added to the top of life, but rather it is true. Therefore it affects everything. Much modern art flows out of the view that is radically different. We must be aware of that.

There are two mistakes we can make. One is to say that there are Christian subjects in some kind of narrow sense. The other mistake is to say that it does not matter what I do, that it does not matter that I write or paint exactly as the culture does. That is superficial as well. It fails to understand where the culture is and what has caused it to produce the kind of art and writing that it has produced. It flows out of the doomed world that is expressed in existentialist philosophy. Much of modern art expresses that in the acutest possible way. Almost all modern theater does. I can think of plays by people such as Peter Shaffer, Edward Albee, and Ionesco. They all expressed the acute problems that the modern person faces in not having any kind of final meaning for his life.

A Christian cannot simply copy that just because that is what twentieth century art is. One has to think more deeply about it. It is a difficult subject, but there are some helpful things written by Rookmaaker about this. He has a little booklet called *Art and the Public Today* and another one called *Art Needs No Justification*. There is also a little book by Schaeffer called *Art and the Bible*. There are also several lectures of his on tape about art norms for Christian artists.

If we are looking at art, ought we to be able to determine what is being communicated? Or is it simply a matter of individual response? That is the way people will speak sometimes. They will say that it is only what you feel about a painting that matters. I suggest that the question itself reflects something about one of the struggles that exists in modern art, which is not true at any other point in history. You can look at any other time in the past and determine what someone was trying to communicate through a piece of music, painting, novel, poetry, or play. The artist was clearly expressing something about the world. It is immediately obvious to the person who looks at it, hears it, or reads it that something is being expressed. It is easier when the written word is involved, but the same issues apply in other

mediums. I suggest that it is a twentieth century problem that art is now wrestling with. Philosophy has rejected the notion that there is objective reality out there and has stated that all that matters is the subjective, which is fundamentally where existentialism ends up. Sartre said that in the end the only truth there is is that I exist and that I think. He takes Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," "*cogito ergo sum*," and he applies it in a different way. Descartes was still operating in a biblical framework, which Sartre certainly was not. Sartre says that the existence of the individual and my response to things is all that matters in the end. That is all there is. That idea is reflected in the modern arts when we are told that we do not have to ask what the painter is trying to communicate and it is only a matter of how we respond to things. Under that idea lies the view that there is no objective reality.

Even communication between people is impossible. Each of us is an island unto himself, which turns around Shakespeare's statement that "No man is an island." In our culture we are left with a situation in which everyone is an island to himself. Real communication from one person to another is regarded as impossible. So poetry and the novel language becomes fragmented to express that. Communication is really difficult. Does anybody understand me, or am I trapped within myself? We see that in morality as well. Morality is something that is totally relative to the individual. He is his own island of autonomy, making his own choices without regard to anything outside himself. That is a totally new way of seeing art, to look at art as not expressing something objective but that which is open to everybody's interpretation.

The Christian must ask some fundamental questions about that. As Christians we believe that we are living in a universe that is created by God, by a God who is not silent but has spoken to us. He has genuinely communicated to us in a way that we can understand and respond to. He has told us objectively true things about the world. Beyond that, He has created us as persons in such a way that we can understand the world that He has made. There is coherence between my mind and the universe that is out there. So I can look at the trees and understand them. In that way science is possible, because there is coherence between my mind and the orderly world that God has created. It is not a chance universe.

It is the same with people. All people are made in the image of God. Language is a gift of God, and there is real communication possible. Communication is sometimes difficult, but it is possible. So the Christian must say that I do not accept the idea that no real communication between one person and another, whether in words or art, is possible. The Christian cannot possibly accept the position of total subjectivism, which is where some modern art ends up. That arises from a worldview that is completely alien to the Christian. Every time a play is produced or you read a piece of poetry or you look at a painting, you recognize that there is something there.

You see a tension there in modern art. There are people who are really trying to communicate something. On the other hand, they may also be saying that there is only subjectivism. You see that tension all the way through. You see many tensions like that in modern art. There is an insistence that the universe is just a chance, meaningless universe. Yet at the same time there is communication of meaning, pattern, order, and regularity. A poet like Sylvia Plath or Ted Hughes says that life is completely absurd and everything is horribly ugly and awful, and yet at the same time they communicate in beautiful words and wonderful images. They glory in the creation that is there. You see this tremendous tension there, because on the one hand there is a complete denial of order, beauty, and meaning, and yet it is expressed in orderly, beautiful, and meaningful language. There is a tension at the heart of it there. Human beings have been created with a longing to communicate. Once someone has set something down, he has actually rejected subjectivism. Often Christians have not thought through the issues that are involved because it does take some hard work.

If you look at the history of still lifes, for example, those that came out of Holland and were the most famous ones from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, there is no question that they arose because of the Christian worldview. That kind of art would never have been painted in India under Hinduism, for example, because there was no value to the external world. In the same way, William Carey, when he went to India in 1798, produced the first botany of Indian plants, because there had been no attempt before to understand and classify the plants that were there because the external world was considered ultimately unimportant. Worldviews have a very profound effect on people that we are not even aware of. That is my point.

Let us consider another practical example. Many of the problems of famine that exist in North Africa at the present time have arisen because of a particular worldview. If you talk to any missionary who has worked in parts of Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, or northern Kenya, where there have been real problems with food, they will tell you there is a worldview that does not see the human person as someone who has been created to have any kind of dominion over his environment. There is a worldview that requires people to do things in exactly the same way they have always been done in the past. One of the problems a missionary who is trying to change agricultural practices faces is that it is considered to be offensive to the spirits of one's ancestors or the spirits that inhabit the land if one does anything differently. So people are caught in a cycle of poverty. There is nothing one can do to dig wells, irrigate the land, or fence the crops off from the animals that roam over the field, because the worldview does not allow for those things to happen. It may even forbid them. It is not that anybody in Africa has consciously thought through all of the things they cannot do anymore just as it was not thought through in India that they cannot study plants and produce botany books. It is just a product of a way of seeing things. There is a whole way of understanding reality that lies behind the conscious level of daily life. Yet it is there in a profound way.

In his book, *How Should We Then Live*, Schaeffer said that "rivers of art" flowed out of the Reformation in northern Europe. What he was trying to say was that as you look at the wonderful still lifes or landscapes that were painted in northern Europe, particularly in Holland, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, they arose out of a worldview. It was not that people were creating this art and consciously saying that he was doing it because he was a Christian. It may be that many individual painters were not Christians. People did not say, "Because I am a Christian I can paint fish and bowls of flowers and trees and peasant women and jugs of milk and bowls of fruit." It was simply a product of what was thought about reality, that this universe was made by God, and it is there to be enjoyed by the human person. Things God made are good and are there to be enjoyed, and they are beautiful. Both an understanding of science and art and an understanding of dominion flow out of a biblical understanding.

When that understanding disappears in a culture then the art begins to change, just as the morality begins to change. Everything changes because the world is seen in a different way, even if it is not consciously seen that way. So the kind of art you can produce in one moment in history you cannot produce in another. It would seem like an anachronism, and it really is, in a sense. I would not look at a bowl of flowers and say that it is a Christian painting. That is not what I am saying. On a deep level, the way people paint, the way people do science, the way people do agriculture, and the way people act toward each other flows out of their way of seeing the world. As soon as we start talking about the way you treat each other, then it is much more obvious. Art, and particularly painting and music, operates at a level where you cannot set it all down quite so simply the way you can when you are thinking about morality or the way people treat each other as human persons.

Just as surely as Hinduism produced widow burning and still produces the killing of baby girls and temple prostitution and the shunning of lepers and blind people and pushes them aside as totally

untouchable kinds of people, it will also produce certain kinds of art and science. In the same way, Christianity also has an effect on a culture. It changes the way people see things. Remember that Paul said, "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation." I remember somebody who became a Christian, and he said on the day he became a Christian, "It was as if I saw the world for the first time," because he began to see the whole physical universe in a completely new way. It was like scales had been taken off his eyes, because he had been taught, like other modern people, that this universe is simply a mechanism, just a product of time and chance. That had the effect for him of dulling his vision. When he became a Christian, however, and he acknowledged that there was a Creator, he began to see the world in a completely new way. Every flower, every tree, and every sunset looked completely different. It mattered now in a way that it had not mattered before.

In a sermon I heard recently, the preacher said that the whole world is filled already with the glory of God. The Christian sees that. Even on a cold day, with flurries of snow blowing around, the universe is filled with the glory of God. It is because of what we believe about God that we automatically see the creation in that way. If I am not a Christian, then I may not see it that way. I may see it very differently. While one cannot make an immediate statement about a painting and say that it is a Christian painting, one can look at the whole flow of painting, music, plays, poetry, and novels produced by a culture, and over time say, "Yes, that clearly reflects this worldview." You get realistic art coming out of Christianity and its influence on a culture. It is art that paints people as real people. You see that happening in the seventeenth century. People were painted as they really are. You begin to actually see the world as it actually is, because you begin to understand something true about it.

As that Christian worldview has disappeared from our culture in terms of the way our culture is shaped, an art that is totally different has been produced. It is an art that expresses subjectivism, relativism, fragmentation, lack of order, and chaos among other like qualities. You can see dramatic examples in the work of Edward Albee or Ionesco. Consider some of the plays that Ionesco has produced. I have mentioned the plays of Samuel Beckett in which there is a complete breakdown of communication between people. That reflects something about a worldview. All art does that.

It is not always easy to describe it. The approach that I am taking or that Schaeffer took can be ridiculed by saying, "Of course I cannot look at that still life and say that it was painted by a Christian." I am not suggesting one can simply do that. Yet the whole output of an artist over his life will most certainly express who he is and what he believes, as well as the kind of culture he lives in. If it does not, then one has to say that it is simply superficial art.

Any artist is shaped by his or her culture. There is nothing wrong with that. He is shaped by a context. A Christian painting today or writing music today will write music or paint in a way very different from a Christian who lived 100 years ago, even though they believe the same things. That is an important point. We can think of the hymns that have been produced as examples. The hymns that were produced in the nineteenth century, not all of them, but many of them, reflect Victorian culture. They reflect sentimentality, sweetness, and light. There is a lack of realism in some of that music, in some of those words. We went through a time in the 1950s and 1960s in which much of the Christian music that was being produced was very superficial. It did not have much biblical content or musical depth. In the last 10 years there has been a growth of new Christian music that certainly fits in this culture and is accessible to people who live today. Non-Christians can walk into a church and hear some of that music written by someone like Graham Kendrick, and they can respond to it immediately. It fits into this culture. It is accessible to people. He is a person who is not speaking in a strange tongue. He is a twentieth-century person writing things in a way that is accessible to modern people. It is wonderful to have Christians doing that. At the same time, it is not superficial. The words are wonderfully biblical,

and they express all kinds of theology quite profoundly in a more modern idiom, and the music is in a modern idiom.

The Christian will write in a different way. There is no point in going back to the past and saying, “I want to paint still lifes like the Dutch painted in the seventeenth century” or “I am going to paint like Rembrandt.” We have to live now, when God has called us to live. I must seek as a Christian to express my understanding of the world the way I see the world within the context of this culture. As I said in a previous lesson, the danger for Christians is that we might retreat from the culture into our own subculture and develop our own forms that communicate to nobody except for ourselves. We do that in much Christian popular music or in Christian films. They are not accessible to people outside.

Do we say that the culture is so far removed from Christianity that it is impossible to communicate with it? I do not think so. We can think of two examples, the movies *Chariots of Fire* and *Babette’s Feast*, neither of which was produced by Christians. Yet both of them say something powerful about Christianity in a positive way. It is sad that they were produced by people who were not Christians, rather than somebody who was a Christian who could produce something with that kind of integrity and that kind of respect for the Christian faith. Generally speaking, however, Christians only produce things for our own subculture. That is sad. Since we have not liked what is happening in the culture, we have tried to develop our own forms that have no relationship to what is going on in the culture. Alternatively, we have made the mistake, as in much Christian popular music, to simply copy the culture’s forms and put Christian words to them. That is not good enough either. What we are called to do by God is be much more creative. We should take the forms of the culture and treat them in a creative way as we communicate a different message. We should not simply copy them, especially since they often turn out to be poor copies. Children will tell you, “I will not listen to that music. It is not even good.” It is not because of the words, but it is because they do not think it is good enough. It does not have enough integrity. So they dismiss it as second class. That is a tremendous challenge, because we ought to be producing things that are good, that have quality, because we know that God has created us in His image with creativity. It is not something that we happen to have by chance. It is something that God has given us. We need to pick up the challenge to then use that in every one of these areas. It will have to be something that is produced in the context of this culture.

One of the things we have tried to do in my class on apologetics is to consider how Genesis, for example, or the book of Ecclesiastes, was written in their cultural contexts. They were not written and dropped out of heaven. God gave them into that moment of history in a form that was accessible to people at that time for expressing His truth. That is the challenge for the Christian today, whether I am preaching a sermon, making a film, painting a picture, or writing music. I am to take the way I see the world as a believer and express it in a form that will be accessible to people in this moment of history.

It is precisely because we understand what is taking place that we understand the points of tension in the culture, such as that between subjectivism and the realization of the passion that every artist has for communication. That is why he is setting it down on canvas or writing it in words, because he does have a longing to communicate. Exactly at the point of tension that is there, or at the point of fragmentation or absurdity of the world, you are able to express something that is very different from the culture. Yet it does require creativity. It is neither copying the crowd nor baptizing something with Christian words nor being nostalgic for the past. It is being creative now.

I am not suggesting that art is propaganda. I am not saying that the Christian always sets out consciously saying, “I must communicate the Gospel.” I do not mean that for a moment. Yet we ought to be so

shaped in the way that we see the world, by our understanding as Christians, in the way that we see everything, including other people, that it will affect even unconsciously the way we do things.

For example, sexuality is treated differently by different painters. Usually by modern painters it is treated as something pornographic or something to titillate the senses. If you consider the way Rembrandt did it, however, he was just as explicit, such as in the picture in which he is going to his wedding bed, yet it is completely different. The Christian has a completely different way of looking at things. That will affect everything. Sometimes it will affect everything consciously. Yet the more I grow as a Christian, the more it will affect unconsciously the things that I produce. Seeing people with dignity through my camera will not be something that I have to stop to think about. It will be something that as a Christian I automatically respond to people with. It is just as one hopes that kindness and gentleness will be a part of one's character that one does not have to force but that is growing. In the same way, a Christian worldview ought to be shaping unconsciously everything that we see, think, and do, and the things that we produce.