

## Beauty and Truth: A Biblical Vision of Literature (and the Arts)

### I. Our God is both a God of truth and a God of beauty.

- A. Jesus calls Himself “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and everywhere in scripture God proclaims Himself to be the source of all truth and the adversary of liars.
- B. Yet the scriptures also talk of the “beauty of the Lord” (Psalm 27:4) and of the “Strength and beauty” that “are in His sanctuary” (Psalm 96:6).
- C. Surely all of us have experienced the unbelievable beauty of God’s creation. God is the supreme artist, as well as the righteous lawgiver and the source of all truth.

II. When we think of the imaginative works that are studied in the humanities, however—stories, poems, plays, painting, sculpture, music—we may first think only of beauty. Most of us don’t first associate the imagination with truth. But the fact is that we should look for both God’s truth *and* God’s beauty in art and literature, just as we do in anything else that matters in our lives.

III. In *The Poetics*, written in the fourth century B.C., Aristotle writes that imaginative literature begins with the child’s instinctive imitation of the world around him and is a way of learning truth about that world:

First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons. . . . The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general. . . . This the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, “Ah, that is he” (sec. 4).

IV. What kind of truth does literary imitation teach? In Aristotle’s view, it is the truth of the human “form” or “universal”—the common human nature that we all share.

- A. He writes, “Poetry, therefore, is a higher and more philosophical thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act according to the law of probability or necessity . . .” (sec. 9). How a person of a certain type will probably or even necessarily act in a given situation depends on the laws or principles governing the human mind and heart, the fundamental nature that we all share as human beings. That’s why Aristotle calls it the “universal.”
- B. Poetry, according to Aristotle, conveys this universal truth better than history, because the poet is always free to create words and actions for his character that reveal that character’s motives, thoughts, and feelings, whereas the historian is limited to recording only those words and actions he can document, and often these actions do not reveal the motives of the person’s heart and therefore throw little light on human nature.
- C. By “poetry” Aristotle really means literature generally—poetry was the only form of literature in his time; even drama was written in the form of poetry.
- D. Aristotle is clearly assuming that through careful observation of the human life around him and introspection into his own heart, the poet can learn a great deal about our

universal human nature. The poet, in Aristotle's view, is a particularly gifted observer of that nature and a particularly gifted articulator of what he observes.

- E. Whether or not we agree with Aristotle about poetry's superiority to history, we should seriously consider that literature, along with all the imaginative arts, has a great deal to teach us about the human mind and heart, human psychology, or the human spirit, through authors' discerning imitations of human nature. While often not true as records of individual facts, the arts are true in a deep sense—as records of important truths about the human nature God gave all of us when He created men and women.

V. Scripture supports the idea that art and literature can convey fundamental truths about us and our lives.

- A. In I Samuel 12:1-4 Nathan convicts David of his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba by means of a story. David can obviously see his sin more clearly through the lense of a story of a greedy rich man who steals a poor man's sheep than he can see it simply by looking at his own life.
- B. Jesus uses stories—parables—in the New Testament to illustrate the truths He is teaching.
- C. The Old Testament tabernacle was a work of art that was meant to symbolize key truths about the complete atonement that would come with Jesus' death on the cross. The ritual of the Passover functions in the same way.
- D. The narratives of the Old and New Testaments are historically accurate, not fictions, yet they can be seen as stories God is writing that teach us a great deal about ourselves and our relationship with Him.

VI. The coupling of truth and beauty in art and literature means that they convey truth in a unique way—through illustration, embodiment, dramatization—and can thus (1) make learning that truth enjoyable, (2) bring that truth home to the heart or emotions, as well as the rational mind, and (3) motivate us to live out that truth. (See Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry.")

- A. Mary Karr's "Who the Meek Are Not"<sup>1</sup> uses an elaborate metaphor to give new clarity and force to our vision of the Christian virtue of meekness.
- B. Shakespeare's "Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds" gives a remarkable vision of I Corinthians 13 love.
- C. C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, on the other hand, gives a deeply troubling vision of self-deception, pride, and selfishness that are so hidden under apparent love and conscientiousness that even the character whose heart is corrupted by them doesn't know they are there. Her face deceives even her.

VII. One common mistake some Christians make regarding literature and art is to assume that only Christians can produce works worth reading, viewing, or listening to. This view, however, is not biblical.

- A. Romans 1:20 makes it clear that a great deal of the truth about God and, implicitly, ourselves in relation to Him, is revealed through the created world. This revelation of God's truth,

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<sup>1</sup> This poem, along with Shakespeare's "Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds" and other Christian poems appears at the end of these notes.

which theologians call “general revelation,” is available to all people, believers and unbelievers alike.

- B. Romans 2:14-16 makes it clear that even those who do not have God’s written moral law have this law “written in their hearts.” All people, believers and unbelievers, as C. S. Lewis argues cogently in *Mere Christianity*, have a conscience that points to ultimate truths about themselves, their world, and the One who rules over it.
- C. Unbelieving writers and artists may not have the final answers to life’s questions, but they often ask those questions in particularly powerful, honest ways.
- D. *Heart of Darkness*, for example, though written by Joseph Conrad, who does not appear to have been a believer, gives us a vision of human egocentrism, self-deception, and conscience that coincides very well with the teachings of scripture.

VIII. A second mistake Christians often make is to assume that the “truth” literature teaches should always be positive, encouraging. Look at the stories of scripture—they include rape, incest, adultery, murder, sorcery, and grotesque cruelty and violence. God obviously does not believe we need only the good news about ourselves to be edified. He clearly thinks we need to see the truth about our sinfulness and desperate need for Him as well as about the beauty of His holiness, the greatness of His salvation, the loveliness of the created world.

- A. Literature should not just be an escape from reality. It should plunge us into the truth of our world and our lives. Some of that truth is appealing and lovely, but some is not.
- B. While some modern and postmodern literature, admittedly, errs on the side of being being despairingly dark and cynical, gratuitously profane, grossly and graphically violent, and seductively erotic, some Christian readers, artists, and writers expect all literature to be full of “precious moments.” Literature sometime needs to shake us up, convict us, make us think, trouble our sleep, if it is to help us grow.
- C. We trivialize our art and literature and keep it from appealing to a hurting world when we make it less than fully honest about the world’s darkness, pain, and evil.
- D. We keep our art and literature from having a witness to the intellectual, academic community when we keep it from being intellectually challenging.
- E. Norwegian artist Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream* (part of a series painted in 1893-1910) is upsetting to look at, yet it is a very powerful representation of modern man in a world without God and increasingly without any meaning—man totally responsible for his own destiny in an empty cosmos. Is it not healthy for Christians to see art like this that reminds us of the terror and despair of those who don’t know the love and grace of Christ? Should we run from their anguished emptiness or seek to understand it as fully as possible?

IX. A third mistake Christians make is to think that when Christian art and literature depict Christians, these people should be models of spiritual excellence, physical fitness, emotional adjustment, and marital bliss.

- A. Such art and literature fail to tell the truth about who believers are and what their real lives are like. It therefore fails to persuade intelligent readers, who know better than the shallow, manicured vision they’re being presented with.

- B. Such art mistakes witness for advertising. (“Let’s bend the truth so that we can sell Jesus”—a really God-honoring attitude, huh?)
- C. Being honest about our real struggles, doubts, hurts, and neuroses is the basis for any authentic witness or relationship, in art or elsewhere. Look at David’s transparency in the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 6:1-7, Psalm 77:3-4).
- D. Writers like Flannery O’Connor and Katherine Paterson prove that one can be unswervingly honest and yet very positive about the gospel and its ability to change lives.

X. A final mistake Christians make is to think that as long as the theme of a work of art or literature—its assertion about who God is or who we are in relation to Him—is true, then the way it communicates that theme doesn’t matter. Nothing could be further from the truth.

- A. An imaginative work’s accurate depiction of human nature as it really is in this world, is its way of persuading the reader that its assertions about our relationship to the next world are worth listening to. Moving cardboard, unreal, inconsistent characters around a reduced stage to make a “Christian” point convinces no one of the truth of that point.
- B. Again, we serve a God of truth. We lose both artistic excellence and spiritual power when our imaginative works fail to back up their assertions of ultimate truth with truthful dramatizations of real people and their lives.
- C. Such imaginative works also miss the opportunity to honor the Lord by working “heartily as unto [Him]” in all we attempt (Colossians 3:23). Art that reflects unskilled or lackadaisical craftsmanship is just laziness and ignorance on display. It does not bear witness to the beauty and truth of our Lord.
- D. The beauty of a Christian artist’s skilled, diligent, loving craftsmanship will support the truth of the biblical view of human nature and life that he is trying to convey, just as beauty always supports truth in art and literature.

XI. Art and literature matter. In our culture, we are experiencing not just a “battle for the mind” but a battle for the imagination. Thankfully more and more evangelicals are waking up to the importance of art and literature as forms of witness, as encouragements of our spiritual growth, as ways of worshipping God. We cannot afford not to be involved in this crucial battle front.

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### **Examples of Good and Bad Christian Poetry:**

#### **Who the Meek Are Not**

**(This poem is a very effective dramatization, through vivid concrete images, of the true meaning of the Christian virtue of meekness.)**

Not the bristle-bearded Igors bent  
under burlap sacks, not peasants knee-deep  
    in the rice paddy muck,  
nor the serfs whose quarter-moon sickles  
    make the wheat fall in waves  
they don't get to eat. My friend the Franciscan  
    nun says we misread  
that word *meek* in the Bible verse that blesses them.  
    To understand the meek  
(she says) picture a great stallion at full gallop  
    in a meadow, who —  
at his master's voice — seizes up to a stunned  
    but instant halt.  
So, with the strain of holding that great power  
    in check, the muscles  
along the arched neck keep eddying,  
    and only the velvet ears  
prick forward, awaiting the next order.

Mary Karr, from *Sinners Welcome* (2006), HarperCollins

### **Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds**

**(This is Shakespeare's wonderful poetic expression of the I Corinthians 13 definition of love, particularly the truths that "love bears all things" and "love never fails.")**

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
Oh, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

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If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

1609

William Shakespeare

### God's Will for You and Me

**(This is not good poetry—there are no concrete images, and the poem is not very honest about the struggles as well as joys that constitute the Christian life. It presents a “precious moments” Christianity more than the real thing.)**

Just to be tender, just to be true,  
Just to be glad the whole day through,  
Just to be merciful, just to be mild,  
Just to be trustful as a child,  
Just to be gentle and kind and sweet,  
Just to be helpful with willing feet,  
Just to be cheery when things go wrong,  
Just to drive sadness away with a song,  
Whether the hour is dark or bright,  
Just to be loyal to God and right,  
Just to believe that God knows best,  
Just in his promises ever to rest—  
Just to let love be our daily key,  
That is God's will for you and me.

### The Collar

**(This poem dramatizes a believer's honest struggle with the pain that following Christ sometimes involves. In it he honestly voices his doubt, anger, and disappointment with God, an openness with God that helps him to return to a place of faith.)**

I struck the board, and cried, "No more!  
I will abroad!  
What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.  
Shall I be still in suit?  
Have I no harvest but a thorn  
To let me blood, and not restore  
What I have lost with cordial fruit?







Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

1633

John Donne

*The David*

**(This poem is my poetic response to first seeing Michelangelo's *The David* statue in Florence. I hope it illustrates the way poetry expresses its ideas through concrete images. It seemed to me that the statue was expressing Michelangelo's sense of the completion of classical culture's celebration of reason in the Christian faith embraced by the culture of Renaissance Italy.)**

Every muscle, vein, and tendon perfectly defined  
Yet completely at rest,  
One half-step toward the attack  
Yet still waiting for God's word,  
Large classical head and face,  
Large, effective hands,  
No weapon but a sling  
Because he is a weapon—  
An arrow in the bow of the Lord  
Drawn back to the ear—  
Goliath will hear him sing  
When faith and reason, mind and body move together,  
Christianity completes classicism.  
The faith his strong feet stand on is firmer than the earth,  
His glance is surer than confidence,  
And the giant looks like an opportunity.

2010

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