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How can art enhance and enrich the Christian faith? What is the basis for a relationship between the church and visual imagery? Can the art world and the Protestant church be reconciled? Is art idolatry and vanity, or can it be used to strengthen the church? Grounded in historical and biblical research, William Dyrness offers students and scholars an intriguing, substantive look into the relationship between the church and the world of art.

Faith and art were not always discordant. According to Dyrness, Israel understood imagery and beauty as reflections of God's perfect order; likewise, early Christians used art to teach and inspire. However, the Protestant church abandoned visual arts and imagery during the Reformation in favor of the written word and has only recently begun to reexamine art's role in Christianity and worship. Dyrness affirms this renewal and argues that art, if reflecting the order and wholeness of the world God created, can and should play an important role in modern Christianity.

Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue Details

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From Reader Review Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue for online ebook

Katerina says

Visual Faith is an academic look at the relationship between the visual arts and Christianity. The book begins with a historical overview of art within the Christian community. Dyrness then turns our attention towards how art and beauty are presented within the Bible. Having established this groundwork, he considers what theology has to say about the visual arts and how the visual arts support theology. That discussion leads into considerations of how Christians can interact with art in our modern context.

I found aspects of the art history especially interesting. Dyrness explains how the focus on Christ's story led the Western church to develop art focused on key story events while the Eastern church's focus on the people within the story pushed their art towards icons. After the Catholic-Orthodox split, Dyrness mainly follows the Western, Catholic art history where he points out how art evolved to draw the viewer into the painted scene so that one could respond to the story. With the Reformation, the move toward mysticism and the development of the printing press, pushed Christianity towards valuing personal experience and preaching. Since America was founded with this mindset, many American churches are hesitant to include visual arts as part of their worship.

In his theological considerations, Dyrness concludes that art is "nothing special;" rather, it is a natural part of living. As people go about their day to day business, some pause to create art. As such, art is not a useful part of living but a response to living. It can be a response to beauty, morality, or a combination of the two which can be described as appropriateness or a sense of rightness. It can also be a response to the lack of beauty, morality, or appropriateness. Art is also a response to God and his creation. "All art aspires to be worship." Certainly not everyone creating art recognizes that they are worshiping God; some would even deny God's existence. Yet, all artists draw inspiration from God's creation, whether they recognize that or not. God reveals Himself through the created world. Since Christians have a fuller understanding of God, they are in the best position to "echo reality" in their creative works.

These are just a few highlights of the book. It is worthy reading for Christians interested in the arts or in more fully integrated worship.

Curby Graham says

Excellent discussion of how our increasingly visual culture impacts our understanding of art and theology. I had my mind changed on a couple of topics and agree that the loss of a more word-based culture is a reality but not necessarily a disaster. A word and visual based outlook have interesting implications for Christianity. Well worth the read.

Raegan Dalton says

A must-read for any artist in the Christian faith. The author weaves theology into art history. It's brilliant to see a book that promotes artistic expression and backs such practices up with scripture and church tradition.

Joel says

a thoughtful, thought-provoking book, this title provided a helpful history of the church and art, reviewed contemporary art and some christian responses.

the chapter on biblical terminology for ``beauty" was really helpful; there isn't a word in hebrew for aesthetic beauty as we think of it. the concept of beauty is always tied with integrity, uprightness, righteousness, appropriateness, being just, loving, merciful, or holy.

dyrness also looks at possible roles art could play in christian discipleship, or in cultivating a sense of ethical discernment. he interacts with elaine scary's ``on beauty and being just" but thinks that her more humanistic approach doesn't have an adequate basis for either beauty or justice.

i need to take time to re-read a few chapters to give them more thoughtful consideration.

Aja says

I had to read this for a class. I thought this was interesting in a way that it was more so towards Reformed traditions interacting with visual art and their theology, although this can apply to Protestants who aren't used to having art in their worship services constantly (compared to Orthodox, Catholic, and possibly Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Lutherans who are used to it). It had some really great points that spoke to me as a Christian & an artist.

The only thing that affects my review is that it was hard to keep my interest while reading it. Maybe part of it is because I'm busy with schoolwork at the moment, but overall my engagement was not as strong as another book I read for class. However, I say that if anyone who is a Christian and an artist wanting a try at reconciling it in their Protestant tradition, then try this out if it can keep your attention.

Bill says

Dyrness explores the world of imagery in Christian worship, including an historical survey of artistic expression of Christian faith throughout the existence of the church.

He advocates for a re-entry of sorts of art into mainstream evangelical worship. Though we live in a very visually-oriented world, art in worship is often neglected, if not completely ignored.

I know that in my own Christian circles, art has never been a strong part of our worship services. I have a hunch that this has been the case simply because the arts have too often been associated with liberal theologies--something that my denomination has avoided like the plague.

Over the past several years, I have explored various artistic forms of worship, and have found this practice to be quite refreshing. One of my favorite additions to my personal worship is the use of icons. These images (which are incidentally "written", not "painted") were used to communicate theological truths to the illiterate masses. But i find that they offer our brains yet another avenue of "hearing" and "learning".

And this is the point of Dyrness, that the arts, when properly understood, provide a rich variety of understanding and communicating spiritual realities.

In today's visually-oriented world, the church would do well to utilize the arts more effectively in communicating to the world.

Dwight Davis says

Overall, this is a helpful entryway into theological aesthetics, but it should by no means be a stopping point. The history of religious and modern art that Dyrness gives is worth the price of the book alone. I worry, however, that his view of Christians in the art is far too narrow. If I am reading him correctly, he seems to think that all "Christian" art should be evangelistic or communicate the gospel in some way. I fear that this ideological view of art is what has loosed much mediocre evangelical "art" on the world. I would love to see a more sustained argument for an artistic engagement beyond evangelism, some sort of argument for art and beauty for the sake of art and beauty. The narrow view of art presented here doesn't take into account common grace or a robust view of culture.

Stephen Hiemstra says

What exactly is beauty?

Last fall my kids took me to a film. In the film, one of Hollywood's most beautiful actresses portrayed a low-class, manipulative, rather loose woman. The film's plot seemed shallow and pornographic, designed more to offend than to enlighten. I left the theater upset and annoyed, not entirely understanding why.

In his book, *Visual Faith*, William Dyrness writes:

Our modern images feature surface and finish; Old Testament images present structure and character. Modern images are narrow and restrictive; theirs were broad and inclusive...For us beauty is primarily visual; their idea of beauty included sensations of light, color, sound, smell, and even taste (81).

As the old adage goes, beauty is more than skin deep.

In clinical pastor education we were taught to look for dissidence between words and the body language of patients that we visited. This disharmony between words and body language is, of course, a measure of truth. In like manner, the Bible paradigm of beauty is that the truth of an object matches its appearance.

Dyrness writes: the biblical language for beauty reveals that beauty is connected both to God's presence and activity and to the order that God has given to creation (80). The human spirit, although undefinable, is obvious by its absence: a beautiful, living human body emptied of its spirit is no more than a repulsive corpse. Morality works much the same way: Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion (Proverbs 11:22 ESV).

While Dyrness does not dwell on social criticism, he sees a lack of artistic imagination as an impediment to renewal of faith—especially in a society that is constantly stimulated by visual images (155-156). He cites the Prophet Joel:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions (Joel 2:28 ESV).

As barriers between high class and popular art are lowered, we see the democratization (all flesh) of art that Joel prophesied.

William A. Dyrness (www.fuller.edu/faculty/wdyrness) is a Professor of Theology and Culture at the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Visual Faith is written in 7 chapters:

Development of the Visual Arts from the Early Church to the Middle Ages;
Development of the Visual Arts from the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century;
Art and the Biblical Drama;
Reflecting Theologically on the Visual Arts;
Contemporary Challenges for Christians and the Arts;
A New Opportunity for Christian Involvement in the Arts; and
Making and Looking at Art.

These chapters are preceded by a list of illustrations, a preface, and an introduction. They are followed by a conclusion, notes, bibliography, and indices.

Dyrness describes his objectives as to—extend and enrich a Christian conversation on the visual arts—and he immediately relates this conversation to the dialog on worship (9). Following Simone Weil, Dyrness observes that people are drawn to God through affliction, religious practices, and the experience of beauty. He then goes on to argue that because modern life has banished these first two draws, the church is limited to the third draw—beauty—in attracting people to God (22). Dyrness concludes arguing for renewal in three areas: a new vision for the arts, renewal in worship, and a restoration of the Christian art tradition (155).

Dyrness speaks against the perception that interest in the arts is a Christian hobby practiced particularly by Catholics and mostly avoided by serious protestants. He argues persuasively that both Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin saw God's artwork in creation as infinitely more interesting than human artifacts (59). In fact, Calvin's outward focus in ministry—the whole of creation belongs to God, not just the sacred images of Jesus and the communion table in the church (the inward focus in the Middle Ages)—profoundly influenced art from the reformation period forward.

Visual Faith is a fascinating book. This review does not and cannot capture the subtly and freshness of Dyrness' writing. My own interest in the visual arts and Dyrness' work arises out of my need to understand how to appreciate and incorporate visual art in online ministry. In a visually sophisticated world, we need to understand images and how they shape our own thoughts.

What exactly is beauty? Dyrness' Visual Faith is a good place to start the conversation in searching for an answer.

Andrew says

this review first appeared on [<http://intraspace.blogspot.com>]

three or four years ago there weren't a lot of books around about christianity and the arts. since my university days i'd been obsessed with the idea of a re-emergent arts movement in the church and it seems i wasn't the only one. in the last couple of years, a noticeable movement has indeed begun to take place. alongside that are an increasing number of books on the subject.

but i got this book when there weren't so many, and i aimed to get anything that came out. the rather drab title and the awful cover design put me off reading it for a long time - even the author's name sounds like "dryness".

finally, three years after buying the book, i finished reading it. and it turned out to be an excellent piece of writing.

dyrness begins by giving a historical survey of art and the church (interesting), talks about art in the bible (interesting), gives some theological perspectives (difficult), then talks about the challenges and opportunities for christians in the arts today (excellent). all up, a very good survey of the issues.

dyrness challenges protestant churches to pick up visual creativity and shows that it doesn't have to be at the expense of 'the word'. recommended reading for anyone who is interested in the application of visual media in the church.

Jonathan says

An interesting and well researched polemical argument for an increased presence of the visual arts in Protestant Christianity. Of central importance to the book is the lengthy discussion of the Protestant Reformation, which uprooted the visual arts from liturgical practice. Dyreness argues that this was a mistake, and was a phenomena not so much rooted in Biblical thinking, but rather the philosophy of Plato, which asserted the superiority of the spiritual and invisible over the tangible and visible.

Dyreness also looks at even the most emphatically non-spiritual art of the late 20th century as a tacit search for something beyond the material world, and sees in much modern and contemporary art a search for higher truth. He argues that it is the role of the Christian artist to engage in contemporary culture, and suggests that the church should take advantage of the opportunity to engage with the world in this visual dialogue.

The author seems to be at his best when discussing art and art history from the perspective of a Christian. The chapters dealing with theology get cumbersome and, at times, thoroughly impenetrable: "Art that bears this special imprint of the Spirit will anticipate in space and time, substantially though provisionally, the final transfiguration of the cosmos." Huh?!

All in all, a good read. Sort of an updated Schaeffer, but with a bit more substance, in my opinion.
