

# ART IN CHRISTIAN LIFE



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Art in Christian Life  
T. M. Moore  
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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## Welcome to *Art in Christian Life*

Art is perhaps the most routinely neglected resource for Christian life and witness.

Yet human beings were made for art, and we are all involved in the arts in many ways.

Art has always played an important role in the Christian movement, and Christians have created a vast legacy of works of art that continue to inspire and delight many.

Why aren't more of us making good use of this gift from the Lord?

In this study we will explore the role art can play in human life, look at a few examples from the history of Christian art, and consider ways we might begin to make better use of the arts in our own walk with and work for the Lord.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Created for Art

*So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* Genesis 1.27

*Very good, indeed*

Here in our home state, a company called Green Mountain Drone provides overhead shots of the Vermont countryside, from which Vermont PBS culls snippets, to fill part of the gap between the end of one program and the beginning of the next. Those brief but glorious drone shots underscore the distinctly Vermont texture of our public television stations.

One of my favorite of their videos features vistas of two of Vermont's many state parks, one of which is just a few minutes from our home ([click here](#) to watch, but promise you'll watch the whole video, and on full screen). The rag-time piano in the background provides a jaunty, fun mood for enjoying some of the everyday beauty of Vermont.

Watch Green Mountain Drone videos, and you'll understand why so many people flock to Vermont in the fall. They come for the beauty. They want to stand on Mount Mansfield or by Lake Champlain, or wander one of the state's many trails or preserves, and take in the color, textures, shapes and slopes, ins and outs, flora and fauna of what is some of the most beautiful scenery in the world. If you can't make it to Vermont in the fall, [ShipFoliage.com](#) will sell you a box of fall leaves via the Internet.

Fall tourism is big business in Vermont, because people know beauty when they see it. The beauty of Vermont is so alluring, that folks will pay premium prices to enjoy it, be rejuvenated by it, or just stand there and watch, their eyes filling with tears and their minds with wonder.

You begin to get a sense, gazing on such beauty, of what God must have felt at the end of the creation week, when He pronounced the work of His hands, "Very good!"

Experiencing such beauty reminds us why art is so important to Christian life.

*Art, you say?*

Art is not a subject that occupies the time of many of us, at least, not for very long. Most of us are not habitués of the local art museum; we probably don't own a subscription to the symphony; we haven't studied a painting or sculpture recently, and we'd be hard pressed to name a favorite poet. Art's OK for those who are into that kind of thing. But most of us are not.

The role of the arts in our society has been usurped by pop culture in all its many and varied forms – most of them noisy, passive, attention-deadening, frivolous, and merely entertaining. A good deal of serious art is still available – paintings, sculptures, symphonic music, poetry, and the like – but it's just not the sort of thing with which we occupy our minds.

But every human being possesses an aesthetic sense and a creative bent; we like pretty things, and we like to express ourselves in pleasing ways – even if they're only pleasing to us. We can't get away from the artistic aspect of human nature.

It makes sense, therefore, that we should try to understand why we are the way we are, and what place the arts might have in our lives.

*Creators all*

God is the Supreme Creator, the Great Artist, Who brought into being out of nothing a creation of such vastness, wonder, beauty, diversity, order, color, sound, dimension, scope, and harmony that He could confidently pronounce Himself pleased with what He had made. The creation of God was *good* in His eyes; it pleased God, reflected His own character, refracted His being, and served the purposes for which He created it.

Then God made human beings in His own image and after His own likeness. That being so, we must be in some sense creators as well, as Paul Johnson argued in his book, *Creators*. Further, and unlike animals, humans can appreciate and celebrate the *goodness* of creation, and of the creative work of others.

God has endowed us with a spark of divinity. And the potential of that divine spark to ignite in us the warmth of rapture, vision, and mind-boggling delight is tapped, in part, through the experience of beauty.

In the Scriptures, as soon as human beings began to fill the earth and spread out over its surface, they engaged in artistic expression of various kinds. They created musical instruments, wrote poems and songs, drew and painted, and began making everyday items adorned with lines and patterns and colors, which have no useful purpose except to satisfy man's artistic urge. Made in God's image, even those who reject Him and His Law cannot help expressing their likeness to Him – and need of Him – through art.

God made human beings to be creators, as He is our great Creator; we are inescapably artists all. Thus the arts in all their forms are an integral aspect of our humanity. To ignore or to deny them is to frustrate our development as people made to reflect the very essence, purpose, and character of God in the world. We gasp and weep with joy to observe a magnificent landscape or the brilliant colors of fall, and this is but a reminder that something in our being hungers for the nourishment only art can provide.

*For reflection*

1. How would you define beauty? What makes something beautiful? Do you agree that human beings require experiences of beauty? Explain.
2. What role have the arts had in your walk with Christ? Do you think that more involvement with various art forms could contribute to your spiritual growth? Why or why not?
3. What opportunities will you have today to observe something beautiful, something that gives you that sense of the *goodness* of God that yet remains in His world? How will you make the most of this opportunity for your walk with the Lord?

*Next steps – Conversation: Where do your Christian friends turn to experience beauty? Ask a few of them.*

## 2 Something for Everyone

*All Your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia,  
Out of the ivory palaces, by which they have made You glad.* Psalm 45.8

### *Invitation to glory*

The anonymous [painting of Christ enthroned](#), from the medieval *Book of Kells*, includes a feature that one can easily overlook amid the lavish, intricate, and ornate art work that fills that illustrated page.

As described in Scripture, the heavenly throne room of our Lord Jesus Christ is richly adorned with a wide variety of arts. Music, fragrances, lavish furnishings, garments and tapestries, singers and musicians, jewels of various sorts – all these are described, in one place or another in Scripture, as present with the exalted Christ to honor, delight, and glorify Him. We do not know for certain that this is exactly what heaven looks like, but it's how God is pleased to have us think about it.

The Scriptures *describe* Christ's throne room; the artists of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD) sought to represent it *visually*. The painting of Christ enthroned from the *Book of Kells* is one of the more glorious of such depictions.

In the heavenly realm, where saints wait in the presence of Christ and His angels for the new heavens and new earth, the use of the arts abounds. The *Book of Kells* painting of Christ on His throne captures the glory and splendor of this heavenly scene with artistic power.

So it is curious that, over each of Christ's shoulders is a blank, unadorned panel. Celtic Christian art is renowned for filling the artistic surface with delicate drawings of various sorts. But here, in perhaps the most famous example of art from the period of the Celtic Revival, two white spaces remain unfinished. Interpreters differ on the meaning of this lacuna. Given that Celtic Christian art was meant to be not only instructive, but also participative, my sense is that these spaces were left blank so that viewers of this scene could, if only in their own minds, add what they thought might contribute to the glory of Christ depicted here. Caught up in the majesty and wonder of this portrait, our imaginations bristle with glorious ideas for contributing to our forebears' exalted vision of our Lord and Savior.

Art in all its forms provides opportunities for us to engage with Christ and those who have glorified Him, so that we too can experience the eternal glory of God.

### *Varieties of art*

Art can both express the glory of God and lead us to experience and participate in that glory. The Scriptures mention many arts that God saw fit to use in advancing His economy among men.

Prominent among these are the arts of song and poetry – as in the psalms, for example – as well as of instrumental music, both popular and liturgical (cf. the superscriptions of many psalms, which suggest a folk or popular tune, and 1 Chron. 25).

The visual arts also are employed in many settings: tapestries, carvings, metal work, painting and sculpture, architecture and design, garments of various kinds. The building of the tabernacle and the temple involved lavish and extensive adornment with various arts; and the City to Come of Revelation 21 is described in terms of rich artistic and architectural beauty.

Sometimes the arts are representational, as when pomegranates, dolphins, palm trees, and other familiar

features were carved into the furnishings and paneling of the temple. At other times the arts are more abstract – mere suggestions of beauty in patterns of colors, shapes, or materials. We think of the bejeweled priestly vestments of the Old Testament, and even the heap of stones that gave witness to the unity of the tribes of Israel.

*For us and for the divine economy*

From cover to cover in Scripture it is quite clear that God intends His economy to go forward among men by wide and varied use of the arts. The arts gave creators opportunities to depict the beauty, immensity, wonder, and goodness of God using everyday items and exotic materials. And because the forms they created were immediately available to all the people, those great works of art could draw people into the *experience* of God's glory where, through singing, prayer, and dramatic participation (as in a sacrifice, or the Lord's Supper), they could *express* the glory of God as well.

This same potential is available to all believers. The arts can bring us into God's glory, and allow us to share in and express His glory as we make our contribution to the blank panels of all the arts which await our creative hand. Learn about the arts, especially the great heritage of Christian art. Discover the glory of God in the beauty wrought by those who honored Him with their art. Then share your experience of God's glory with others.

We must not ignore this great treasury of gifts and abilities that God has deposited among us. We are all creators, all endowed with an aesthetic and artistic sense, all capable of discerning the glory of God in the beauty of a work of art. The songs we sing, the fashions we wear, what we read or write, how we adorn our homes and workplaces, even our conversational style – these are all forms of creativity and, hence, forms of art. They are blank spaces amid the everywhere-present glory of God, where we can participate in that glory in our own ways.

*For reflection*

1. Why do you think God chose to use so many different art forms to solidify His relationship with His people?
2. Art can exert formative power on the soul – on what we *think*, how we *feel*, and what we *value*. Can you think of a work of art – literature, sculpture, painting, or music – that has profoundly affected your soul? Explain.
3. The Lord's Supper is a form of art, a brief drama in which all believers participate, and which allows us to engage and express the glory of God. Explain. What can hinder this God-given art form from realizing its potential to engage us with God's glory?

*Next steps – Conversation: With what forms of art are your Christian friends involved? What do they gain from that involvement? Ask a few of them.*



### 3 To Delight

*And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.* Genesis 2.9

*Art all around*

One of my favorite paintings by a contemporary Christian artist is Philip R. Jackson's still life, *Party's Over*. Here's this funny origami bird, perched on a straw, ready to launch from a boat made of a soap dish and a party hat, into the great imagined beyond. Mr. Jackson explains the story this painting tells, but welcomes our own interpretations as well.

Who would think that everyday items like soap dishes, straws, and party hats could be combined to tell a story in art? And of what use is art that takes such items as its subject?

I suspect that most of us don't think of the arts as having any real use. They simply are. Art is a kind of pastime, an accessory to life, a take-it-or-leave-it fringe or frill that too many of us have chosen, for the most part, to ignore.

But as we have seen, God is very high on the arts – all kinds of arts – and He has made us in His own image so that we might gain the benefit He intends for us from this wondrous area of human cultural endeavor.

Furthermore, God has specific uses in mind for the arts, uses that are important to our development, enjoyment, and prospering in life, and to the progress of God's purposes among men. The more we understand about the uses of art, the more eager we will be to employ art according to God's eternal design.

The first use of art, which is foundational to all others, is to bring us delight.

*A delight to the eyes*

God is no mere utilitarian. He assembles ordinary things in extraordinary ways, and part of His purpose in doing so is to give us delight. When He made the trees, bearing all the wide range of delicious fruit, He didn't simply make them drab and unappealing. He wanted people to approach them and to harvest the bounty He had provided, and so, to draw them to the trees, God made them pleasant to the sight.

Consider the various factors that go to make a tree a delight to the eyes: shape, size, fullness, color, variation, trunk, limbs, branches, leaves, relation to its environment, and so forth. All these things collaborate to appeal to our aesthetic sense. This is what God intends for the arts as well. They should please and delight us, provide wholesome and even edifying enjoyment, and remind us in some way of the beauty, goodness, and truth of Him Who made us artists all.

The key to art's ability to delight and please us lies in the peculiar way the artist combines the various elements of his genre and marshals them together before our aesthetic sense. Philip R. Jackson has shown a special knack of staging everyday objects so that they tell stories with eternal significance. A small cluster of grapes represents new life for the world. An onion riding on the back of an origami bird expresses a husband's sympathy for his pregnant wife. Broken eggshells are assembled to depict the church as the hope of a broken world. Many of Philip R. Jackson's paintings demonstrate a profound whimsy, and the delight we feel as we study each object keeps us coming back for another viewing – a true measure of beauty, as William Cowper explained in his poem, *The Task*:

*Scenes must be beautiful, which daily view'd*

*Art in Christian Life*

*Please daily, and whose novelty survives  
Long knowledge and the scrutiny of years; -  
Praise justly due to those that I describe.*

*God wants us to delight*

When a composer brings melody, harmony, tone, rhythm, and orchestration together; when a story-teller weaves numerous characters and sub-plots into one grand tale and scheme; or when a poet bends all the devices of his craft to focus our attention, engage our senses, ignite our imagination, and strum the chords of our affections – when such things occur we know pleasure, enjoyment, and wholesome delight. This is precisely according to God’s plan. We cannot read the psalms, with their soaring visions of nations, mountains, fields, and forests celebrating the greatness of God, or their comforting images of shepherds, homes, and a secure city, and not experience delight in praying them.

Art should bring us a measure of delight, even art that troubles us, or causes us dread. The pleasure we experience from paying attention to those aspects of a work of art that appeal to us – sound, color, theme, rhythm, and so forth – can help us appreciate the beauty of even the most disturbing stories or images.

If we want to benefit from this use of art, we should seek out those arts which are most pleasing to us, and study them carefully to understand how they accomplish this God-given function. Then we will enjoy more fully not only art, but Him Who gives us the arts as well. We may grin at the origami bird, launching from the stern of a paper-hat boat, but we will linger there, perhaps asking ourselves, “And what about when the party’s over for me?” And then, perhaps, we will pause to give thanks to our Creator and Redeemer.

*For reflection*

1. Think of a song you enjoy, or that you like to sing. What is it about that song that gives you delight? How does the delight of that song affect you?
2. Can you think of a psalm, or other passage of Scripture that you enjoy reading or contemplating? Why do you find this passage especially delightful? Does your enjoyment in reading or meditating on this passage help you in wanting to understand its teaching? Explain.
3. How can art that gives us delight turn our thoughts and contemplations to the Lord?

*Next steps – Preparation: Find a favorite psalm or other passage of Scripture. Why is this a favorite? Do you sense a measure of delight reflecting on this passage? How does that sense of delight draw you further into the text? Share your observations with a Christian friend.*

## 4 Art for the People of God

*“Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel.” Deuteronomy 31.19*

### *The pleasure of the old*

Susie and I love the old hymns. What soaring pleasure and power for worship come from robustly singing [“Lead on, O King eternal! We follow, not with fears.”](#) Here is a hymn to focus us on Christ exalted, firm up our resolve in seeking the Kingdom, remind us of the power of the cross, and unite our voices to encourage one another, even in dark or troubling times.

I’m not opposed to contemporary praise songs, and some are very good. But it’s hard to match the old hymns of the faith for their ability to fill our worship with the joy and glory of the Lord.

Fundamental to God’s purpose in giving us the arts is their power to bring pleasure to our souls – our minds, hearts, and consciences. The lyrics of the old hymns stretch our minds with the majesty and glory of God, and the high calling we have received from Him. The melodies engage the heart so powerfully that it can at times be difficult to keep singing, because of the tears. And together, lyrics and melody drive a sound nail into our conscience, firming up and renewing Kingdom convictions and cherished truths.

If art were not pleasurable, it is doubtful it would be able to fulfill any of the other uses for which God intends it. But because God made us to know pleasure, and the arts can delight us in the depths of our souls, they also have power to *form* our souls in ways consistent with God’s plan to give us a future and a hope (Jer. 29.11).

Even – and perhaps especially – in our times of trouble. In the late 1830s, when the Cherokee Nation was forcibly removed from its homeland and marched along the Trail of Tears from Georgia to the Oklahoma territory, people who observed the cruel sight as it passed their homes reported hearing these Christian people singing, “Lead on, O King eternal! We follow, not with fears.” Joy and hope in the midst of deep injustice and unrelenting misery – this is the power of art, and in particular, the power of song.

The arts can teach and sustain us, and God intends for us to use the whole range of arts that He may instruct us in His truth. And of all the arts available to all the people of God at any moment, none is so powerful as song.

### *A song to remember*

Consider only two examples. First, the Song of Moses: God had just finished giving His Law to a new generation of Israelites, people who had been born in the wilderness, and so had not seen His mighty works of redemption, or heard His voice speaking on the mount. At this point in Deuteronomy, God had strictly admonished the people about straying from His commandments, for it was in their best interest, and that of the surrounding nations, for them to hold fast to His Word. He was bringing His lessons on the Law to a conclusion, and He wanted the people to remember and take His words to heart, so that they would remain faithful to Him, as He would remain faithful to them.

To help ensure this, God instructed Moses to write a song. Evidently, God considered that the Song of Moses – which is still being sung in heaven (Rev. 15.3) – would serve His people enough by making a deep impression in their souls.

On a more contemporary note, William Billings' (1746-1800) *Chester* is a powerful hymn of the American Revolution, capturing and declaring the faith of a people who firmly believed God was on their side against the tyrannical rule of King George III. British threats may abound, and the British army and navy may seek to impose their will on an independent people. But the colonists of New England rallied their resolve and renewed their faith by singing this powerful hymn, whether as part of Lord's Day worship, or spontaneously, at town meetings and political gatherings. *Chester* reminds us that the foundations of this nation were laid on a Biblical worldview, and that governments can only expect to flourish as they follow the good purposes of the Lord.

Songs like these, and countless other great songs of faith, as well as the psalms of Scripture, can be wellsprings of joy, buttresses of faith, and words of witness at every moment, filling us with the delight and pleasure of the Lord, and helping us along whatever trail of tears we may travel.

*Christians and the arts*

Christians, from those hiding in Roman catacombs to the Celts in Ireland, medieval monks chanting to echo the music of heaven, Protestant clergy and laity declaring their faith with Luther's *A Mighty Fortress*, countless missionaries of the Second Great Awakening, who left the comforts of home with the words of "Stand up, stand up for Jesus!" echoing in their ears, to today's contemporary composers and musicians, have understood that the same art which delights us when we understand it, is also powerful to instruct us in the things of the Lord, and to carry us forward in our witness for Him.

God understands this as well, and He intends that we should make plenty of room in our disciplines of Christian growth for the arts, and not least of all, for singing. Our discipleship will be incomplete without the aid of this powerful tool.

*For reflection*

1. Do you have a favorite hymn or praise song? Why do you especially delight in this song? How does it affect your soul?
2. The Song of Moses is still being sung in heaven. We don't sing it, just like we don't sing most of the great songs of faith our forebears composed, or the psalms God Himself has given us. Do you think this is a good thing? Explain.
3. How can you see that song has a powerful effect on people in our culture today? How does pop music, for example, affect people?

*Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about how you might take better advantage of the art of singing in your walk with and work for the Lord.*

## 5 Declare Yourself

*“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Deuteronomy 6.6-9*

### *Art as reminder and statement*

I once knew a pastor who understood the way art can function to make a statement about what’s important to us. His home was decorated with all manner of artifacts from Asia and Africa – masks, drawings, pieces of furniture, knick-knacks, and so forth. These were items he had accumulated over the years, during many trips abroad, or that others, knowing of his interest in Asian and African art, had given to him and his wife as gifts.

But he did not collect these statues, prints, tapestries and other objects primarily for their beauty – even though he derived a great deal of enjoyment from them, and could talk about any one of them with relish. Instead, these objects functioned as *reminders* to him, and to all who entered his home, that Christians are a missionary people and a worldwide community, and that our primary mission is to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Thus, the décor of his home was a *statement* concerning his priorities, and the priorities of the church he served.

It was no coincidence that this church had the largest and most expansive missions outreach I have ever seen.

### *What does your home say?*

A fair amount of literature is available explaining that the way people decorate their homes says a great deal not only about what pleases them, but what they believe.

In some homes, not much care is given to what hangs on the walls, how furniture is arranged, or whether things are kept neat and tidy. Such homes will certainly have a television, and this may be the focus of attention of the home’s inhabitants. The home may say, “Whatever,” and that’s just fine with those who live there.

In other homes, quite the opposite can be observed. Although a television set may be included, more attention is given to the décor of the home, and to the way things are arranged and kept.

While you might not decorate your home with artifacts from Asia or Africa, the choices you make concerning the appearance of your home say much about your interests and convictions. In the way we decorate, furnish, and keep our homes and property is an opportunity to use art to remind yourself of what’s important to you, and to declare your concerns to any who visit in your home. That art may be prints on the wall or music in the CD player, or your own artistic work of keeping the lawn or arranging the home. Whatever it is, it will say something about you and your beliefs.

When the Lord instructed the people of Israel to “write” His Law on the doorposts of their homes, and on the gates of their city, I doubt He meant this literally. God Himself has “written” His Law on our hearts, as image-bearers of God (Rom. 2.14, 15), and His Spirit is “re-writing” His Law on the hearts of those who believe in Christ (Ezek. 36.26, 27), now the *Spirit* of the Law, and not merely its *letter* (cf. 2 Cor. 3.4-6). God’s purpose in doing this is that the Spirit of the Law, written on our minds, hearts, and consciences, might remind us of His priorities and fit us to declare, by words and deeds, the love we have for Him and our neighbors.

Similarly, by “writing” the Law of God on the doorposts of our homes and the gates of our cities, we make a statement about the kind of wholesome and edifying culture we support, and remind ourselves of the beauty, goodness, and truth of God.

*Powerful tools*

Art and culture are powerful tools for declaring our deepest convictions and highest priorities. Christians are called to do everything for the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12; 1 Cor. 10.31). This includes how we care for our persons and property – the music we choose, our manner of dress and conversation, how we adorn our homes, what we read, the meals we prepare and how we present them, the orderliness and care with which we keep our property, and much more. By taking care to “write” the Kingdom priorities of God in all these areas, we bring the light of His glory to the world, precisely as He intends.

Our homes can be a work of art, reminding us of God’s goodness, beauty, and truth; and they can declare those virtues to all who may visit. Let us choose carefully, therefore, how we decorate, furnish, and care for our homes, lest by our ignorance or indifference, we misrepresent the core values and concerns of our lives, and miss a wealth of everyday opportunities to glorify God through the gift of the arts.

*For reflection*

1. How much of a conscious effort has gone into the way you decorate and keep your home? Do you see this as an opportunity to express your faith? Explain.
2. Obviously, there are some kinds of décor, and some ways of keeping a home, that Christians ought to avoid. What would you suggest as some guidelines for thinking about making a home more expressive of our calling to God’s Kingdom and glory?
3. The Law of God is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). It is the Law of liberty and love, freeing us from the deceptions of sin, and fitting us to be agents of grace. What would it mean to “write” this Law on your home?

*Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about the subject of this article. How much thought do they give to what the décor of their homes, and their manner of dress, conversational style, and work habits, say about their deepest beliefs, convictions, and priorities?*

## 6 Aid to Worship

*They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying:  
“Great and marvelous are Your works,  
Lord God Almighty!  
Just and true are Your ways,  
O King of the saints!  
Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name?  
For You alone are holy.  
For all nations shall come and worship before You,  
For Your judgments have been manifested.”* Revelation 15.3, 4

### *The art of worship*

The great commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matt. 22.34-40). We love God truly when we love Him with all our soul and body – when our mind is set on Him, the affections of our heart are united in desire for Him, the values and priorities of our will are submitted entirely to Him, and our words and deeds are directed toward Him and for His glory. Worship is the supreme setting for nurturing love for God and renewing commitment to Him, because, like nothing else in our lives, worship engages all aspects of our being in an act of devotion to God.

To ensure that worship realizes this fullness, God is pleased to include art in various forms for the worship His people offer. The pattern of worship revealed in Scripture features various forms of art, which, as the people of God engage these, catch up their entire being in celebrating and growing in the Lord. The more conscious we are of the role of the arts in worship, and the more faithful we are in employing them, the more our worship of God will be what He seeks, and what we need for consistent growth in Him.

Art plays into worship in a variety of ways: music, singing, the elements and flow of the liturgy, body posture, the preaching of the Word, the drama of the sacraments, even the architecture and adornments – or lack thereof – of the worship setting. Worship is the original and most enduring form of public art, involving many people engaged in various tasks, using a variety of art forms, all working together to create a public witness to the Creator Who directs them in this effort.

Worship without art is unthinkable. Whenever God’s people worship, they are engaged in the arts. The important questions are whether our use of the arts in worship is as God intends, and whether we who engage those forms in worship know what we’re doing, and are doing what we should.

### *A focal point*

One of art’s great abilities is to focus our attention in ways narrative alone cannot. Art invites us to look, attend, concentrate, imagine, and experience, appealing to a wide range of intellectual and affective powers around a single idea or theme. When the worship leader invites us to stand to sing, he is calling us to take up a work of art, and to use this gift from God to celebrate and exalt Him. He has given us music, instruments, and voices, and He calls us to exercise these together for His glory, consciously, conscientiously, diligently, and with love.

Think of a song like, “[A Mighty Fortress is Our God](#).” The powerful, assertive melody ranges from the top of the scale, as if originating in the heights of heaven, to its depths, where we live, and incorporates moods of triumph as well as uncertainty. The first melody phrase is repeated in each stanza, and is so strong and assertive that it sustains us through the more hesitating and inverted phrases of the middle, before we return to a final, confident tone of the primary theme in the last line. The first two phrases declare, “Here is what we



all believe!” The next two raise a question, “Yes, but...” The final phrase answers the querying mood of the middle lines with an affirmation of faith: “And He must win the battle! His Kingdom is forever!” The lyric is bold, confident, resolute, and filled with faith and hope. As we sing, we recall, proclaim, celebrate, and rejoice in the victory of Christ over the enemy of our souls.

Music and singing are just one of the forms of art employed in public worship. Together these forms, understood and embraced as God intends, can lift us in worship into the very throne room of the Lord, where our worship can realize the purpose for which God calls us to offer it. When, as is frequently the case, the mood and shape of worship are focused more on entertaining worshipers than exalting and honoring God, this abuse of art and worship eviscerates worship’s power to transform us, and reinforces instead our basically self-interested way of life. We learn only how to love ourselves more, but this does not prepare us for a life of self-denial, sacrifice, and witness for Christ, as is painfully evident today.

*Learn to worship!*

Art can powerfully engage us as whole persons when we come together to worship God, but we must not take it for granted. They will be best served by the arts in worship who take the time to learn how the music and lyrics of a hymn work, why the liturgy is arranged and paced just so, why we kneel or bow or raise our hands at certain times, what the colors, forms, and other symbols used in liturgy mean, how the reading and preaching of the Word work together, and what the sacraments are and why we administer them just so, and then to allow all those powerful elements to collaborate in lifting them into the presence of God with great joy.

Then, as we engage the arts in worship – observing, listening, waiting, singing, responding, entering the mystery and drama of the Lord’s Supper – we can consciously delight in the forms God has provided for His worship, and use them to declare afresh our love for and commitment to Him.

Don’t be a mindless or half-hearted worshiper! Learn about the various art forms employed in worship at your church, and discover how the artistic components of worship can make *your* worship more meaningful and compelling.

*For reflection*

1. How confident are you that the arts are used in worship in your church as God intends? Explain.
2. What could you do to participate more consciously and conscientiously in the various art forms of worship?
3. Why do we insist that worship, properly engaged, is the best environment for helping us to grow in love for God?

*Next steps – Transformation: Make a point to learn a new hymn each week. Look it up by title online. What did the composer intend? How does the music work to heighten the lyric? Sing the hymn throughout the day, and practice worshipping God with it.*



## 7 To Honor and to Extol

*My heart is overflowing with a good theme;  
I recite my composition concerning the King;  
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer. Psalm 45.1*

### *Our chief end in life*

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* reminds us that mankind's chief end in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. All that we are and have, all that we think and do, everything to which we aspire and for which we yearn, is to be turned to the praise, glory, enjoyment, and honor of our mighty God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For this is life eternal, that we might know God, and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent, and knowing Him, might find our greatest joy and pleasure being in His presence, and our entire life's purpose in seeking His Kingdom and righteousness (Jn. 17.3; Ps. 16.11; Matt. 6.33).

What could be a more fitting use of art than as a means of honoring and extolling the God Who gave this good and perfect gift to us? In discovering His joy and presence in some work of art, and being drawn by delight to praise and thank Him for His goodness? Or to share His beauty, truth, and goodness with others by sharing our love for those forms of art which plainly and powerfully reveal Him?

Some of the greatest achievements in the treasury of art history are those works devoted to exalting God and holding Him up to praise. They provide us with abundant and powerful opportunities to enter the glory of God and to declare that glory to others. Let's consider a few examples.

### *J. S. Bach*

If for this aspect of the use of art in Christian life we lingered only on [Johann Sebastian Bach](#), we would find abundant reason to glory in and glorify our Lord. Bach regarded his music as theology in song; he sought to capture the richness, sweetness, intricacy, beauty, delicacy, power, and wisdom of God in all his musical compositions, and to tell the story of His redeeming grace as many ways as he could.

Before beginning a composition, Bach would write the initials, "J J" at the top of his manuscript – Latin for "Jesus, help." Then, when his work was completed, he would inscribe the initials, "S D G" at the end, or the words, *solī deo gloria* – to God alone be the glory. Bach's music points and lifts us to the transcendent realm and the great Creator and Sovereign Lord Who rules over all things. His influence in the history of music is vast, affecting everything from hymnody, to symphony, opera, folk music, and rock. His work offers not only many inroads to and glimpses of the glory of God, but an example of how work done to God's glory can affect others as well.

### *Artists for the Lord*

Other examples of this same practice can be found in poetry. Poets as varied in time and place as Ephraim, Colum Cille, Petrarch, Dante, Spenser, Herbert, Milton, Hopkins, Milosz, and Wilbur have pursued their art with a view to exalting the beauty, goodness, and truth of God. [Gerard Manley Hopkins](#), unknown as a poet in his own day, plied this calling with faithfulness and unsurpassed beauty, and has left a legacy of work that can teach us to reflect on the world around us with an eye to knowing and glorifying God.

The same can be said of such painters as Caravaggio, Dürer, Rembrandt, and [Philip R. Jackson](#); hymn writers from every age of the Church; assorted story-tellers, novelists, and essayists – such as Madeleine L'Engle, C. S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry; folk artists; instrumentalists; designers and architects; sculptors; and many more.

The history of the Christian movement is adorned with artists from every age whose work captures the glory of God, and can lead us to experience and proclaim that glory. Besides these, many artists who have not been people of faith, drawing on the example of Christian artists, have produced works of beauty, goodness, and truth that reflect the glory of God. One thinks of Dürer's influence on young Andrew Wyeth, the psalms on Whitman, Bach on the Beatles, and Van Gogh on countless contemporary artists. Here too we can find that it is the glory of God to conceal His beauty in works of art from many cultures and times, and the joy of His children to discover that glory, wherever it may please God to reveal it (Prov. 25.2).

The arts are an excellent resource to help us fulfill our calling, whatever that calling may be. Since the arts are powerful to delight, instruct, remind, bear witness, and engage us for worship, it only makes sense that we should give more careful attention to learning about the arts and to incorporating forms of art into our walk with and work for the Lord. Books, websites, recordings, museums, online courses, and other resources for learning about the arts abound. We do well to have some component of our growth in the Lord devoted to the study of this important resource.

Our individual efforts to glorify God in our speech, lifestyle, dress, work, and artistic creations can lead others to consider Him in new ways. Given the many forms of the arts, and the ubiquitous interest in art by people in all walks of life, and the many opportunities for learning about and engaging the arts, to neglect this important field of endeavor is to forfeit a powerful resource for honoring God and knowing a fuller and more fruitful Christian life.

We were made *for* the arts *by* the Great Artist Himself. A great adventure of learning, delighting, growing, worshiping, and bearing witness awaits us in the arts, as we discover how to enjoy and use them for the glory of God and the blessing of our neighbors.

*For reflection*

1. Why do you suppose the arts have such a small place in the life of contemporary Christians? Is this a good thing?
2. In your experience, which of the arts have you found to most interesting and enjoyable? How might you begin to learn more about these arts?
3. How can Christians encourage and assist one another in making better use of the arts?

*Next steps – Transformation: What's one thing you can do, beginning today, to make better use of the arts in your Christian life?*

*Art in Christian Life*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Churches today do not consider training in the arts to be an important part of Christian life. Why do you think this is so? Does the history of the Christian movement support this idea?
2. For the life of a Christian, why do beauty, goodness, and truth matter? Might we expect the arts to help us grow in these? Explain.
3. If our understanding and use of the arts is limited, or if we are indifferent to the arts, can we expect to worship God as He intends? Explain.
4. What would be a workable approach for you to begin learning more about the arts and how they can serve you in your walk with and work for the Lord?
5. What's the most important lesson you have learned from this brief study of art in Christian life? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.