

Echoes of
E D E N



Reflections *on* Christianity, Literature, *and the* Arts



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Contents

1	God and Humans as Creative Artists	9
2	Imitation, the Heart of the Christian's Approach to Creativity	21
3	Building a Christian Understanding of the Artist's Calling	37
4	How Do We Judge the Arts?	51
5	Echoes of Eden: God's Testimony to the Truth	65
6	The Conversion of C. S. Lewis and Echoes of Eden in His Life	83
7	Echoes of Eden in Tolkien's <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	103
8	Harry Potter and the Triumph of Self-Sacrificing Love	123
9	Shakespeare and a Christian Worldview	145
10	Jane Austen, Novelist of the Human Heart	167
	Appendix: The "Outing" of Dumbledore	191
	General Index	193
	Scripture Index	???

God and Humans as Creative Artists

Thinking scripturally about the arts is an area where there appears to be great confusion in our churches. On the one hand, many Christians have been taught that, as believers in Christ, we ought only to listen to music, read books, or watch films that have been produced by fellow believers. On the other hand, almost all Christians will, in fact, read newspapers and books, watch television shows and movies, go to plays and musicals, listen to music, and buy art cards and pictures for our walls simply because we *like* these things. And we will do this without much reflection on who produced them, unless we encounter something that is obviously blasphemous, gratuitously violent, or clearly pornographic.

Even those who suggest most passionately that Christians should only enjoy art by other Christians will take delight in buildings, bridges, roads, interior decoration, clothes, or beautifully prepared and presented meals, and they will take this delight without asking whether the architect, builder, designer, manufacturer, or chef is a committed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, how are Christians to think about the arts? To approach this subject, we begin with the biblical doctrine of creation.

God, the Creator of All Things, Visible and Invisible

Every orthodox creed and every believing theologian throughout the history of the church has affirmed the Christian's faith in God, the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. We all have our favorite scriptural passages that affirm this doctrine, that express our hope in the Lord who made all things,

10 ECHOES OF EDEN

and that communicate this faith and hope with words of marvelous beauty. Two such passages are Psalm 8:1,

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

and Psalm 19:1,

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

We praise God now for the wonder of his creation, and we will praise him for this for all eternity:

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created. (Rev. 4:11)

Many other Scriptures also explore this conviction—sometimes at great length, as well in glorious poetry; see, for instance, Job 38–41, Psalm 148, and Psalm 19 (a psalm that C. S. Lewis called one of the greatest lyric poems ever written).

John Calvin, in exquisitely beautiful French prose, writes of the wonder of God's creation in words that retain their remarkable power even in our English translations and are worth quoting at length:

1. Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however

dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse. . . . And because the glory of his power and wisdom is more refulgent in the firmament, it is frequently designated as his palace. And, first, wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory. Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Heb. 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible. . . .

2. In attestation of his wondrous wisdom, both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs, not only those more recondite proofs which astronomy, medicine, and all the natural sciences are designed to illustrate, but proofs which force themselves on the notice of the most illiterate peasant, who cannot open his eyes without beholding them. It is true, indeed, that those who are more or less intimately acquainted with those liberal studies are thereby assisted and enabled to obtain a deeper insight into the secret workings of divine wisdom. No man, however, though he be ignorant of these, is incapacitated for discerning such proofs of creative wisdom as may well cause him to break forth in admiration of the Creator. . . . Still, none who have the use of their eyes can be ignorant of the divine skill manifested so conspicuously in the endless variety, yet distinct and well-ordered array, of the heavenly host; and, therefore it is plain that the Lord has furnished every man with abundant proofs of his wisdom.¹

The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins delights us with his poetic paean of praise in one of his best-known works, “God’s Grandeur”:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.5.1–2.

12 ECHOES OF EDEN

In another of Hopkins's poems, "Pied Beauty," we find that he holds up for our pleasure the amazing diversity of color, texture, taste, and action in creation:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Daniel Loizeaux considers God's creativity under four headings. He writes: "How God's imagination daily loads us with benefits. Contemplate this embarrassment of riches from a four-fold aspect: their perfection, diversity, profusion, inventiveness."² I am indebted to Loizeaux's discussion in my own exploration of these four aspects of God's creative genius.

Perfection

If we look under a microscope at anything God has made to see it in all its detail, we will discover that the more we see, the more amazing is his creative genius. A closer view enables us to see new and unimagined beauties and infinitesimally tiny wonders. Look at the structure of a leaf, a diamond, a snowflake, or a human cell. If we compare any product of human technology to any work of God—for example, try looking at an object made of polished steel, copper, or bronze—and try the same experiment in magnification, we very soon will observe the difference. What God has made is

²Daniel Loizeaux, "The Imagination of God," *Genesis: Journal of the Society of Christians in the Arts, Inc.* 1, no. 2 (1975): 72.

lovely to our eyes, but our own works, viewed under a microscope, show their flaws.

Diversity

Think of the many different varieties of birds, insects, trees, and flowers; or for an even more extraordinary example, the infinite variety of snowflakes, sunrises, sunsets, or—more importantly—human beings: no two are exactly the same.

Several times over the past few years my wife and I have traveled to Naples, a city on the Gulf Coast of Florida, to stay for a few weeks in a friend's home just five minutes' walk from the beach. Each afternoon when we are there we join the many other people who return to the beach to watch the sun go down over the Gulf—each day it is glorious, and each day it is different. In each moment of each sunset there is constant change, and yet every moment has its own glory and perfect beauty.

Profusion

God loves abundance: think of those daily sunsets or the flowers in a meadow, or the stars in the night sky—if you can get away from bright city lights to see them, such as out in a deep forest, in a desert, or high up on a mountain. In such a setting, the sky seems to be nothing but stars. Indeed, astronomers tell us that there are 60 billion galaxies in the universe, and that each one of these galaxies contains between ten billion and a hundred billion stars. Our sun is just one of these untold billions of stars. Such profusion is unimaginable to us.

I remember going hiking in the Sierra Mountains in Central California with my sons and a friend and his family. We slept out in the open, and one night we set out our sleeping bags by the shore of a small lake at about eleven thousand feet. It was a clear night and we lay there looking up at the stars. The number of them and the brightness of their light overwhelmed us. Then the moon rose over the mountains across the lake, and I burst out with the words of Psalm 8:

14 ECHOES OF EDEN

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens. . . .

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars, which you have set in place . . . (vv. 1–3)

Then, together we sang hymns and songs of praise. We had to express something of our awe and wonder at the loveliness of this world and of the glory of its Maker.

Inventiveness

We admire men and women who come up with new designs, and rightly so. But just think how this activity is only an infinitesimally tiny copy of the inventiveness of the Lord, who delights in making all things new—not just at the beginning of the creation, but every day.

Not Asceticism but the Glad Reception and Enjoyment of the Gifts of God’s Creativity

It is evident as we read Genesis 1 that God believed that all he had made was good. Repeatedly during the account of the creation, this refrain occurs: “God saw that it [“the light,” v. 4] was good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). At the literary high point of the text, when we read that he had created man, we find this expression of the Lord’s delight in his work: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (1:31).

However, some Christians believe that this world and the created order are no longer good after the fall. One writer puts it this way: “Before the Fall there was an earth; now there is a world; after the Second Coming there will be a kingdom.” He goes on to say that everything of this old creation—even inanimate object—is contaminated by the spirit of antichrist, indwelt by the Devil, and under the power of darkness. The writer concludes, therefore, that the enjoyment of life and of God’s daily gifts is no longer genuinely

spiritual; for such enjoyment is tainted with carnality and therefore in some manner suspect and inherently dangerous to us.

Calvin responded to such a view with a resounding affirmation of the beauty of this world and the appropriateness of delight in God's creation gifts: "Should the Lord have attracted our eyes to the beauty of the flowers, and our sense of smell to pleasant odors, and should it then be sin to drink them in? Has he not even made the colors so that the one is more wonderful than the other?"³

Scripture itself insists not only that delight in creation and the enjoyment of God's gifts are right and good, but also that asceticism—the claim that taking pleasure in our creaturely life is somehow unspiritual or even sinful—is in fact a heretical teaching. If heresy seems an excessive charge, then consider Paul's passionate words in 1 Timothy 4:1–5, an example of a biblical denunciation of the teaching that it is ungodly to enjoy the gifts of life:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

In these words, Paul insists that food, sex, marriage—indeed all the gifts of creation—are good and holy, for God himself has declared them to be so in his Word. Paul demands that we see that asceticism, even if it comes under the guise of spirituality, is heretical, even demonic. Why does he speak with such impassioned language? The simple answer is that the teaching that it is sinful to enjoy the gifts of creation is deeply blasphemous because it is a rejection of God's own valuation of creation. Asceticism turns its back on God and regards his creation as worthless, or even worse, as somehow corrupting to us, as if creation itself were a source of sin.

³John Calvin, *On the Life of the Christian Man* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 88.

16 ECHOES OF EDEN

Repeatedly in the history of the church, Christians have been tempted to devalue the richness of creation—and therefore the arts—as if it would be somehow more “spiritual” to live a life devoid of beauty, of good things, of music, of literature, of painting, of color, and so forth. It is as if bare simplicity, barrenness, and even ugliness were somehow more pleasing to God. Behind this idea is the conviction that the “spiritual” is all that matters, and that the physical, therefore, is at best only of secondary value. In this view, the arts are considered optional, rather extravagant, an unnecessary extra in life. But this belief is nonsense and, according to Paul, a heresy of the most serious kind, for in the end it is a denial of the goodness of creation and the goodness of its Creator.

The English poet and pastor George Herbert, in his poem “The Elixir,” captured this obligation of the Christian to value as good all that God has made. This poem may be found in many hymnals; I include here stanzas 1, 4, and 6:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean
Which with his tincture, “for thy sake,”
Will not grow bright and clean.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.

Reflecting further on this theme, we may point to five foundational doctrines that affirm the value of the richness of life here in this world:

- *Creation.* See, again, Genesis 1 with its repeated “God saw that it was good” and Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 4:1–5 (quoted above). God commands us to agree with him, to acknowledge that everything that he has made is good, and then to receive this good work of his with thankful and glad hearts.
- *Common grace, or God’s providential care for all creation.* See Genesis 9:8–17 and the everlasting covenant that God makes with all creatures after the flood. God cares for *all* creation, as evidenced in Psalms 103 and 145, and also in Jesus’s words in Matthew 6:26–29 and 10:29–31, where he speaks of God watching over and providing for the flowers and the birds and, even more, all people.
- *The incarnation.* The eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became flesh; he became a man; he became a part of this universe—not merely for the thirty-three years of his earthly life, but for all eternity to come. Who can imagine a more remarkable affirmation of the physical than this, that the everlasting God who alone has immortality entered our world, joined the human race, and shares our life!
- *Bodily resurrection.* See Paul’s joyful words about our physical resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5:1–5. Nothing expresses with greater clarity that our physical life in this world is precious than this conviction of God’s commitment, “not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4).
- *The new creation.* There will be a renewed earth, with the curse removed (see Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1–4). This promise of the glory of the earth to come underlines the significance and value of all that God has made for our enjoyment here and now. Redemption will not be complete until our human life is restored to its full delight in the wonder of God’s good creation.

God’s Image Bearers as Sub-Creators

Man and woman, God’s image bearers, are made to be sub-creators following after their Creator. The God who made all things made

18 ECHOES OF EDEN

us to exercise dominion under him over this good creation (Gen. 1:26–28). In Psalm 8, David declares that this likeness to God, demonstrated as we rule over this earth and its creatures, constitutes our glory as human persons. He asks a question that many people ask when they are overwhelmed by the glory of creation (just as we were that night in the High Sierras):

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him? (vv. 3–4)

David replies to his own question:

You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet.

This answer by David challenges us never to devalue human beings, for we are crowned with the glory and honor of being like God. The universe in which we live may indeed be so remarkable and wonderful to us that we sometimes feel very small and insignificant when we look at its beauty or grandeur. But in Psalm 8 David teaches us that God's glory shines more brightly in each human person than it ever does in the loveliest night sky, the grandest mountain range, or the vastest ocean.

We are persons made to be like the personal God who made us and everything else around us. As those created to image God, we are designed by him to exercise rule over the creation in which we are set. In exercising dominion over God's good creation, we are not creators in an absolute sense, like God, but, rather, sub-creators at best. We never create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) like God, for we are always working with some aspect of what he has already made. We might say that our dominion over this earth means that we "till the garden" of color, words, form and texture, sound and harmony, stone and clay, and imagination; of God's works in creation and of human works in history and in society. Sir Isaac

Newton likened our ruling the earth with the arts and sciences to the playing of a child: "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy, playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."⁴

C. S. Lewis recognized that all great artists acknowledge that there is something outside themselves that is greater than they are, and that is greater than the works that they make: "The greatest poems (*indeed all of the greatest artistic works*) have been made by men who valued something else much more than poetry."⁵ For the Christian, there needs to be a humble bowing before God the Creator and a glad acceptance of the gift of his created order with which we all do our work.

We exercise dominion now by "making things" with our hands, minds, and imaginations. This task will be ours forever, for on the renewed earth all the creative glory of all the nations will be brought into the kingdom of God to honor Christ (Rev. 21:24–26). Year by year we will go up from every part of this earth and bring what we have made to offer at the feet of Christ the King.

Sometimes Christians will insist that the only work that is truly worthwhile, pleasing to God, and spiritual is the work of serving the proclamation of the gospel across the world. This view suggests that if we were all truly earnest Christians, we would leave our "secular" jobs, in which we are simply making a living, providing for our families, and ruling the world, and we would all join the "sacred" work of mission. But if we stop and think about Jesus's life, we see that he was doing so-called secular work as a carpenter or a fisherman for many more years than he was a preacher and teacher. It would be blasphemous to suppose that during these years Jesus was living in a manner that was not fully godly and completely pleasing to his Father in heaven.

⁴Quoted in L. T. More, *Isaac Newton: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 664.

⁵C. S. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," *Genesis: Journal of the Society of Christians in the Arts, Inc.* 1, no. 2 (1975): 22.

20 ECHOES OF EDEN

The import of this reflection on our human calling to “till the garden” of this world with body, mind, and imagination is that the arts need no justification; they are good gifts of God, a basic part of the creation order. Our calling is simply to be thankful for these gifts of sub-creativity.

We may say, however, that there are five aspects of our God-given creativity, or five “callings” to direct us as we engage in the work of creating before the face of God, the great Creator who made us like himself and for himself:

- We are to seek to *glorify God* in all we do.
- We are designed to *find fulfillment for ourselves* in using, developing, and expressing the gifts God has so richly given us.
- We are to seek to *be of benefit to others*, so that they may be able to look at what we create and say of it, “It is good.” The Christian artist always lives in community and is called to serve others in the development and expression of the gifts God has given to each one for the blessing of all.
- In being creative, we fulfill our human design by *exercising dominion* over the earth.
- We are called, in all we do, including in our creative work, to *set back the boundaries of the fall*, to restrain the abnormality of our present human life in its brokenness and sorrow, and our present world that is under the curse and therefore resists our dominion.