

# The Importance of Aesthetic form in the Preservation of Truth



Religious Affections Ministries

# Truth



- ❧ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Ti 3:14–15)
- ❧ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Ac 20:27)
- ❧ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Ti 2:15)

# Truth and Aesthetic Form



- ❧ The Emergent Church denies propositional truth in favor of aesthetic form.
- ❧ The Missional Church affirms propositional truth as expressed in Scripture and denies the significance of aesthetic form.



# Preserving the Truth



- ❧ What is truth?
- ❧ What we have been given through Scripture, and what we are charged with preserving, is more than brute theological facts compiled in abstract statements.

# The Bible as Art



“. . . the books of the Bible are, in the main, works of literary art. From Genesis to Revelation we find epic narratives (tragic and comic), proverbs, poems, hymns, oratory, and apocalyptic literature whose artistic tools include allegory, metaphor, symbolism, satire, and irony. Comparatively little of the biblical material is strictly didactic, and where this is the case, such as in the book of Romans, the logical rigor itself is elegant (an aesthetic quality). Finally, Jesus' own preferred method of instruction, the parable, is an aesthetic device. And even when not using parables, his language tends to be heavily laden with metaphors and symbolism, a fact that exasperated the disciples.”

James S. Spiegel, "Aesthetics and Worship," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 4 (1998): 44.

# The Bible as Art



“The Bible comes to us in an artistic form which is often sublime, rather than as a document of practical, expository prose, strict in outline like a textbook.”

“We do not have truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a ‘beautiful setting.’ Truth and beauty are in the Scriptures, as indeed they must always be, an inseparable unity.”

Clyde S. Kilby, *Christianity and Aesthetics* (Chicago: Inter--varsity Press, 1961), 19, 21.



# The Bible as Art



There are other types of precision or clarity than the scientific. It has been said, for example, that poetry is “the best words put in the best order.” Similarly, because we are dealing with the Bible as God's word, we have good reason to believe that the biblical words are the right words in the right order. . . .

# The Bible as Art



To interpret the Bible truly, then, we must do more than string together individual propositions like beads on a string. This takes us only as far as fortune cookie theology, to a practice of breaking open Scripture in order to find the message contained within. What gets lost in propositionalist interpretation are the circumstances of the statement, its poetic and affective elements, and even, then, a dimension of its truth. We do less than justice to Scripture if we preach and teach only its propositional content. Information alone is insufficient for spiritual formation. We need to get beyond “cheap inerrancy,” beyond ascribing accolades to the Bible to understanding what the Bible is actually saying, beyond professing biblical truth to practicing it.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 48, no. 1 (2005): 96, 100.



# Truth and the Moral Imagination



☞ To inquire into what God has made is the main function of the imagination. It is aroused by facts, is nourished by facts, seeks for higher and yet higher laws in those facts; but refuses to regard science as the sole interpreter of nature, or the laws of science as the only region of discovery.

- George MacDonald, *The Imagination, and Other Essays* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1883), 2.

# The Moral Imagination



- ☞ It is a fallacy to think that one's worldview consists only of ideas. It is a world picture as well as a set of ideas. It includes images that may govern behavior even more than ideas do. At the level of ideas, for example, a person may know the goal of life is not to amass physical possessions. But if his mind is filled with images of fancy cars and expensive clothes and big houses, his behavior will likely follow a materialistic path. A person might say that God created the world, but if his mind is filled with images of evolutionary processes, he will start to think like an evolutionist. Someone may know that he should eat moderately, but his appetites override that knowledge when his mind is filled with images of luscious food. The imagination is a leading ingredient in the way people view reality. They live under its sway, whether they realize it or not.

- Leland Ryken, "The Bible as Literature Part 4: "With Many Such Parables": The Imagination as a Means of Grace," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147, no. 587 (1990): 393.







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# Imagination in the Bible



- ❧ Indeed, the panoply of genres in the Bible is nothing less than the imagination in full literary display.  
- Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 278.



# Aesthetics in the Bible



- ❧ The point is not simply that the Bible allows for the imagination as a form of communication. It is rather that the biblical writers and Jesus found it impossible to communicate the truth of God without using the resources of the imagination. The Bible does more than sanction the arts. It shows how indispensable they are.

Ryken, "The Bible as Literature Part 4," 392–93.

- ❧ "The Lord is my shepherd."
- ❧ "The Lord is my cattle-driver."









# Imagining Truth



- ❧ If we preserve propositional statements of doctrine alone in the form of systematic theology and doctrinal confession, and yet we have not preserved a biblically informed imagination of those facts, we have not succeeded in preserving the truth.
- ❧ Where conservative Christianity goes a step further is to also commit to preserving the *way in which the Bible expresses truth and moral standards*—in other words, Conservative Christians seek to preserve biblical truth, biblical goodness, and biblical beauty.



# Cultivating Imagination in Worship



Our musical and liturgical choices in worship can display an aspect of God that is often ignored. We must ask ourselves, how can we whet the congregation's appetites now for the satisfactions that will be theirs in God for eternity? One way would be to commit ourselves to the pursuit of God's beauty made manifest through his creation and ours, and value that beauty highly when making decisions for worship.

- John Mason Hodges, "Aesthetics and the Place of Beauty in Worship," *Reformation and Revival Volume 9* (2000): 73.

# Imagination and Worship



“At its best, liturgical art is not merely consistent with sound doctrine but serves positively to illuminate biblical teaching, making imaginative expression or application of biblical truth.”

- Spiegel: 51



# Imagination and Worship

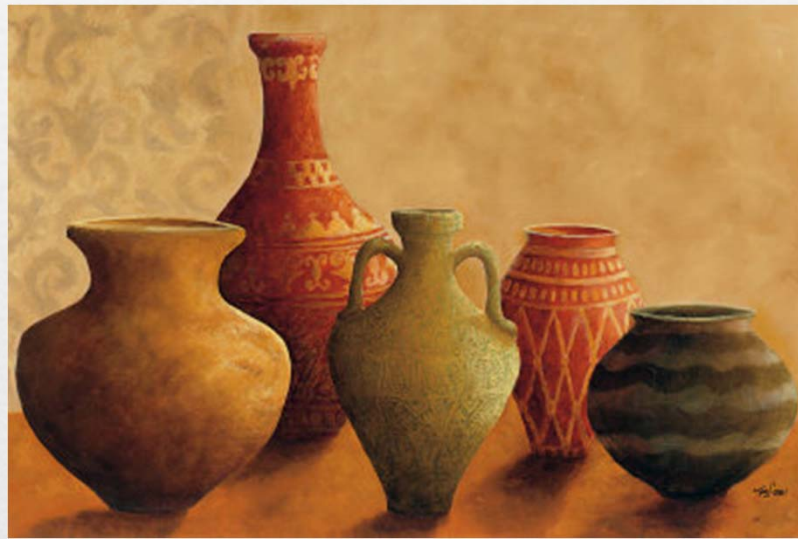


“Surely the fact that God himself chose an artistic medium as his primary vehicle of special revelation ought by itself to persuade us to place a special premium on the arts.”

- Spiegel, 44.

Conservative worship is essentially a desire to preserve the kinds of aesthetic forms contained in Scripture in our worship.

# Form



H<sup>2</sup>O



COOL

cool

COOL

# Word/Phrase Choice



❧ ancient

❧ elderly

❧ frail

❧ rickety

❧ seasoned

❧ old



# Truth in Worship



- ❧ Our truth must correspond to reality.
  - ❧ God's reality
  - ❧ Scripture
  
- ❧ Truth in Scripture is more than brute theological facts compiled in abstract statements.
  - ❧ God. Which God? What is he like?

GOD

GOD

God

God

God



# Form



A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing:  
For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and power are great  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Martin Luther, 1529

# Form



How strong and sweet my Father's care,  
That round about me, like the air,  
Is with me always, everywhere!  
He cares for me!

Anonymous, ca. 1929



# Form



So, when I'm lying in my bed,  
and the furniture starts creeping,  
I'll just laugh and say,  
“Hey, cut that out!”  
And get back to my sleeping.  
‘Cause I know that God's the biggest,  
and He's watching all the while.  
So, when I get scared I'll think of Him,  
and close my eyes and smile.

God is bigger than the boogie man.  
He's bigger than Godzilla,  
or the monsters on TV.  
Oh, God is bigger than the boogie man.  
And He's watching out for you and me.

# Form



Draw me close to you  
Never let me go  
I lay it all down again  
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire  
No one else will do  
'Cause nothing else could take your place  
To feel the warmth of your embrace  
Help me find the way, bring me back to you

You're all I want  
You're all I've ever needed  
You're all I want  
Help me know you are near.



# Performance



“‘Happy Birthday, Mr. President’ was a song sung by actress/singer Marilyn Monroe on Saturday, May 19, 1962, for then-President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, at a celebration for his forty-fifth birthday, ten days before the actual day of his 45th birthday, Tuesday, May 29. Sung in a **sultry voice**, Monroe sang the traditional ‘Happy Birthday to You’ lyrics, with ‘Mr. President’ inserted as Kennedy’s name. . . . Afterwards, President Kennedy came on stage and joked about the song, saying, ‘I can now retire from politics after having had Happy Birthday sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way,’ alluding to **Monroe’s delivery**, her racy dress, and her general image as a sex symbol.