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Taylor, W. David O., editor. *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*. 2010. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0801071911.

The creation of the book *For the Beauty of the Church* was inspired by the conference “Transforming Culture: A Vision for the Church and the Arts,” held in 2008 in Austin, Texas. Written to correct the seeming lack of vision for the arts in the church and “to inspire it in its life and mission,” the book initially came to me at a time when I was becoming keenly aware of the sacrificial cost of enjoying beauty. As I read, I would put down the book to wipe away tears trickling down my cheeks as the book resonated so much with what I was going through then. It’s an honor to write a review of several chapters from this volume.

Arts Pastor W. David O. Taylor (who recently joined the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary’s Texas campus) is the editor of this book that features writers from various denominational backgrounds: Anglican, Presbyterian, charismatic, and Catholic. The first two chapters, focused on the Gospel and worship, establish theological and scriptural foundations. The next four focus on four kinds of people involved in the arts one way or another: the art patron, the pastor, the artist, and the “practitioner.” This fourth category defies easy categorization, but includes aspects of being a pastor, a promoter, and a producer. The final two chapters of the book discuss the dangers and the future of art-making in the church.

I would like to give a summary of the following chapters: “The Gospel: How Is Art a Gift, a Calling, and an Obedience”; “The Art Patron: Someone Who Can’t Draw a Straight Line Tries to Defend Her Art-Buying Habit”; “The Pastor: How Artists Shape Pastoral Identity”; “The Artist: What Exactly Is an Artist and How Do We Shepherd Them?”; and “The Future: Looking to the Future, a Hopeful Subversion.”

The first chapter is written by Andy Crouch, worship leader and author of *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. He shares four observations on culture, based on Genesis 2 and 3. Crouch connects one’s perspective in culture to his or her subsequent stand on the arts. According to him, culture is God’s gift to man, as evidenced by what God gave Adam: a garden. Second, the garden is not only useful for nourishment or nutrition but it is also a beautiful place with the presence of gold. He stresses the significance of beauty by citing that the Genesis passage “indulges in metallurgical excursion” (Gen. 2:12), noting the presence of gold, whose value is fundamentally not in its usefulness but in its beauty. Third, there is potential for exploitation in culture as man’s way to self-sufficiency, wanting to live independent from God. He illustrates this through the fig leaves that Adam and Eve resort to wearing: useful, but not necessarily beautiful. The fourth observation returns to God, who not only initiated culture, but also continues to create within the creation, seen in his use of the leather garments to replace the fig leaves, the ark of Noah, and the bread and the wine—something more than simply the raw materials “wheat and grapes.”



Crouch forwards a theme that resonates through the subsequent chapters: that the value of art lies in its being “unuseful,” that it is not a means to an end, its *raison d'être* does not extend outside itself. He defines art as “those aspects of culture that cannot be reduced to utility”; it is not useless but “incapable-of-being-expressed-as-useful” and yet valuable. He places worship in the same category, and asserts that God does not “require us to be useful to Him.” Crouch lends to a strong voice in giving value to people not deemed useful by society. He ends by giving the examples of play and pain, two “useless” domains that artists bravely enter. With these two realities that reflect the beauty and brokenness of Christ’s body, Crouch hopes to “rekindle our capacity to be beautifully unuseful to God.”

During my college years studying music education in the Philippines, we were taught the mantra “art for art’s sake,” believing that music is justification enough for school. Though those words then felt so abstract and remote, we had to accept them as law, written in books and passed down from scholars and pedagogical authorities. Thankfully, Crouch broadens the discussion with his scriptural exposition on culture and beauty. Knowing that God is the initiator of culture and the one who gives value to beauty is a fitting starting point, a motivation to look for his imprints in the most imperfect culture. Beauty brings with it an inner joy, a quiet pleasure, a sense of awe and amazement, a sighing of contentment. Crouch reminds us of other incalculable and priceless “unuseful” or “impractical things” in life that we may contemplate along with worship and art: precious children, grandparents, friends and friendships, and yes, play.

I find Crouch’s “unusefulness” claim helpful, but I feel that it would be a serious error to go too far with this. Art is not useless, or without function. Having witnessed multiple art forms from different cultures, I have observed that the arts fulfill important functions in the community. For members of these cultures, their art forms do serve a purpose. They tell stories, “archive” history, reveal identities, knit communities together, accompany celebrations, and much more. Yes, it is also for beauty, and that in itself is a function. But I believe there is dual “unuseful/useful” quality of the arts that needs to be recognized. (This is demonstrated in Lauren Winner’s chapter, which I discuss below.)

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson, best-known for *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, writes the chapter on “The Pastor: How Artists Shape Pastoral Identity.” Peterson names three artists who were instrumental in forming what he calls a “distinct, biblically-rooted, and church-oriented pastoral identity.” Most striking to me is the story of Judith. An artist who worked with textiles, she came into Peterson’s church as one who was discovering new life in Christ. Judith represented those who stand in awe of the grace that is made available to them, who feel “lucky” for hearing the Good News, who are grateful for being in a safe, wonderful place like the church. Judith saw everything “as if for the first time” and responded with childlike wonder to things she was learning in the community of believers and from the Word of God. The other two artists Peterson names are Willi Ossa, who worked as a janitor by night and a painter by day, and Gerry Baxter (known by the pseudonym Bezalel), an architect who helped design their church building. Peterson describes these artists as people who are not defined by their jobs but by their calling. Being an artist is their vocation. As a pastor, Peterson likens himself to them: called to serve his God, and not simply to perform a job or a task. In pastoring these artists, Peterson found himself being simultaneously challenged and inspired. Peterson extends an invitation to his fellow pastors to make friends with the artists, for they bear a freshness of the beauty of Christ and make tangible and more real the truths that might otherwise remain an abstraction.

Some of my artist friends may be wishing that Eugene Peterson was their pastor, too. Growing up, it was common to hear stories of church musicians who were placed under disciplinary action for breaking ministry

rules and who eventually left the church. They used their talents somewhere else, outside the body of Christ. It was disheartening to see these young men and women, whom churches oftentimes relied on the most, seemingly cared for or understood the least. Burdened by this scenario, we've held events like "Levites in Leadership," for church musicians thrust into leadership positions without having been mentored or spiritually fathered. But this of course could only go so far, not really redressing the past hurts. Fortunately, many church leaders have now grown in the area of discipling musicians and artists. May there be more of Peterson's tribe, pastors who appreciate and love the artist and who will reach out to more Judiths, whose refreshing perspective we all could learn from. May Peterson's voice, and many more like his, continue to resound and call forth their fellow shepherds to care for these sheep, who though stubborn and difficult to understand at times, also stand with them in tirelessly creative service.

"How, in terms of Christian ethics, can you justify spending that money on art when there are poor people to be fed?" This is the question Lauren F. Winner struggles with in her chapter, "The Art Patron: Someone Who Can't Draw a Straight Line Tries to Defend Her Art-Buying Habit." The question came from someone from the audience when Winner was lecturing, referring to a \$900 papercutting on the story of Ruth that Winner had purchased. For Winner, the artwork held a personal meaning, helping her make sense of her conversion from Judaism to Christianity and the loss that it entailed. Explaining further, Winner draws from her Jewish background. She describes where her attitude for the arts originated: the Jewish concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, where one does not settle for obeying the commandments, but one strives to "beautify" them. By going beyond the requirement, by making the worship implements beautiful and not just functional, one "adorns" God, one beautifies him with praises, one honors and glorifies him. For the author, the expensive papercutting does not just symbolize her own journey: it also adorns God.

Winner, though affirming that the value of arts cannot be defined within or limited to pragmatic terms, asserts that the arts do have a purpose. They have played roles, positive and negative, and Winner finds examples from North American church history and even nature. The arts can continue to have a purpose: to make clear scriptural doctrinal truths, and to reveal more of God and his beauty.

Winner tackles one of the most difficult and perennially controversial topics in relation to art: its economic aspect. Coming from a third-world country where socioeconomic differences are more pronounced and where the arts have been part of the great divide, I appreciate this discussion. When, for example, I told my dentist that I was going to study music in college, he asked me why I would do that. He said only people who didn't know what to do with their money (and people who played in marching bands) majored in music. I found it refreshing to read Winner's honest and personal approach to this complex and emotional issue. I have witnessed firsthand the devastation that a mindset of poverty can bring. This way of thinking can be just as devastating as an actual lack of resources. When brought face to face with the generous God of provision and abundance, the "impractical" expense of worship fades and is rendered insignificant. The worshiper becomes more willing to "adorn" God, to sacrificially give back to him, even at a costly price, knowing that there's more where it has come from.

Winner gives a welcome balance to the "arts-as-unuseful" idea, with its emphasis on tangible purpose. She does this by referencing her mother's role in her purchase of an expensive artwork, and by giving examples of how the arts have been the church's effective helpmeet in its mission of propagating and elucidating the Gospel. The arts do give us a connection to our past and our heritage, providing security and an anchor that is helpful in moving forward.

In the chapter “The Artist: What Exactly Is an Artist and How Do We Shepherd Them?” Barbara Nicolosi discusses what art is all about and teaches the readers how to spot a real artist. Nicolosi describes herself as an Evangelical Catholic, a journalist, a critic, and one “who’s serious enough about screenwriting” to consider herself an artist.

Nicolosi claims that beauty is the artist’s domain, citing Thomas Aquinas’s definition: “The beautiful is wholeness, harmony, and radiance.” The author lists four characteristics of artists:

1. their talents are exhibited at an early age;
2. their works have emotional power;
3. they bring a newness, an unforeseen freshness of perspective and delivery; and
4. they are obsessed with details and nuances of form.

Nicolosi notes that artists are sometimes “socially inept” not only because of the long hours needed to perfect their work, but because the work entails the un-pleasurable disclosure of one’s true, but hidden and oft-misinterpreted, nature. Artists have eyes that see what others fail to see. They share these visions through symbols and sounds, color and texture, in a language that is never direct, but always multi-layered with interpretation.

Nicolosi urges the pastors to “hang in there” with the artists, observing that when God gifts a community with an artistic genius, he also sends at least one who can appreciate and understand this genius. This arts supporter saves the artist for all of us, the artist who plays the dual role of priest and prophet in making creation’s beauty more tangible.

I like the straightforward way Nicolosi characterizes the artist and lets the non-artist peek into the artist’s complex world. It does a service and paves the way for a better appreciation of one by the other who is often stereotyped and dismissed as “moody because he’s an artist.” Her descriptions of how to spot an artist are helpful, especially for pastors and would-be advocates who need to be there for them. In talking about the arts, however, I wish Nicolosi also delved more into the provoking, unsettling aspects, the ways the arts can disturb the status quo.

The book’s last chapter, “The Future: Looking to the Future, a Hopeful Subversion,” is written by theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie. Begbie presents his vision for the arts of the future. He proposes beginning with the future instead of being overwhelmed by the present. Begbie then imagines how the arts could be different today if they were subverted by this future, Spirit-filled vision. The Spirit would then be free to do several things to bring about this vision: 1) unite the unlike; 2) generate excess; 3) invert; 4) expose the depths; 5) re-create; and 6) improvise. Uniting the unlike is exemplified by the coming together of pastors and artists in the conference that gave rise to this book. Though they are two distinct groups communicating on different planes and through different media, the collegial dialogue was not only mutually enriching but benefited the church at large as well. The Spirit subverts the human tendency towards uniformity. Excess, not balance, is the attribute of the coming kingdom, where evil is not simply replaced by good but overwhelmingly defeated by an expansive love, where there is an abundance of riches, beauty, and grace. The Spirit subverts and inverts when the coming ruler is a Lamb, where the humble are exalted and the proud are debased. The Spirit subverts the inclination to be superficial and sentimental, and instead probes and reveals the repulsiveness of human filth and frailty, bringing it back to the cross where life and redemption are found. Where weapons of war are converted to implements of peace, where the physical world is not obliterated but carried to a new

dimension of life, there the Spirit subverts and recreates. Lastly, the Spirit improvises, not being limited to the binary options of order and disorder, but moving beyond to the surprising and spontaneous. Begbie envisions that pastors and artists alike would in the future explore together the implications and executions of this seeing-from-the-future-back-to-the-present stance.

This final chapter is a fitting capstone to the entire book. It shares with the Bible a hopefulness that comes not from the present reality but from the certainty of a triumphant and glorious future. It recognizes the challenges and yet provides a reassuring picture that can fuel one on despite the difficulty. It addresses the artists and the pastors. It speaks not only about the product or the art form, but also about the people who may be involved.

As a younger believer, I have always accepted, almost without question, anything written by English-speaking evangelical authors. Interestingly, it is through exposure to arts in missions that I have learned to put on a new set of lenses that constantly seeks cultural connections and applications. I now see that *For the Beauty of the Church* is clearly a book written by North Americans, for North Americans. The artistic examples cited are, naturally, mostly from that region and I do not begrudge that. But as an Asian, I now wonder about our own concept of beauty: in relation to worship, in relation to the church. How do we talk or write about it? Who are our artists? What artworks would be cited in the book? Begbie's vision of uniting the unlike would have been realized immediately in the book if voices from the worldwide church were also represented. It is the dream of this reviewer that our voices would be listened to by our brethren from the North. Then again, it may indeed be part of that hopeful future.

Without a doubt I have enjoyed and learned much from *For the Beauty of the Church*. It comes at an opportune time, when the artist's influence has reached an unprecedented peak and when the pastor's guidance and involvement has become more crucial and vital. It covers relevant issues from different perspectives. I will continue to recommend it to my artist friends and pastors. If I could have added one thing to the book, it would be a chapter dwelling on the artist's true and main inspiration, our beautiful Savior who paid the costliest price for broken and marred people like us to undeservedly experience the reality and joy of beauty.

Editor's note: Two small changes were made in this review after the initial publication. One was a minor typographical error, and the other was a clarification in the wording of a sentence. The revised version was uploaded on the same day as the original publication.