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BIBLICAL MEDITATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS: A
METHOD OF BIBLICAL MEDITATION FOR A POST-
CHRISTIAN, VISUALLY-SATURATED AGE

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APPROVAL SHEET

BIBLICAL MEDITATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS: A
METHOD OF BIBLICAL MEDITATION FOR A POST-
CHRISTIAN, VISUALLY-SATURATED AGE

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For the glory of God

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PREFACE

I would like to thank the many people who encouraged and supported me in this process. Thank you, Dr. Don Whitney, for your continued guidance; I have learned much from you both in word and deed. Thank you to my parents and sister—you have cheered me on and continue to embody godly faithfulness. Thank you, Jon, for your unending support—I love you. Thank you, Southern Seminary, for how much you have formed me and spurred me toward godliness. Thanks be to God for these gifts. *Soli Del Gloria* again and again.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The following dissertation presents an application and extension of biblical meditation through the visual arts that derives from a proper understanding and ongoing practice of meditation on Scripture.

Thesis

The thesis of this dissertation is: The visual arts should be counted amongst the methods of biblical meditation—as outlined and practiced in Scripture—as a biblically faithful and exhortative means for healthy biblical spirituality, particularly in today’s post-Christian, visually-saturated culture.

The research questions pursued in the dissertation are: (1) What is biblical meditation in definition and practice, and (2) Can the visual arts be an expression of biblical meditation for the spiritual edification of believers today? The dissertation develops a method of biblical meditation stemming from a scriptural understanding of meditation and its practices that flow into an extension of this practice through the visual arts.

For clarity, definitions of both biblical meditation and the visual arts will be established. The definitions of the major terms utilized in this project are as follows:

Biblical meditation. *Biblical meditation*—a God-centered practice commanded for believers—is the careful thinking and pondering primarily upon God’s Word, but also upon God’s works (including his work of creation), God’s attributes, and God’s ways, in accordance with Scripture. These four broad categories are established in Scripture. Biblical meditation is derived from and directed to a Triune God and is a God-given gift for the purpose of the believer’s maturity and sanctification.

Visual arts. The *visual arts* are art forms that are primarily visual in nature, including painting, sculpture, architecture, and even filmmaking. Although this dissertation focuses solely on the painting medium of the visual arts, the argument presented can be adapted and applied to all forms of the visual arts.

Methodology

This dissertation develops a research-based methodology for its completion. The dissertation establishes a biblical and theological argument for a definition and practice of meditation from the Bible, performs a brief survey of meditation throughout church history, and determines how meditation is perceived and understood both inside and outside the church today. The dissertation then references the relationship of the church and the visual arts throughout history and analyzes their pedagogical usage and societal value, after which a connection from the visual arts to biblical meditation is suggested and an application of a method of biblical meditation through the visual arts is proposed.

Summary Research

The primary research done today on the subject of meditation occurs in the social sciences. Influenced by transcendental meditation (TM) and similar practices, meditation has become a tool used in counseling, psychology, psychotherapy, and education. A brief, online search on academic research regarding the topic of meditation overwhelmingly leans in this direction. Consequently, dissertations and theses that blend meditation and “spirituality” in a secular or non-Christian context abound. However, several dissertations and master’s theses, recognizing this trend, have been written on the correlation of a Christian definition of meditation and mental health, whether regarding

seminary students¹ or Korean church congregations.² Other dissertations have analyzed Christian meditation from a biological and neuroscience perspective, such as Richard Bauer’s recent work on “contemplative Christian spirituality.”³ Theses and dissertations that combine the topic of meditation with other Christian or “spiritual” practices also abound, whether combining contemplative prayer,⁴ equating Lectio Divina with Scripture meditation,⁵ or even integrating yoga⁶ with Christian meditation.

However, this dissertation seeks to develop and form a practice of biblical meditation as defined and presented in Scripture, not primarily from a survey of forms of meditation in the Christian tradition, nor from Eastern spirituality, syncretistic forms, or secularized meditation. David A. Weber has written a strong DMin dissertation on a Reformed model for Christian meditation today.⁷ Although several DMin and PhD works offer various models and arguments for biblical meditation for individual believers in the local church and students of Christian institutions, not much has been produced in the

¹ Sun Tsai, “A Pilot Study on the Impact of Christian Meditation and Biofeedback on the Mental Health of Graduate Students in Seminary” (MA thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2016).

² Jinse Kim, “The Efficacy of Christian Devotional Meditation on Stress, Anxiety, Depression, and Spiritual Health with Korean Adults in the United States: A Randomized Comparative Study” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2014).

³ Richard Christian Bauer, “Investigating Contemplative Christian Spirituality as Christian Formation through a Process Hermeneutic: An Analysis of History, Evolution, and Neuroscience in Christian Meditation” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2020).

⁴ Karen L. Bray, “Contemplative Prayer and Meditation: Their Role in Spiritual Growth” (DMin diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2017).

⁵ Amy Sturdivant Jennings, “Scripture Meditation (Lectio Divina) and the Regulation of Negative Reactions to Stress in Anderson University Students Anderson, South Carolina” (PhD diss., Mercer University, 2020).

⁶ Carl C. Caskey, “Guidelines for Christian Meditation Integrating Yoga Meditation into Christian Prayer” (DMin diss., United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, 1986).

⁷ David A. Weber, “Christian Meditation in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a Reformed Model” (DMin diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2017).

evangelical academy on the practice of meditation.⁸ A variety of theses and dissertations connect meditation with other biblical spiritual disciplines and practices, such as silence⁹ or evangelism.¹⁰ When writing on meditation, some have chosen to present the topic through a historical lens, such as those on the Puritan model¹¹ or based on a historical figure; Ronald C. Barnes's project on Andrew Fuller is an example.¹²

This dissertation connecting biblical meditation with the visual arts contributes a unique offering to the field of biblical spirituality. Several dissertations address art and religious practice or mindfulness,¹³ but none seek to clearly define biblical meditation and operate from that specific definition. Unlike other dissertations that have focused on

⁸ For example, see Christopher Ellis Osterbrock, "Teaching Biblical Meditation at Mount Washington Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio" (DEdMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018); Dwayne Gene Martin, "Deepening Discipleship During Corporate Worship at Refreshing River of God Fellowship in Ephrata, Pennsylvania" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019); Barry Glendon Raper, "Teaching Biblical Meditation as a Means to Prayer to Students of Welch College, Nashville, Tennessee" (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013). See also Matthew Bassett Ford, "Hermeneutical Meditation at Fountain of Life: Fostering a Habitual Interaction with Scripture among Millennials" (DMin diss., Trinity International University, 2021). Also written with a similar theme is Sakunee Kriangchaiporn, "The Role of Meditation in Spiritual Learning for Christian Discipleship in Thailand" (PhD diss., Biola University, 2015).

⁹ Jonathan Mermis-Cava, "Relating with Silence: Christian Meditation and the Production of Roles, Relationships, and Culture" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2007).

¹⁰ Ashley Carver-Woodward Boyles, "Reaching Transcendental Meditation Followers for Jesus: Christian Meditation and Cultural Contextualization" (MA thesis, Liberty University, 2017).

¹¹ See Kathy Ann Knight, "A Study of Richard Baxter's claim for the Indispensability of Heavenly Meditation as Presented in the Saints' Everlasting Rest" (MA thesis, Regent College, 1987); Greg K. Daniel, "The Puritan Ladder of Meditation: An Explication of Puritan Meditation and Its Compatibility with Catholic Meditation" (MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1993).

¹² Ronald C. Barnes, "Think on The Word: Biblical Meditation in the Life of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and The Tradition in Which He Stood" (DMin thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019).

¹³ Su-Lien Hsieh synthesizes art with Buddhist practices in Su-Lien Hsieh, "Buddhist Meditation as Art Practice: Art Practice as Buddhist Meditation" (PhD diss., University of Northumbria at Newcastle, United Kingdom, 2010); while Amaris Espinosa studies art-based interventions and mindfulness for mental health in Amaris Espinosa, "Art as a Mindfulness Practice" (PsyD diss., Antioch University, 2018).

biblical studies or meditation itself,¹⁴ this dissertation provides a method of meditation based upon and stemming from biblical meditation that flows through the visual arts. The sole research project that is somewhat similar to this dissertation is Gui Jie Zhang’s DMin dissertation from 2011.¹⁵ Titled “Growing the Church: Christian Renewal through Art and Meditation,” Zhang recognizes the power of the visual arts and offers “artistic meditation” to better know God and understand his Word both individually and corporately. It appears that her method is designed for church leaders to utilize for purposes of numerical congregational growth, as she has recognized a decline of the Presbyterian Church (USA). As an artist, the author combines her artistic and theological concepts to bring about a journey from spiritual brokenness to renewal through meditation. It appears from the abstract that Scripture is not central to this process.¹⁶ This dissertation, however, presents a different methodology. The method offered—the application of biblical meditation through the visual arts—is based on the practice of *biblical* meditation and is a theocentric model, not one that begins with personal brokenness. While this dissertation offers a method that leads to personal sanctification that results in stronger biblical spirituality within the church as a whole, unlike Zhang, this work’s primary objective is not to promote numerical growth in a local church or denomination.

Significance

The significance of this research for the field of biblical spirituality is twofold.

First, because so many different forms of meditation are practiced and promoted in

¹⁴ For example, John A. Brownsberger, “Christian Meditation: Its Value and Relationship to a New Testament View of Discipleship” (DMin diss., Ashland Theological Seminary, 1990); Edward L. Hedding, “The Uniqueness of Christian Meditation” (MA thesis, Liberty University, 1986); Craig Harrison, “From Doctrine to Application: The Art and Practice of Biblical Meditation” (MA thesis, The Master’s College, 2001).

¹⁵ Gui Jie Zhang, “Growing the Church: Christian Renewal through Art and Meditation” (DMin diss., University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, 2011).

¹⁶ Unfortunately, the full text is not available to view or purchase by the request of the author as stated on ProQuest and the information provided in this section is gleaned from the abstract only.

American culture, Christians can easily lose a clear understanding of what *biblical* meditation is. Though meditation is a Christian tradition, it is frequently absent from evangelical practice in part due to a lack of teaching as well as to concerns about its many counterfeit forms.¹⁷ By contrast, there is a surge of non-Christian forms of meditation in American society at large, stemming from the popularization of New Age and Eastern spirituality. To meet this challenge, the church should reassert to its members meditation according to the biblical definition and practice. Beyond this, evangelicals can both teach meditation rightly amidst many worldly counterfeits, while also having an opportunity to recognize this cultural trend as a means to model a spiritual discipline that reflects the source of true and lasting peace, Jesus Christ. A means of godliness and spiritually deep work, meditation must be studied and taught to better equip the saints to live fruitfully amidst a sea of postmodern thought and unbiblical culture. Based upon the Triune God, biblical meditation finds itself upon the teachings of the Bible but extends far beyond its pages. Derived from and directed to the Triune God, biblical meditation is both didactic and apologetic. Its nature is both personal and relational, cerebral and affective. True biblical meditation is a means to worship God and respond rightly. Meditation flows from time in the Word to affect all aspects of one's daily life. By means of this spiritual discipline, Christians become more holistically mature, less hypocritical, more charitable and evangelistic, more submissive to Christ's lordship, and experience the life-changing power of the gospel message. Meditation is a gracious gift from the Triune God for

¹⁷ A 2017 study by the Barna Research Group analyzes the practices of those who profess to be spiritual but not religious. Although "meditation" is not clearly defined, the research reveals that in the US meditation rates are actually higher among those who "love Jesus but not the church" than among those who attend church." The conclusions reveal the various practices of both nominal "Christians" and "spiritual" individuals in the United States. See Barna, "Meet Those Who 'Love Jesus but not the Church,'" March 30, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-love-jesus-not-church/>; Barna, "Meet the 'Spiritual but Not Religious,'" April 6, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/>. Additionally, a Barna study in 2018 studies the self-care practices of spiritual Americans. Meditation is listed third, after being in nature and reading spiritual books, revealing the prominence of meditation (again, though undefined) in the American culture. See Barna, "How Spiritual Americans Practice Self-Care," April 18, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/spiritual-americans-practice-self-care/>. Interestingly, particularly for this dissertation, meditation is given a broad definition and appears to be removed from any scriptural basis or connection.

knowing him more intimately and learning how to live for his glory.

Second, the evangelical church often shies away from the visual arts as a resource for sanctification and the cultivation of good thought. evangelicals have possessed a long tradition that has wisely upheld and cherished the primacy and final authority of the Word of God.¹⁸ The Bible must remain central to how believers learn about and know God. Being a “people of the Book” has resulted in the church rightly giving first importance to the spoken and written word when it comes to teaching what the Bible says since these means are not only ordained in Scripture, but they also convey truth in the clearest, most specific, and unambiguous ways of human communication. However, this tradition has perhaps swayed too much toward the medium of books and the written word and away from the visual arts. Out of genuine concern for breaking the Second Commandment, the Protestant tradition rightly moved from iconography and portraits of Jesus. However, knowing God through words is not the only way to learn about the things of God. Again, words are the ordained means through which God has revealed and preserved his communication, but God declares his glory in a myriad of ways. The firm foundation of the Word should bring about a richly and biblically-based meditative life *and* cultivate greater sensitivity toward God in everyday life. A spirituality based primarily and predominantly upon *Sola Scriptura* that *then* informs and transforms the understanding of all other avenues of learning is a biblically-sound spirituality.

The visual arts, that is, art forms primarily visual in nature (such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and even filmmaking), are available to followers of Christ as a rich source for applying biblical meditation, although this dissertation focuses solely on the painting medium of the visual arts. This research contributes to the overall scholarship regarding meditation, as biblical meditation is grossly under-practiced in the church.

¹⁸ The definition of evangelicalism both here and throughout this dissertation aligns with Bebbington’s quadrilateral of the four characteristics of evangelicalism. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

Moreover, providing a variety of methods of meditation directly benefits the church. The qualities of the visual arts require pause and reflection, much like the practices of biblical meditation. In a visually-saturated society in which images and videos vie for attention and consumption, a biblically-based understanding and interpretation of the visual arts can teach principles that run antithetical to the deluge of content believers face daily. The visual arts often reflect the cultural values of the period in which they were produced, display the creative *imago Dei* of humanity, and have been used for educational purposes for centuries. In this dissertation, the visual arts are reasserted as a helpful medium of spiritual growth, particularly as biblical illiteracy remains high and the consumption of images grows even within the church. The significance of this research demonstrates how the visual arts can be a natural expression and rich source of ongoing biblical meditation. In today's rushed, entertainment-obsessed, and visually-saturated culture, a method of biblical meditation extended to the visual arts can offer a faithful expression of healthy, growing, biblical spirituality. Though the evangelical church has reason to be wary of images, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that a method of meditation can be extended to the visual arts in a biblically faithful manner.

Argument

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. After establishing the definition and right practice of *meditation* as commanded and described in the Bible, the dissertation shifts to clearly define the term *visual arts* and establishes an argument for the benefit of the visual arts. The third section of this work proposes a method of visual arts as an extension of biblical meditation and provides examples from several pieces from a variety of art traditions and periods. The dissertation concludes with an exhortation of how this method can edify the church and believers today.

Chapter 2, "Biblical Meditation: Its Twenty-First Century Counterfeits," discusses the various forms of meditation popular in society today. After a short definition of biblical meditation that is further elaborated in the following chapter, the chapter

establishes an overview of meditation in popular culture. Various forms of meditation have rapidly become popular practices in culture as a means for stress reduction and serenity. Postmodernism has directly influenced the rise of transcendental meditation and New Age spirituality. These perceived views of meditation have seeped into Christian circles as well. Both Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have frequently adopted non-biblical and practices in their spiritual formation practices. Many evangelicals have also adapted some of these practices (mostly unwittingly) or have ignored meditation altogether. This chapter analyzes these trends in greater depth.

The third chapter, “Biblical Meditation: Its Scriptural Foundation,” establishes meditation as defined and practiced in the Bible. This chapter develops a theological argument for meditation. Presenting the Trinity as the ultimate source (as it is only those who are redeemed by the Triune God’s work of salvation) and object of meditation (whether through the Word he has authored or through his actions or character), the dissertation asserts that the nature and being of the Trinity establishes the impetus, desire, and ongoing embodiment of a biblically meditative life for the believer. Derived from and directed to a Triune God, meditation is a gift for the purpose of godliness. Biblical meditation is founded upon God and thus believers are commanded to meditate upon God’s Word, God’s attributes, God’s works (including his work of creation), and God’s ways, the four broad categories found in Scripture.

Although a necessarily concise treatment of a large subject, this chapter discusses the teaching on meditation in both Testaments, providing word studies and analyses to trace the idea of meditation throughout the Bible. Establishing meditative practice both through a systematic theological and biblical theological lens, this section presents a holistic understanding of meditation as a concept and as a practice of Scripture. The pattern of biblical meditation shifts from commendation in the Old Testament, describing the blessed, faithful person as a meditative one, to command in the New Testament, exhorting Christians to meditate and respond to the resurrection of Jesus

Christ.

The dissertation shifts from a presentation of biblical meditation to a discussion of the visual arts in chapter 4, “Biblical Meditation and the Visual Arts: An Argument for Its Usefulness.” The church has always grappled with how to balance the visual arts with a proper understanding of idolatry and veneration of images. Simultaneously, the arts have been a major tool for the education and edification of believers in the church. In this chapter, the church’s role in the development of visual arts in Western civilization is briefly presented, as well as the shift in the relationship of the visual arts and the church since the Reformation. Special attention is given to John Calvin and the tradition continued by the Puritans. Chapter 4 will then bridge the visual arts as an application of biblical meditation. Amidst a culture in which images constantly bombard humans, a clear definition of the visual arts is established, as well as its importance and reflection of human flourishing and formation. Thus, the application of the visual arts is both defined and clarified in its scope. The limits and potential dangers of interacting with the visual arts is presented, as is a discussion whether it is theologically acceptable to depict God in visual imagery. Clarifying that the visual arts do not and cannot assert new revelation, the visual arts can, however, be a healthy means for expressing biblical truth and encouraging believers. The chapter contrasts this understanding of the visual arts as an extension of biblical meditation with existing methods of bridging the visual arts with spirituality.

The fifth chapter will present a variety of examples of this relationship of the visual arts and meditation beginning with explicitly Christian art (i.e., Lindisfarne Gospels¹⁹ and Rembrandt’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*²⁰), art based on Christian themes

¹⁹ *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, manuscript, c. 700, The British Library, London, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lindisfarne-gospels>.

²⁰ Rembrandt van Rijn, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1646, National Gallery of Art, London, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/pupil-of-rembrandt-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.

and ideas (i.e., Thomas Cole’s *The Oxbow*,²¹ Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors*,²² and Pieter Jansz Saenredam’s *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem*²³), and concludes with how examples from non-Christian traditions or worldviews (i.e., Banksy, *Sweep It Under the Carpet*²⁴ and Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*²⁵) can also be used to illustrate how meditation upon the truth of God and his Word is extended to the visual arts.

The dissertation concludes in chapter 6 with an exhortation regarding the relevance and importance of this understanding of meditation and the visual arts for the evangelical church today in “The Visual Arts and Biblical Meditation: Its Relevance and Importance for the Evangelical Church Today.” The unique circumstances of the twenty-first century—a pandemic, the technological revolution, escalating issues regarding mental health, gender, and the environment—require churches to continually assess how they are ministering to their congregations. One goal of this dissertation is to help church leaders consider how the visual arts can become a means to breed religious affections. As a biblical discipline, meditation is always relevant, but its necessity and value are often overlooked. The visual age can so easily turn believers’ hearts away from biblical truth, but the discipline of meditation fortifies and strengthens them. A development of the relationship between biblical meditation and the visual arts can become a healthy, regular

²¹ Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, oil on canvas, 1836, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10497>.

²² Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, oil on oak, 1533, The National Gallery, London, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>.

²³ Pieter Jansz Saenredam, *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem*, oil on panel, 1631, Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/102395>.

²⁴ Banksy, *Sweep It Under the Carpet*, spray paint on brick, 2006, Chalk Road Farm, London, England, accessed May 18 2023, <https://banksyexplained.com/sweep-it-under-the-carpet-2006/>.

²⁵ Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007, diamond and human teeth on platinum, White Cube Mason’s Yard, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://whitecube.com/exhibitions/exhibition/damien-hirst-masons-yard-hoxton-square-2007>.

practice for believers to incorporate as they become more mature, thoughtful followers of Jesus Christ. The chapter includes a practical section that provides a guide and suggestions for individual believers, families, local churches, and Christian institutions within the evangelical community to practice this interaction of biblical meditation and the visual arts.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL MEDITATION: ITS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY COUNTERFEITS

Postmodernism has affected how people—including many Christians—view meditation as a means of self-improvement rather than as an exercise toward Christlikeness. Postmodern spirituality deviates in many ways from traditional monotheistic religions and its influence is particularly evident in the popularization of New Age and Eastern religious practices throughout Western culture.¹ As people have increasingly searched for the meaning of life and spiritual significance outside of biblical Christianity (as evidenced by trends toward an overall decrease in church attendance), different versions of meditation have increased in prominence in Western society. This chapter will first present an analysis of the postmodern influence on the rise of non-Christian meditation, then trace the popularity of transcendental meditation in Western culture. This chapter will also discuss how these forms of meditation have influenced Christianity, both broadly in Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, as well as in evangelicalism. This chapter will conclude with a biblical critique of these forms of meditation, thus discounting these other versions of meditation as options for Christian practice and maturity.²

¹ Unlike traditional monotheistic religions (which of course, vastly differ amongst themselves in their views of God, the nature of sin, salvation, eschatology, etc.), postmodern spirituality does not have a cohesive doctrine within its own system. Rather, postmodern spirituality encourages individuals to customize their own religious system to reflect their unique life experiences and what brings most personal satisfaction. This difference quintessentially reflects the spirit of postmodernism.

² This response will solely focus on critiquing postmodern forms of meditation, as chap. 3 will provide a dedicated discussion of biblical meditation and its biblical and theological foundation. However, one must acknowledge the work of Charles Taylor on this matter at large in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Postmodernism Broadly Defined

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy writes on postmodernism:

That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism. However, it can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning.³

One of the reasons postmodernism defies definition is its philosophical fluidity and downplaying of objectivity. Philosopher James K. A. Smith echoes this in his description of postmodernism as a “slippery, elusive, and controversial” term that evokes differing definitions depending on its context.⁴ Academic Gene Edward Veith Jr. notes that postmodernism owes its advent to the Enlightenment as well:

Splitting the two realms [of nature and supernature] has been disastrous. One way of doing so is to exalt the physical and to denigrate the spiritual. This was one strain of the Enlightenment, continuing to develop in nineteenth-century materialism and in the set of beliefs known as modernism. Another way of splitting the two realms is to exalt the spiritual (or the mental, or the interior) and to denigrate the physical. This was the way of the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism, which has continued to haunt the Christian tradition and which has taken a variety of secularist forms, including postmodernism. These two kinds of reductionism seem to be opposite, but, in effect, they are much the same. Without the Creator, we also lose the creation.⁵

Veith aptly recognizes that these issues reflect a larger concept that is no mere postmodern shift, but it is an issue of human depravity that the church has always had to confront, albeit in different forms.

However, postmodernism represents a marked shift from the Enlightenment, challenging its tenets of rationalism, empiricism, and certainty of truth as it emerged from modernism to become the reigning philosophy of the culture today. Key postmodern philosophers include Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Lyotard first coined the term in his 1979 publication *La Condition Postmoderne* to cite

³ Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism>.

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 18.

⁵ Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Post Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 38.

the rejection of metanarratives.⁶ Foucault further developed this philosophy, emphasizing subjectivity and creative experimentation as key to the formation of the self. Derrida's idea of deconstruction⁷ compounded these thoughts. He argued that the words can only be explained in relation to the system in which they exist. This trio of philosophers emphasized a relativistic approach to assert that all human reality reflects a social construction, as everything is a product of a sociolinguistic community. In postmodernism there is no objective truth, no essence. Christian philosopher Garret J. DeWeese notes that postmodernism regards "all statements must be interpreted relative to a linguistic community and should not be regarded as objectively true to false to some other philosophical position."⁸ In other words, overarching explanations are myth and dominant ideologies should be rejected, for meaning is derived from social constructs and socially accepted narratives. Postmodernism questions if reality can be objectively assessed. Consequently, a postmodern view of the self is based on social construction. As the individual is shaped and molded by interactions with the world, other individuals, their environment, and culture at large, he or she creates a "rich matrix of attributes."⁹

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).

⁷ Jacques Derrida first coined "deconstruction," a word now ubiquitous in culture today. To deconstruct is to take apart, yet Derrida did not intend for this to merely be a negative action but also positive and ultimately reconstructing. He asserts that everything is based on interpretation and a subjective narrative or experience; thus, deconstruction is necessary. For Derrida, the key to recognize this bias is that language is the "necessary filter through which the world comes to us." Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 46. Claiming there is nothing outside the words of a text, Derrida asserts no one can interpret anything from the words of a text apart from what has already been interpreted through language. He states that a reading or interpretation "cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than [the text itself] . . . or toward a signified meaning outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language." See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), 158.

⁸ Garret J. DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy as a Christian*, Christian Worldview Integration (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 164.

⁹ Patrick Nullens and Ronald T. Michener, *The Matrix of Christian Ethics: Integrating Philosophy and Moral Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 44.

Thus, the self must seek fulfillment through experience. Postmodern individuals live inside not objective reality but constructed representations of reality.

Postmodernism manifests itself in many forms not only in philosophy, but also in politics, the humanities and the sciences, and prominently in popular culture.¹⁰ Since postmodernism defines culture as a meeting point of continuously competing stories without an objective standard of measure, the popularity or effectiveness of these stories hinges, thus, upon how attractive they are within the community itself. Because objective truth is denied, postmodernism has ushered in a wave of pluralism. Moreover, coupled with the great technological and digital advances of the times and increasing globalization, Western society is marked by an endless buffet of options, resulting in a highly consumeristic society. In fact, marketing research increasingly focuses on studying people as “consumers [who are] emotional and narcissistic human beings who utilize consumption as a way to construct meaningful experiences.”¹¹ Even if one reflects on his or her own life, one does so within the incessant streams of tailored ads based on social media algorithms that dictates what is intentionally curated on the phone screen while scrolling. Diana Villegas observes, “Postmodern culture is characterized by endless

¹⁰ Postmodernism’s influence has not been without opposition. One of the most prominent critics of postmodernism is Jürgen Habermas. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Studies in Contemporary German Thought, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MA, 1990). He critiques postmodernism based on performative contradiction and the paradox of self-reference. As postmodernism spreads influence in other areas, criticism outside of philosophy and theology are being levied. Marcel Kuntz, a French biotechnologist, continues to warn the scientific community against postmodern methods in science. He writes,

In the face of alleged uncertainties, many politicians and citizens find it reassuring to examine several “truths” and shifting paradigms in risk assessment. However, doing so with no reference to indisputable scientific knowledge engenders risk assessment unscientific, increases uncertainty and paves the way for arbitrary decisions. This form of postmodernist assault on science has been difficult to grasp for many scientists, because it comes disguised in the clothes of democracy, freedom of speech and tolerance of opinion. (Marcel Kuntz, “The Postmodern Assault on Science: If All Truths Are Equal, Who Cares What Science Has to Say?” *EMBO Reports* 13, no 10 [2018]: 885-89)

¹¹ Alexandros Skandalis, John Byrom, and Emma Banister, “Experiential Marketing and the Changing Nature of Extraordinary Experiences in Post-postmodern Consumer Culture,” *Journal of Business Research* 97 (2019): 44.

variety in tastes, choices and values, a result both of the questioning of hierarchies of tastes and values and the globalization of culture resulting from new communication technologies.”¹² The unending search of ever-increasingly stimulating experience continues to deeply shape and drive human mind and behavior.

Postmodern Spirituality

From the framework described, postmodern spirituality arises. Postmodern spirituality is derived from this skeptical view of the external world and turns inward to find fulfillment. Described as the “privatization of spirituality” by British professors Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in *Selling Spirituality*, the postmodern shift toward individualization and the rejection of collective norms and values dominates today’s spiritual landscape.¹³ Postmodern spirituality unsurprisingly intentionally rejects institutional and traditional religion. Sociologist Dominika Motak further describes this change: “This phase of religiosity turned into spirituality is intimately linked with individualization at its most radical. Individualist spirituality can only be spoken of when it becomes ‘faith for someone’: when it is purposely made by an individual for his own sake, in response to his ‘spiritual needs’ and fashioned after his personal idiom.”¹⁴ In other words, since there is no longer one broadly accepted set of rules, norms, or values, one can establish their own spirituality based on personal preference and experience. A focus on the self and highly individualized, postmodern spirituality approaches traditional religion with skepticism and prefers to select aspects of religion to suit oneself. Jewish theologian Boaz Huss argues that the term “postmodern spirituality” is intentionally favored over “postmodern religion,” for it separates today’s free, self-guided experience

¹² Diana Villegas, *The Christian Path in a Pluralistic World and the Study of Spirituality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 43.

¹³ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 15-17.

¹⁴ Dominika Motak, “Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21 (2009): 135.

that blends science, religion, and culture from traditional religious traditions.¹⁵ This postmodern shift in understanding the self, religion, and personal growth displays itself clearly in this changed attitude toward spiritual practices such as meditation.

Postmodern spiritual interests continue to soar. This “tectonic shift” of the spiritual revolution has turned away “from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences,”¹⁶ according to sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. Linked with an emphasis on freedom and choice, the deregulation and delocalization of religion allows individuals to select, fuse, syncretize elements from a variety of religions. What was once unacceptable in the traditional religious practices of modernism, now flows into the stream of free-floating ideas, at the ready to be fitted into one’s constructed reality. Heelas observes, “People no longer feel obliged to heed the boundaries of the religions of modernity. Instead, they are positively encouraged to exercise their ‘autonomy’ to draw on what has diffused through the culture. . . . They—so to speak—raid the world, drawing on whatever is felt desirable.”¹⁷ Postmodernism has clearly seeped into the religious vernacular of culture. Villegas characterizes this postmodern trend as “being on an intentional journey seeking self-knowledge, personal growth and healing, and the creation of meaning. . . . Being spiritual involves the creation of individualized narratives and, therefore, being an active agent in the shaping of the self.”¹⁸ In contrast to prior modern religious movements based on overarching truths and set patterns, postmodern spirituality focuses on tailorable practical knowledge. Huss writes that it

¹⁵ Boaz Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2007): 118.

¹⁶ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2.

¹⁷ Paul Heelas, “Introduction: On Differentiation and Dedifferentiation,” in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 5.

¹⁸ Villegas, *The Christian Path*, 22.

instead offers “consumers techniques and spiritual experience rather than articles of faith, myths or grand narratives.”¹⁹ The center of postmodern spirituality is decidedly centered on the self.

Postmodern Meditation

This spiritual shift has been accompanied by a surge of Eastern religious influence in the West beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, an “Easternization of the Western cultural paradigm,”²⁰ according to British sociologist Colin Campbell. One needs only to peruse a local bookstore to notice that Eastern religions (and their offshoots) only continue to increase in cultural prominence. This phenomenon is understandable, as these Eastern religions focus on an actualization of the divine self and the achievement of inner bliss. A marked characteristic of both Buddhism and Hinduism is the practice of meditation to attain these goals. Each major tradition of Buddhism promotes its own forms of meditation, Theravada, Zen, or Tibetan. The most popular form of Hindu meditation in the West is transcendental meditation (TM). This phenomenon is especially evident in the resurgence and popularity of meditation as an accessible, non-religious spiritual practice to ease stress and bring calmness. The postmodern popularity of Eastern meditation is most evident in the rise and continued popularity of TM. The appeal of Eastern religious traditions must be credited to the pioneering movement and continued success of TM in the West and thus must be specifically analyzed.

The Rise of Transcendental Meditation in the West

TM boomed in the West, including the United States, in the latter half of the twentieth century. First established by Maharishi Mahesh, TM spread from India to Europe

¹⁹ Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah,” 119.

²⁰ Colin Campbell, “The Easternization of the West,” in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London: Routledge, 1999): 35-48.

and the United States, largely due to the influence of Western celebrities and the wealthy elite. TM quickly assimilated into Western culture, emphasizing its nonreligious aspects and accessibility for all people. The normalization of nonreligious meditative practices has grown since the 1960s, as psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors have implemented TM into their techniques and professional practices. Fitting well with postmodern ideals, TM has cemented itself in its cultural prominence, most reflected by the default understanding that meditation in the West is TM, characterized by an emptying of the mind to reach inner peace. The next section will provide an analysis of TM, its rise in the West, its history and influence in American culture and the social sciences, and then offer a biblical critique and suggest how the church can respond to increasing questions regarding spirituality from both within and without believers.

A Brief History of TM

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, born Mahesh Prasad Varma, first developed TM in India, then brought his teachings to the West through a series of campaigns. The popularity and interest in TM exploded in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s in Western culture as The Beatles, Mick Jagger, Mia Farrow, and Jane Fonda (to name a few well-known celebrities) learned and embraced TM as a personal meditative practice to manage stress and achieve bliss. Becoming a fixture on late night shows, talk shows, and news channels, Mahesh became a darling of the media and the wealthy elite, also gracing the covers of magazines and newspapers. In 1975, Mahesh established Maharishi International University in Iowa.²¹ Thousands of people have attended the campus, receiving training to learn and adapt TM into their daily practice, much like those of their celebrity idols and those whom they admired. Although reaching its initial peak in the

²¹ Maharishi International University offers degrees residually and online. The “Home of Consciousness-Based Education,” MIU writes on the “Who Are We?” section on the home page, “We come from many places, cultures, and backgrounds, but share a strong common commitment to personal inner growth, wellness, sustainability, and positive values. We support a progressive and inclusive campus culture that’s creative, dynamic, and focused on making the world a better, more peaceful place.” Maharishi International University, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.miu.edu/>.

1970s, over six million people had been trained in the TM centers located in 108 countries by the end of the twentieth century.²²

Many celebrities and prominent figures today, from Clint Eastwood, Ellen DeGeneres, and Howard Stern, to Oprah Winfrey, popular podcaster Tim Ferriss, and billionaire businessman Ray Dalio, practice TM. Filmmaker David Lynch is perhaps the most vocal proponent of TM today.²³ He established The David Lynch Foundation in 2005. The mission statement of the organization is as follows:

We are dedicated to helping people of all ages from all walks of life in the UK and worldwide overcome stress, suffering, and hardship, and unfold the full potential of life. As the UK branch of the David Lynch Foundation UK (DLF UK), we use stress-reducing programmes that are scientifically proven to promote creativity, happiness, success, and peace. Our methodologies transform lives from within to create a more harmonious and peaceful world, especially focusing on groups who need it most, such as stressed teachers and students, the homeless, prisoners, and the many thousands of war veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²⁴

The website continues, “The effectiveness of the programmes that we use, which includes transcendental meditation as founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, has been established in hundreds of published scientific studies.”²⁵ The continued popularization of TM has been, as Corinna Laughlin of Loyola University notes, a strategic positioning of celebrity leverage and an intentional westernization of the Eastern practice. She writes,

²² Gene R. Thursby, “Hindu Movements Since Mid-Century: Yogis in the United States,” in *America’s Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 573.

²³ David Lynch announced in April 14, 2022 that he would donate \$500 million to begin a world peace fund in Fairfield, IA (the headquarters of TM). His goal is to bring world peace through TM. See Isaac Hunter, “Filmmaker David Lynch Sets Up \$500M Fund in Fairfield to Bring World Peace through Transcendental Meditation,” *Des Moines Register*, April 16, 2022, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/entertainment/2022/04/16/david-lynch-launches-500-k-world-peace-through-transcendental-meditation-fairfield-iowa/7331675001/>.

²⁴ David Lynch Foundation UK, “Our Mission,” accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.davidlynchfoundation.org.uk/our-mission.html>. The David Lynch Foundation continues to fund research to demonstrate the benefits of TM, as well as amass testimonials from professionals of TM, including a study of PTSD reduction in veterans, published in March 2021. See Mayer Bellehsen et al., “A Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial of Transcendental Meditation as Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Veterans,” *Traumatic Stress* 35, no. 1 (2022): 22-31.

²⁵ David Lynch Foundation, “Our Mission.”

The [David Lynch] foundation strategically positions TM by presenting it as a technique that can be incorporated into a medically-reflexive, healthy lifestyle. . . . Instead of the Maharishi, celebrities, most notably Lynch himself, are proffered as symbols of the benefits of practicing TM. Celebrities represent creativity as a commodity—something that is valued highly in American popular and business culture.²⁶

For example, comedian Jerry Seinfeld’s October 2020 interview on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* is featured on top banner of the “What Is TM?” page of the official TM website. In this interview, he states, “I’m the big meditator guy . . . since 1972. . . . It’s the greatest technique for rest and lowering the stress level.” When Colbert notes that Seinfeld looks relaxed and jokes that it must be lonely to feel that way (since this was taped during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic), Seinfeld responds, “No, it’s transcendental meditation.”²⁷

Practice of TM

One can quickly identify why TM has been readily embraced in a postmodern culture. Although rooted in Hinduism, Mahesh marketed TM through a simple, seemingly nonreligious, easily adaptable technique, emphasizing that everyone possesses the capacity and ability to practice TM.²⁸ In his popular book *The Science of Being and the Art of Living*, Mahesh states, “The possibility is now at hand for the peoples of all religions to start the practice of transcendental deep meditation and acquire within themselves a state of integrated life by the direct experience of absolute consciousness of the divine being.”²⁹ As stated by Mahesh, TM provides access to the divine for all people of all religions. TM was packaged as a practice for all, regardless of religious background, to discover a realm

²⁶ Corinna Laughlin, “Transcendental Meditation’s Tipping Point: The Allure of Celebrity on the American Spiritual Marketplace,” *Popular Communication* 18, no. 2 (2020): 119.

²⁷ Maharishi Foundation USA, “What Is TM?” accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.tm.org/transcendental-meditation>.

²⁸ This is Mahesh’s thesis in Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Meditation: Easy System Propounded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (Westminster, MD: International Meditation Centre, 1962).

²⁹ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *The Science of Being and the Art of Living* (Buffalo, NY: Allied, 1963), 252.

beyond this world. To access this world, Mahesh taught individuals to practice TM for twenty minutes in the morning and for another twenty minutes again in the evening. Centered on the repetition of an individualized mantra given by an instructor or guru for the “potentiality to promote development to the maximum extent,”³⁰ advised Mahesh, the individual should repeatedly utter the mantra to “[calm] the mind and [limit] the flow of extraneous thoughts,”³¹ particularly when other thoughts or distractions arise. Mahesh taught that through this mantra repetition for the allotted twenty minutes, one could attain TM’s objective: happiness and peace by “emptying one’s mind to achieve bliss where you see yourself as united with the Divine, as part of God,” (alternatively called the “Cosmic Mind”) describes sociologist Joseph Weber.³²

TM’s success aligns with the rise of postmodern belief and practice. TM turns one’s attention and mind inward. Instead of focusing on external circumstances, pressures, or worries, TM advocates that the meditator focus upon the self to eliminate stress and worry. There, Mahesh states, “the mind would find that great joy which transcends the greatest joy of relative existence and achieve the eternal absolute bliss.”³³ This bliss simultaneously decreases stress, increases concentration, and improves health. The TM movement, with its Hindu roots and influence, became successful partly by downplaying its Hindu aspects and focusing on its mental and emotional benefits, appealing to a postmodern society. Mahesh’s claims that TM could be practiced by anyone, regardless of their faith, intentionally introducing Hindu beliefs to Western individuals in an unobtrusive manner. Mahesh rephrased and reshaped the religious terms and language to

³⁰ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Meditation with Questions and Answers* (London: International SRM, 1967), 106.

³¹ Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 58.

³² Joseph Weber, *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2014), 33.

³³ Mahesh, *The Science of Being and the Art of Living*, 158.

diminish the apparent Hindu influence and tones to present a religiously neutral practice. Rather than implementing the phrase “Transcendental Consciousness,” Mahesh simply described a spiritual Hindu practice through mantras, avoiding religiously specific terms. Individuals only learn Hindu teachings and language after training and initiation as the next step of their spiritual journey. However, for the beginner and less committed, TM requires no change in religion or behavior. Mahesh repeatedly emphasizes this claim, stating, “Whether a man believes in God or not, he’ll be able to meditate and enjoy the bliss of meditation.”³⁴ The seemingly religiously neutral TM has apparently appealed to many.

During the 1970s height of TM, Denise Denniston and Peter McWilliams published *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller. In it, the authors emphasize the non-religious nature of TM: “It’s absurd to assume that just because the TM technique comes from India, it must be some Hindu practice. The TM technique is a scientific discovery which happens to come from India. The TM program does not involve any religious belief or practice—Hindu or otherwise.”³⁵ It is not only TM’s defenders who assert this, but the official TM website itself states that TM does not ask its practitioners to believe in anything. In the last point of the “Six Things You Should Know” section of the “What Is TM?” page, the website states, “The TM technique is not a religion, philosophy, or lifestyle. No belief or expectation is needed for it to be effective.”³⁶

Postmodernism, coupled with the rise of TM and the wane of Christian culture, dug the path for further exploration in meditation. The nonreligious emphasis of TM has spilled into other modern meditative movements. As a result, meditation is now generally viewed as a means for personal fulfillment and growth in an areligious manner. In

³⁴ Mahesh, *Meditation*, 44.

³⁵ Denise Denniston and Peter McWilliams, *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life* (Allen Park, MI: Verse monger, 1975), 20.

³⁶ Maharishi Foundation, “What Is TM?”

Giovanni Dienstmann's *Practical Meditation*, a popular, introductory handbook to meditation published in 2018, he writes, "Meditation was originally created to overcome suffering, find a deeper meaning in life, and connect to a higher reality. Today, it is also used to find personal growth, improve performance, and achieve optimal health and well-being."³⁷ The secular method toward meditation portrays a neutral, areligious approach that does not "presuppose a specific worldview,"³⁸ says scholar Halvor Eifring. He continues, stating, "In modern contexts, meditation is often learned in secular settings such as evening courses, practiced at home after work, and understood in terms of health and well-being. Such contexts are often neutral in the sense that they do not presuppose a specific religious worldview."³⁹ These types of meditation, although deeply rooted in Buddhism or Hinduism, package themselves as devoid of any spiritual content. This nonreligious meditation is intended to improve the self to achieve greater self-insight and well-being within, flowing into positive thoughts and altruism toward others. In summary, TM postulates that it requires no spiritual element, but rather is an exercise of the mind to contemplate, relax, and calm oneself. The "What Is TM?" website asserts that TM "can only be taught by certified TM teachers in a course carefully personalized for each individual,"⁴⁰ thereby fitting well into the overall postmodern arc of the privatization of spirituality. A practice that requires no personal change but is tailored to each individual, TM appeals to many in this postmodern era.

³⁷ Giovanni Dienstmann, *Practical Meditation* (New York: DK, 2018), chap. 1, <https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/practical-meditation/9781465480873/>.

³⁸ Halvor Eifring, "Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Technical Aspects of Devotional Practices," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.

³⁹ Eifring, "Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam," 5.

⁴⁰ Maharishi Foundation, "What Is TM?"

Practices of TM in Medicine and Social Sciences

Because TM can be easily learned and adapted into daily practice without lifestyle or belief change, it has been implemented in many treatments for medical conditions, counseling, and therapy techniques. Transcendental meditation is also an ongoing subject of medical and social science research. Today, TM is a popular means of psychotherapy, treating stress reduction and chronic illnesses, including cancer, hypertension, psoriasis, and AIDS,⁴¹ and is also used to treat a myriad of addictions, including drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Psychologist Jeff Brantley praises the medical and scientific community for their increasing implementation of meditation. He credits this to the attention professionals acknowledge between the mind and the body in the past few decades. He writes, “Many of the meditation methods now taught in the West for health purposes owe some (or considerable) debt to the instructions and experience detailed by meditation teachers of more ancient traditions [Eastern religions].”⁴²

Results of published studies reveal positive effects of meditation upon human behavior and bodily response. In a study published in 2019 in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, three randomized experiments were performed to determine long-term effects of meditation on cognition.⁴³ Taiwanese researchers studied three categories of meditation, including TM, in over 300 students at three different high schools. The researchers hypothesized that students would improve cognition after practicing TM twice a day for approximately twenty minutes for six to twelve months. Other groups either napped, practiced contemplative meditation, or did

⁴¹ B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 2014), 45.

⁴² Jeff Brantley, “Mindfulness FAQ,” in *The Mindfulness Revolution: Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the Power of Mindfulness in Daily Life*, ed. Barry Campbell Boyce (Boston: Shambhala, 2011), 40. This book offers further studies, statistics, and results, and chapter-by-chapter discusses the evidences of meditation in medicine, psychology, and other social sciences.

⁴³ David Orme-Johnson, “8.1 Three Randomized Experiments on the Longitudinal Effects of the Transcendental Meditation Technique on Cognition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 58, no. 10 (2019): S311-S312.

nothing at all. Researchers conducted their experiment analyzing different variables, including creative thinking and trait anxiety. The experiment yielded interesting results. TM produced significant positive effects on all variables tested, but especially in creativity, practical intelligence, and field independence. TM exceeded the effects of napping in all variables and contemplative meditation on five of the seven variables. The researchers conclude that TM improves brain function and cognition, thus yielding greater improvement in skills and grade point average. The researchers also suggest TM can help reduce dropout rates and the negative effects of ADHD in students. Similar results have been found cross-culturally, as reflected in a 2021 study on Peruvian children.⁴⁴ Such benefits appear consistent regardless of global region, whether in Taiwan, Peru, or the United States.

Researchers David F. O’Connell and Charles Nathaniel Alexander credit TM’s success in this manner: “Transcendental meditation is a technique for holistic personal development rather than a specific treatment program for alcohol or substance abuse. It is a systematic technology for the development of consciousness.”⁴⁵ Because TM addresses holistic development, according to the authors, it alleviates the risk factors for substance abuse or anxiety and instills protective factors that prevent individuals from succumbing to the addiction. The effects of TM appear numerous and beneficial. Even amid the pandemic, the David Lynch Foundation began offering partial and full scholarships for healthcare workers to receive TM training amidst the COVID-19 pandemic to relieve stress and burnout.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Lee Fergusson, Javier Ortiz Cabrejos and Anna Bonshek, “Aymara Childrens’ Practice of Transcendental Meditation in Perú: A Learning History Model of Parent and Teacher Perceptions,” *Journal of Latinos and Education* 22, no 3. (2021): 893-910.

⁴⁵ David F. O’Connell and Charles Nathaniel Alexander, *Self-Recovery: Treating Addictions Using Transcendental Meditation and Maharishi Ayur-Veda* (New York: Harrington Park, 1994), 457.

⁴⁶ This initiative, called Heal the Healers Now, was also featured on the *Good Morning America* show on April 6, 2020 in a re-airing of a 2016 TM segment. In this segment, both anchors, Robin Roberts and George Stephanopoulos, affirm how TM has benefitted their own stress management. See

Postmodern Influence on Christian Meditation

Pastor and theologian Joel Beeke writes, “The very word *meditation*, once regarded as a core discipline of Christianity . . . is now associated with unbiblical ‘New Age’ spirituality.”⁴⁷ Eastern spirituality and religions have become a popular resource for individuals to connect with their spiritual selves and find fulfillment.⁴⁸ The church has lost much of what meditation entails due to the postmodern trends of toleration and acceptance, incorporating and blending religions and religious practices together. A syncretistic approach toward Christian spirituality continues to rise. Both in academic and ecclesial contexts, crossovers between religions and practices exist, borrowing elements from TM, or other Buddhist and Hindu practices. Philosopher Virgil Nemoianu writes,

Where the hard core of dogmas and beliefs of any religion is (and most likely ought to remain) firm and constant, the vast “surrounding” area of religious humanism can afford to be much more flexible, can allow itself to find many spots of overlap, of combination, many common denominators [including] the interest in the beautiful, the common speculation and meditation on the best and most efficient ways to approach transcendence.⁴⁹

He is not alone in this postmodern approach of a softening of exclusivity and embracing other narratives. For example, some Roman Catholic priests, including William Johnston, Anthony de Mello, and John Main integrate Buddhist and Hindu practices into their teachings on Christian prayer and meditation, using mantras, prayer mandalas, and

David Lynch Foundation UK, “Heal the Healers Now,” accessed July 15, 2022, <https://healthehealersnow.org.uk/>.

⁴⁷ Joel R. Beeke, *How Can I Practice Christian Meditation?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2016), 5.

⁴⁸ See Barna, “Meet the ‘Spiritual but Not Religious,’” accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/>. Barna, “How Spiritual Americans Practice Self-Care,” accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/spiritual-americans-practice-self-care/>.

⁴⁹ Virgil Nemoianu, *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities: Conflicts and Coexistence* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2010), 99.

labyrinths. Famously, Catholic monk Thomas Merton's affinity for Zen Buddhism has been documented well.⁵⁰ Merton notes in *The Inner Experience*,

There is always the possibility that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God, because we shall see presently that the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense "undivided" (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience. And the fact that the Eastern mystic . . . does not necessarily mean that he has not experienced the presence of God when he speaks of knowing the Inmost Self.⁵¹

Merton's mystical approach blends easily with Eastern spiritual practices, but with apparently little concern for potential dangers of such syncretism. Today, various religious academic journals and publications also merge such traditions together, inserting Eastern elements into Christian spirituality. For example, spiritual director and adjunct theology instructor Susan J. Stabile borrows significantly from Tibetan Buddhist meditations and practices to enhance Christian meditation. She writes, "There are significant differences between Buddhism and Christianity, but the two faiths share many values. It is my hope that reflecting on these shared values and as well as on the differences between the two faiths will help deepen your understanding of Christianity and strengthen your life as a disciple of Christ."⁵² Being syncretistic is a benefit to Christian practice, she argues.

Buddhist feminist scholar Rita Gross shares a similar sentiment: "What can seem like a clear contrast one minute becomes a surprising similarity the next moment. Crossovers abound. It seems that Buddhism denies the existence of self while Christianity does not; but then some Buddhists talk of the 'big I; and Christian teachings often talk

⁵⁰ See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999); Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000); Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness, and Everyday Mind* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2007).

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 13.

⁵² Susan J. Stabile, *Growing in Love and Wisdom: Tibetan Buddhist Sources for Christian Meditation* (New York: Oxford University, 2013), 239.

about the necessity to ‘lose the self.’”⁵³ Although fitting in the landscape of postmodern spirituality, this blending and borrowing elements from other spiritualities and religions reflects not Christian humility but a danger that can steer believers further away from the teachings of Scripture. Ethics professor and theologian John Jefferson Davis astutely writes, “This so-called phenomenon of ‘crossing over’—Christians adopting Buddhist and other religions’ spiritual practices—can be a symptom of ignorance of one’s own spiritual heritage and a further reason to retrieve a *Christian* and *biblical* theology and practice of meditation.”⁵⁴ Rather than being reflective of the biblical tradition of charity and kindness, such crossing over reveals a postmodern approach to religion.

The postmodern trend of the privatization of religion is not limited to secular or non-Christian religious practices. Philosopher Victoria S. Harrison observes that an individual may practice Christian beliefs without adhering to a specific denomination or a local church, while also combining spiritual practices from other religious traditions. This trend is growing, especially as quick access through digital platforms and media has made it even easier to cultivate and curate in the twenty-first century.⁵⁵ Villegas summarizes today’s spiritual world in this way:

Postmodern culture with its move away from unitary, normative narratives creates a context for the development of hybrid spiritual practices as well as for the separation of spirituality from religion. The globalization of culture and the availability of varied sources of wisdom make possible the individualized spiritual narratives that combine disparate traditions. Besides traditional places of worship multiple media sources offer wisdom from oriental traditions, non-Christian religions, and contemporary narratives regarding growth, meaning and healing. The wisdom for

⁵³ Rita M. Gross, “Meditation and Prayer: A Comparative Inquiry,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 22 (2002): 77. This journal also has several articles on Merton’s relationship with Buddhism that provide an affirmation to Merton’s interests. See Francis X. Clooney, “Thomas Merton’s Deep Christian Learning across Religious Borders,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 37 (2017): 49-64; John P. Keenan, “Thomas Merton’s Unfinished Journey in Dialogue with Buddhism,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 37 (2017): 103-28.

⁵⁴ John Jefferson Davis, *Meditation and Communion with God: Contemplating Scripture in an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 16.

⁵⁵ Victoria S. Harrison, “Postmodern Thought and Religion: Open-traditionalism and Radical Orthodoxy on Religious Belief and Experience,” *The Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 6 (2010): 965.

life created from such varied sources is often considered equally valuable to the traditional wisdom of a person's religious tradition.⁵⁶

This trend has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As churches shifted to an online medium of worship services, churchgoers have been slow to return. As postmodern spirituality reflects a curation of one's personal preference, it is no surprise that many individuals have a diminished desire to return to the constraints of a location and time on Sunday mornings.⁵⁷

Postmodern spirituality and its approach to religion have not only affected the less devoted. Evangelicals have also been influenced by these various forms of meditation and spirituality. In *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald S. Whitney observes, "Even among believers, the practice of meditation is often more closely associated with yoga, transcendental meditation, relaxation therapy, or some New Age practice than with Christian spirituality."⁵⁸ With both the Eastern influence on meditation and the overarching culture of religious toleration and acceptance as major contributing factors, exacerbated by the church's lack of teaching on biblical meditation, many in the Western church, including those in evangelical circles, have lost the true definition and practice of meditation. Whitney continues, "Because meditation is so prominent in many spiritually counterfeit groups and movements, some Christians are uncomfortable with the whole

⁵⁶ Villegas, *The Christian Path*, 26.

⁵⁷ Although church attendance may also be affected by health concerns and continued variant waves, since the start of the pandemic, the percentage of Christians who attend church monthly has dropped from 64 percent to 57 percent according to an April 2022 Lifeway Research study. Lifeway Research, "Evangelism Explosion Study of American Christians' Openness to Talking about Faith," May 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Evangelism-Explosion-Survey-of-American-Christians-Report.pdf>. Only two of three regular attendees have returned according to a March 2022 Pew Research study. Pew Research Study, "More Houses of Worship are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance Is Unchanged since Fall," March 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>. In 2023, Lifeway Research published that while church attendance and even giving increased, membership in the Southern Baptist Convention has seen its largest decline in the last century in the last year. Lifeway Research. "The Annual Church Profile," May 9, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/2023/05/09/southern-baptists-decline-in-membership-grow-in-attendance-baptisms/>.

⁵⁸ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 46.

subject and suspicious of those who engage in it.”⁵⁹ Despite the longstanding Christian tradition and teaching on meditation, many American Christians picture meditation as someone humming with their eyes closed while sitting cross-legged. Wary of these images, many Christians have chosen to avoid meditation altogether, unsure of what is biblical and what is non-Christian.

A Biblical Analysis of TM

Initially, TM may appear to be a beneficial, helpful practice that can improve everyone’s lives, including Christians. After all, the scientific evidence suggests its many benefits. Moreover, the Bible does teach individuals to be still and behold God (Ps 46:10), routinely seek him (Josh 1:8; Ps 1; 5:3) and seek peace (Ps 34:14; Isa 26:3; John 14:27; Phil 4:7). Even the Puritans emphasized body posture, routine, silence, and stillness.⁶⁰ However, biblical meditation and TM differ radically in philosophy. TM does not reflect the practices of meditation outlined in the Bible. Rather, TM lures individuals away from practicing true meditation into a superficial, ultimately destructive practice. Campbell McAlpine, writing in the early 1980s when TM’s popularity still remained high, astutely observes, “Transcendental meditation seeks to provide a counterfeit practice of men and women who have been created to meditate on God, his character, his words, his works and his ways.”⁶¹

Although TM may have its appeal, it possesses major philosophical and theological differences with Christian thought and practice. Most strikingly, instead of focusing on the self and personal pleasure and benefit, the Bible conversely teaches the meditator to focus on God, his Word, and to seek conformity to the image of his Son,

⁵⁹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 46.

⁶⁰ For an excellent overview of the Puritan practice of meditation, see Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004). Beeke’s overview is thorough and quite helpful.

⁶¹ Campbell McAlpine, *Alone with God: A Manual of Biblical Meditation* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1981), 4.

Jesus. TM clings to mantras as the means to inner peace. Christian meditation does not repeat a man-given mantra, but, as theologian Edmund C. Clowney reminds readers, biblical meditation clings to the “rich treasure of Scripture [as] the key to Christian meditation.”⁶² Rather than emptying the mind to achieve balance, biblical meditation teaches the believer to fill the mind with the things of God so he or she will become increasingly influenced by the Holy Spirit and become more like Christ. This process will be developed in greater detail in the following chapter. TM cannot provide a long-term solution to sin, for only Christ can. Although studies show TM’s positive benefits, TM cannot provide lasting results, for it does not address the core human need. In Keith A. Gerberding’s 1977 response to TM, *How to Respond to Transcendental Meditation*, he observes, “Christianity goes beneath the surface problems, dealing with the fact of sin, giving help from outside to solve mankind’s real problem. . . . In failing to deal with sin, TM provides nothing more than a little salve to people with deep wounds.”⁶³ The boost in self-confidence, stress management, or decreased anxiety through TM can only be temporary, for it can address only problems related to this life, and not matters related to eternity. No one can make themselves right with God and prepare for eternity through ritualistic, positive thinking and breathing.

As stated previously, TM focuses on emptying the mind to enter cosmic bliss, to become one with the universe, the “divine,” or nature, thus placing the self as equal to God. TM portrays humanity as having the potential to be divine. The Bible teaches humans as fallen, mortal, depraved creatures in need of a Savior. Scripture emphatically teaches that God is the only being truly transcendent, and humans must humble themselves to worship and magnify God, not themselves. TM teaches detachment and escapism, but the Bible confronts the reality of living in a fallen world through knowing the one, true, and living

⁶² Edmund C. Clowney, *Christian Meditation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2002), 23.

⁶³ Keith A. Gerberding, *How to Respond to Transcendental Meditation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), 30.

God. Mahesh writes that TM “goes inward toward the ocean of happiness, the Bliss, which is the goal of everyone’s life.”⁶⁴ But the Bible clearly teaches that true happiness is found only in knowing God through Christ and in living a faithful life that glorifies God, whether in pleasant or difficult seasons. The transformation Christianity offers trusts not the self, but the gospel, the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection. In creating one’s own inward reality, TM seeks to be one with the Cosmic Mind. Visual techniques and mantras are uttered to construct one’s own reality. Yet, Christians are called to meditate not on what is fabricated, but on what is true (Phil 4:8). Biblical meditation does not pursue a state of thoughtlessness, but rather it attempts to fill one’s thoughts with Scripture, seeking what is above where Christ is (Col 3:1-2). Pastor David W. Saxton, in his excellent book *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind* observes, “Rather than seeking to arrive at a plane of self-actualization, biblical meditation seeks to think God’s thoughts after Him. It seeks to grow in appreciation that all of life is lived before a great and mighty God.”⁶⁵ The tenets of TM run counter to the Bible’s teachings on what actualization actually is.

TM and other postmodern forms of meditation avoid an external authority, and in doing so can never supply a substantive solution to the problems it attempts to answer. This cost, however, is not free. Gerberding writes, “TM keeps turning one back in on one’s self, instead of bringing one to repentance. Christian repentance means turning to God in contrition and faith, and then turning to change one’s direction in living.”⁶⁶ Unlike TM, Jesus’s offer of all spiritual blessings, reconciliation with God, and union with him comes at the cost of forsaking the world and following him; transformation requires a death to the self. Anyone can supposedly attain the benefits of TM without sacrificing any

⁶⁴ Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Meditation: Easy System Propounded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (Westminster, MD: International Meditation Centre, 1962), 34.

⁶⁵ David W. Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 15.

⁶⁶ Gerberding, *How to Respond to Transcendental Meditation*, 24.

personal preference, religion, or activity. Christianity strikingly differs. To follow Christ, one must relinquish power, control, and their current sinful state. Jesus demands a sacrificial response and fullhearted devotion, for he himself gave his life for whoever heeds his call (Matt 5:13-14; 10:37-39; 13:44-47). Jesus brings healing, peace, joy, and every spiritual blessing, but individuals must be willing to humble themselves before God to accept the gift. God will exalt both his name and his people in his time and his sovereignty (1 Pet 5:6), something that can never be achieved by determined will or self-propelled glorification. Only through obedience to God can one truly live freely and fully. Gerberding wisely continues, “Christ promises everything, but He also asks for everything. Christianity offers all that one needs but demands a sacrificial response as well.”⁶⁷

Ultimately, TM is self-centered; biblical meditation is God-centered. Augustine declares, “The soul must look outside of itself to the changeless God.”⁶⁸ TM views the self as the ultimate authority. TM’s goal is to become god, attaining Divine Bliss; doing so by means of individual effort whereby one must become his or her own savior. However, only through divine revelation, intervention, and salvation can anyone experience true happiness and transformation. By minimizing sin and an objective standard, TM and postmodern spirituality in all its forms can only offer a short-term solution to a deep-rooted issue. TM contradicts biblical truth, for it wrongly places the responsibility of salvation upon people who are lost and broken without the redemptive work of Christ. TM seeks to bring inner peace and bliss from within; but the Bible declares that no lasting, true peace can be achieved without the Triune God. The Bible does not teach coping mechanisms, rather it proclaims that the word of the cross is the very power of God (1 Cor 1:18). Knowing the self through the mantra and self-reflection of TM, will place no one on a path to God. Instead, the Bible reveals that true peace and fulfillment are found

⁶⁷ Gerberding, *How to Respond to Transcendental Meditation*, 23.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), xii, 26, 53.

through Christ, living in response to his commands and following his example of love and self-sacrifice. Apart from God, the self will always fail.

TM continues to be promoted as a personal, quasi-spiritual, mentally beneficial exercise. As it influences American society, one must continue to ask whether TM aligns with the teachings of Scripture. Saxton writes, “Everyone meditates on something, whether it is right, wrong, or neutral. Some meditate on problems in life or offenses committed by others. Some consider how to make more money or how to complete home projects. Others meditate on some truth of the Bible. Universally, though, meditation is practiced by all.”⁶⁹ Whether it is TM, Buddhist, or New Age meditation, or simply worrying over and thinking upon life choices or issues, humans naturally meditate. Today’s popular forms of meditation, specifically TM, clearly reflect more of the philosophical environment from which they emerged than how the Bible describes meditation. Yet, McAlpine writes, “The call to meditate is not a polite evangelical request to adopt a useful technique that will brighten up the quiet time. Rather it is a command to be disciplined; to think clearly; to be prepared; to be watchful; and above all, to know God and his Son, Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Meditation must no longer be averted and neglected by the church. A great need to clarify and reassert the biblical definition of meditation continues to surface. Meditation—biblical meditation—is a necessary practice for the health and maturity of the believer. God clearly commands and expects people to worship him through meditation. Without meditation, the believer’s spirituality suffers greatly.

How the Church Can Respond

How should evangelicals react to this postmodern Easternization and secularization of meditation both within and without the church? The church must recapture and redeem the term according to its biblical definition. Whitney agrees this is

⁶⁹ Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 13.

⁷⁰ McAlpine, *Alone with God*, 175.

the starting place: “Because meditation is so prominent in many spiritually counterfeit groups and movements, some Christians are uncomfortable with the whole subject and suspicious of those who engage in it.”⁷¹ Rather than shy away from meditation, the church must wholeheartedly reintegrate it in a biblical manner. Christians have a powerful opportunity to reply to the postmodern philosophical framework with a substantive, true response.

The increasing numbers of people practicing non-Christian forms of meditation display a deep spiritual hunger and need. The fact that millions of people have been trained in TM reflects a strong desire in Western culture to possess and find peace amidst chaos, especially amidst the ongoing social, economic, and mental consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The church has been given a gift: people are actively seeking significance and peace, and the church possesses the answer. The church can respond to the TM movement with kindness and clarity by revealing the flaws in TM and graciously and lovingly show that biblical meditation brings true peace because the focus of the worship is not the self, but God. Forty years removed from his original words, Gerberding’s statement still rings true: “We who are Christians celebrate a faith that offers divine resources for the falling human spirit. we know that our religion is genuine, a gift from God for our every need. . . . The problem with TM’s assumption of human perfectibility is that it leads to gross disappointment. It *won’t* work!”⁷² The church has a powerful opportunity to meet the emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of those who are searching. Although TM promises to improve one’s life, reduce stress, and increase happiness, Christians know that TM will never fulfill the promises it boldly claims. Their interests in (or pursuits of) spirituality and self-development are eternally answerable through Jesus Christ.

⁷¹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 46.

⁷² Gerberding, *How to Respond to Transcendental Meditation*, 18, 20.

The church must, in response to TM and other forms of meditation, teach biblical meditation both within and without their local congregations. TM has had a profound impact on Western culture. However, biblical patterns of meditation reveal that TM is not a viable solution for the problems it seeks to address and instead the biblical definition offers much greater stability and growth. Whereas TM constructs a false aura of self-reliance and autonomy, only by believing and continuously meditating on the Scriptures will one avoid the imbalanced view of man and the world that postmodernism promotes. Puritan Edmund Calamy illustrates this beautifully: “Divine meditation is a mighty help to beget in us a contempt of the world, and all worldly things; for the world is like unto gilded copper, it is an easy matter for a man to mistake gilded copper for true gold . . . but meditation of the world will wash away all the paint that is upon the world.”⁷³ Meditation on Scripture strengthens the mind and heart toward greater godliness *and* discernment as believers interact with a post-Christian world. Only through Christian meditation upon the Triune God (not the self) who provides reconciliation and peace will one truly know oneself, live free, and embody true joy. Responding biblically to postmodern versions of meditation and their supposed benefits should begin by establishing the biblical definition of meditation. In a hostile world, this spiritual activity cannot be avoided. For the believer, meditation must be a foundational, regular practice of personal piety. The church should reclaim and redeem meditation as a practice of discipline, worship, and godliness. The object of meditation should carefully remain on the Triune God, for minds and hearts naturally wander.

Conclusion

The postmodern trends of meditation, greatly influenced by TM, continues to grow in its appeal in the twenty-first century. Its prominence expands beyond spirituality and is shaping psychology and the sciences as well. These many versions of spirituality

⁷³ Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation* (London: for Tho. Parkhurst, 1634), 66.

and meditation in culture must be assessed by comparing them with what is taught in the Bible. While promising much, such models reaffirm that the world's forms of meditation are fool's gold compared to meditating on the pure gold of Scripture. In a society that embraces many forms of meditation, the importance of grasping a biblical understanding of meditation remains vital. A biblical understanding of meditation must be clarified and practiced, and to that end this dissertation now turns.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL MEDITATION: ITS SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

In the sea of misguided and unbiblical forms of meditation, one asks what Christian meditation is. As discussed, the postmodern mindset of doing what feels best, cultivating one's own truth, and establishing one's own destiny has resulted in an endless search and curation of spiritual practices cobbled together to create one's own personalized set of religious practices and beliefs. This cultural phenomenon reflects a larger issue: people are searching for truth, peace, and satisfaction, although misguided in many ways. Boston University theologian Claire Wolfeich argues, "The widespread and diffusive use of the term 'spirituality' in popular culture points to an interest in matters of the soul, cutting across religious traditions. . . . The spread of spirituality (easily noticed in popular magazines, talk shows, gift shops, and bookstores) and the multiplicity of uses of that term calls for critical self-reflection."¹ Simultaneously, since the nascence of the Enlightenment and the emphasis on the mind, Jan Johnson argues that meditation has waned: "Scripture meditation became infrequent because of the post-Enlightenment emphasis on science and linear thinking, which displaced reflection and rest (two ideas found prominently in the Psalms)."² Society heralds knowledge by reason or experience as supreme rather than balancing intellect and emotion together. One must first recognize these tensions and trends to then respond rightly with biblical truth. How does the Christian synthesize meditation

¹ Claire Wolfeich, "Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 122.

² Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-On Guide to Lectio Divina* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 20.

with the teachings of Scripture, particularly when the forms of meditation with which one is familiar seem antithetical to it?

Although the definition and practice of meditation has been misappropriated to describe methods associated with New Age or Eastern spiritualities, Christianity possesses a rich history of meditative practices. The Bible clearly outlines a lifestyle of meditation in both the Old and New Testament.³ Moreover, Christians stand apart from other religions in their firm belief in a Triune God. As theologian Fred Sanders writes, trinitarianism is “the encompassing framework within which all Christian thought takes place and within which Christian confession finds its grounding presuppositions.”⁴ A biblical understanding of meditation is imperative for a healthy spirituality. Believers grow in Christlikeness through meditation upon the Triune God as described in his Word. The scriptural definition of meditation must be clarified and defended, for a high number of believers lack both the biblical foundation and regular practice of this necessary discipline.

This chapter will establish true meditation as a biblically mandated practice that ponders the character, works, and Word of God. Biblical meditation—a God-centered practice commanded for believers—is the careful thinking and pondering primarily upon God’s Word, but also upon God’s works (including his work of creation), God’s attributes, and God’s ways, in accordance with Scripture. It should be practiced regularly from and always rooted in Scripture so that believers can strengthen their biblically based

³ This chapter will demonstrate how Scripture clearly emphasizes the objects and subjects of meditation. However, the Bible does not prescribe specific methods or precise forms of meditation. Thus, believers can meditate, consistent with principles of Scripture, in a variety of applications. This dissertation will assert a method through the application of the visual arts, but for a list of other creative, helpful methods of biblical meditation, see chap. 3, “Bible Intake (Part 2) . . . for the Purpose of Godliness” in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 37-78.

⁴ Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 53. Sanders provides an excellent overview of the Trinity. In the first part of the book he develops a methodology for establishing a Trinitarian theology and its eminent practice in Christian life. Sanders continues his discussion displaying the size, shape, and access of salvation as only through a Triune God. He concludes his book connecting evangelical practices, particularly Bible reading and prayer, as markedly Trinitarian in nature.

spirituality to withstand the surrounding spiritual darkness. This chapter will discuss the object and ultimate source of biblical meditation: the Triune God, particularly since the believer's union with Christ allows for this relationship with God to be a deep, ongoing reality. After this discussion, the chapter will establish the biblical foundations for meditation will be established. This chapter will then conclude with suggestions for how twenty-first century Christians can scripturally and obediently meditate according to the Bible's commands and expectations.

Biblical Meditation as Trinitarian Worship

The character of biblical meditation rests upon the foundation of a Christian's union with Christ by faith and his or her communion with the Triune God. The Triune God is both the foundation and object of one's meditation. Thus, a right understanding of who God is and one's relationship with him must be clarified. Meditation is a gift from God by which—through Christ—one may enter into worship and communion with him. Biblical meditation is definitively a gift from the Triune God and an ongoing practice of trinitarian worship to him.

Although one in essence (Deut 6:4), the Trinity exists beyond human comprehension as three distinct persons without division. "The Baptist Faith and Message" (the confession of faith of the Southern Baptist Convention) outlines belief in God this way:

There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. To Him we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. The eternal Triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.⁵

The beautiful doctrine of the Trinity is essential to Christian teaching. Theologian Michael

⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message 2000," accessed August 25, 2021, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

Reeves observes, “Because the Christian God is Triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others. The trinity is the cockpit of all Christian thinking.”⁶ God the Father rules and reigns over his work with full knowledge, grace, and wisdom; nothing has or will occur outside of his providence and sovereignty.⁷ He sends the Son and Spirit to do his work. Not primarily Creator or Ruler, God is Father before all else and is thus essentially fatherly in all that he does.⁸ Christ is the eternal Son of God who came to the earth incarnate. He is fully God and fully man. Although always existing, in his incarnation he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. This sinless Jesus obeyed the will of the Father unto death. Since his resurrection and ascension, he is interceding with the Father on behalf of his believers and promises to one day gloriously return.⁹ The Spirit inspired the writing of the Scriptures and illumines humans to understand it and receive the gospel message. The Spirit exalts Christ and regenerates, indwells, and baptizes believers. He sanctifies believers, prays on their behalf, and gives spiritual gifts. The Spirit empowers the church

⁶ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 16. Reeves provides an excellent book on the Trinity, deftly explaining a complex subject with great theological, historical, and practical acumen. Although only 130 pages, each sentence packs much insight in the beauty and fundamentality of the Trinity for the Christian faith.

⁷ See Gen 1:1; 2:7; Exod 3:14; 6:2-3; 15:11-18; 20:1-19; Lev 22:2; Deut 6:4; 32:6; 1 Chron 29:10; Ps 19:1-3; Isa 43:3,15; 64:8; Jer 10:10; 17:13; Matt 6:9-13; 7:11; 23:9; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; John 4:24; 5:26; 14:6-13; 17:1-8; Acts 1:7; Rom 8:14-15; 1 Cor 8:6; Gal 4:6; Eph 4:6; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:6; 12:9; 1 Pet 1:17; 1 John 5:7. References selected from The Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message.”

⁸ Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 23.

⁹ See Gen 18:1-2; Ps 2:7-12; 110:1-7.; Isa 7:14; 53:1-12; Matt 1:18-23; 3:17; 8:29; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16,27; 17:5; 27; 28:1-6,19; Mark 1:1; 3:11; Luke 1:35; 4:41; 22:70; 24:46; John 1:1-18,29; 10:30,38; 11:25-27; 12:44-50; 14:7-11; 16:15-16,28; 17:1-5, 21-22; 20:1-20,28; Acts 1:9; 2:22-24; 7:55-56; 9:4-5,20; Rom 1:3-4; 3:23-26; 5:6-21; 8:1-3,34; 10:4; 1 Cor 1:30; 2:2; 8:6; 15:1-8,24-28; 2 Cor 5:19-21; 8:9; Gal 4:4-5; Eph 1:20; 3:11; 4:7-10; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:13-22; 2:9; 1 Thess 4:14-18; 1 Tim 2:5-6; 3:16; Titus 2:13-14; Heb 1:1-3; 4:14-15; 7:14-28; 9:12-15,24-28; 12:2; 13:8; 1 Pet 2:21-25; 3:22; 1 John 1:7-9; 3:2; 4:14-15; 5:9; 2 John 7-9; Rev 1:13-16; 5:9-14; 12:10-11; 13:8; 19:16. References selected from The Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message.”

toward greater obedience and mission.¹⁰

This Triune God experiences deep and perfect intimacy among the members. The Father, Son, and Spirit express the essence of holy fellowship and relationship. “God is love” (1 John 4:8),¹¹ is experiencing and sharing love for all eternity, each person participating and loving equally. Because God is perfect love, he cannot be selfish; rather, he seeks to spread his overflowing, abundant love. The great American philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards echoes this notion, describing God as a fountain who, in his goodness, seeks that he would be “diffused and expressed.”¹² Thus, this Triune God chooses to reveal himself to humanity. Although he does not benefit from people, God generously condescends to initiate relationship with his creation. Theologian Anthony Thiselton notes, “[Revelation] is a divine act of communication, in contrast to a merely human act of discovery. . . . Revelation is therefore a profound act of love which initiates the possibility of communication and love between God and humankind.”¹³ Without God’s free disclosure of himself, humans cannot find or fathom God. The act of revelation, a declaration of love, reflects the nature of the Trinity, further evidenced by the inspiration and preservation of Scripture that continues to proclaim who he is to ongoing generations and peoples.

Yet, the issue within many evangelical spheres is that this doctrine seems distant and hazy. Rather than recognize it as a foundational belief of who God is and how this

¹⁰ See Gen 1:2; Jdgs 14:6; Job 26:13; Pss 51:11; 139:7-12; Isa 61:1-3; Joel 2:28-32; Matt 1:18; 3:16; 4:1; 12:28-32; 28:19; Mark 1:10,12; Luke 1:35; 4:1,18-19; 11:13; 12:12; 24:49; John 4:24; 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7-14; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4,38; 4:31; 5:3; 6:3; 7:55; 8:17,39; 10:44; 13:2; 15:28; 16:6; 19:1-6; Rom 8:9-11,14-16,26-27; 1 Cor 2:10-14; 3:16; 12:3-11,13; Gal 4:6; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; 5:18; 1 Thess 5:19; 1 Tim 3:16; 4:1; 2 Tim 1:14; 3:16; Heb 9:8,14; 2 Pet 1:21; 1 John 4:13; 5:6-7; Rev 1:10; 22:17. References selected from The Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message.”

¹¹ All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, “Ethical Writings,” in *The Words of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2008), 9:459.

¹³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *A Shorter Guide to the Holy Spirit: Bible, Doctrine, Experience* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 97.

Triune reality affects all theology, one's practical view of the Trinity remains insipid and underdeveloped. Sanders writes, "We tend to acknowledge the doctrine with a polite hospitality but not welcome it with any special warmth."¹⁴ Although confessing its importance, taught and learned in seminaries and churches, the Trinity is viewed as an abstract, distant doctrine instead of a vibrant, exciting truth. The next section will seek to expound biblical meditation as a response to a Triune God and display of Trinitarian worship. The doctrine of the Trinity is not only foundational to Christian belief, but it also profoundly shapes how one responds to salvation and ongoing sanctification, specifically through meditation.

Communion with the Triune God

A believer's communion with God is made possible only because of the Triune God's work of salvation. J. I. Packer writes, "God is Triune; there are within the Godhead three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and the work of salvation is one in which all three act together, the Father purposing redemption, the Son securing it, and the Spirit applying it."¹⁵ The Father declares and upholds his covenants. The Son—the incarnate Word of God—declares and obeys the will of the Father. The Spirit illumines this Word in the hearts of those he calls, so that the gospel is not only heard, but wholly embraced. Overflowing from the eternal fellowship with the Son, the Father spreads his love outward. The Father directs his Son lovingly to bring reconciliation; the Son joyfully responds and obeys. Only through the blood of Jesus can humans enter into fellowship with God the Father. As the Son responds to the love of the Father and obeys his will, the Son loves the church as an expression of love to the Father as well, and the Spirit kindles in the church a love for the Father and the Son. God is Father not only to Jesus but incredibly conveys sonship to those who unite with the Son by faith. Through Jesus, God

¹⁴ Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 13.

¹⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 25.

the Father invites humans to be his children and co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:12-17). By faith, they are grafted in to Jesus, the true vine (John 15:1), united with Christ. This blessed reality reflects the Father's perfect fatherhood. John Calvin observes, "[As] a foreseeing and diligent father of the family he shows all his wonderful goodness toward us . . . we are indeed his children, whom he has received into his faithful protection to nourish and educate."¹⁶

Closely linked with the Son at each point of Christ's earthly ministry, the Spirit brings about the incarnation, anoints and empowers the Son, is promised to come and subsequently poured out, and indwells and applies Christ's work to believers. The Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus to his disciples to be with them forever, to teach and bring remembrance of the things of Christ (John 14-16). The Spirit seeks for those whom he calls to experience the forgiving power of God through the Son's sacrifice. The Spirit's role in the inspiration and illumination in Scripture remains in effect as one hears, reads, studies, memorizes, and meditates on the Bible. Packer astutely notes, "Without the Holy Spirit there would be *no gospel, and no New Testament*. . . . Without the Holy Spirit there would be *no faith and no new birth*—in short, *no Christians*."¹⁷ As Jesus commissions the church to go into all the world, the Spirit enables the body of Christ—both individually and corporately—to obey and joyfully proclaim this salvation message, and expand the kingdom. The Holy Spirit's work of reconciliation is not merely to the Father but to one another in the body. Consistent with that of the Father and the Son, the work of the Spirit flows outward. His outgoing nature spills over into the interpersonal relationships of the believer in whom he dwells.

This gospel life is an utterly Trinitarian work. Beginning before and outside of humanity, the Triune love that neither needs, benefits, nor is completed by humans,

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.14.2, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:22.

¹⁷ Packer, *Knowing God*, 61-62, emphasis original.

displays his soteriological work to not only invite the called but be united with them. The more one understands the deeply Triune nature of God's work of salvation, the more one is propelled to make returns to him. This communion, one that the great Puritan John Owen describes as "the mutual communication of such good things, wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted," consists of God "in his communication of himself to us, with our returns unto him, of that he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him."¹⁸ The work of the Triune God throughout eternity thus causes his followers to humbly respond, which includes meditation upon his beauty, which results in glorious worship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Reeves summarizes the Trinitarian effect in this way:

By sharing the Spirit with us, the Father and the Son share with us their own life, love and fellowship. By the Spirit uniting me to Christ, the Father knows and loves me as his son; by the Spirit I begin to know and love him as my Father. By the Spirit I begin to love aright— unbending me from my self-love, he wins me to share the Father's pleasure in the Son and the Son's in the Father. By the Spirit I (slowly!) begin to love as God loves, with own generous, overflowing, self-giving love for others.¹⁹

A man whom many consider to be the father of English Puritanism, William Perkins, explains that the human will is a blind faculty that the Holy Spirit illumines, after which the believer's affections and will follows.²⁰ Upon the illumination, regeneration and consequent profession of faith, sanctification begins. All flowing from this union with Christ, the objective of sanctification then becomes how to further grow a great love for God and conversely increase a hatred of sin. Puritan pastor John Flavel, in *Christ and His Threefold Office*, explains this communion is both positional and actual.²¹ It is both a biblical reality and an ongoing maturation of the believer. He writes that this

¹⁸ John Owen, *Communion with God* (London: W. Nicholson, Warner Street, 1808), 10-11.

¹⁹ Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 96.

²⁰ William Perkins, "Exposition of the Symbol," in *Works of William Perkins*, ed. Ryan Hurd (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017), 5:11-18.

²¹ John Flavel, *Christ and His Threefold Office*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2021).

communion is “a spiritual correspondence between Christ and the soul” as “God lets forth influences upon our souls, and we, by the assistance of His Spirit, makes returns again unto Him.”²² Zealously adhering to the James 4 idea of drawing near to God and he will draw near to you, the Puritans promoted the blessed life of pursuing and communing with God. The Puritans contend that to inform the mind with the things of God is to commune with him. The most obvious source of this for the Puritans was the Word of God, for when the mind is in communion with God, God sends forth his sweet influences, which then rightly orders one’s affections. This is the primary means the Holy Spirit uses in believers to sanctify them. It is the means by which spiritual eyes are opened and both vivification of Christian behavior and mortification of sin simultaneously occur.²³

Sealed by union with Christ and communion with God, meditation expresses the communitive relationship enjoyed by believers with the Triune God. As defined, meditation is a holy practice, based on the revealed Triune God of Scripture, which is done for the sake of godliness and Christian maturity. Edwards observes that this Christian practice is the “*principal sign* by which Christians are to judge, both of their own and others’ sincerity of godliness.”²⁴ Meditation does not, then, revolve around the self (unlike popular forms of meditation today), but upon a Triune God. Thus, meditation bases itself solely upon the revealed Triune God of Scripture.

Meditation as Derived from and Oriented toward the Trinity

Biblical meditation is thus intrinsically Trinitarian. If meditation centers upon God, and the God of Christianity is uniquely Triune, then meditation, both theoretically

²² John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (London: W. Baynes and Son, 1820; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1968), 4:240.

²³ For further discussion of meditation’s role in Christian sanctification, see Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004).

²⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2009), 405-6, emphasis original.

and practically, should reflect this reality. Meditation centers upon the Triune God through which one can more and more behold, commune with, and worship the Father, Son, and Spirit. Biblical meditation cannot occur without the work and reality of the Triune God. Meditation is initiated and propelled by the Spirit's work. The desire to meditate is inaugurated and deepened by the Spirit, the same Spirit who inspired the source (that is, the Bible) from which believers meditate. Calvin writes that the Spirit "who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded."²⁵ Through his indwelling, God gives to believers himself. He lives within the believer. Thus, the desire to grow in Christlikeness originates not in human form but from the indwelling Spirit. The transformative fruit of the Holy Spirit displays itself not only in inner restoration but external piety. Spiritual formation professor Diane J. Chandler writes, "Through the Holy Spirit we are made participants in another world; the world of God's life as Trinity. The Holy Spirit validates that God is closer than we are to ourselves. . . . We are transformed to be witnesses—that through the work of the Holy Spirit God claims us as friends, citizens of the Kingdom of Christ."²⁶ The Spirit, in past and present, continues to draw the believer to Christ. The Spirit produces fruit as he woos the believer toward greater meditation upon the Triune God.

Moreover, biblical meditation can occur only through the work of the Son. Christ becomes the means through which meditation, and the entire Christian life, is made possible. Christ, the perfect sacrifice once for all, became the mediator (1 Tim 2:5-6), both the sacrifice and great high priest (Heb 9). Those in Christ are declared new creations, reconciled to God, and given the ministry of reconciliation to others (2 Cor 5). Believers are promised that God will conform them to the image of the Son (Rom 8:29),

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4, 1:79.

²⁶ Diane J. Chandler, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Formation: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 208.

a predestined reality for all who bear the name of the Son. Thus, Christian meditation is initiated by the Spirit but follows from and made possible by the finished work of Christ the Son. Moreover, Jesus serves as the model for Christians to follow. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates a lifestyle of deep meditation before the Father. His retreating away, quoting of Scripture, and willingness to fully obey the Father encourage believers to pursue meditation and its fruit. Meditation, as discussed, is not an end to itself, but a means to worship God with greater faithfulness. Jesus, the God-man, displays this life that stems from intimacy with the Father. Theologian Hans Mol writes, “Jesus showed concretely what God’s intentions were for actual living in an inhospitable, imperfect, sinful world. . . . Jesus also put his own life on the line to maintain his integrity, as God’s representative, and exemplified through crucifixion and resurrection that the fullness of life is much more than physical survival.”²⁷ God is not a remote, disengaged being. No, he remains invested in believers’ holiness. Jesus, God incarnate, serves as a material example for those who are cleansed by his blood. Jesus displays the beauty of a meditative life.

Biblical meditation leads to the praise and glory of God the Father. The ultimate outcome of biblical meditation, along with all else, is the glory of God. Despite human shortcomings, Christians must glorify God through devoted meditation. Swinnock writes, “We are unable to give Him all the glory that is due His name, but we can give Him all that our mind, heart, and affections have to offer. ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name’ (Ps. 103:1).”²⁸ This great gift of meditation both comes from the Father, the source of all good gifts (Jas 1:17), and is for his glory. In his abundant lovingkindness, the Father reveals himself and seeks to be known amongst his rebellious creation. The gift of meditation reminds believers of the goodness of the

²⁷ Hans Mol, *Calvin for the Third Millennium* (Canberra, Australia: ANU, 2008), 6.

²⁸ George Swinnock, *The Blessed and Boundless God*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), 166.

Father who continuously lavishes his love upon his own.

Christians worship a Triune God who has worked as a Trinity to bring salvation and redemption. This God imparts his life both to and within his believers. “The good news of the gospel is that God has opened up the dynamics of his Triune life and given us a share in that fellowship,”²⁹ Sanders argues. Both salvation and sanctification display the work of a Triune God. Consequently, meditation also becomes an act of response, worship to, and transformation by this Triune God. This reiterates how biblical meditation is intrinsically Trinitarian. Meditation cannot occur without the Trinity’s stimulus; its goal becomes errant without the Trinity in mind. The “honey-mouthed” Puritan preacher Richard Sibbes joyfully states, “[God] delights to spread his beams and his influence in inferior things, to make all things fruitful. Such a goodness is in God as is in a fountain, or in the breast that loves to ease itself of milk.”³⁰ Christians bask in this light as believers meditate on this glorious God. While on earth, as the Spirit sanctifies, believers must live as unto the Lord, recognizing the Father as the source (Col 3). Meditation is gifted generously by God to the godly as a means for them to know, love, and worship him with greater fervency and joy. “The process of coming to know the Triune God more and more by beholding Christ in the gospel,”³¹ writes Pastor David A. Weber as he defines Christian meditation. This process draws individuals into a deeper, more mature relationship with the Triune God—the Father, Son, and Spirit—toward sincere worship and a more devoted lifestyle.

At the core of meditation remains a proper view of the Triune God, his ways and character. A right orientation of God brings genuine worship. As Edwards puts it, “Wherever true religion is, there are vigorous exercises of the inclination and will, towards

²⁹ Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 68.

³⁰ Richard Sibbes, “The Successful Seeker,” in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863-1864), 6:113

³¹ David A. Weber, “Christian Meditation in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a Reformed Model” (DMin diss., Reformed Theological Seminary, 2017), 75.

divine objects.”³² In other words, an ongoing practice of biblical meditation reflects Christian sanctification and the fruit of salvation, a heart and lifestyle that rightly beholds God, removes the self as centric to one’s existence, and leads to what humans were truly created to be. Through meditation one discovers who they truly are in Christ, for through biblical mediation one prunes away that which is not Christlike, the Holy Spirit transforming the heart to produce his fruit in all areas. Meditation’s objective is that the individual would increasingly know and respond to the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

A Biblical Definition and Practice of Meditation

Believers must recapture the art and practice of biblical meditation. Moreover, the church must return to a biblical understanding of meditation and teach believers its right definition and practice, for only Christianity offers true peace, wholeness, and freedom. These things—which those who practice Eastern-influenced meditation so desperately seek—are found in Christ alone. Scripture addresses the foundational issue—the problem of sin and the forgiveness of a Savior, by gloriously declaring that the Triune God has made a way for peace, wholeness, and reconciliation through the work of Jesus Christ. After one comes to Christ, the imperative to know and practice what the Bible teaches remains so that the believer can faithfully embrace and practice meditation. By analyzing the descriptions and patterns of meditation in both the Old and New Testament, a scriptural understanding of meditation will reveal its necessary in both thought and practice.

Meditation in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, two key Hebrew verbs are translated “meditate”: הגה

³² Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 100.

and שׁיח.³³ These two verbs represent the majority of the usages of meditation through the Old Testament. The root הגה can mean to utter, groan, growl or mutter, much like the sound of a dove or the growling of a lion before its prey, and can also refer to the plotting of the evil.³⁴ The meditative definition of הגה, however, is used seven times throughout the Old Testament (Josh 1:8; Pss 1:2; 63:7; 77:13; 143:5; Prov 15:28; Isa 33:18), the majority referenced in wisdom literature. הגה is defined “to think intently and at length, as for spiritual purposes” or “to reflect deeply on a subject.”³⁵ It is used in two of the most well-known passages of biblical meditation in the Old Testament: Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2.³⁶ In Joshua 1:8, Joshua is receiving an exhortation from the Lord as he begins his conquest of Canaan and succession of Moses’s leadership. As the original definition implies, this understanding of meditation contrasts with the popular practices of postmodern meditation. Scholar Kenneth A. Mathews writes,

“Meditate” (*hagah*) does not refer to a repetition of mystic words (mantra) or to reaching a heightened level of spiritual awareness. It describes contemplation for the purpose of understanding and obedience. The merism ‘day and night’ means “continually” (cf. 2 Tim. 1:3). Vigilant study of God’s instructions must characterize the king (Deut. 17:19) and the wise person (Ps. 1:2).³⁷

Mathews threads this biblical concept to other exhortations of this practice in Scripture, identifying its importance for Joshua’s success as he faces a momentous task.

Similarly, in Psalm 1:2, the psalmist describes the “blessed” man. As the

³³ Various other verbs are translated “to meditate” in the Old Testament, but this chap. will focus on the two most prominent verbs.

³⁴ Gleason Archer Jr., R. L. Harris, and B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), s.v. “הגה,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁵ Isaiah Hoogendyk, ed., *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), s.v. “הגה,” Logos Bible Software.

³⁶ Joshua 1:8 says, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” Ps 1:2 reads, “but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”

³⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Joshua*, Teach the Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 14.

strategic and intentional introduction to the psalter, Psalm 1 presents a clear picture of the one who is blessed. This blessed man is the righteous man described as one who meditates day and night on the Law of God. This person has a close, ongoing relationship with God not only in word but also in action. In his commentary on the book of Psalms, biblical scholar Willem Prinslo notes, “This idea is further explicated by means of a simile in v. 3. The simile of a tree planted by streams of water portrays the life of the righteous as being fruitful, permanent, and continuous.”³⁸ Again, this ongoing muttering, a constant rehearsal of the Law and how to respond to it, is illustrated by a vibrant, healthy tree. Biblical scholar Geoffrey Grogan observes that the streams of water evoked in Psalm 1 were common irrigation channels in the Near East. He states, “Planted thus, the tree fulfills its intended potential, just like someone refreshed and nourished by God’s Word. Someone so planted is prosperous. Thus, the believer must be committed to meditation, practicing it often, for the more faithfully he or she meditates, the greater his or her intimacy with God will be.

If this psalm is indeed introductory, this implies that, despite all the trials and afflictions of the godly reflected in later psalms, true prosperity is their portion.”³⁹ Thus, the psalmist outlines an intentionally meditative characteristic of the blessed person. It is not a chance reference to this practice, but, especially considering the total range of human experience and emotion of the Psalms, the placement of Psalm 1 and its exhortation of meditation must be noted. Psalm 1 declares that the meditator, like the tree planted by the streams of water, will never wither, but continue to bear fruit. Campbell McAlpine responds to this beautiful promise: “What a glorious prospect of the meditator. Through all the seasons of life, he or she will be evergreen, because of being ‘planted by

³⁸ Willem S. Prinslo, *Psalms*, Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2019), 2.

³⁹ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 45.

the rivers of water,' abiding in Christ and feeding on the Word of God."⁴⁰ The meditator may face difficult seasons, but the Scriptures declare that he or she will not spiritually fade or decay but rather stand strong amidst trials. Being blessed (through meditation) does not guarantee material blessing or ease in life but offers objective truth, hope, and a proper perspective of the things of this world and of heaven. Thus, the general sense of *הגה* includes both a continuous mental process and an ongoing affective component. Much like the ongoing, never-ending schemes of the wicked, the meditative usage of *הגה* in the Old Testament refers to a constant pondering and thinking upon spiritual matters.⁴¹

The second Hebrew verb, *חש*, is defined as to talk, complain, or consider, as well as to meditate, meaning to think intently and at length for spiritual purposes.⁴² In English, *חש* can be also translated as talk, ponder, or pay. *חש* emphasizes a loving, continuous rehearsal of the things of God, both inwardly to the self and outwardly toward others. It is used eleven times in the Old Testament, specifically in the Psalms (77:4, 7, 13; 105:2; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 148; 145:5). The famous Psalm 119's references to meditation all utilize this verb. In this profound declaration of the glory and riches of God's Word, the psalmist exhorts his readers to indeed meditate on God's Word and respond to it faithfully. It must be stated that this repeated connection of meditation and the Torah is not merely the first five books of the Old Testament. Rather, as John Goldingay, British Old Testament scholar, writes,

The great Torah psalm, Ps. 119, emphasizes Yhwh's promises as well as Yhwh's commands, and the teaching about the faithless makes promises as well as offering exhortations (e.g., Prov. 1:8-19). Such teaching presupposes a whole worldview.

⁴⁰ Campbell McAlpine, *Alone with God: A Manual of Biblical Meditation* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1981), 105.

⁴¹ As discussed, *הגה* is indeed a key verb to understand biblical meditation. However, this chap. will demonstrate that the biblical concept of meditation extends beyond *הגה* in both the Old and New Testament presentations of this spiritual practice.

⁴² Hoogendyk, *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon*, s.v. "חש."

The same is true of the teaching on which the faithful need to meditate. It comprises promises as well as exhortations, and an alternative whole worldview.⁴³

Thus, meditation is not merely information consumption. As נִשְׁׁ defines, this talking expands from an internal dialogue to an external conversation with others. Psalm 119:97 states, “O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.” Goldingay’s translation of this verse reads, “How I am dedicated to your teaching; it is my murmur all day.”⁴⁴ Again, this ongoing urge to think and repeat God’s Word is, as Goldingay notes, a “proclaiming and rejoicing; it suggests strong feelings outwardly expressed.”⁴⁵ It can be concluded that biblical meditation should not be merely an isolated, personal exercise. Rather, biblical meditation bubbles over into interpersonal action and exchanges. Thus, as pastor David A. Weber concludes, “It is a careful pondering and chewing over matters of the soul. Meditation in the Old Testament is presented as the spiritual activity of heart and mind that characterizes a God-fearing saint. He loves God’s Word and prizes it as gold or honey.”⁴⁶ Indeed, meditation is a rich, expressive, and deep spiritual work.

The Old Testament understanding of meditation is an ongoing process; a filling of the mind and heart toward that of heavenly matters. Meditation connects thoughts with love. The two Hebrew verbs together reveal that biblical meditation both stems from the heart and engages the mind. Rather than solely emotive, the Old Testament reveals that meditation reflects on God’s law, his actions, or his character. Nathanael Ranew, writing in 1799, stated, “Meditation therefore must have this attendant of delight, which like a

⁴³ John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 81.

⁴⁴ John Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 373.

⁴⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150*, 388.

⁴⁶ Weber, “Christian Meditation in the Twenty-First Century,” 14.

flame, like the chariot of Elijah, carries up the soul in musing into heaven.”⁴⁷ The Old Testament understanding of the heart is not mere emotion, but is the essence and core of a person’s internal life, which not only encompasses emotion, but also will, thought, and character. Thus, meditation incorporates the person’s entire being. Weber continues, “The word meditation in the OT is used to describe the expression of the heart; meditation is the speech of a man’s true inner self.”⁴⁸ Meditation affects the entire person, for it addresses the inner life which then affects the outer life. The Old Testament picture of meditation brings the individual to God to further conform himself or herself, through both intellect and affections, to the will and image of God, deepening one’s faithfulness, love, and worship to him.

Meditation in the New Testament

The presentation of biblical meditation shifts from commendation in the Old Testament to commandment in the New. While Joshua is commanded to meditate as he leads Israel into Canaan and the psalmists laud the blessings of the benefits of meditation, there is not an explicit command for all believers to meditate. However, as the concept and practice of meditation is further developed in the New Testament, meditation moves toward commandment. Paul and the other apostles command their audiences—and thus believers today—to consider the gospel and meditatively respond to its glorious realities. While also describing the many benefits of practicing meditation, the New Testament shift is clear: meditation is a command. Thus, the testimony of Scripture does not merely encourage and hope for meditative followers of Christ but decidedly expects Christians to regularly engage in biblical meditation.

The New Testament’s teaching on meditation is pervasive. Several New

⁴⁷ Nathanael Ranew, *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation: or A Treatise Proving the Duty, and Demonstrating the Necessity, Excellency, Usefulness, Natures, Kinds, and Requisites of Divine Meditation* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1799), 51.

⁴⁸ Weber, “Christian Meditation in the Twenty-First Century,” 11-12.

Testament verbs and passages reflect the imperative for the New Testament church to meditate upon God and his Word. Although certain English translations rarely use the word “meditate” in the New Testament, the concept presents itself thoroughly.⁴⁹ The Greek verb μελετάω, used in the LXX in the Old Testament for both הגה and חיש, is used in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 4:15, to be diligent with the spiritual gifts given.⁵⁰ In Luke 2:19, Mary ponders the things surrounding Jesus’s birth in her heart. In Luke 21:14, Jesus, when forewarning of future wars and persecution, uses the verb προμελετάω so that people are prepared to know how to answer when trials occur. The New Testament calls its readers to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus, then to respond through meditative thought and action (Heb 13:8; 2 Tim 2:8).

The usage of the imperative by the New Testament authors marks a change from the Old Testament. No longer is the discussion for a specific individual or general descriptions of a blessed, obedient life, but the New Testament now commands believers to respond to the gospel through meditation. The author of Hebrews, while tying the Old Covenant and its connection to Christ, calls his audience to meditate on Christ’s completed, fulfilled work. Hebrews 12:3 asks readers to consider how Jesus endured hostility and suffering so that they will not grow weary. To encourage his readers, the author reminds them of the suffering of Jesus and to take heart and display courage as they meditate upon Christ’s example. In the Tyndale New Testament Commentary, David G. Peterson writes, “The challenge to consider Jesus heightens the emphasis on looking to him as the pioneer and perfecter of faith. . . . In particular, the author wants his

⁴⁹ The New American Standard Bible does not use the word “meditate” in the New Testament. The English Standard Version utilizes the verb only once in the New Testament in Luke 21:14.

⁵⁰ In the LXX, μελετάω is used eighteen times for the verb הגה (Josh 1:8; Isa 16:7; 33:18; 59:3, 13; Pss 1:2; 2:1; 35:28; 37:30; 38:13; 63:7; 71:24; 77:13; 143:5; Job 27:4; Prov 8:7; 15:28; 24:2). Both verbs μελετάω and ἀδολεσχεύω are used to translate חיש and are used twice (Pss 119:148; 143:5) and nine times (Pss 69:13; 77:4, 7, 13; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78) respectively.

audience to meditate on the fact that Jesus endured such opposition from sinners.”⁵¹ New Testament scholar Thomas R. Schreiner adds,

The readers are urged to consider Jesus, and again his endurance is featured, which is just what the readers need as well. . . . By considering what Jesus suffered, they will have a fresh resolve in a world that remains unfriendly and opposed. Giving up is another way of describing apostasy. It is the converse to enduring to the end, and Jesus endured by looking to the ultimate reward.⁵²

Thus, thinking upon the work of Christ is not merely self-guided mindfulness. Rather, this reflection is a true meditation on the work of Christ, as preserved and declared in Scripture, for sanctification and perseverance. Such meditation should not only include Christ’s death and resurrection, but Christ’s current session should be a topic of reflection as well.

Proceeding further into the New Testament teaching on meditation, the apostle Paul desires the early church to seek Christ and godly virtues. This Greek verb, ζητέω, meaning “to seek,” is implemented throughout the New Testament almost four hundred times.⁵³ This seeking, of which Jesus employs in the Sermon on the Mount when calling believers to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33), reflects an ongoing pursuit of godliness. The shepherd who loses one sheep from his flock will leave the ninety-nine to “seek” the lost animal (Matt 18:12) and the merchant unendingly seeks beautiful pearls and rejoicingly sells everything to buy one of great price (Matt 13:25). Just as the Old Testament concept of meditation reflects a continuous musing, so the New Testament calls for a consistent seeking of God’s kingdom and conforming to a godly lifestyle. Applying this verb, Paul exhorts his readers to set their minds and hearts on things above in the book of Colossians. Colossians 3:1-4 says,

⁵¹ David G. Peterson, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 285.

⁵² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 379.

⁵³ See its usage in Matt 6:33; John 5:44; 7:18; Rom 2:7; cf. Phil 2:21; 1 Thess 2:4-6; cf. Phil 3:19-20.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Rather than focusing on earthly things or not meditating at all, Paul commands the Colossian church to meditate on the things of heaven, transforming their minds and affections. Continuing this argument, Paul will exhort the Colossians to put off the old man and put on the new. A key characteristic of the sanctified believer is described in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” One must note this emphasis on the Word of God. As one seeks the things above, one must also allow Scripture to abide in his or her life, which is both an individual and corporate reality. Such is the lifestyle of a biblically meditative believer.

In response to union with Christ, Michael F. Bird describes the lifestyle of the one who meditates, as prescribed in Colossians 3: “The accompanying commands seek and set your mind upon the things above is not pietistic escapism but refers to a steadfast devotion to Jesus Christ which determines the attitudes of the believer.”⁵⁴ As one rejects “pietistic escapism” in favor of “steadfast devotion,” Colossians 3 embraces a holistic lifestyle that matures from biblical meditation. Moreover, seeking things above and setting minds on things above distinctly connect one’s thoughts to one’s actions. By meditating on the work of Christ and the reality of union with Christ, actions and lifestyle will change. This ongoing process of continually seeking is “a desire to have one’s thinking and lifestyle continually oriented around Christ’s kingship over all things,”⁵⁵ argues G. K. Beale. Clearly, Paul’s imperative is all-encompassing, particularly as he continues his

⁵⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, A New Covenant Commentary (Eugene OR, Cascade, 2011), 97.

⁵⁵ G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 115.

discussion by exhorting the Colossians to put away the old man and put on the new in the rest of chapter 3.

Additionally, Paul exhorts the Philippian church to dwell and think upon virtuous things. In Philippians 4:8, he writes,

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

In the Greek, the verb root of “to think,” λογίζομαι means “to give careful thought to a matter, think (about), consider, ponder, or let one’s mind dwell on.”⁵⁶ Rather than creating one’s own reality, emptying the mind, or ignoring issues, Paul commands his audience to meditate upon things of God. Ralph P. Martin, New Testament scholar, argues this is much further than a simple thinking or keeping in one’s mind: “It is rather ‘take into account (logos), reflect upon and then allow these things to shape your conduct.’ The following verse is a continuation of Paul’s message with a call to explicit action: ‘put it into practice.’”⁵⁷ Paul is thus presenting a template, a biblical list, of not mere virtues, but Christian characteristics presented throughout Scripture as means for meditation and thus application.

Thus, it is unsurprising that when Paul writes to his spiritual son, Timothy, Paul commands him to “reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Tim 2:7). Summarizing his exhortation in 2:1-6, Paul likens remaining faithfully stout to a soldier, athlete, and farmer. Paul calls Timothy to think upon Paul’s words and continue to minister well. As biblical meditation requires an ongoing consideration of the words of God while the Holy Spirit ministers to illumine minds and hearts toward godliness, commentator Walter L. Liefeld writes, “The fact that Paul urges

⁵⁶ F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev and ed. W. Arndt and W. Bauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 598.

⁵⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 177-78.

Timothy in verse 7 to ‘reflect on what I am saying’ and that he needs God-given ‘insight’ into it show that these teachings require more than superficial assent.”⁵⁸ Paul pleads with Timothy in one of Paul’s last letters as he nears his death that Timothy meditate effectively and biblically.

Throughout the New Testament, the authors exhort their audience to humbly meditate on spiritual truths and thus be transformed. This renewing of the mind is what Paul refers to in Romans 12:1-2 that leads to godly discernment is impossible without biblical meditation. How can one be rightly transformed and continuously be sanctified without biblical meditation? The New Testament declares and responds to the reality of Christ’s death and resurrection and exhorts followers to apply the truths as the soul is further transformed through meditation. Meditating upon the example of Jesus propels individuals toward greater godliness. The Holy Spirit dwells within the believer to spur him or her toward this prospect.

Through both direct command and examples, the Old and New Testaments together reveal the power and practice of meditation. Not only do specific passages teach this, but the examples of biblical characters reflect meditation as well. Moses commands people to talk and practice continually about God’s law, teaching and modeling to the next generation, and to take heart and care to God’s commands (Deut 6:7; 32:46). Through the spiritual practices of Joshua, David, Mary, Paul, and Jesus himself, one notices patterns of deep, regular meditation whose thoughts and affections continuously clung, carefully considering God, his character, actions, and Word. In conclusion, the Bible commands meditation throughout the testaments.

Reviewing the practice, patterns, and specific mentions of meditation throughout all Scripture, one may observe that the Old and New Testaments present three categories of meditative focus for the believer: God’s works—including his creation and past acts—

⁵⁸ Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 51.

his ways—his attributes and character—and his Word. Whether in happy situations or times of distress, the Bible expects believers to meditation upon the Triune God, considering his ways, his works, and Word.⁵⁹ The first two of these categories, although distinct, are intimately tied to the third: the Word of God. Biblical meditation cannot be done without the foundation and basis of Scripture.

Biblical Meditation as Scripture-Based Meditation

Meditation is a vital practice for faithful believers, for it is the process by which the Word and acts of God through the mind and heart create a response. However, for meditation to be biblical, it must be tethered to and grounded upon the truths of God as expressed in the Scripture. Meditation centers upon the Triune God, through which one can more and more behold, commune, and worship the Father, Son, and Spirit, and by which the meditator can grow in godliness and Christian maturity. Donald S. Whitney defines meditation as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture or upon life from a scriptural perspective, for the purpose of understanding, application, and prayer.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Packer defines meditation as

the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God.⁶¹

Meditation fundamentally practices hearing and responding to God, growing in spiritual maturity and conformity of the image of the Son, Jesus Christ. Meditation, both “directive and devotional,”⁶² observes Edmund Clowney, simultaneously devotes the heart toward

⁵⁹ For further reference, see Pss 19:14; 49:3; 94:19; 119:11, 15, 23, 28, 93, 99; 143:5; Luke 2:19; John 4:24; Eph 1:18; 1 Tim 4:13; Heb 3:1.

⁶⁰ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 46-47.

⁶¹ Packer, *Knowing God*, 18-19.

⁶² Edmund C. Clowney, *Christian Meditation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2002), 31.

greater faithfulness while also engaging the mind. Through meditation, the individual seeks God and inclines himself or herself toward greater obedience through worship. The Bible calls for its adherents to fill their mind with the things of God, morning and night, that it would spill over into their lives, relationships with others, and all that they do. Whitney likens meditation to a brewing a cup of tea. The hot water of one's mind absorbs the tea bag of Scripture. Meditation is the steeping process of the tea. The longer it steeps, the richer the water becomes.⁶³

Unlike the common understanding of meditation in Western culture, meditation is neither mystical nor mindless. Rather, God wants his people to know and respond to him. He communicates plainly through his Word to those willing to hear and obey. God is not a God of confusion, but a God of clarity. Although God can speak through any means, Dallas Willard explains, "We must reply to this tendency [of hearing God through mysterious feelings or curious circumstances] by stating emphatically that God *is not a mumbling trickster*. . . . On the contrary, we can expect (given the revelation of God in Christ) that if God wants us to know something, he will be both able and willing to communicate it to us *plainly*."⁶⁴ An active exercise, meditation does not allow individuals to passively wait for God to mystically speak. Meditation requires the individual to develop the discipline and awareness to meditate regularly and fruitfully, foundationally through the Scripture.

The Johannine theme that equates obedience to God's commands as a love for God himself echoes in the background of Scripture-based meditation, for God's commands are revealed in Scripture. Thus, meditation cannot be true, Christian meditation unless it is anchored in the Bible. The most reliable, consistent, and clear source for meditation remains the Bible. Thus, Christian meditation starkly differs from the mystical Eastern forms of meditation to clear or empty the mind. Unlike Eastern forms of meditation, Christians meditate upon the God of the Bible. As Clowney states, meditation is "not an

⁶³ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 47.

⁶⁴ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 250.

arbitrary ‘mantra’ but the rich treasure of Scripture is the key to Christian meditation.”⁶⁵ Christians hear God most distinctly and consistently through the Bible. After all, biblical spirituality attempts to conform to the teachings of Scripture, and thus the Word must be the foundation upon which Christians meditate. McAlpine observes, “Bible meditation is one of the essential means that God is seeking to restore to make us people who not only know *that* God has spoken, but also *what* he has spoken.”⁶⁶ Biblical meditation, as revealed, fills the mind with Scripture, the truths found in God’s Word, and the reality and future hope proclaimed through the gospel. Biblical meditation shapes the individual’s mind, heart, and actions to more deeply align with the Bible and the God of the Bible.

Although summarized above, the spiritual and practical benefits of meditation are too numerous to describe in detail. But they include the fact that Scripture-based meditation helps protect believers from falling away into error or sin. Meditation on the Bible also helps prevent ignorance or misapplication, for, as David Saxton states, “Deliberate meditation upon Scripture builds a habit of thinking through decisions in a biblically thoughtful manner.”⁶⁷ Moreover, Scripture meditation is the means by which thoughts and the intellect are absorbed into the emotions and the heart. Without intentional meditation on Scripture, people will select other objects on which to meditate, worship, or ponder. Apart from Scripture, meditation can only but fall wayward like the nonreligious or Eastern meditative forms in the world. Throughout the Bible, the human authors insist that their audiences meditate on God’s Law and the things of God. Scripture remains the most reliable source through which one hears and meditates upon his voice and teachings.

Without biblical meditation, believers are sure to become weakened in their godly resolve. The author of Hebrews warns, “Therefore we must pay much closer

⁶⁵ Clowney, *Christian Meditation*, 23.

⁶⁶ McAlpine, *Alone with God*, 26.

⁶⁷ David W. Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 53.

attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (2:1). Puritan scholar and professor J. Stephen Yuille writes, “Scripture meditation is the vehicle by which what is known in the head seeps down into the heart. Without it, we muse on trifles and that which is evil.”⁶⁸ Believers need the Word of God to remain anchored by his clear commands and ponder his truths. Thus, through Scripture-based meditation, the individual will be increasingly shaped by the Word.⁶⁹ Through meditation, the meditator is corrected, purged, and pruned. The Word cuts through the heart to reveal sin, wrong attitudes or motives, and erroneous desires and ambitions. Through meditation, one’s thoughts, affections, and actions become more like those of Christ. Consequently, meditation is neither a mystical nor passive activity; it is not an end to itself as a calming, self-soothing mechanism. Puritan George Swinnock beautifully describes meditation’s fruit. He explains that true knowledge does not merely inform the mind, but rather “takes the heart as well as the head. . . . Right knowledge begins in the head, but it does not end there. It affects the heart and regulates the life.”⁷⁰ Meditation is not designed to be a stiff, mechanical exercise to be done mindlessly or passively. No, the Scripture is living and active, through which the Holy Spirit speaks and touches the individual as he or she meditates upon the works and character of God revealed in his Word. Davis notes, “Meditation on the Scriptures, when illuminated by the Holy Spirit, can function in all four dimensions: informative, transformative, imaginative, and unitive.”⁷¹ Meditation on the Scripture utterly transforms both the inner and outer life of the believer.

⁶⁸ J. Stephen Yuille, *Great Spoil: Thomas Manton’s Spirituality of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 109.

⁶⁹ Of course, one’s interaction varies when interacting with the different genres of Scripture. For example, meditating on the Proverbs vs. Judges, the Old Testament genealogies vs. the Sermon on the Mount, or the minor prophets vs. Paul, may require different forms of meditation and applications. This could become an area for future research in the study of biblical meditation.

⁷⁰ Swinnock, *The Blessed and Boundless God*, 140.

⁷¹ John Jefferson Davis, *Meditation and Communion with God: Contemplating Scripture in an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 106.

This centeredness upon the Bible prevents a wayward understanding of meditation. Biblical meditation combats the world's teachings, for it exposes erroneous instruction and thought antithetical to the Scriptures. True biblical meditation produces greater spiritual maturity, and reliance upon and worship to God. Thus, it must be approached seriously and with discipline. Meditation is a solemn endeavor and should be approached with reverence and gravity. Joel Beeke both exhorts and warns, "Be aware of its weightiness, excellence, and potential. If you succeed, you will be admitted into the very presence of God and feel once again the beginning of eternal joy here on earth."⁷² Meditation is life-giving, life-transforming, and must be approached as such.

Furthermore, biblical meditation stimulates the meditator to prayer. Regarding meditation, Puritan pastor William Bridge wrote in the seventeenth century, "As it is the sister of reading, so it is the mother of prayer."⁷³ Reading without meditation often results in little evident fruit; meditation without Scripture is dangerous; and "to meditate and to read without prayer upon both, is without blessing."⁷⁴ Meditation on Scripture prompts prayer, enhancing both disciplines. Prayer is a normal response to a divine encounter initiated through meditation. Scripture, meditation, and prayer weave well together in a life of spiritual discipline.

The Scope of Meditation

As previously mentioned, the Bible enjoins meditation on God's Word, God's works, and his ways; thus, the scope indeed is vast. The individual can meditate on all things as long as it connects to God as revealed in the Word. Whitney notes, "The Bible doesn't limit the scope of meditation to the Bible itself. However, all meditation should

⁷² Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004), 82.

⁷³ William Bridge, *The Whole Works of the Rev. William Bridge* (1845; repr., Beaver Falls, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1989), 3:132.

⁷⁴ Bridge, *The Whole Works*, 3:154.

focus either on what is revealed in Scripture or be informed by Scripture.”⁷⁵ The breadth of meditation can reach beyond the Bible itself, but the scope is either limited to or informed by the Bible. Whether the psalmist meditates on God’s law, the New Testament apostle muses on heavenly things, or the modern-day believer sees the beauty of creation and worshipfully responds through meditation, all meditation must relate to the Source of wisdom and life. Meditation based on biblical teachings can be found anywhere, for God is creator, and he is providential and sovereign. Whether through a conversation among friends, the changing leaves of the autumn, or a tragic event, all situations can become a moment of meditation and worship. However, these moments must be connected to or rooted in Scripture. Although meditation can occur through all situations, what has been revealed in Scripture remains the most clear and consistent method God speaks to his people. Biblical meditation always leads to greater, more devoted worship of the Triune God. The authority of Scripture stems from a supreme God that transcends philosophical trends or assertions. The Reformation call of *sola Scriptura* is upheld, for the absolute claims and commands of Scripture bring rootedness to a roaming society.

Rooted in Scripture but with potential in a myriad of situations, meditative moments affect and shape all aspects of life and thought. This is what Clowney affirms when he writes, “We remember [the Holy Spirit]’s works of old; we meditate on the climax of his mighty deed at the cross of Calvary and at the empty tomb, but we remember too his dealings with us, the mercies we have known in our past years, months, days, and hours.”⁷⁶ What a beautiful gift meditation is. This breath of biblical meditation will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters, as subsequent chapters will promote the visual arts as a method of biblical meditation.

⁷⁵ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 306-7.

⁷⁶ Clowney, *Christian Meditation*, 43.

Conclusion

It must be stated that meditation does not save the one who meditates. However, it remains a gift from the Triune God to worship him, a biblical command for Christians to obey, and an indispensable tool and fruit of the saved and sanctified life. It warms a naturally cold heart toward great affection and faithfulness. Through biblical meditation, one beholds, worships, and enjoys the Triune God. Meditation as defined by Scripture becomes the believer's close friend. Meditation must be approached earnestly, with great attention and discipline, accompanied by a meek, obedient heart willing to hear and respond to the God of the universe. Meditation is not a trendy practice the church adapts in response to other forms of spirituality in culture; meditation is a divine directive that the saints of old have practiced. Though the practice of meditation has continued throughout church history, and the saints of today must reclaim and restore to its intended purpose. Meditation is supplied by and oriented toward a revealed Triune God who generously gives of himself to his people, calling believers to cast off worldly vices and "walk by the Spirit," in step with him and bearing his fruit (Gal 5:16-25). Biblical meditation assists believers in upholding these God-given commands.

In this chapter, it was shown that the command to meditate on Scripture is of great benefit to the believer. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, biblical meditation provides an offensive attack on and defensive block against sin. As Puritan Edmund Calamy said in *The Art of Divine Meditation*, "A true meditation is when a man doth so meditate of Christ as to get his heart inflamed with the love of Christ; so meditation of the Truths of God, as to be transformed into them; and so meditate of sin to get his heart to hate sin."⁷⁷ In the absence of consistent, biblical meditation, one's mind and heart can only be but increasingly overcome in this evil age by the torrent of unbiblical messages that pervade the culture. Baptist pastor Edmond Smith describes the natural progression that results from a lack of meditation: "If you continue to neglect meditation, it will

⁷⁷ Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation* (London: for Tho. Parkhurst, 1634), 26.

dampen or destroy your love for God. It will make it unpleasant to think about God. It will leave you open to sin so that you view sin as a pleasure. It will leave you vulnerable and fragile before trials and temptations of every kind. In short, it will lead to a falling away from God.”⁷⁸ Smith provides his caution, for the consequences of abandoning meditation are great. If believers do not seek to redeem their given time and ignore meditation, then they will be overcome by the wind and waves of worldly thinking. It is much easier to waste time than to discipline one’s use of it. God expects his people to pursue him with a diligent spirit. Believers must approach meditation as a necessary command of their spirituality for the glory of the Triune God.

One also recognizes that meditation requires discipline. Calamy warns against apathy and neglect: “There are many Christians that have set upon this work of meditation, and finding it too hard and difficult, and meeting with so much opposition in their hearts, wandering thoughts, and abundance of spiritual distempers, they have been discouraged, and laid it aside, which certainly they ought not to have done.”⁷⁹ The more often practiced, meditation becomes easier, and one’s spiritual roots grow deeper. Though difficult for some in the beginning, through perseverance, the meditator will soon glean the spiritual, eternal riches of his or her divine encounters with God. Although requiring discipline and persistence, the cost to not meditate never outweighs its importance. Despite the difficulty, particularly in today’s digital, social media, and always “on” culture, one must meditate, for through meditation one’s love and worship of the Triune God will increase. Packer reminds Christians, “The healthy Christian is . . . the Christian who has a sense of God’s presence stamped deep on his soul, who trembles at God’s word, who lets it dwell in him richly by constant meditation upon it, and who tests and reforms his life

⁷⁸ Edmond Smith, *A Tree by a Stream: Unlock the Secrets of Active Meditation* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1995), 36.

⁷⁹ Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 118.

daily in response to it.”⁸⁰ The need for growing mature believers always remains, but particularly in an increasingly hostile climate, Christians must dedicate themselves to know, be rooted in, and live out God’s truths. The necessity of regular, biblical meditation far outweighs the cost. Meditation, as a regularly practiced duty, reflects a humble heart before God, which is a mark of Christian maturity. Saxton warns readers of the grave importance of meditation: “Without redeeming the time through godly meditation, one will be overcome with the evil of the age and be left vulnerable to polluted, depraved thoughts that incessantly seek a mind upon which to work their evil.”⁸¹ Perhaps the waywardness of many Christians is due to a lack of Scriptural meditation. As Saxton continues, “No believer will overcome the effects of mental pollution without using his time to continually renew himself. Christians who refuse to use their time to meditate upon the Word are as foolish as an army sentry without bullets or a fireman without a water source.”⁸² The imperative to take the time to meditate remains vital, especially as the culture turns away from truth.

Today, the believer must take care to meditate if he or she is to cultivate one’s love for God. This “profitable and heavenly a work”⁸³ to borrow Joseph Hall’s description of meditation, stands directly in contrast with the busyness and instant gratification of the digital age. The rushed nature of the twenty-first century and the “cult of speed, efficiency, and production”⁸⁴ make it difficult for believers to slow down, to be still before God, and meditate. However, perhaps, this indicates that meditation is more important than ever before. The external chaos of the ongoing, still-growing

⁸⁰ Packer, *Knowing God*, 116.

⁸¹ Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 54.

⁸² Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 54.

⁸³ Joseph Hall, *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall* (Oxford: Philip Wynter, 1864), 6:79.

⁸⁴ Davis, *Meditation and Communion with God*, 24.

technological revolution distracts those enmeshed in it, but often this noise and busyness is self-imposed. Because of one's own unwise digital choices, and perhaps laziness or foolishness, the time is not being redeemed but is wastefully disappearing. Christians must intentionally choose stillness and meditation away from the busyness of technology, the hurriedness and harried stress of the dings and buzzes of smartphones, laptops, and tablets. Weber considers what may result from such meditation and what believers should do before it is too late:

We may find, in generations to come, that this limiting of information is the most important factor for spiritual growth in the digital era. This overabundance of information means that Christians must start making deliberate decisions about the amount of information they will allow into their lives. Not only should we guard what we consume, but how much we consume. There will have to be a conscious effort to choose what not to know, so that we may give attention to what is truly worthy of being known.⁸⁵

Biblical meditation is crucial if the believer is to withstand the temptations of the devil and stand against today's cultural current of pseudo, antibiblical spiritualism. The church must call people to ponder the truths and spiritual realities of God, founded upon Scripture, that they may further understand and respond to it. Without meditation, one will be tossed by the waves of the cultural sea, blown by the winds of unbiblical thought, and be rendered unfruitful in the midst of thorny ethical and political issues. Thus, Christians must choose to heed Psalm 46 and "be still and know" that our Lord is God. Meditative silence is not inactivity but a posture of attentiveness to God, allowing the self to meditate upon him, his character, works, and Word. Like so many of those of Bible, but especially like the many examples of Jesus in the Gospels,⁸⁶ Christians today should seek to get alone with their heavenly Father so that moments of meditation can occur.

It is not unreasonable to view the cultural movement toward meditation and "spirituality" as a backlash against the speed of technological advancements and its

⁸⁵ Weber, "Christian Meditation in the Twenty-First Century," 171.

⁸⁶ Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; John 6:15.

byproducts. Self-fulfillment may not be all it is hyped up to be.⁸⁷ The sheer numbers of those actively pursuing spirituality and self-development today may also indicate a widespread search for truth and better solutions to difficult questions. In this (and every) cultural moment, Christians can humbly, but confidently, present the truth of the gospel and biblical answers to life's biggest questions. The world's inborn narcissism can be cured only by embracing a Trinity-centric view. The Triune God to whom all glory is due can alone satisfy the deepest needs of those he created in his image. Those who become truly enlightened would see the infinite superiority of centering their lives upon him and not themselves. Meditation on Scripture is a means to this enlightenment and a sure guide for realigning their hearts away from themselves to this great God. Christians, likewise, need to learn to meditate on Scripture, both to mature their own spirituality, but also to demonstrate to the world the true peace Christ brings. Meditation is not only personally beneficial but outwardly evangelistic. Whereas other forms of meditation promise to decrease stress and bring inner peace, only believing, meditating, and obeying the claims of Christianity will bring lasting joy, hope, and peace. Christians can be distinct from the world, for "the more the heart is replenished with holy meditation, the less will it be pestered with worldly and carnal thoughts,"⁸⁸ says Manton. This distinction can reveal to those desperate for peace and an antidote to their stress and anxiety that Christ is indeed the Savior who forgives sin, reconciles the person to God, and brings the transformation no one can produce on their own.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer succinctly states, "Why do I meditate? Because I am a Christian."⁸⁹ Biblical meditation, tethered but not limited to Scripture, fills the mind,

⁸⁷ For a fascinating look at the adverse effects of self-pleasure from a secular, postmodern perspective, see the NBC comedy television show, *The Good Place*. In the third and last season of this show, the characters are given the ability to design their own versions of the afterlife and come to realize the shallowness of this fantasy.

⁸⁸ Manton, *The Complete Works*, 7:481.

⁸⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 2nd ed., trans. David McI Gracie (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000), 22.

affects the heart, is a fundamental practice of the spiritually mature in Christ. The Bible attests to its benefits and necessity, for biblical meditation reveals the true nature of the world, the self, and God, whom Edwards describes as “the supreme harmony of all.”⁹⁰ One way this supremely harmonious Triune God magnifies himself is in his glorious work of salvation and sanctification. Christians should recognize the Trinity’s deep work and respond with increasing meditation and worship before him.

Having established a biblical and theological basis of meditation, the next chapter will shift into a discussion of the visual arts, their varied relationship with the church throughout history, and explore how the visual arts can be a positively applied method of biblical meditation in today’s highly visual age.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “The Miscellanies,” in *The Words of Jonathan Edwards*, 13:331.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL MEDITATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS: AN ARGUMENT FOR ITS USEFULNESS

The visual arts, in both the past and now, are a rich source of understanding human thought and behavior from a sociological and anthropological perspective. As Christians are called to be the light of the world and go into it to preach the gospel, their understanding of people is a tool for effective gospel proclamation and discipling. As the West shifts to a post-Christian culture, how should Christians then wisely, humbly, and charitably engage others? In today's highly visual culture, applying the visual arts as a method of biblical meditation can be a major catalyst for maturity and the strengthening of a Christian's mind and imagination.

As the biblical definition and scope of meditation has been established in previous chapters, this chapter will overview the church's history and relationship with the visual arts, establish the importance of the arts in human flourishing, and then demonstrate how the visual arts can be a powerful means and application of biblical meditation. This method of biblical meditation that utilizes the visual arts will be presented as a means for spiritual edification and growth as Christian saints participate in the metanarrative of redemption, and it will provide a theological argument for this practice for believers to better embody the truths of Scripture and become more mature, wise persons. For several centuries, the visual arts have been a powerful stimulus for Christian meditation and worship. Though sometimes the responses to these stimuli have transgressed biblical boundaries or allowed the arts to usurp the role of Scripture, nevertheless the visual arts can be profitable for devotional purposes by twenty-first

century believers in an image-saturated culture. The chapter will provide a historical overview and right theological grounding for this application.

The Development of the Visual Arts in the West

The development of the visual arts in the West is indebted to the church. Many of the most notable works of Western art, whether Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, or the wonder of Notre Dame, are universally recognized masterpieces. Such works and buildings' connection to Christianity are explicit. For centuries, art and architecture were used as means to teach people Scripture and reflect the transcendence of God. People would view these pieces and use them as prompts and means to meditate on Scripture. In ages when people did not have access to and/or the ability to read the Bible, art served as a means through which one could consume the Word.¹ Yet, this relationship has also been often contentious. The complex (and at times convoluted) relationship of the arts and the church must thus be reassessed.²

In the early church, though evidence of the earliest visual representations of Jesus himself do not appear until the third century AD, Jesus was quickly symbolized indirectly by pictograms such as the *ichthus* fish, a lamb, an anchor, a vine to represent Christ's union with his people, and a peacock to represent resurrection. Patristic scholar and professor at the University of Virginia, Robert Louis Wilken notes, "On the walls of the catacombs Christians painted pictures of persons and events recorded in the Scriptures, for example, Moses striking the rock at Kadesh, Daniel in the lion's den, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the raising of Lazarus."³ Biblical scenery and images

¹ This viewing could be problematic, as an individual's understanding of Scripture would be based on a piece of artwork that was the artist's interpretation of Scripture.

² This section does not seek to provide an extensive overview of art history but rather to highlight some events and aspects of art history pertinent to this dissertation's overall aim.

³ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2003), 240.

were used to decorate places of worship, catacombs, or other significant sites. Depicting biblical narratives and teachings (particularly the sacraments of baptism and communion), these images were utilized and understood to be tools and not objects of worship. Thus, the visual arts were a normative expression of spirituality in the early Christian church. Moreover, the early church fathers embraced what was seen (most often nature but not exclusively so) to point to the revelation of God. Augustine recognized the natural world as a sign to reflect God or lead people to him, pointing to the Romans 1 declaration of God that “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20). In *On Christian Doctrine*, he writes, “If we wish to return to our Father’s home, this world must be used . . . so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made—that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.”⁴ In other words, the world’s physicality points toward spiritual and eternal realities. While affirming the danger of idolatry by those who use nature, artwork, and images as the end of worship or as tools without understanding its significance, Augustine was unafraid of visual imagery as a tool for greater intellectual or spiritual comprehension.

Despite this early tradition, the use and purpose of images shifted. Thus, the church, particularly in the Eastern church, began to vigorously debate the use of images by the eighth century. These icons, oftentimes small paintings of Christ or saints, were generally used as a means through which one would pray or worship, yet not viewed as the object of prayer or worship itself. In AD 754, Byzantine emperor Constantine V both forbade the use of images and formally condemned those who defended them. Motivated by either (or both) the rise of Islam in the East⁵ or the desire to diminish the societal

⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009), 1.4, 4.

⁵ When assessing this debate in the eighth century, one must not discount the larger political and societal factors unfolding. This debate grew as Islam gained prominence in the East, a strongly iconoclastic

influence of the monks (who both supported the use of images and whose income was partly generated by making and selling them), Constantine V's decision further fueled the debate. Two sides emerged: the iconoclasts vehemently opposed and sought to destroy images while the iconodules (or iconophiles) remained in strong support for using images in worship.

The most prominent theologian amidst the debate was John of Damascus (c. 675-749). Once a high official in the Islamic caliph's government before resigning to first become a monk and later a priest, John of Damascus defended the use of images. Arguing that not all reverence is worship and not all images are idols, he advocated for images as a means of Christological orthodoxy. Realizing Christians were submitting to the Islamic antipathy toward images more than a Christian understanding, he responded to the iconoclasts in *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*: "But since God . . . became true man . . . the Fathers, seeing that not all read nor have the time for it, approved the descriptions of these facts in images, that they may serve as brief commentaries."⁶ Based on the incarnation, John of Damascus asserted that since Christ came in the flesh, images are a theologically orthodox means of teaching, particularly in the vastly illiterate society in which he lived. If God is the first maker of images, and if God himself created humans after the divine image to image himself, then one should embrace the usage of images in worship. Providing an apologetic against Islam's theology and a Christian basis for imagery in the Christian tradition, John passionately defended the use of images.

While this debate impacted the West to a much lesser extent during the eighth and ninth centuries, the East continued to tensely examine this issue. By 787, the seventh ecumenical council gathered in Nicea where they clarified that worship (*latría*) is only

religion that vehemently forbade any figural representations. One cannot not overlook this major societal and religious shift occurring simultaneously that directly affected Christian thought during the eighth century in Eastern Christian thought and practice.

⁶ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, vol. 3 of *The Fount of Knowledge*, trans. Norman Russell, Popular Patristics Series 62 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2022), 4.16.

due to God, but less worshipful veneration (*dulia*) can be given to images. By 842, images were formally restored in the East. John of Damascus's argument had won. The controversy subsided and Christians continued to embrace images in the church, both in the East and West.

Through the medieval age and the subsequent renaissance, visual imagery continued to be utilized in both branches as a major tool for spiritual pedagogy. Art historian and theologian William A. Dyrness writes, "Visual meditation was felt to be more effective for remembering and recalling things that we absent from the mind, than words alone."⁷ The emphasis on the eye as the gateway to the imagination rather than the memory is reflected in the art produced in the medieval age and renaissance. As in an illiterate society, Christian artwork flourished as a major means to teach the biblical text. The interaction between the text and image was on magnificent display through the propagation of Christian-themed art or illustrations of biblical text in churches, private homes, or monasteries.⁸

By the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had shifted their position. No longer mere tools, images had become objects of worship themselves. Contradicting the Council of Nicea's definitions of worship and veneration, visual images or objects were not only purported as objects of worship but pathways for eternal security. Thus, as the Protestant Reformation untethered itself from the corruption of the papacy, Reformers led the charge of becoming decidedly anti-Catholic. Directly responding to the Catholic view, the great Reformer John Calvin stringently prohibited images in the church. The prominence of this topic in Calvin's theology is revealed in his treatment in chapter 11 of Book 1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Citing the use of

⁷ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 23.

⁸ The Lindisfarne Gospels will be discussed in the following chapter. A brilliant interplay between biblical text and visual art, this illustrated manuscript provides a strong example.

images as a direct violation of the second commandment, Calvin argued from the biblical text that such inclusion of images was disobedient to the commands of God. Calvin explicitly states,

We are forbidden every pictorial representation of God. . . . Since this brute stupidity gripped the whole world—to pant after visible figures of God, and thus to form gods of wood, stone, gold, silver, or other dead and corruptible matter—we must cling to this principle: God’s glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him.⁹

In other words, representations are gross *misrepresentations* of God. Calvin continues his argument in the second point in chapter 11: “Every figurative representation of God contradicts his being.”¹⁰ God speaks against making images in Deuteronomy 4:15 and thus Calvin concludes that God speaks against all images. Those who seek or advocate visible forms of God are volitionally rebellious. Citing passages in Isaiah 40, 41, and 45, and Acts 17, Calvin develops his argument as affirmed in both the Old and New Testament. While Calvin recognizes the signs God gave in the Bible (i.e., clouds and smoke and flames of Deut 4:11; or the Holy Spirit appearing as a dove in Matt 3:16), he writes that “even direct signs of the divine Presence give no justification for images. . . . [These signs] aptly conformed to his plan of teaching and at the same time clearly told men of his incomprehensible essence”¹¹ and thus should not be copied or attempted by humans.

Calvin concludes, “Images and pictures are contrary to Scripture”¹² Graven images are forbidden. Criticizing the Greek Christians (which would include John of Damascus and his spiritual descendants), Calvin argued that simply because they made the images beautiful did not exempt them from committing sin. He writes, “Thus is the

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.11.1, 99-100. Henceforth, I will cite Calvin with the book title followed by the volume, chapter, and section, and include the page number of the book.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.2, 100.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.3, 102.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.4. 103.

foolish scruple of the Greek Christians refuted. For they consider that they have acquitted themselves beautifully if do not make sculptures of God, while they wantonly indulge in pictures more than any other nation.”¹³ Yet God, Calvin defends, forbids any likenesses for they represent him “falsely and with an insult to his majesty.”¹⁴ In other words, “Any use of images leads to idolatry.”¹⁵ God’s power is bound to any visible form created; thus, Calvin notes men are “so stupid that they fasten God wherever they fashion him; and hence they cannot but be adored.”¹⁶ It matters not if humans are worshipping an idol or if the idol is representative or symbolic of God. It is, Calvin concludes, “always idolatry when divine honors are bestowed upon an idol, under whatever pretext this is done.”¹⁷ God cannot be imaged in any way, for humans cannot rightly handle such images. Unsurprisingly, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* further elaborates upon Calvin’s argument in its answer to the 109th question: “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are . . . the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshipping of it, or God in it or by it.”¹⁸

Calvin’s iconoclasm must be analyzed in the context of the Reformation and the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. His arguments are made assertively and are clearly developed from Scripture. Yet, even amidst his prohibition of images of God, Calvin’s aesthetic theology was well-developed. For Calvin, this visual beauty was found in the glory of creation. Creation, a “mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.4. 103.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.4, 104.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.9 109.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.9, 109.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.9, 109.

¹⁸ The Westminster Divines, *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Edinburgh, 1647), question 109.

otherwise invisible”¹⁹ is the theater of God’s glory. Thus, successive generations formed by Calvin’s influence would, while cleanly breaking from prior church tradition, instead embrace creation as a source for visual expression. As such images portrayed what can be seen, not what is invisible, this were right and legitimate “gifts of God”²⁰ to be enjoyed.

Interestingly, not all Reformers adhered to Calvin’s strict prohibition. Rather, Martin Luther possessed a positive view of images. Adhering more with the opinion of the early church, Luther advocated that if one possessed a right understanding of images as tools and not the goal of worship, images should be incorporated into worship and pedagogy as a helpful means to teach and mature Christians. Radically differing from Calvin, Luther used visual imagery and the visual arts to teach people the Bible and doctrine. He advocated for the use and propagation of the visual arts. Luther notes, “Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding. . . . Yes, would to God that I could persuade the rich and mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it.”²¹ Thus, Luther filled the edition of the 1534 German Bible with woodcut illustrations of the biblical stories they accompanied. He did not take issue with pictorial representations of Scripture and eagerly applied them toward his spirituality and pedagogy. Likewise, Ulrich Zwingli, while maintaining a strict iconoclasm, employed woodcuts to assist people’s grasping of the theological meaning of the Word and sacraments. Amidst the reformers, Calvin’s ban stood uniquely distinct from Luther or Zwingli’s acceptance. Yet, Calvin’s legacy has had a deep impact on the church. The evangelical church continues this tradition even today—there is little to no emphasis or recognition of the importance of images in the typical evangelical church in the West,

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.5.1, 52.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.12, 112.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. John Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), 51:77.

particularly in the United States.²²

The Puritans continued Calvin's prohibition. Whereas the eye was given prominence before the Reformation, afterward the ear became dominant—the preaching of the Word was preeminent. For the Puritans, the Bible was the source of deep imagination and outworking in life. However, while Puritans limited their production of visual art, the visuality of life was heavily emphasized. Dyrness writes, “Visible imagery is missing, identified as it is with superstition. But the visual dimension of faith is nevertheless present.”²³ Thus, while the visual arts were not nearly as propagated as sermons and other writings, the Puritans visually embodied the Christian life in their lifestyle, descriptive speech, appreciation for nature, and how they built both church and civic buildings. In the architecture and planning of cities, the illustrative usage of imagery in writing and preaching, and the focus on the spiritual life and imaginations as the stirring of one's affections, the Puritans' appreciation of the visual life was rich and compelling. In *The Saints Everlasting Rest*, Richard Baxter writes, “God would not have given us either our senses themselves or their usual objects if they might not have been serviceable to his own Praise and helps to raise us up to the apprehension of highest things.”²⁴ This Puritan typological imagination and aesthetic theology imagined true rest found in heaven, an experience of which all yearn; an experience that was corporeal and spiritual. Thus, for the Puritans, art had to serve a higher purpose of teaching or portraying this theological framework. Dyrness observes,

For the Puritans images were banished from churches, but in place of such sacred imagery, the whole of life, in its patterns and structures, took on the character of an icon of God's presence. And in the midst of this theater of God's glory, it is the

²² This will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.

²³ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 140.

²⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (London: Joseph Caryl, 1949), 151.

individual person as the special image of God that stands out as the dramatic focus in the narrative of salvation.²⁵

Consequently, the visual arts of the Puritans are reflected in their most-often painted subjects: people. Considered a sort of treatise on the value of the image of God, such portraits, especially of spiritual leaders, were a theological declaration that echoed the “real art” God makes, the gifts of grace given in and through his servants. The Puritan idea of beauty, a deeply theological and eschatological reality, sought to develop a redemptive art in their aesthetics, whether in portrait, language, architecture, or personal devotion. Even as the Puritans forbade images for worship, they embodied a highly meaningful aesthetic lifestyle, recognizing the importance of the visual reality in Christian living.

The visual arts shifted in the subject matter of their pieces along with the religious reforms in locales influenced by Calvin’s theology. As Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness write, Calvin’s aesthetic outlook “relocated the religious and theological significance of art beyond the recognition of—or even association with—Christian *subject matter*.”²⁶ Because such representations were forbidden in worship, Protestant art shifted to portraying everyday life as religiously meaningful. Whether observational, still life, portraits, or landscapes, such images reflected the spiritual vibrancy of the world. The Dutch masters of the seventeenth century were particularly adept in this tradition. Such pieces were meaningful theological propositions: by depicting what society considered common and low (i.e., agrarian life, still life, and landscapes), they declared the value of such subject material just as God proclaimed the goodness of his creation.²⁷ Adopting this Calvinistic approach, Protestant art depicted what is visible with

²⁵ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 238.

²⁶ Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism*, Studies in Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 160. This book is an excellent resource that delves deeply into the intrinsic religiosity of contemporary art and encourages Christians to interact and appreciate such art redemptively and thoughtfully.

²⁷ Examples will be discussed and further expanded in the following chapter.

a theological understanding of God's glory. The command to ponder the things of God through his creation and works pointed to a greater artist who masterfully declared the world into existence and one day will establish a New Heaven and New Earth.

As the art world has shifted into modernism and contemporary art in the twentieth century to the present day, many Christians balk at its grotesque, strange, or decidedly un-Christian subject matter. Yet, even this era reflects its religious roots.²⁸ The deep—if distorted—spirituality of a great deal of modern art, much like the spirituality of postmodern meditation, reflects a yearning for spiritual truth. Whereas in Rembrandt's era masterpieces were created with declaratory or proclamatory functions, art today emphasizes asking deep questions or unsettling norms. Like the imprecatory Psalms, Job, or the book of Ecclesiastes, contemporary art seeks to disjoint and disrupt life to question reality. While the separation of art and Christianity in contemporary art seems entrenched, one can recognize how art has been shaped by religion's contexts and theological concerns. The religious influence in modern art is often quite heavy, and while some expressions are a rejection of organized religion, the deep philosophical questions of the meaning of life, purpose of humanity, and questioning injustice—all questions that can be answered through the Christian worldview—are present. As E. John Walford notes, "Without entering into the realm of the horrific and grotesque in the manner of those postmodernist artists who find in beauty only boredom, for the Christian artist the incarnation of Christ provides a basis to engage with integrity both beauty and ugliness, pleasure and pain."²⁹ The Christian framework can enter these spaces and questions and provide substantive responses to life's greatest questions, deepest longing,

²⁸ Note the example of Piet Mondrian's career as reflective of his journey to seek the transcendent, purified art. See more examples in Anderson and Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture*.

²⁹ E. John Walford, "The Case for a Broken Beauty: An Art Historical Viewpoint," in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 109. For an excellent (and brief) overview of beauty, see Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and most desperate cries of pain.

The varied relationship between the church and the visual arts requires much more discussion than presented here. However, one can notice the deep cultural context for the major events in this historical overview. The iconoclastic movement in the East rose as Islam becomes prominent; John of Damascus defended images for the church in response. The Roman Catholic Church equated image with the Divine; Calvin wrote in defiance of this false doctrine. In the middle of these seemingly contrasting arguments remains a distinction between appreciation of image as a tool and worship of image as God in both John of Damascus and Calvin's arguments.

Is It Acceptable to Depict God?

In this overview of the church and the visual arts, one must address whether any visual depictions of any member of the Trinity are biblically permissible. Such debate has been ongoing (as already referenced in the previous section) for much of church history. There remain two general views: one that accepts some images of the Father, Son or Holy Spirit in the visual arts and another that asserts that any visual depiction of God is a violation of the second commandment in the Decalogue. Based on the popularity of Christian television series and movies, paintings, and usages of Christ images in churches today, it seems that the majority of Christians—particularly in the United States—have no issue with at least some visual presentations of Jesus. Yet, considering Calvin's assertions, one must consider this question. While Calvin (and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*) must be placed in his cultural context, believers must face his discussion about images, as he bases his argument on the second commandment: the prohibition of images of God. Is it wrong to produce or view art that depicts God in any form? Is one violating Scripture when viewing depictions of Christ? Though much of modern art is removed from a Christian context, believers must navigate how to interact with the visual arts that depict biblical scenes from centuries past that still hang in museums. By such statements, Calvin and the Westminster Divines indict much of the long history of

Christian art. Is this tradition indeed idolatrous?

Does Christian art that depicts any person of the Trinity violate the Ten Commandments? The first and second command declare, “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod 20:3-4). God continues to elaborate upon the second command, giving his reasoning as to this prohibition: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod 20:5-6). The prohibition’s concern is not necessarily the idol itself but the idolatry and idolatrous lifestyle that results from making and worshipping such an object. Biblical scholar Douglas K. Stuart asserts, “Idolatry was not merely a practice of worshiping by means of statues and/or pictures as focal points for worship; rather an entire, elaborate religious system and lifestyle, all of it running counter to what God desired and desires true worship to be.”³⁰ The worship of false gods (or even worshipping God improperly) is a major concern of the Ten Commandments, for God’s jealousy and his holiness demands pure, undefiled worship. Though a popular religious characteristic of the Ancient Near East, idols were forbidden in Israel. “Since in the ANE gods were viewed as being present in idols that represented them, bowing down before such an image was considered an appropriate way of showing respect to the relevant god. . . . Exclusive loyalty to YHWH leaves no room for the Israelites to worship other gods,”³¹ biblical theologian T. Desmond Alexander notes. Even though virtually all other Ancient Near East cultures used idols as

³⁰ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 401.

³¹ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2017), 404.

means to show deference, Yahweh explicitly forbade this practice—a distinctive of Judaism amongst all other Ancient Near East religions. John I. Durham observes, “No image conceivable to them could serve to represent him. They must worship him as he is, not as they can envision him or would like him to be. . . . Israelites are forbidden to make images for the worship of Yahweh because he is Yahweh.”³² Creating idols reduced Yahweh into an object that could only lead to a wrong understanding of who God is and sinful worship before him.

The distinction in the second commandment is between God and the making and worshipping of idols, not an entire dismissal of images. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. states,

[The second] commandment is not meant to stifle artistic talent but only to avoid improper substitutes that, like the idols of Canaan, will steal hearts away from the true worship of God. One need only to consider the tabernacle with its ornate appointments—all fashioned according divine instruction—to see that making representations is not absolutely forbidden.³³

The Old Testament has a clear, robust theology of the proper use of images, and God’s progressive revelation is often accompanied with visual experiences. God unleashed his signs and wonders of the Exodus “before your eyes . . . and on earth he let you see” (Deut 4:34-36). Israel is called to remember these eyewitness events. Moreover, the Old Testament usage of images is not merely contained to recall past events but is used for holy worship. God instructs Israel to utilize their artistic talent to create symbolic items for decoration in the tabernacle. Whether decoratively sewing pomegranates and bells on the priestly garments (Exod 28:31-35), the lampstand decorated with almond flowers (Exod 27:31-40), or casting cherubim for the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:17-22), no artistic ability was spared in the creation of the tabernacle and its objects. In his Exodus commentary, R. Alan Cole adds, “[The cherubim above the ark] were the throne for the

³² John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 286.

³³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Exodus*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, *Genesis-Leviticus*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 575.

invisible presence of God above. However, if the making of cherubim was permitted, then the prohibition of the ‘image’ will refer only to the making of direct objects of worship, not to the representation of any living object, as sometimes understood later.”³⁴ Again, the second commandment thus is not an omission of images *in toto* but is limited to idolatry. As humans are commanded to create objects that aid the proper worship of God, this creative act does not violate the second commandment. One can extend this point further, arguing that not only are images not prohibited, but they are encouraged by God. As God revealed himself, God used visual experiences to accompany his Word. William Dyrness concludes, “Images are not so much prohibited in the Old Testament as integrated into the progressive revelation of God’s purposes for the earth, pressed into service as the visible dimension of a transcendent reality.”³⁵ The distinction between images of God (which violate the second commandment) and images implemented for worship (which are encouraged) must be clear.

In addition to the Decalogue, the Old Testament clearly teaches that no one can see or depict God. God tells Moses that none can see his face and live (Exod 33:20). Thus, even descriptions of God are limited to his character and attributes throughout the Old Testament. Interestingly, however, when Daniel prophesies about the Son of Man in Daniel 7, he describes God’s appearance: “The Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire”(v. 9). John Goldingay describes this glorious scene: “The particularly explicit picturing of God in human fashion comes here in the latest work within the OT, and paradoxically, it is the human portrayal of God that captures

³⁴ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 186.

³⁵ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith (Engaging Culture): Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 65.

God's divine incomparability as a just and absolute ruler."³⁶ Daniel's physical description of God is unique in the Old Testament, yet it demonstrates that such verbal descriptions is not in violation of biblical commands. This passage, however, still does not provide evidence for an allowance for tangible, uninspired images of God.

The incarnation of Jesus bursts onto the Roman world in the first century AD, shocking the Jewish world. Though God is not a man that can be depicted, he became man through the incarnation, physical and visible to others. As the beloved disciple writes in 1 John 1:1-3,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with your eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews writes, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (1:3). During Jesus's earthly ministry, God dwelt among people; people saw him and interacted with him. First century men and women have tactical experiences as Jesus touches people to heal them, washes his disciples' feet, and breaks bread to feed the hungry. The woman with the issue of blood reaches out to touch the hem of his garment and Jesus asks, “Who touched me?” Mary anoints his feet, and the disciples are invited touch the nail-scarred hands as proof of Christ's victory over death. Upon his resurrection, he eats with his disciples to confirm that he is indeed not a ghost. Paul emphasizes that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Through Jesus, this unseeable God became seen. Artist-theologian Cameron Anderson observes, “Whether one is an iconoclast or iconophile, the meaning of the incarnation is certain: the unseen God is *seen* through the veil of Christ's flesh. This simple fact has redirected the

³⁶ John Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 30 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 362.

whole of human history.”³⁷

The incarnation makes what was unseen now seen. Thus, one wonders if the incarnation shapes Christian thought regarding visual depictions of God. Philosopher Stephanie Rumpza recognizes this shift: “Indeed, from the Old Testament alone, we have no basis to make an image of the infinite God, as in the command against graven images. But the situation is radically altered when the Son became incarnate. The invisible God took on visible flesh, the infinite entered finitude, and the formless took on the form of human nature.”³⁸ Whereas the Old Testament command is clear, the incarnation radically shifts God’s people’s concept of who God is. Alexander connects the significance of the incarnation in relation to the Ten Commandments: “While the Decalogue rejects outright the possibility that carved idols may reflect important aspects of God’s nature, it should not be overlooked that the opening chapter of Genesis affirms that human beings were originally created in the divine image.”³⁹ As humans image God, they should not establish idols to defile their worship and their image-ness. God’s image is seen not through idols but in humankind. “Remarkably, God’s redemptive plan for humanity involves the restoration of the divine image in humanity. In the light of this, the NT claim that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) is highly significant,”⁴⁰ Alexander continues. The incomprehensible incarnation transforms what was unseeable to physical flesh. While the Father remains invisible, the Son has become visible. This physicality, visibility, and tangibility provides basis for depictions of Christ (though perhaps not the Father) in the visual arts. Rumpza agrees, noting that “while we do not

³⁷ Cameron Anderson, *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts*, Studies in Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 145.

³⁸ Stephanie Rumpza, *Phenomenology of the Icon: Mediating God through the Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003), 25.

³⁹ Alexander, *Exodus*, 407.

⁴⁰ Alexander, *Exodus*, 407.

have any basis for imaging the Father, who remains invisible, uncircumscribable, unknowable, the Son presents us with God's visibility in human flesh."⁴¹

The incarnation is significant for the portrayal of Christ in the visual arts and has been a longstanding argument for the legitimacy of this artistic subject matter that does not violate biblical command. Church history can provide great wisdom as modern-day believers seek to resolve this issue. After Constantine's conversion of Christianity in AD 312, church buildings grew exponentially along with a welcomed desire to decorate the buildings with paintings and mosaics of Bible stories, biblical characters, and Christ himself. The early church's usage of images and depictions of biblical scenes and individuals (including Christ) was based upon the incarnation. Wilken observes, "Pictorial art, like poetry, began early in the church's history. Because of the Incarnation, Christianity posits an intimate relation between material things and the living God."⁴² The incarnation is utterly foundational to the acceptance of images of Christ in visual forms.

Though an overview of the iconoclastic debate and its resolution at Nicea has already been discussed in a previous section of this chapter, the prominent voice of John of Damascus, the converted monk from Islam living in the Holy Land, should be revisited and expanded. His three treatises to defend the use of icons offer much insight. In *On the Divine Images*, he argues that removing icons "challenged the fundamental Christian belief in the Incarnation, that the God who is beyond time and space was made known through a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of a woman and lived in a particular place and time in history,"⁴³ describes Wilken. Because God took on human flesh, this legitimized painting images of the Christ. John declares, "When he who is

⁴¹ Rumpza, *Phenomenology of the Icon*, 25.

⁴² Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 244.

⁴³ Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 245.

bodiless and without form, immeasurable in the boundlessness of his own nature, existing in the form of God, empties himself and takes the form of a servant in substance and in stature and is found in a body of flesh, then you may draw his image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it.”⁴⁴ John defends images as viable objects in assisting worship for they neither are the object of worship, nor do they violate Scripture. This boundless God has put on humanity. “Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by the partaking of flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead, but I paint the image of God who became visible in the flesh.”⁴⁵ Such is not violating biblical command, for these images are based upon a God who has revealed himself in the flesh, bodily died, and has put on a glorified, resurrected body.

In his defense, John references the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, “And we all, with unveiled face, [behold] the glory of the Lord” (3:18). If Jesus is the “image” of God (Col 1:15), John of Damascus argues that whereas in former times one could not see God and thus images led to idolatry and the violation of the Decalogue, through the incarnation, humans can “see” God. Consequently, images are central to the Christian faith. Because Jesus’s resurrected body remains even as he has ascended to the right hand of the Father, John defends the usage of the visual arts to depict Christ. He declares, “Depict his wonderful condescension, his birth from the Virgin, his Baptism in the Jordan, his Transfiguration on Tabor, his sufferings which have freed us from passion, his death, his miracles. . . . Show his saving cross, the tomb, the resurrection, the ascension into the heavens.”⁴⁶ As John of Damascus passionately

⁴⁴ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson, Popular Patristics Series 24 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1997), 15.

⁴⁵ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, 94.

⁴⁶ John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, 18.

advocated for images as a theological proclamation of the incarnation in centuries past, the modern church should consider his words.

Calvin himself still affirmed the visual arts that depict what is visible as gifts from God to be enjoyed, including depictions from history and events, nature, or fellow humans, as long as is retained a didactic purpose. If Jesus, the God-man, is indeed a historical figure, then does this prove an exception to Calvin's prohibition? John Calvin never addresses John of Damascus directly. Though Calvin would certainly still argue against portrayals of Christ, this God who could not be seen by man came in the flesh to be seen by men. Theologian David Lyle Jeffrey identifies this tension: "Anxiety about the potential for such confusion [of idolatry] has led some Christians, prudentially, to ascetic severity where art is concerned, whether in contexts of worship or domestic life."⁴⁷ Believers have opted toward prudence, avoiding the issue altogether rather than to fall into accidental disobedience. Yet this caution has not been without consequence. Jeffrey continues, "Unfortunately, in the process much of value has been lost, not only to places of formal worship, but informally and spiritually, through a narrowing sense of the fullness of divine giftedness and the joy of creativity offered back in love for the Giver."⁴⁸ Perhaps the church can reclaim this vacuum and engage the arts in a godly, biblically faithful manner.

The modern church should learn from John of Damascus's apologies. The radicality of the incarnation fulfills the Old Testament and shapes the early church in significant ways, including how to utilize the visual arts to worship God. Longtime friend of C. S. Lewis and influential Anglican writer Dorothy L. Sayers offers in *The Mind of the Maker* that "to forbid the making of pictures about God would be to forbid thinking about

⁴⁷ David Lyle Jeffrey, *In the Beauty of Holiness: Art and the Bible in Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 366.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey, *In the Beauty of Holiness*, 366.

God at all, for man is so made that he has no way to think except in pictures.”⁴⁹ After all, humans visualize stories as they listen to or read them. The prophets themselves describe their visual experience of encountering God. This human impulse cannot be helped. As modern-day believers read the Bible, the waves of the Sea of Galilee grow bigger as the storm surges, the valley of dead bones comes to life as Ezekiel preaches, and the empty tomb shines bright on that Sunday morning. Images are an inescapable component of spirituality and have always been so in the Christian tradition. Not all images (or even church art) have been tied with visualizing Jesus, but images have been utilized (regardless of Christian tradition) to encourage sanctification and echoes to believers the glory of the Triune God.

In reality, few Christians today are ardent iconoclasts. *The Chosen* television series⁵⁰ depicting Jesus of Nazareth is popular, *The Jesus Film*⁵¹ continues to be used as a missional tool to the nations, and churches erect nativity displays in December. This dissertation is not overtly promoting depicting Jesus but allows art to be utilized as a tool for worship (not an object for idolatry). Today, many Christians appreciate, and perhaps venerate, more than they realize, things such as their favorite books, Christian pastor or author, or worship songs—icons of the twenty-first century. Entranced by these things, like those captivated by relics in history past, believers today grapple with a right usage of these modern “icons” that are meant to be tools and not the object of worship itself. Others flee to the opposite extreme and denounce everything aside from Scripture as unnecessary and borderline dangerous. Believers today should ask what the right balance

⁴⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1941), 22.

⁵⁰ This ongoing series was created by Dallas Jenkins in partnership with Angel Studios in 2017 and is available through their app and through various streaming services online. As of 2024, *The Chosen* has released four seasons of the life and ministry of Jesus.

⁵¹ *The Jesus Film* is a 1979 drama directed by Peter Sykes and John Kish. This film has been highly popular for gospel-sharing purposes and has been translated into over 2,000 languages. See Jesus Film Project, “Free Gospel Video,” accessed January 1, 2024, <https://www.jesusfilm.org/watch>.

is between remaining stoutly Christocentric and biblically anchored, while also rightly embracing images as a helpful tool for Christian maturation. The Bible clearly teaches against idolatry *and* appeals to visual imagery to illustrate spiritual truth. This dissertation is not explicitly advocating for images of God but rather demonstrating how the visual arts in general can be a source for believers to practice biblical meditation. Thus, if the Word and image are not mutually exclusive, then how can believers understand the unique contribution the arts provide for Christian spirituality? The visual arts provide a unique value to the Christian life and deepening of both theological knowledge and imagination, as this next section will develop.

The Visual Arts' Unique Value

The visual arts provide much for the modern believer to be reminded of the glory of God and the responsibility of his image-bearers in their calling to be holy in an unholy culture. The unique value the visual arts provide for human flourishing and how they are an important theological reflection of the Triune God should be recognized and embraced by believers. The visual arts are a means through which biblical meditation can occur at the foundational level. Their innate transcendent and spiritual qualities evoke meditative moments.

Regardless of the influence of Christianity in Western art, both in centuries past and today, the visual arts reflect the creative act humans perform as creatures made in the image of God. Theologian Francis Schaeffer notes, "Art has value as a creation because man is made in the image of God, and therefore man not only can love and think and feel emotion, but also has the capacity to create."⁵² As *imago Dei*, humans possess a divinely-given, even divinely-mandated, impulse to create. The visual arts innately reflect, display, and celebrate this compulsion. Art conveys the larger doctrine of the *imago Dei* as the

⁵² Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art & the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 34.

product, the creation, of an image-bearer. Humans are not merely emotive and intellectual creatures, but are creative beings made in the image of the Creator God. Whether the artist acknowledges it or not, he or she is embodying this gift of being the *imago Dei* and thus reflecting the goodness of the Creator God. Pastor Erwin McManus writes, “To create is to be human; to create is to fulfill our divine intention; to create is to reflect the image of God; to create is an act of worship.”⁵³ The desire to create is to proclaim a narrative that reflects this Triune God who has revealed himself ultimately through Jesus and is still unfolding his story through time.

The creative act is a pronouncement of God’s gift of his image and the telling of the metanarrative unfolding. Pastor-theologian Francis Schaeffer writes, “A Christian should use the arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself.”⁵⁴ In other words, the arts can become a means through which Christians are reminded of the Godhead, a piece of worship to the Creator God. In a small scale, the creative act proclaims what God has done, is doing, and will do in future time. The great twentieth-century theologian R. C. Sproul writes, “God is not only the author and inspirer of art, but He Himself is an artist. In a very simple way, we observe that every single day. . . . By the power of His word He can create worlds of beauty, fill empty voids with real things, and triumph over the unformed abyss by speaking the word of creation.”⁵⁵ Thus, the process of creation is not merely a physical act, but a spiritual one. It reflects the work of the great artist, the Creator himself. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff observes, “Works of art are not simply the oozings of subconscious impulses; they are the result of beliefs and goals on

⁵³ Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Artisan Soul: Crafting Your Life into a Work of Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 10-11.

⁵⁴ Schaeffer, *Art & the Bible*, 10.

⁵⁵ R. C. Sproul, *How Should I Approach Art? Crucial Questions* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier, 2023), 19.

the part of the artist.”⁵⁶ Art is a product of a processed expression of thought. In other words, art reflects the spirituality of its creator. For the Christian viewer, approaching the visual arts through this theological understanding can provide greater appreciation. One is beholding pictures, yes, but the art pieces hold much more substance than merely colors and brushstrokes. Art causes pause within the believer to meditate on the creative act of God and the creative impulse he has placed in his image bearers.

Moreover, art displays transcendency. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes, “There are certain works of art—by Dante, Bach, the makers of Chartres Cathedral: the list is endless—whose power seems inseparable from their epiphanic, transcendent reference. Here the challenge is to the unbeliever, to find a non-theistic register in which to respond to them, without impoverishment.”⁵⁷ Taylor is arguing that to view the visual arts without a theistic framework is a *greater* challenge than to approach it with this worldview. Why is this so? The goodness and truths found in art point to the source of all goodness and truth: the Triune God. The ineffable qualities of art point to something greater than the piece itself: the arts point to a higher Being. “And whatever goodness or beauty may come into the world through these works of art, it is only on account of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,” notes W. David O. Taylor.⁵⁸ Such qualities in art point to a larger reality: the existence and beauty of God. Art becomes a means to knowing something, or rather someone, greater. It points to a greater Creator at work on the canvas of time and humanity. The transcendent quality is both inseparable and inescapable from merely the physical entity the viewer is beholding.

⁵⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 89.

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2007), 607.

⁵⁸ W. David O. Taylor, “Art for Faith’s Sake,” in *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*, ed. Josh Chatraw and Karen Swallow Prior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 286.

Although the fall has rendered a sinful state, this ability to see the transcendent in art remains. Kutter Callway observes,

Humans can, in fact, interpret and understand their experiences of transcendence in the arts appropriately, albeit imperfectly. Furthermore, these experiences (rightly understood) can and do serve as trustworthy resources for constructive theological work that addresses the various crises and catastrophes that have come to define contemporary society.⁵⁹

The visual arts are a means to further emphasize the transcendence displayed in Scripture. As clearly stated, this ability is flawed—the objective truth of Scripture is still required and remains central—but the arts can also reflect God.⁶⁰ Callaway continues, “This does not mean that everything humans apprehend about the divine is appropriate (or orthodox), but it does indicate that we should be confidently optimistic rather than cautiously pessimistic concerning the human capacity to apprehend the transcendent Divine in and through aesthetic experiences.”⁶¹ Art reflects the transcendent, and while one should never uphold images as the final authority, one cannot deny its influence and usefulness to reflect and reemphasize revealed doctrine in Scripture and right spirituality.

Consequently, if the visual arts reflect this transcendent God, then they also point toward the story this God is unfolding. Art points to the larger notion of an arrived and coming redemption. “Art has the mystical task of reminding us in its production of

⁵⁹ Kutter Callaway, “Transcendence, the Arts, and New Creation: An Empirical Approach,” in *The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie, Daniel Train, and W. David O. Taylor (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022), 71.

⁶⁰ Callaway seeks for a method to determine if humans possess the ability to respond to a transcendent God through an aesthetic experiment. His experiment tests to see what humans are comprehending and perceiving in their aesthetic experiences. He concludes that the marked empathy shift from viewing pictures of people and identifying their emotion reflect the power of images. Callaway achieves these results using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count and the Multi-Faceted Empathy Test (MET), which has been proven to have a high degree of reliability and validity, to measure cognitive and affective empathy by showing a series of photographs of people, identifying the specific emotion of a person in the picture, and rating how the subject himself personally feels what the person in the picture is feeling. Callaway argues that the pictures, a material artifact and image, create an aesthetic experience in which the subjects respond and display greater empathy by it. He admits that subjects may not admit God’s presence and activity, but utilizes his experiment to determine how humans respond to images reflect their image-bearing status. Callaway, “Transcendence, the Arts, and New Creation,” 69-88.

⁶¹ Callaway, “Transcendence, the Arts, and New Creation,” 84.

the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster,”⁶² states Abraham Kuyper in his series of lectures on Calvinism. The visual arts reflect the now and not yet tension of the Christian life. A beautiful God has provided the means to both appreciate beauty now and anticipate a fully redeemed beauty in the future. Even when one’s present circumstances cannot change, art “serves the cause of human liberation by producing in us a sense of estranged reconciliation with reality as it is and the vision of an alternative,”⁶³ says Wolterstorff. Viewing beautiful art can intensify a believer’s longing for the future consummation of God’s plan. This tension, like creation in Romans 1, seeks a resolution. It invites believers to embody the arc of redemption unfolding before them by reflecting God’s beauty in their lives. Whether the piece of art portrays something glorious or tragic, it points toward the future and final consummation of God’s redemption. Dyrness adds that art “is able to provide anticipations of that future—though not in isolation from the narrative that leads to that place.”⁶⁴ Art thus becomes a powerful means of proclaiming the scriptural notion of redemption. The gospel declaration of Jesus as the Christ, Deliverer, and Judge who has come once and will come again provides a theological framework on how to interact and appreciate the arts, for the gospel invites believers into the family of God and expects Christians to be active stewards expanding the kingdom. As Wolterstorff argues,

Since we are now called to be God’s agents in His cause of renewal, of whose ultimate success He has assured us, art now gains new significance. Amidst the now-and-not-yet tension, the arts provide a powerful apologetic of God, his character and his actions. Art can serve as instrument in our struggle to overcome the fallenness of our existence, while also, in the delight which it affords, anticipating the shalom which awaits us.⁶⁵

⁶² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 55.

⁶³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015), 52.

⁶⁴ William A. Dyrness, “Dante, Bunyan and the Case for a Protestant Aesthetics,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 3 (2008): 302.

⁶⁵ Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 84.

Echoing the Pauline call to be ministers of reconciliation, Wolterstorff connects the Christian life to the arts, for art visually reminds, encourages, and exhorts believers toward obeying the calling of Scripture to live well in the tension of the now and not yet. Art helps to provide balance—to recognize both the difficulty and beauty of this world while pointing to a greater future of restoration ahead.

In a small way, the visual arts' changelessness in the formal sense of composition, line, or color, and material properties, echo how God is eternal and immutable. Isaiah 40 recalls the eternity of Scripture because even though the grass withers and the flowers fade, God's Word endures forever.⁶⁶ Generation after generation of viewers have stood in awe of Rembrandt's masterpieces, Michelangelo's sculptures, and Van Gogh's compositions. Despite how much has changed in culture and society since their original production, these pieces—and the appreciation of them—have not changed over time. Thus, the visual arts provide a unique, continuous value in the human existence. Unlike music or the theatre arts, the visual arts remain constant over time. Though styles and forms of all art forms have shifted over time (Impressionism is distinct from Renaissance painting; Bach differs from the Beatles; *Hamlet* contrasts to *Hamilton*), each production of music or theater changes as different musicians, actors, and directors interpret the notes and lines with varying inflection, tempo, and perspective. The conductor and director's vision of the same piece can imbue a fresh take of the piece; the performance of a Tchaikovsky concerto or *Death of a Salesman* varies each time the musicians play or actors act, even if minutely. In contrast, an art piece is a time stamp of the artist's proclamation. Aside from natural deterioration (that can be slowed and even reversed through art restoration), each art piece remains exactly as it was when first created. While one must also recognize the thick contextual layer the visual arts provide—

⁶⁶ Isaiah 40:6-8 reads, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

for viewing Rembrandt today is much different than when Rembrandt was alive—as the historical, cultural, and social context of the twenty-first century highly informs the contemporary viewer’s experience. The impact of Rembrandt is not lessened by being temporally separated from its origin. The beauty found in the visual arts endures and continues to proclaim a greater and more eternal beauty beyond its frame.

Biblical Spirituality and the Visual Arts

These stated qualities of the visual arts must not go unnoticed by Christian spirituality today. Upon recognition of the importance and profundity of the visual arts, the visual arts can become a powerful method through which biblical meditation informs and shapes one’s spirituality. The inward, reflective quality evoked by art becomes a means by which spiritual maturity can deepen. Like the Protestant art that painted subjects and scenes not explicitly religious, yet pointedly revealed the connectedness and beautiful ordinariness of faithful spirituality, art—regardless of its subject—can continue to be a major tool for spiritual formation. Theologian Jennifer Allen Craft asserts a similar claim. In her excellent treatment of the arts in *Placemaking and the Arts*, she argues, “The visual arts are a potential catalyst for spiritual formation that unites the community’s experience of divine presence.”⁶⁷ She continues to note that art achieves this “as it crafts places and creates contexts for the formation of desire, of community belonging, and of service in place.”⁶⁸ The visual arts are a substantive area to incorporate in Christian spirituality because they can nudge individuals toward contemplative pause and a connection of its visual components, reminding believers of the image of God, God as Creator, and his transcendence. In other words, the visual arts facilitate both an inward and outward response.

⁶⁷ Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life*, Studies in Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 139.

⁶⁸ Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts*, 140.

All types and functions of art have their place and importance in human existence, for art forms are a creation of human thought and expression. Thus, they can reflect the values and questions of the context in which they are created. As Dyrness observes, “Whether done by Christians or non-Christians, the best art concentrates the values and questions of a particular cultural moment.”⁶⁹ Christians can affirm art and not categorically reject it due to a lack of understanding or a failure to seek common ground, even (and perhaps especially) in the contemporary art world. Hans Rookmaaker wisely observes, “We may not like the art of our time, but we must deal with the questions it raises, even as we are engaged with the culture that produced it. To avoid this is to deny our Christian responsibility.”⁷⁰ Thus all art, including contemporary art, can be appreciated by Christians as it engages fundamental, philosophical questions. Even when the declarations of certain artists and their pieces may not align with the Bible, Christians can recognize these works as a manifestation of the thinking of the artist on a subject matter and thus use these pieces as a springboard for gospel discussions. When encountering a disturbing piece of contemporary art, the Christian’s thinking can be sharpened as he or she considers it in light of what they have learned and meditated upon directly from Scripture.

In an essay titled *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis describes the holistic experience of the visual arts:

We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such as surrender, for until have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 142.

⁷⁰ Hans Rookmaaker, *Modern Arts and the Death of a Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 36.

⁷¹ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 19.

To stand before art and allow it to teach oneself creates pause and humility before the artist's creation. The requirement of art echoes the greater demands of Scripture in biblical meditation. To truly participate in art requires much more than a quick glance; the visual arts mandates pause, reflection, and meditation. Everyone employs their personal philosophy to interpret artwork; for the Christian to apply the teachings of Scripture and to biblically meditate through the art one is beholding—this is the power of the visual arts and meditation combined. As believers engages their capacity for introspection and imagination, biblical meditation becomes an essential skill to rightly utilize art as an application and extension of Scripture-based biblical meditation. If art possesses great power to shape people, then it should be used as a helpful source through which biblical meditation can flourish.

In today's visual culture, humanity is constantly bombarded with messages through images. Scripture can teach Christians to be wise and live in this culture well. Dyrness writes that, for the seventeenth century Puritans, "Scripture was not so much an answer book for the problems of life, as it was a rich imaginative source of right living of their lives. . . . Meditation on this story provided an imagination that was often richly allegorical and figurative."⁷² Likewise, Scripture can provide such a framework for this generation in today's visual culture. As one lives in this increasingly visual and image-saturated society, the practice of interacting with the visual arts as an application of biblical meditation can shape and cultivate this imagination even further. Images matter a great deal. In view of the power of images to shape one's perspective on many things, churches should train their members how to think about them.

From a psychological perspective, images play a significant role in shaping one's thoughts and attitudes. A study from Michigan State University in 2015 concluded that although the brain's association cortex was thought to be solely responsible for

⁷² William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004), 165.

decision-making and the visual cortex accomplished lower-level processing, the visual cortex is fully capable to make decisions as well. In other words, the area of the brain previously understood only to explain the images but not execute decisions is much more powerful than thought. While the association cortex remains the central decision-maker, the visual cortex not only contributes to decision-making but can “choose” as well. Jan Brascamp, Randolph Blake, and Tomas Knapen, the researchers of this study, further explain their findings, “The part of the brain that is responsible for seeing, for the apparently ‘simple’ act of generating the picture in our mind’s eye, turns out to have the ability to do something akin to choosing, as it actively switches between different interpretations of the visual input without any help from traditional ‘higher level’ areas of the brain.”⁷³ Thus both images and visual processing powerfully affect decisions and associations already joined together in the brain, revealing how information gathering and formation occurs without individuals realizing its effect. Images deeply shape oneself.

Two examples from the history of the United States reflect the positive influence of imagery to shape opinion and thought. During the Civil War and Reconstruction era, two individuals strategically shaped the American perception of the African American through visual imagery: Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass. As photography gained immense popularity during the late nineteenth century, both utilized personal portraits to leverage and change the discourse concerning African Americans during a crucial time in history, both sitting for numerous self-portraits to disseminate their agenda. Understanding the power of image, Truth sold copies of her photo to support her platform as she traveled to speak for both the abolitionist and suffrage movements, utilizing her photographs to propagate her movement beyond her speaking. Truth recognized photography as a direct

⁷³ Jan Brascamp, Randolph Blake, and Tomas Knapen, “Negligible Front-Parietal Bold Activity Accompanying Unreportable Switches in Bistable Perception,” *Neuro Nature* 18 (2015): 1672.

means to address “a society attempting to redefine the status of black men and women.”⁷⁴ Douglass similarly subverted the stereotype of the African American as inferior and uneducated property of whites. Yale University professor David Brooks writes, “Douglass was combating a set of generalized stereotypes by showing the specific humanity of one black man. Most of all, he was using art to retrain people how to see. With these portraits, Douglass was redrawing people’s unconscious mental maps. He was erasing old associations about blackness and replacing them with new ones.”⁷⁵ Both individuals helped reshape the image of the African American not only through public speaking and writing, but also through their usage of visual imagery. Removing existing perceptions and experiences with new positive images, both Truth and Douglass disrupted the established associations in the minds of their contemporaries and transformed their view toward African Americans.

Likewise, the power of art and images is increasingly being recognized in contemporary evangelicalism. This movement is slowly extending beyond theological discussions of aesthetics. InterVarsity Press’s excellent collection *Studies in Theology and the Arts*, of which several of the books are referenced in this dissertation, provides an ongoing discussion of the importance of all the fine arts in theology and human flourishing. Similarly, Julie Benner’s *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer*⁷⁶ provides a guided experience introducing artwork depicting biblical passages, coupled with reflection questions and prayers. While not fully recommended for its slight leaning toward mystical contemplation, this is a practical introduction for Christians to begin recognizing the usefulness of the visual arts to Christian spirituality. Similarly, The

⁷⁴ Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Enduring Truths: Sojourner’s Shadows and Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 12.

⁷⁵ David Brooks, “How Artists Change the World,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/opinion/how-artists-change-the-world.html>.

⁷⁶ Julie Benner, *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

Visual Commentary on Scripture website⁷⁷ curates short devotions on specific passages of Scripture with three visual arts pieces, linking the arts with Scripture. However, this ecumenical resource is for a broadly Christian audience, including, but certainly not exclusive to, the evangelical community. Thus, the general approach and theological range of this resource expands beyond the confessional statements of evangelicalism. The rising interest within evangelicalism and the visual arts is also represented by Russ Ramsey's 2022 popular book *Rembrandt Is in the Wind*.⁷⁸ Aiming for a popular (not academic) audience, Ramsey writes about art in a way that is an encouraging indicator of the increasing discourse of the importance of the arts in evangelicalism. Most recently, Elisa Yukiko Weichbrodt wrote *Redeeming Vision: A Christian Guide to Looking at and Learning from Art*,⁷⁹ a book designed to help believers recognize how images form oneself and how to learn from different pieces of art. The increasing attention from evangelicals to the arts demonstrates the recognition of the place of the visual arts in biblical spirituality.

Gospel-centered living is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, but its effects spread beyond the historical events into all aspects of the Christian life. Even (or perhaps especially) when viewing art that portrays grotesque or uncomfortable subject matters, biblical meditation provides the framework to engage such subjects or experiences well.⁸⁰ With wisdom derived from biblical meditation, Christians can engage

⁷⁷ The Visual Commentary on Scripture, "The Visual Commentary on Scripture," July 2022, <https://thevcs.org/>.

⁷⁸ Russ Ramsey, *Rembrandt Is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022).

⁷⁹ Elisa Yukiko Weichbrodt, *Redeeming Vision: A Christian Guide to Looking at and Learning from Art* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

⁸⁰ Steve Turner offers a solution for how Christians can engage art well. He introduces the idea of concentric circles of Christians and art. Each ring has elements the Christian should recognize and appreciate. At the center is the gospel message of the death and resurrection of Christ. Then, issues inspired by some of the Bible's primary theological themes (i.e., moral freedom, original sin, or the spiritual realm). The third ring contains things that carry an imprint of clear Bible teachings but are not uniquely Christian.

and utilize the visual arts as a major source for spiritual growth and deeper meditation. As one increasingly meditates biblically, the visual arts can become a more significant and regular means for worship of God.

Biblical Meditation and Visual Arts

The aspects and application of biblical meditation through the visual arts highlights what has already been declared in Scripture. In today's cultural turmoil and chaos, the visual arts can nudge Christians to reject the unending and unsatisfying allures of this earth and instead be still and meditate on Scripture's truths. The visual arts shape thinking processes, imaginations, and how one views and cultivates beauty. They can expand one's thinking and display the breadth of creation, sanctifying believers to be more gracious, creative, and thoughtful toward others. Biblical meditation can, in a sense, consecrate the visual arts by evaluating them through the lens of Scripture. "The arts actively invite us to experience both a sense of home and homelessness, of locatedness and dislocatedness, enabling us to recognize what it means that we live in a time of the already but not yet,"⁸¹ Craft beautifully summarizes. The arts do not remove Christians from this world, but in a meditation of the arts, they can be a means of anchoring believers, as embodied creatures, to better and perhaps more responsibly engage this world.

As one practices biblical meditation, the visual arts can become an intentional and significant application of meditation. The visual arts have already been a deep well for Christians to meditate and grow in worship of God, and they can be a useful tool for twenty-first century believers in a highly image-saturated culture. The richness of the visual arts for meditation has been presented, but how does a Christian apply the visual

Then, art that has expressions of Christian faith in its dignification of human life or introduction of a sense of awe, can be appreciated. See Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016), 81-88.

⁸¹ Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts*, 230.

arts in their practice of biblical meditation? The following section will humbly offer a method of biblical mediation through the visual arts. The practice of biblical meditation will be applied to the visual arts with the hope that believers will become wise and more intentional followers of Christ through this method. In the words of Francis Schaeffer, “Art forms add strength to the world view which shows through, no matter what the world view is or whether the world view is true or false.”⁸² This method of biblical meditation utilizing the visual arts (henceforth BMVA) connects a piece of artwork that one considers with what Scripture has clearly affirmed and stated.

BMVA affirms what is revealed in Scripture; its emphasis is upon what is declared through Scripture and thus distinguishes itself from mystical or contemplative practices. Biblical meditation embraces and embodies the truth and beauty of Scripture; BMVA bases itself on what Scripture has proclaimed about the three areas of biblically-commanded meditation—God’s Word, his works, and his ways—by bridging Scripture and the visual arts through Scripture-based meditation. It submits to Scripture and emphasizes its teaching. It neither replaces, assumes, nor reinterprets what the Word of God declares. As the Bible is sufficient, the implementation of BMVA does not threaten the authority of Scripture but joyfully submits under it.

BMVA operates to connect Scripture with art, whether in support of what one sees or in contrast to what the artist is portraying. BMVA asks the individual to look at art and determine how the piece illustrates scriptural truths that have been asserted and meditated upon through biblical meditation. By practicing BMVA, one further supplements the slowing down and pondering that biblical meditation requires. Furthermore, this BMVA serves as a redemptive counter to the cheap imagery of social media in the twenty-first century. Biblical truths can only be connected if the believer is already practicing biblical meditation to fill their minds and chew on the truths of Scripture. As

⁸² Schaeffer, *Art & the Bible*, 38.

the believer grows increasingly familiar with and in love with the Word, BMVA will become richer and more profound. These truths are brought together, allowing deep thought and fruitful meditations to occur. The believer's thoughts and responses to biblical truths can be beautifully supplemented and highlighted through a simple slowing down to view the visual arts as these pieces seek to be seen by observers. As all truth ultimately points to God, BMVA seeks to draw out biblical truths and apply them in a manner that allows believers today to be more aware of algorithm-based, marketing-driven imagery that bombards their everyday lives and instead redeem the visual arts as a meaningful means of embodying a meditative life for the sake of godliness.

This method does not approach art as if it can complete Scripture or reveal something that has not already been declared in the Word. BMVA is not revelation but a method to experience of the truths of God's revelation in Scripture. BMVA ties art to the God of truth and beauty. Through BMVA, one's imagination and resolve toward greater faithfulness can be transformed. Biblical truths or accounts do not change through BMVA, but the internal response to God's Word does. As one practices this application of biblical meditation, the artwork and Scripture together bring a scripturally-based meditative experience that utilizes a visual element to further muse on Scripture and apply it to life.

This methodology of biblical meditation will demonstrate how art becomes the vehicle for this spiritual discipline. Art critic and historian Taylor Worley observes, "Of course, not everything we encounter [in art] can or should be celebrated, but we should demonstrate in tangible ways that the faith, hope, and the love of the Christian gospel compels us to celebrate what we can."⁸³ Whether the artwork should be celebrated or not, only through biblical meditation can one accurately discern this conclusion. Unlike mystical contemplation that engages in more speculative thinking and free exploration, the definition of biblical meditation already established provides clear boundaries. As all

⁸³ Taylor Worley "Encountering God's Story with the Arts," in Chatraw and Prior, *Cultural Engagement*, 292.

truth points to God, this method of meditation using the visual arts seeks to enhance interaction with the visual arts and cultivate greater affective awareness amidst this visually-charged twenty-first century. The visual arts invite its viewer to pause, for the image of bigger, more profound, and has much to assert the longer one lingers. As meditation's emphasis is to inform the mind to enflame the heart to action, BMVA seeks to adhere to the same methodology.

Both interpreting art on the terms the artists present (their context, intention, etc.) and recognizing the expectation of art that goes beyond the confines of the artist, BMVA can be applied to all artwork affirming that all truth is God's truth. A truly Christian evaluation of any work of art requires that theological criticism and/or appreciation of the artwork should be applied in and across the artist's intentions. While the artist may be the first voice and interpreter of his or her piece, he/she is certainly not the sole or only important voice in interpretation. This dissertation will continue in the next chapter to focus on the interpretation of art from the observer's perspective.

Conclusion

The arts can be a locus for the application of theology. The role of the arts is a theological manifestation of the *imago Dei*, an expression of human experience, a reflection of culture, and its helpfulness to the church has been established. Even today, the notion that the arts possess a unique offering to human flourishing, especially in this society that is less interested in arguments and proofs of God and more interested in God's imminence and presence, can be a moving apologetic for the gospel. God's presence remains alive and interacts everyday through and in culture, and challenges believers to use the arts for the glory of God. Thus, the arts should be incorporated into biblical spirituality as a means through which the believer can mature. BMVA can also offer a quiet solution to the noisy, busy, restlessness that often characterizes the modern day. In an age of hurriedness (even and sometimes especially regarding personal devotion), BMVA helps to establish pause and reflection upon what has already been revealed in

Scripture. The following chapter will continue the connection established between biblical meditation and the visual arts with several examples of BMVA.

This chapter provided a brief history of the visual arts, an argument of its theological importance, and a framework for the application of biblical meditation to the visual arts. The visual arts can and should be embraced as a means unto godliness. Art flexes the Christian believer's spiritual muscles and tests what one believes, forcing one to grapple with the tensions or connections the artwork provides to Scripture. Whether one is reading the Bible directly, appreciating artwork, or observing everyday rituals, biblical meditation, and particularly visual biblical meditation, can strengthen believers to live in the now and not yet as they await Christ's return. This dissertation will now apply the method of BMVA using several pieces of art from various categories in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

BIBLICAL MEDITATION APPLIED TO THE VISUAL ARTS

As the case for the importance and theological richness of the visual arts has already been made, BMVA will perhaps allow the believer to recognize the infusion and influence of biblical truth in all aspects of life with greater frequency. Biblical meditation, in stark contrast to the meditation practiced in popular culture or other religions, demonstrates a musing upon truths of God found in Scripture, a filling of the mind and enflaming of the heart unto more faithful Christlikeness. Joining the metanarrative of redemption to live out this reconciliatory ministry in private and public spheres and in mind and heart, the grand story of Scripture exhorts its followers to live out the story in all aspects. As the purpose of meditation is to know and behold God, rooted on the Word but affecting all aspects and experiences of life, BMVA aids in the effort to hear, receive, treasure, and apply the Bible through visual means. By studying and analyzing art, people can glean deep spiritual treasures and establish more meditative moments in his or her lives. BMVA can be a powerful method through which believers can consider the works God has done in creation, history, and current or personal moments.

This chapter will apply this method in a progression from explicitly Christian art to landscape and portraiture and conclude with explicitly non-Christian art.¹ Art will be discussed both from an academic and theological perspective. By doing so, one will learn how BMVA operates and seeks to rightfully apply biblical meditation to the visual arts.

¹ I established these categories to demonstrate how BMVA can be applied to all types of art (of Christian origin, relation, or not); these are not recognized categories elsewhere.

This chapter will provide several examples of the visual arts, provide analysis, and demonstrate BMVA. In my demonstration of BMVA for each, I will employ the following process, and in so doing show how other Christians may practice BMVA. I will begin by formulating my initial observations of the piece, after which I will begin to ask questions of the piece and connect these questions with how the piece reflects (or contrasts with) who God is and how humanity is to respond to God. As biblical meditation asks participants to meditate upon God—his Word, his works, and his ways (including his character and attributes)—so too BMVA asks how the piece of art being viewed also causes believers to ponder who God is (whether through affirmation, contrast, or even questioning God). Thus, the process of BMVA of the following pieces will primarily spur meditation founded upon God, but subsequently ask participants to consider how the piece reflects a biblical understanding of humanity. These simple questions encourage biblical meditation through the visual arts, allowing for rich (internal or communal) conversation and further stimulating spiritual maturity, regardless of familiarity with art history and analysis.

BMVA and Christian Art

The application of BMVA will first be established by analyzing explicitly Christian art. In this section, the Lindisfarne Gospels and Rembrandt's *Adoration of the Shepherds* will be discussed. As Christian art, the connections to biblical truth are most obvious, and thus the application of biblical meditation can be easily made. As this model of biblical application asks believers, regardless of familiarity of the piece or the artist, to apply biblical meditation to the visual arts, this category is the logical starting place to learn the practice.

Eadfrith, The Lindisfarne Gospels (c. 700)

An eighth century illuminated manuscript of the four Gospels, the Lindisfarne Gospels is one of the oldest surviving translations of the Gospels in Old English.² It displays impressive skill, drawing from a myriad of cultural influences. Each Gospel is introduced with full-page portraits of the evangelist, an illustrated cross, and a decorated incipit (the opening words of a text).³ Comprised of 258 total leaves, the text includes fifteen fully decorated pages and sixteen pages of decorated canon tables.⁴ The artwork was placed within the pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels as a stimulus to further meditation and worship. Art historian Francis Watson writes, “The Lindisfarne artwork exists not for itself but to enhance and interpret the gospel texts that gave rise to it. In this novum opus, the artwork mediates the renewing power of the fourfold gospel.”⁵ For the viewer, these patterns reflect not only a devotion to the work by its maker, but a reflection of the image of God placed in the artist to reflect the orderliness of God and his work.

² The Lindisfarne Gospels, manuscript, c. 700, The British Library, London, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lindisfarne-gospels>.

³ A full-color facsimile was published in 2002 and a selection of the pages are available to view at the British Library’s website, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lindisfarne-gospels>. The following parenthetical references of these images link to the image gallery from this website.

⁴ The pigments required for the decorated pages also represent a global network that contributed to the Lindisfarne Gospels. Nearly twenty shades and colors are used in the manuscript. Gold was not the only costly material used. The red pigment kermes was only derived from insects that live on a specific type of oak tree in countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. Indigo was procured from South Asia, woad from northern Europe, and blue lapis lazuli, perhaps the most exotic shade of all arrived from the foothills of the Himalayas. Furthermore, the consistency and depth of the black ink used reflect the skill of an artisan to mix the right ratios of iron gall with carbon to create a stable recipe. Amazingly, the ink has neither faded nor eroded over time. See Francis Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels: The Art of Interpretation,” in *Producing Christian Culture: Medieval Exegesis and Its Interpretative Genres*, ed. Giles E. M. Gasper, Francis Watson, and Matthew R. Crawford (London: Routledge, 2017); and Katherine L. Brown and Robin J. H. Clark, “The Lindisfarne Gospels and Two Other 8th Century Anglo-Saxon/Insular Manuscripts: Pigment Identification by Raman Microscopy,” *Journal of Raman Spectroscopy* 35 (2004): 11. Both sources provide an insightful overview of all the pigments used in the Lindisfarne Gospels, as well as the pigment identification process utilized to determine each shade.

⁵ Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels,” 60.

Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne (698-721) copied the four Gospels from Jerome's Latin Vulgate and masterfully decorated its pages beginning in circa 710.⁶ His successor, Æthilwald, bound the pages, and Billfrith the anchorite made the ornamented and bejeweled metal cover.⁷ In the 950s-960s, Aldred inserted a gloss that translated the Latin into Old English between the lines of the original text and added a colophon (a short statement regarding the publication of a work) to identify the contributors. The Lindisfarne Gospels was most likely produced in the monastery at Lindisfarne. Also called Holy Island, Lindisfarne was one of the most important centers of learning and spiritual life in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria during the seventh and eighth centuries. The Lindisfarne Gospels was most likely made in celebration by the successors of Cuthbert who was made bishop of Lindisfarne in 684.

Even without the historical background of the manuscript, viewers of the Lindisfarne Gospels often marvels at the meticulous detail and opulent decoration—no expense was spared. Both in motif and in content, the Lindisfarne Gospels proclaims the character and acts of God, as displayed through the Word. The Lindisfarne Gospels exhorts that its audience respond to what they witness and read in its pages. As previously stated, the illustrated introduction to each Gospel includes a fully painted incipit (the opening words of a text, particularly popular in early printed material and in liturgical works) page (see figure 1), composed of the introductory words of each Gospel.

⁶ There are varying opinions regarding the date of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Historian Richard Gameson argues Eadfrith would have been too elderly to be able to undertake such a large project in 710 and thus dates the Lindisfarne Gospels from the 690s to c. 710. See Richard Gameson, *From Holy Island to Durham: The Contents and Meanings of The Lindisfarne Gospels* (London: Third Millennium, 2013), 16-19. However, Michelle P. Brown, former curator of illuminated manuscripts at the British Library, the home of the Lindisfarne Gospels since 1973, argues for the later date, citing the Insular influences in the art and script as evidence.

⁷ The original cover is lost. Smith, Nicholson, and Company created a new cover, also decorated with silver and gems, in 1852-1853; its design motifs were taken from illustrations in the manuscript itself. See Image 21 of the image gallery on the British Library website.



Figure 1. Incipit page of the Gospel of Luke

The first three letters stand out both in size and decoration as a reflection of the Trinitarian nature of God in all four incipit pages. The incipit of Matthew distinguishes LIB, Mark INI, Luke QUO, and John INP (British Library images 16, 8, 14, and 18). The symbolism continues: the long descending first letters of each triad suggest that “the divine condescension that occurs in the incarnation.”⁸ God has indeed become flesh and dwelt

⁸ Watson further elaborates on the specific lettering choices made by the artist-scribe: “That the eternal God is threefold appears especially in the distinct, separated letters of the Lukan QUO monogram. The oneness of this threefold God may be contemplated in the fused letters of the Matthean LIB, the Markan INI, and the Johannine INP. See Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels,” 58.

among man (John 1:14). Watson observes, “The viewer whose gaze is held by these letters is contemplating a monogram of the Triune God. In the beginning was God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . . It is this God who is foundation and source of the gospel narrative.”⁹ These groupings are an intentional artistic and theological decision to highlight the eternal, transcendent Triune God who revealed himself to mankind and declares his salvific work in history, now preserved in the four Gospels these incipit pages introduce.

Both in overt and subtle forms, the Lindisfarne Gospels points to this God. As they present the Word, the Lindisfarne Gospels desires to reflect the treasures and depth of the Scriptures in verbal faithfulness but also aesthetic expression. Additional choices exhibit a larger theological understanding. Although geometric patterns and symbolic numbering were already an important aspect of Insular art (the art of the British Isles), Eadfrith consciously included the use of numbers to illustrate a larger theological reality. For example, the frequent use of multiples of ten in the geometric patterns and appearances of X’s in the design of the Canon Tables (see figure 2) connect the Roman numeral for ten with the Greek letter X, the first letter for Christ. Heather Pulliam notes, “Within the Lindisfarne Canon Tables, the frequency with which the ‘X’ appears at the top and center of framing arches suggests an emphasis upon Christ’s role as keystone.”¹⁰ These intentional artistic and numeric choices to move the audience to behold God are declared throughout the entire manuscript.

⁹ Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels,” 58.

¹⁰ Heather Pulliam, “Painting by Numbers: The Art of the Canon Tables,” in *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives*, ed. Richard Gameson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 129-30.



Figure 2. Canon table

The proclamatory nature of God is developed in the cross motif throughout the Lindisfarne Gospels. The cross, the fundamental and most widely recognized motif of Christianity, was widely used in Christian Insular art and thus appears prominently in the Lindisfarne Gospels as well. Although usages of the cross motif have already been discussed, the visual imagery of the cross reaches a pinnacle in the cross carpet pages (see figure 3). The illustrated pages of intricately designed crosses are placed at the beginning of each Gospel after the individual evangelist's portrait¹¹ and before the incipit page (British

¹¹ The manuscript places great care to display the Gospels as a unified story but with four distinct perspectives. The evangelist portraits depict each individual as divinely appointed and authorized to preserve the message through word. The evangelist is flanked by the winged creature that represents each Gospel (a human in Matthew, a lion for Mark, a calf for Luke, and an eagle for John), as borrowed from the beings surround the throne of God in Rev 4. Each portrait is laden with imagery and symbolism. For example, the Matthean exhortation for the Jewish people to turn from the law to Christ is further depicted by the painting of a figure (identified either as Christ, Moses, or an unnamed Jewish person) peering from behind a veil or

Library images 2, 7). Although named “carpet pages” because they supposedly resembled the mats placed before the altar in churches, Watson argues that this is a misleading term, for the crosses are not designed after carpets but are “representations of the crucifixion as the site of paschal glory. . . . In assigning these representations to each individual gospel and to the collection as a whole, the artist-scribe presents the gospel narrative as a movement towards a single goal, the victory of the cross.”¹² These pages are not merely reflections of the artwork of the time but are poignant testimonies of the glory of the crucified and risen Christ.



Figure 3. Cross Carpet page

curtain upon Matthew’s writing of his gospel that proclaims the Kingdom has come and the Messiah has arrived.

¹² Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels,” 55.

The continuously high level of artistry that climaxes in these pages reflects the centrality of the cross in this manuscript. The discipline and patience required to complete not only one, but four fully illustrated pages, reflect a cross-centeredness of the Lindisfarne Gospels. The pages become a living embodiment of the power and awe of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The elaborate nature of the work is surpassed only by the incipit pages that further highlight the sacredness of the message the text proclaims. Watson observes, “As the cross pages anticipate the gospel endings (explicits), so the incipit pages emphasize the significance of beginnings, transfixing the reader-viewer’s attention, retarding the onward linear movement of the reading process.”¹³ These illustrations call for the reader to grapple with the words of the Gospel. From the beginning, the Lindisfarne Gospels anticipates and proclaims the completed work of Christ. While this manuscript sets forth the centrality of God through skill, symbolism, and cultural significance, the visual beauty of the Lindisfarne Gospels should also cause pause and reflection. The reverence of the Word motivates the creation of this magnificent document. The aesthetic quality of the document pushes the user to gaze and meditate in awe upon the beauty of God. The visual beauty and didactic function work together to produce a rare gift. Its quality was designed to reflect a larger spiritual reality and points to a beautiful God. The Lindisfarne Gospels seeks to capture a glimpse of God, who *is* beauty, through its artistry.

As Christianity spread, the British Isles were no longer a far corner of the world, but rather were a new center for Christianity; the production of this grand manuscript declared its arrival and flourishing. Those who contributed to its completion viewed themselves as participating in the larger work of God to bring forth the gospel to the ends of the earth. Regarding this, art historian Janet Backhouse writes, “A manuscript such as the Lindisfarne Gospels . . . visibly represented the Word of God which the missionaries

¹³ Watson, “Lindisfarne and the Gospels,” 57.

had carried to their converts.”¹⁴ Seeking to glorify God through the production of a masterpiece, the Lindisfarne Gospel not only declared the arrival and spread of the gospel in the British Isles, but it also proclaimed the redemption of culture through the gospel. Michelle P. Brown, the former curator of the illuminated manuscripts of the British Library, notes, “The text of the Lindisfarne Gospels explodes into a triumphant celebration of the best of all cultures, as its letters grow to occupy the whole page—literally the Word made flesh, or rather the Word made word.”¹⁵ The artist intentionally varies the cultural influences to celebrate various traditions united through the gospel. Each of the cross pages intentionally reflect a different church tradition—Latin, Greek, Celtic, and Coptic.¹⁶ The fusion of Latin, Runic, and Greek letter forms, the use of geometry and mathematics in design, and the gold paint in the lettering and decoration reminiscent of a Byzantine and Romanesque influence suggest a culture being transformed as the fusion of forms is pushed through a distinctly Christian medium.¹⁷ Just as all creation praises God (Ps 148), so this document declares his glory in every aspect. The compilation of these influences in the design of a singular volume reflects the larger unity of the global church.

Brown notes the larger significance of the Lindisfarne Gospels in its historical context. She writes, “The Lindisfarne Gospels forms a greatly respected link with the beginnings of Christianity in the West.”¹⁸ The Lindisfarne Gospels provides a rich source

¹⁴ Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1981), 33.

¹⁵ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality, and the Scribe* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 8.

¹⁶ Michelle P. Brown, “Reading the Lindisfarne Gospels: Text, Image, Context,” in Gameson, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, 91.

¹⁷ John William Bradley argues that the style and details of the portraiture, among other features, reveal one of the early links between Oriental and Occidental art. See John William Bradley, *Illustrated Manuscripts* (London: Bracken, 2006), 59.

¹⁸ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels and the Early Medieval World* (London: British Library, 2011), 37.

for the application of biblical meditation that clearly reveres the Scriptures through its foundation upon God that manifests itself in both a deeply personal and intrinsically communal means. Eadfrith's work is estimated to have taken between ten and twenty years. Writing and decorating Scripture as a living act of prayer and meditation, Eadfrith's slow, intentional, devoted work reflects the seriousness of "an exceptional, spiritually charged project" and embodied the physical endurance, prayer, and sacrifice of the Christian pilgrim's journey.¹⁹

The Lindisfarne Gospels displays the application of the visual arts to biblical meditation. Its purpose was to be displayed on the altar and used in worship. Used during important services and holidays, the Lindisfarne Gospels played an important role in the liturgy of the church. Moreover, Brown asserts that the Gospels was presumably viewed as not only a devotional manuscript but also utilized in the legal system for oath-swearing.²⁰ The Lindisfarne Gospels was designed to create worship by all who saw it. The beauty of this manuscript "symbolized hope and a colorful foretaste of a better existence to come amidst the coarse earthenware fabric of everyday life,"²¹ she observes. Although the artistry and text reflect a solitary endeavor, Eadfrith did so both on the shoulders of and behalf of the entire community of Lindisfarne. Unsurprisingly then, he devotes his work to "God and St. Cuthbert and generally for all the holy folk who are on the island,"²² according to Aldred's colophon. Richard Gameson writes, "The [Lindisfarne

¹⁹ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 398.

²⁰ Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, 66.

²¹ Michelle P. Brown, "'A Good Woman's Son': Aspects of Aldred's Agenda in Glossing the Lindisfarne Gospels," in *The Old English Gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels: Language, Author and Context*, ed. Julia Fernández Cuesta and Sara M. Pons-Sanz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 14.

²² Translation from Gameson, *From Holy Island to Durham*, 93.

Gospels] was both practically and spiritually the book of everyone on Lindisfarne.”²³

The Lindisfarne Gospels embodies and invites biblical meditation through the visual arts within the individual and community, as it founds itself upon the Triune God and his work. Not only did the manuscript provide a future hope, but it served to teach and inspire awe among those who interacted with the Gospels, achieving what good visual arts does: nonverbally emphasizing the now-and-not-yet tension. Through skilled artistry and devoted inscriptions, the Lindisfarne Gospels continues to revere the Word and reflect a deeply personal and intrinsically communal spirituality while remaining centered upon a beautiful Triune God and the ongoing transformation he bestows upon his people through the mediation of his Son. Therefore, the Lindisfarne Gospels reflects much about how biblical meditation and the visual arts intermingle and invite Christians to ponder and thus grow in greater submission to the God who has revealed himself through his Word.

As the Lindisfarne Gospels has inspired believers for centuries, propelling biblical meditation and right worship, how can believers apply BMVA to this document today? Whether viewing the Lindisfarne Gospels through a facsimile, through a computer screen, or in person, there are several ways to apply BMVA to this manuscript. Since biblical meditation’s end is not self-reflection but worship of the Triune God, the Lindisfarne Gospels provide a myriad of opportunities to connect its artistic genius, attention to detail, and even the expense of its production, to the greater Artist, the master craftsman, the boundless and generous King—the Triune God. The analysis of this piece has demonstrated this connection. Whether well-acquainted in church history or art analysis or not, any believer can view the Lindisfarne Gospels and ask the simple questions of how this piece reflects God in how he has revealed himself through his Word (especially the Gospels, the very words that comprise the Lindisfarne Gospels itself), his

²³ Richard Gameson, “Northumbrian Books in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries,” in Gameson, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, 73-74.

works (as the Creator or his work in salvation history as proclaimed in the Lindisfarne Gospels itself), or his ways (God’s artistry, his beauty, his revelation of himself to humanity, etc.). Biblical principles can be gleaned and meditated upon by practicing BMVA on this magnificent piece.

Additionally, believers today can practice BMVA by asking how this piece reflects humanity. One can meditate upon the doctrine of the *imago Dei*—as humans made in the image of God, God has given humanity the impulse to create. Believers, are called to worship him with their all. The Lindisfarne Gospels reveal dedication to God, a lifestyle that gives its best (both in skill set and monetarily) to the Lord, and a devotion to the Word. In a society that values “me” time, self-sufficiency, and self-promotion, the Lindisfarne Gospels asserts biblical principles that contrast with the twenty-first century’s values. As the Lindisfarne Gospels is an explicitly Christian piece, BMVA is easily practiced. By asking the dual questions—what does this piece reveal about God? What does this piece reveal about humanity?—BMVA can become an effective practice for biblical reflection as well as worship of the Triune God.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646 [2])

The career of the brilliant Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) provides ample evidence of biblical meditation on the Word as applied to the visual arts. Rembrandt often chose biblical scenes and stories as topics of his pieces, even depicting several scenes multiple times throughout his illustrious career. This application of Scripture in the visual arts served as means for Rembrandt to invite patrons and viewers alike into the biblical text. Art historian Ronald Bernier describes this as the “intervention of the artist-as-narrator”²⁴ to imagine and invite the viewer to interact with the image and ultimately the Scriptures.

²⁴ Ronald Bernier, “The Economy of Salvation: Narrative and Liminality in Rembrandt’s Death of the Virgin,” *Religion and the Arts* 9, no. 3 (2005): 200.

Although many examples could be analyzed, one biblical depiction should be highlighted. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646 [2])²⁵ is a beautiful image (see figure 4). This biblical scene, taken from the Lukan account of Christ's birth, must have been of particular interest to Rembrandt. This is the second iteration of the same biblical account in the same year; in light of the larger discussion of meditation, these dual paintings reflect Rembrandt's interest in this particular narrative in 1646.²⁶ Although similar in subject, this piece offers a different depiction of the biblical scene.

²⁵ Pupil of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1646, National Gallery of Art, London, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/pupil-of-rembrandt-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.

²⁶ It has been traditionally viewed that both paintings were done by Rembrandt, especially as they are both signed by the artist himself. However, upon recent cleaning and analysis, the National Gallery of London suggests this London piece was painted by a highly-skilled apprentice of Rembrandt and not the artist himself, particularly due to deviations from Rembrandt's usual brushwork and figure depiction. Yet, the manner in which the canvas was prepared indicates that the piece was "almost certainly made in Rembrandt's studio" (See "In-Depth Overview: *Adoration of the Shepherds*", Pupil of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 1646, National Gallery of Art, London, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/pupil-of-rembrandt-the-adoration-of-the-shepherds>.) It was commonplace for apprentices to learn by both copying or creating a version of their master's work. If the piece was sufficient, the master would attribute the work as his own. The National Gallery suggests this is what may have occurred here. However, ongoing debate remains. This dissertation retains Rembrandt authenticity while acknowledging the recent developments.



Figure 4. Pupil of Rembrandt van Rijn, *Adoration of the Shepherds*

Before analyzing the piece itself, one should revisit the biblical text. Luke 2:15-20 says,

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

According to the Lukan account, after the angels gloriously appear to the shepherds tending to their flock at night, the shepherds quickly travel to Bethlehem. There, they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger. Rembrandt chooses to depict this intimate

scene of the shepherds in the Christmas narrative, a quiet moment of worship before the baby Jesus.

Rembrandt's choice of lighting makes a bold theological and meditative declaration. The lighting and dark shadows quiet the scene. The subjects fill the lower half of the painting. His choice to fill the upper half of the work with the shadows of the barn further emphasizes the intimacy of this moment. Whereas the outside world proceeds totally unaware of the significance of this child's birth, Rembrandt's choice of lighting intentionally, graphically and emotionally highlights the intimacy of Luke 2:15-20. Significantly, the light source of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is not the lantern, but the light emanates from the Christ child himself. Although the lantern also sheds light, its emanant quality shies in comparison to the infant. From the moment of birth, it seems Rembrandt connects this biblical scene with the Johannine emphasis that Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12). As scholar Joanne Shaw summarizes regarding Rembrandt's usage of light and shadow, "Rembrandt's paintings direct light illuminating figures and landscape as a pointer towards this promise of eternity and eternal Light."²⁷ Jesus is the "true light [who] gives light to everyone [who came] into the world" (John 1:9). Rembrandt, through the medium of paint, connects biblical texts together to proclaim a theological truth in a visually-meditative manner. Rembrandt's ability to play with light and shadow impresses the viewer while also arguing strong biblical claims of the identity of the infant in the manger and his purpose of salvation.

Yet, the viewer should not overlook these shadows. While the eye is naturally drawn to the lit portions of this scene, the placement and representations of the figures in relation to the lighting further emphasize this importance. As Mary and Joseph gaze upon their child, their faces illuminated by the light, and two shepherds kneel before the Christ child in reverence. Mary, Joseph, and the two shepherds bow in worship before Jesus (vv.

²⁷ Joanne Shaw, "Light and Darkness in Elsheimer, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and Beckett," *Samuel Beckett Today* 24 (2012): 228.

17, 19). Other shepherds further in shadow turn aside as if in furtive discussion, perhaps trying to determine the significance of this child and the actions of the shepherds, as the Luke account depicts in verse 18. Rembrandt also includes a child in the right corner. Interacting with the dog, the child approaches whether in sincerity or curiosity. Shaw observes, “The figures outside the points of brightness are still to be seen and, literally and metaphorically, part of the picture.”²⁸ The figures of *The Adoration of the Shepherds* resonate John 1:11-12: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” The shepherd in the foreground, the figure closest to the viewer, and is the solitary figure whose back is completely turned to the viewer. While the figure allows Rembrandt to demonstrate his skill to depict light and shadow, his stance creates a striking silhouette. This bold outline perhaps suggests the posture of worship the viewer should also take while meditating on Luke 2 and Rembrandt’s artistry together.

As Rembrandt ponders the passage of Scripture, he emphasizes various aspects of the biblical text and its teaching in their artwork, requesting the viewer to do the same and thus deepening their meditation on the God and truths of the Bible. Bernier writes of Rembrandt’s narrative strategy: “Rembrandt’s narrative strategy uses retrospective advance notice and anticipatory recall, where later points to earlier, and earlier to later . . . and [is determined by a] thorough knowledge of the (extended) subject itself, and its theological implications.”²⁹ Rembrandt is not simply providing a straightforward narrative; rather, he is inserting a greater theological argument for the deity and ministry of Jesus. Much like in good Bible study one connects passages with others, Rembrandt asks viewers to do likewise through his work. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* creates meditation for both the artist and viewer to ponder Scripture, meditating on its words and the events

²⁸ Shaw, “Light and Darkness,” 226.

²⁹ Bernier, “The Economy of Salvation,” 193-94.

described. In an age in which one often hurries past verses, visual biblical meditation on the Word creates pause and reflection upon what God has already revealed in Scripture.

Rembrandt's numerous paintings of biblical scenes are prime source for BMVA to be applied. As one of the most well-known painting masters, Rembrandt's pieces continue to evoke great research and admiration. Due to the prominence of the Bible in his work, Rembrandt's paintings continue to be a means through which Christians can defend and teach truth. With Rembrandt's biblical scenes, BMVA can be easily applied by matching the image with the biblical text. Applying biblical meditation to Christian art, thus, can assist believers in meditating on the revealed Word and revisit biblical truths highlighted in the brushstrokes of such paintings. Whether art is used to highlight the text itself or portrays a scene from the Bible, BMVA is a useful tool for meditation upon the revealed Word of God.

**BMVA and Christian-Adjacent Art: *The Oxbow*,
The Ambassadors, and *The Interior of St. Bavo***

As argued, biblical meditation is not confined to one's Bible reading and only when engaging in explicitly Christian activities. Rather, the sanctifying effect of the meditative life affects all aspects of one's existence. Thus, BMVA is also not restricted solely to explicitly Christian art, and its principles and method can be applied to other categories of art. This section will explore examples from landscape art, portraiture, and depictions from common life and connect them to Scripture with the principles of BMVA. As God is Creator and has created the universe with humans as the crown of his creation, landscapes and portraits can easily apply BMVA to these areas of God's evidential handiwork whether in his creation or in his image-bearers.

Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow* (1836)

Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow*, one of Cole's most famous works formerly known as *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, was

painted in 1836 (figure 5).³⁰ In this landscape image, Cole depicts a known location but with his own artistic interpretation. He depicts the valley amidst meteorological shifts. As a storm passes and the clouds break, the shining sun sharply divides the landscape into cultivated farmland on the right and rugged wilderness still shrouded by the clouds on the left. An oxbow in the Connecticut River reflects the sunlight and surrounding trees. The farm fields reveal neatly arranged pastures; sheaves of wheat and plumes of smoke from the homes dotted throughout the valley. Cole paints himself into *The Oxbow* in the right foreground. In this self-portrait, Cole peers at the viewer, smiling as he sits amongst his painting materials overlooking the valley. A chair and umbrella are also staked into the earth on the overlook.



Figure 5. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*

³⁰ Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, oil on canvas, 1836, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10497>.

Cole, the Romantic landscape painter and founder of the Hudson River School,³¹ infused a “high moral and didactic purpose into his paintings,” writes J. Robert Wright.³² Christianity profoundly influenced his artwork. Jonathan Anderson and William Dyrness write, “[Cole] insisted that God was directly and personally encountered through the natural order rather than through the sacramental traditions of the church.”³³ In fact, Cole himself noted that nature itself was where God can “mend our hearts.”³⁴ He goes on to write that through gazing “on the pure creations of the Almighty,” the viewer experiences God. He or she “feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind, and when he has turned to mingle with his fellow men, the chords which has been in that sweet communion cease not to vibrate.”³⁵ In other words, Cole’s love of nature illustrates Psalm 19:1: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” God is not merely Creator, but he is active in his creation and creative work. Just as Psalm 8 begins, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” Cole marvels at how creation reveals the character of God.

BMVA of *The Oxbow*, as always first begins with asking how this piece reflects God (his Word, his works, and his ways) and subsequently asks how this piece reflects humanity. As the believer views *The Oxbow*, the first question is easily answered in its subject matter: creation. The beauty of this created world is one to be meditated upon,

³¹ The Hudson River School was a nineteenth century art movement that emphasized the American natural landscape. Heavily influenced by Romanticism, the Hudson River School was also the first school of painting born in the United States.

³² J. Robert Wright, “Thomas Cole and the Episcopal Church,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 83, no. 3 (2014): 311

³³ Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism*, Studies in Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 144.

³⁴ Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in *Thomas Cole: The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. Marshall Tynn (Saint Paul: John Colet, 1980), 5

³⁵ Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” 100.

preserved here through artwork, and cause the viewer (whether in person or through the visual arts) to marvel at the Creator God. *God's* presence is indelibly marked on creation; his glory is inescapable. *The Oxbow* brings meditative moments to the viewer, reminding him or her that indeed God's "eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived [since] the creation of the world in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). This impressive image asserts the declaration of creation of the glory of God—the mountains in the background reveal that the depth of the image goes beyond what the viewer can see. The breadth of the view portrayed in *The Oxbow* proclaims the beauty of creation as well as a declaration of the ability of God's highest creation: humankind. When one sits and looks at this painting, the juxtaposition between wild landscape and the cultivated land is undeniable. These two drastically different expressions of nature—one in its untouched states and the other manipulated for agricultural gain—reflect the creation mandate given by God to man to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). This image subtly asserts both the works of God in creation and the gift he has given to his creation to cultivate. In Genesis 1, the magnificent work of God in his creative act over the successive days, his power and sovereignty over this overwhelmingly large landscape (further highlighted by the smallness of Cole's self-portrait), further leads the viewer to meditate on the psalmist's cry in Psalm 8:1: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens." This psalm informs the believer's mind as he or she meditates on the Word through the aid of the visual arts.

Simultaneously, the subsequent Genesis 1 mandate to humanity is echoed in *The Oxbow*. The tension of the human cultivation and dominion contrasted with the wild landscape is keenly felt. This Genesis 1:28 command is shown in progress in this work. While they cannot manipulate the rushing water and its oxbow formation, humans have indeed heeded God's call to exercise stewardship and cultivate the land that it may produce fruit. *The Oxbow* reminds viewers of the biblical command to steward the earth. Even amidst the effects of the Fall, Cole's work reminds viewers of these dual truths of

Scripture—the glory of the Creator God and the responsibility of the crown of creation to care for creation at large. Cole’s image reveals the ability of humans to reflect the Creator in their dealings with the earth, to create new structures, to subdue, to exert creative work, and act over its formation. Thus, BMVA’s secondary question—how does this piece reflect humanity?—is also answered in this piece.

Cole emphatically asserts one can experience God in and through creation. Of course, God is revealed as Creator through creation, but not as Savior. One can experience the sovereignty, power, goodness, and even the justice of the Creator God through his work of creation. Art historian Jerome Tharaud writes, “The landscape, even in the absence of explicit religious symbolism or artistic intent, becomes legible as a vehicle for religious and ethical meanings when restored to a cultural context that includes evangelical publishing and the religious-historical associations of particular geographic sites.”³⁶ From this philosophy, Cole paints. Just as Cole appreciates the untouched majesty of God’s creation, he emphasizes this foundational command given at the beginning of time. The logging scars found in the mountain placed in the center of the background form Hebrew letters that read *Shaddai*, the Almighty when viewed from heaven’s perspective. Tharaud continues, “American landscape painting could serve as a medium through which the biblical text mingled with the lived present.”³⁷ Through this subtle inclusion of the Hebrew letters, Cole affirms that God is much more than mere Creator—this Creator God, almighty in his ways, demonstrates his grace to humanity both through common grace and special grace. In both explicit and implicit ways, Cole’s landscapes proudly assert a visual biblical meditation of God’s works as manifested in creation and asks viewers to also assume a similar posture before God.

The Oxbow gently reminds believers of the right interaction humans possess

³⁶ Jerome Tharaud, “Evangelical Space: The Oxbow, Religious Print, and the Moral Landscape in America,” *American Art* 28, no. 3 (2014): 57.

³⁷ Tharaud, “Evangelical Space,” 63.

with nature, not as one's mother but rightly as a blessing from God and declaration of his glory. Cole's work leaves the viewer with a reckoning of the inescapability of God's hand in his creative work and the responsibility humans possess as his image bearers to steward the mandate of creation dominion well. *The Oxbow* further moves a response to God's might and his handiwork. The responsibility to steward the creation mandate rightly in a means that honors the Lord, for whatever a believer does in word or deed should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus while giving thanks to the Father (Col 3:14). James 1:17 states that every good and perfect gift is from God. *The Oxbow* reflects the gift and power of nature in its cultivated and untamed forms. It is a gift to treasure and respect. An application from this process of BMVA can lead to a more responsible stewardship of the land, whether growing in environmental consciousness and material consumption or pausing (or diminishing) today's technologically-centric lifestyle to enjoy the nature God has graciously given. *The Oxbow* reminds Christians not only to steward well but to simply take a walk outside instead of mindlessly scrolling on one's smartphone, to not be more concerned about taking the best picture of the view but to enjoy the moment itself, or to simply be present and grateful for the world God has given his *imago Dei* to live, work, rest, and enjoy.

As the Bible often likens human experience to meteorological and geological phenomena (i.e., Ps 1 blessed man, home on sand and rock in Matt 5; the Parable of the Sower in Matt 13; Mark 4; and Luke 8, etc.), *The Oxbow* can also remind of the vastness of human experience. Difficulties and storms arise, yet the sun will return, whether in this earthly life or beyond. Founded upon the revealed Word and its revelation of the Creator God, human dominion, and the earth, *The Oxbow* causes meditative pause for believers to ponder Scripture and apply it well. As demonstrated, asking the two main questions about who God is and how humanity is reflected, several conclusions can be drawn from BMVA of *The Oxbow*. God is the Almighty Creator and humanity is called to follow his mandate to subdue and care for the earth.

**Hans Holbein the Younger,
The Ambassadors (1533)**

Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (see figure 6) is a masterpiece of portraiture.³⁸ Holbein's virtuoso skills of painting difficult shapes, capturing angles and perspectives, different textures, and accurate portraiture is undeniable. Depicting two men luxuriously dressed and flanked by costly objects, this painting displays much more than a simple portrait. Their elbows rest on the top shelf of the table, which holds a variety of astronomical objects placed atop a tapestry. The bottom shelf displays a globe, a variety of musical instruments, and books. The men pose in front of a lush green damask curtain and upon an ornate mosaic floor. A silver crucifix peers out from behind the curtain on the top left of the painting, and a strange, distorted shape disrupts the foreground. When observed from the correct angle (the viewer must look at the painting from the bottom right side from the viewer's perspective), the viewer will realize that the image becomes a human skull.

When asking the two main questions of BMVA, *The Ambassadors* spurs several important regarding God (his Word, his works, and his ways) and humanity. *The Ambassadors* celebrates friendship as a gift from God. This collective and interconnected life that humans, and in particular believers, embody reflects the Trinitarian life of God himself. Art historian Kate Bomford describes this piece as "a work intended to show the heavenly immortality of its sitters and in that process."³⁹ Hung in the National Gallery of London today, this double portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selves reveals a friendship between a French diplomat to England (de Dinteville) and the bishop of Lavaur (de Selves). The viewer will notice that de Dinteville stands more forward than de Selves, and that the sumptuous material of his clothes reflects his status and wealth within

³⁸ Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, oil on oak, 1533, The National Gallery, London, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>.

³⁹ Kate Bomford, "Friendship and Immortality: Holbein's 'Ambassadors' Revisited," *Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 4 (2004): 546.

the French kingdom, as well his influence in the British kingdom. De Dinteville had spent a year in London as the ambassador of French king Francis I. While in London, this painting was commissioned (whether by de Dinteville or another is unclear) and the two men posed for Holbein. Scholar Charles Pickstone observes that this work “brims with confidence of someone sufficiently in control of life, despite the presence of death, to commission the best artist in the land to paint a private picture of two friends, celebrating their taste, their youth (they are aged, as the picture records, 29 and 25), their involvement at the heart of world events, and their friendship.”⁴⁰ In a society in which friendship has been reduced, *The Ambassadors* celebrates friendships and encourages believers to also pursue, cultivate, and embody spiritual friendship both as a gift and duty of the people of God to love one another (John 13:35) and bear one another’s burdens to fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).

The Ambassadors initially appears to be a flaunting of wealth and status. While the magnificence of the men’s wealth and status, the settings, and the items both atop and surrounding the table reflect the upper echelons of society and opulence, the painting is no mere veneration of wealth but a highly symbolic work. The objects are not simply objects. Art historian Franny Moyle acknowledges the plethora of academic publishing that has mused on its meaning. She notes, “Like so much of Holbein’s work, *The Ambassadors* operates on several levels, with ambiguities that offer different readings. But what is truly exceptional about the painting is the number of apparent interpretations of the work.”⁴¹ Each item on the table has been analyzed at length for its potential meaning and significance, particularly in light of the historical era of the piece. While an in-depth analysis of this work will not be achieved, several prominent features must be discussed that will aid in BMVA of this work.

⁴⁰ Charles Pickstone, “Holbein’s Ambassadors at the National Gallery,” *The Month* 31, no. 2 (1998): 81.

⁴¹ Franny Moyle, *The King’s Painter: The Life of Hans Holbein* (New York: Abrams, 2021), 170.



Figure 6. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*

Having established the Protestant Reformation in England and removing the Catholic church's prominence, Henry VIII ushered in a new religious tone for the nation. The societal changes and ramifications were drastic in English society. The items on display in *The Ambassadors* reflect this new era and disruption from the status quo. The sundial is set to April 11, 1533, with the other instruments, also point to this date. April 11, Good Friday of 1533, perhaps is then connected to the partially visible silver crucifix hanging in the upper left-hand corner of the work. Interestingly, April 11, 1533, was also the day Henry VIII announced his marriage to his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Reflecting the religious and marital changes enacted by Henry VIII, Holbein infers this date as a momentous time for England. As French men involved in the royal court, de Dinteville and de Selve would have been aware of this marriage, especially as Anne had spent time

serving Queen Claude, wife of Francois I, and Marguerite of Valois, the king's sister.⁴²

This nod to Henry VIII is further enhanced by the tilework upon which the men are standing. Well-recognized as the Cosmati floor with its hexagram-shaped design and spectacular geometrical pattern, this floor—the floor at Westminster Abbey—has been the site of the British monarch's coronation since William the Conqueror in 1066. The location, once a symbol of Rome and London's spiritual union, now reflects another subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) reference to the split between England and the Catholic Church who once gave authority and presided over Henry VIII's coronation on the exact spot of the painting. By placing the figures on this floor, Holbein's work recalls the statements of Paul in Romans 13.

In a subtle assertion, Holbein justifies the Protestant Reformation and aligns himself with this movement. Embodying the Christian teachings of faithfulness to God first before social convention or church tradition, Holbein selects particular items to highlight between the two men. This larger spiritual significance of the work lends to the celestial and musical instruments displayed. On the second shelf, the globe is placed upside down, perhaps another nod to the societal changes at large. However, certain cities, including London, Paris, and Jerusalem, are clearly visible. The lute, a well-understood symbol of heavenly harmony, has a broken string to symbolize the discord occurring in society at large. Moyle offers an interesting observation. By painting the lute, Holbein, she asserts, could be asking the viewer to think of homophonic connections within the painting. The lute (and the French "luth") sound like the German pronunciation of "Luther." She writes, "Martin Luther was strongly associated with the instrument; a trained musician, he was known to have played both the lute and the flute (a bag of flutes are also featured in the painting) and claimed that music was second only to theology for

⁴² Moyle, *The King's Painter*, 173.

its ability to drive away the devil, melancholy and evil thoughts.”⁴³ As a soothing balm to Christians’ souls in Britain who were also experiencing discord, the lute reflects the range of human experience in this time.

This Lutheran connection is further forged when one realizes the open pages in front of the lute is a hymnal open to hymns by Luther who was as famous for his hymn-writing as much as his theological discourses. Holbein the Younger transcribes Luther’s hymns: *Komm Heiliger Geyst Herre Goot* (Come, Holy Ghost, Lord God) and *Mensch Wiltu Leben Seliglich und Bei Got Bleiben Ewiglich* (Man if You Would Live Blessed and Dwell in God Eternally). This first hymn, based on the Catholic *Beni Sancti Spiritus*, Luther wrote to celebrate Pentecost. The hymn is a celebration of the church and an act of worship to the Holy Spirit. The second hymn’s following lines continue the hymn’s titular beginning with *Soltu halten die Zehen Gebot/ Die uns gebeut unser Gott* (you must hold to the Ten Commandments/ our God has commanded us to).⁴⁴ By including such items, Holbein contends for the importance of the indwelling of the Spirit in all believers and their personal relationship with God, a major theme in the Protestant Reformation at large, and the primacy of knowing and following God and his law through the emphasis on the Decalogue. For the contemporary individual, a reassertion of personal piety and obedience, initiated and sustained by the Triune God but one that still requires dutiful experience, *The Ambassadors* reflects John’s statement that “we love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19) and to know him is to obey his commands (1 John 2:5). By heralding Luther, Holbein exhorts his viewers to do the same.

The distorted skull at the bottom of *The Ambassadors* not only demonstrates Holbein’s skill and the advances in painting he has achieved but continues a long tradition of *memento mori* in both art history and culture—this idea that death is ever present and

⁴³ Moyle, *The King’s Painter*, 171.

⁴⁴ Jeanette Zwingenberger, *Hans Holbein the Younger* (New York: Parkstone, 2021), 111.

near, inevitable for everyone. The coming of death as an inescapable reality strikingly contrasts with the triumphant tone of the rest of the painting. These two men, standing with their treasures, cannot escape that they will die. The distortion of the skull further enhances the ugliness and tension of death. Despite the somber tone, perhaps the distortion reflects the theological truths that though life is indeed a vapor (Jas 4:14) and death will happen (Eccl 3:2), death has indeed been swallowed up and defeated by Christ (Isa 25:8; 1 Cor 15).

Although marching toward death and earthly decay, salvation is present. Bomford recognizes these heavy symbols as she writes, “Allusions to salvation are as omnipresent in Holbein’s to death; indeed, the opposition between earthly and organising principle of the work’s composition.”⁴⁵ Death and life frame the ambassadors’ presence. While the skull slashes through the lower half of the painting, the crucifix gently peeks out from behind the green damask. In John 12:32, Jesus proclaims, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The placement of the crucifix above the figures alludes to Christ’s position at the right hand of the father and reflects his completed work that covers believers to enter in the beauty of eternity with God. Bomford observes, “At the same time, however, *The Ambassadors* may be understood to represent salvation as a more equivocal process. Like the distorted skull that dominates the lower part of the painting, the tiny, semi-concealed crucifix in its upper part is difficult to discern.”⁴⁶ Whereas death can appear overwhelming, God’s kind beckoning draws people unto himself. The description of God wooing back Israel after their infidelity in Hosea who will “allure her” and “speak tenderly to her” (Hos 2:14) gives believers security for he betroths his people to himself “forever . . . in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy . . . on faithfulness” (Hos 2:19-20).

⁴⁵ Bomford, “Friendship and Immortality,” 567.

⁴⁶ Bomford, “Friendship and Immortality,” 569.

Thus, *The Ambassadors*, though on face value may appear to be a celebration of youth and wealth, asserts an altogether different message. Proclaiming God's sovereignty and the always present gospel (regardless of what evil attempts to do to thwart, pervert, or dilute it), *The Ambassadors* reflects a high view of God and trust in him. In *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors*, Jennifer Nelson writes, "There was thus a shared belief that Christ was the ultimate reconciler of incommensurate difference, a compass to guide early modern Europeans in a world that increasingly made little sense."⁴⁷ The details of this work demonstrate the importance of personal piety and God's majesty. Christ as reconciler for all, the mediator. Asking the questions of the true meaning of life, one's relationship with wealth and prosperity, all the while undergirded with a stout spiritual message, *The Ambassadors* continues to shape and teach its viewers of the larger spiritual reality and the beauty of the gospel overriding the march of time. The presentation of what is material and temporal highlights the promise of death and the offer of salvation through Christ.

BMVA of *The Ambassadors* provides an opportunity for deep biblical meditation upon God—his holiness, his salvific work, his sovereignty, and his goodness—while also emphasizing a return to the Bible as God's revelation. The portraiture format and the many objects on display encourage further questions for BMVA. When engaging with *The Ambassadors*, one may naturally ask, "What is the purpose the skull?," "Who are these people?," and "What is the significance of all of these items?" The observer then begins to connect these questions with BMVA, making spiritual connections from the Holbein image to what one can meditate about God (his Word, his works, and his ways) and observe about humanity. By pausing to meditate, this piece has much to say in regard to God (his eternity, his sovereignty, the salvation he has accomplished) and humanity (as God's church, as recipients of God's gifts, as mortal creatures who will face death).

⁴⁷ Jennifer Nelson, *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 2019), 716.

While the painting may initially appear to be a flaunting of wealth, *The Ambassadors* provides a critique of the fleetingness of life and the importance of correct and Christocentric doctrine.

Pieter Jansz Saenredam, *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem* (1631)

Pieter Jansz Saenredam's *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem* (1631) (see figure 7) depicts a group of figures walking in what has clearly been transformed into a Protestant church building.⁴⁸ Known for his church paintings, Saenredam painted several depictions of the church in St. Bavo through his career. A technical masterpiece of perspective, the horizon line is quite low, emphasizing the height of St. Bavo. Providing a near panoramic view of the church, Saenredam places the viewer inside the building near the periphery of the building. The emphasis of this painting is not religious in tone; the setting is merely in a church. Joining the tradition of the Dutch painters after the Reformation, Saenredam joins in the "religious paintings made in the Netherlands after that date [which] tended to be didactic, oral stories based on domestic life, instead of objects of veneration or meditation,"⁴⁹ as art historian Andrew McIntyre notes.

However, as previous chapters have established, the ordinariness of life is a fertile arena in which biblical meditation transforms one unto godliness. Thus, BMVA can be applied to this work in several profound reminders of the Scripture's proclamation for the Christian believer observing this work. The viewer may first notice the architectural perspective of the piece. The intentional design of the piece emphasizes the monumental space, particularly the height of the church, forcing the viewer to look upward and meditate upon the vast transcendence of God and harkening Psalm 108:4-5: "For your steadfast love

⁴⁸ Pieter Jansz Saenredam, *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem*, oil on panel, 1631, Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/102395>.

⁴⁹ Andrew McIntyre, "Dutch Masters: The Modern Realism of the Reformation," *Institute of Public Affairs* 57, no. 3 (2005): 45.

is great above the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!” Three well-dressed figures lead a group of others who are walking toward the viewer. Elizabeth Stuart and her husband Frederick V, the Winter King of Bohemia, lean into listen to city council member Johan Schatter, who appears to be giving a tour of the building as he points out various features of the church.⁵⁰ The royal dignitaries’ dress contrast from the normal Dutch costume of the time; the distinctive colors and elegance of their dress reflect their status. Yet, Saenredam depicts that even their noble blood is dwarfed by the grandness of the building. The greatness of the God is no match, even to a king and queen, for God is the “great King over all the earth” (Ps 47:2).



Figure 7. Pieter Jansz Saenredam, *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem*

The effects of the Protestant Reformation, particularly the influences of Calvin, are evident. The original decorations and paintings that once ornately decorated the Gothic

⁵⁰ Christopher D. M. Atkins and Steven Zucker, “Saenredam, *Interior of Saint Bavo, Haarlem*,” *SmartHistory*, June 28, 2018, <https://smarthistory.org/saenredam-interior-of-saint-bavo-haarlem/>.

building have been removed and replaced with white paint. The iconoclastic movement stripped the murals and altars that would have filled each nave prior to 1566 and instead, the walls have been completely covered with white. Moreover, Saenredam lightens the existing stained-glass windows of the building to emphasize the whiteness of the space; upon a casual glance, the viewer may not even notice the patterns and colors in the windows. This pure whiteness of the space reflects the holy purity of God⁵¹ and his call for the believer's purity, echoing 1 John 3:3: "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Saenredam, known for his specialization of paintings of churches, does so intentionally to evoke the "visual wonders of divine architecture,"⁵² art historian Martin Kemp notes. Thus, the architecture, through its grandness, through plain in decoration, is perhaps Saenredam's intentional proclamation of the greatness and purity of God himself.

Additionally, the smoothness of the paint produces a glossy, seemingly flawless finish. The lack of visible brushstrokes further appeals to the divine quality of perfection, as Deuteronomy 32:4 declares, "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Through this painting of the interior of a church, one is thus nudged to meditate upon the transcendence, purity, and perfection of God. The sole piece of visual art left in the chapel is a small painting of the exterior of the building, located in the right background this Saenredam piece. By painting a painting within his own piece, Saenredam pays homage to that work and its artist. This small, insignificant painting located on the side of this large, once-Catholic-but-now-Protestant chapel is all that is left of the original building and its former ways, for the building now honors and glorifies God. What once was a beacon of false

⁵¹ The association of whiteness with purity is traditionally only found in the West. See Michel Pastoureau's fascinating series on the history of color, specifically *White: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁵² Martin Kemp, "Saenredam's Shapes," *Nature* 392, no. 6675 (1998): 445.

religion and fake piety, the church has now been cleansed to reflect the holiness and wholeness of God and a biblically-faithful gospel. Dyrness writes, “This is the true image of God’s church, the painter is saying, where the word of God is preached and heard.”⁵³ The emptiness of the space further highlights the purity of the building. Filled with light, the church reflects the light of truth and the purity of God. Saenredam thus invites his viewers to not only view God as holy but for believers to purify themselves as they worship God and hear his Word preached in St. Bavo. Although Saenredam’s image may appear to be a depiction of the “unassuming ordinariness of life,”⁵⁴ as McIntyre notes, there is much that this piece is declaring.

BMVA of *Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem* emphasizes the purity, holiness, and grandness of God. The perspective from which Saenredam paints the building interior causes pause in the viewer to wonder why this artistic choice was made and how, implementing BMVA, this can reflect God. Moreover, the size of the human figures reflects this new era of Reformation; this piece offers hope for a more faithful, pure spirituality rid of excess and false piety.

BMVA and Non-Christian Art

BMVA can be utilized when interacting with explicitly non-Christian art. Although not seeking to be Christian, non-Christian art can be useful for the believer to reaffirm truths of the gospel or provides means for a Christian commentary to what the artwork is portraying. This category can be particularly useful as visual imagery bombards modern life. Believers can apply the same skills of BMVA and non-Christian art to the images they encounter every day. Through BMVA, believers can recognize what to accept and reject about non-Christian art, denying that which is wrong doctrine while

⁵³ William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004), 196.

⁵⁴ McIntyre, “Dutch Masters,” 44.

affirming all truth reflects God and embracing deep philosophical questions that only the biblical worldview can provide a meaningful response.

Banksy, Sweep It Under the Carpet (2006)⁵⁵

The street artist Banksy's signature stenciled graffiti art challenges the historic notion that art is for wealthy institutions and the rich. Known as an artist from and for the poor, his pieces often evoke themes of socioeconomic inequality, the unevenness of social institutions, and the equality of people. Originally from Bristol, England, Banksy began developing his skills on the bus at age fourteen. His signature style of graffiti street art using stencils evolved from a near miss with the police for vandalism. He recounts this night: "I realised I had to cut my painting time in half or give up altogether. I was staring straight up at the stenciled plate on the bottom of a fuel tank when I realised I could just copy that style and make each letter three feet high."⁵⁶ Banksy's works have popped up across the world and has gained fame, heightened even more by his anonymity, which, as lawyer Amanda Scardamaglia observes, has perhaps increased his popularity. She writes, "Banksy's success as a street artist has been possible due to his anonymity, and in particular, his ability to evade detection by the police."⁵⁷ The art itself, the medium, location, and style emphasize his philosophy. As street art, spray painted quickly with stencils on the exterior of buildings, Banksy proclaims social commentaries accessible to everyone in an artistic tradition usually equated with vandalism. The paintings leave behind paint drippings, as the paint drips as it dries on the concrete or brick walled

⁵⁵ Banksy, *Sweep It Under the Carpet*, spray paint on brick, 2006, Chalk Road Farm, London, England, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://banksyexplained.com/sweep-it-under-the-carpet-2006/>.

⁵⁶ Banksy, *Wall and Peace* (London: Random House, 2006), 13.

⁵⁷ Amanda Scardamaglia, "Banksy: Culture, Counterculture and Cancellation," *Griffith Law Review* 31, no. 3 (2022): 418.

canvas. Enigmatic and secretive, Banksy operates as a modern-day Robin Hood⁵⁸ of art.



Figure 8. Banksy, *Sweep It Under the Carpet*

Appearing on Chalk Farm Road in London in 2006, *Sweep It Under the Carpet* (figure 8) is no exception to this Banksian approach to art. Painted on a whitewashed brick wall, a black stencil of a maid, broom at her side and dustpan in hand, lifts the carpet to sweep dust under it. The floor beneath the rug has been untouched by paint; it is the exposed red brick. The stark black and whiteness of the color palate is thus disrupted by the exposed brick (that which is “under” the rug), as well as by the olive tan skin of the maid’s face and hands. In a collection of his works edited by Martin Bull, Banksy states, “In the bad old days, it was only popes and princes who had the money to pay for

⁵⁸ Banksy is also known for his pranks in the art world. The most notorious of his pranks occurred at Sotheby’s auction in London on October 5, 2018. Within minutes of *Girl with Balloon* sold for £1 million, an alarm went off and the artwork partially slid out of its frame (mounted at Sotheby’s). That which was exposed out of the frame had been shredded. Banksy designed this piece to shred itself upon sale. Banksy posted on his Instagram page the following day the quote attributed to Picasso but originally from Mikhail Bakunin, “The urge to destroy is also a creative urge” (this post is no longer available). In October 2021, the partially shredded work was sold for £18.5 million (significantly above the estimated £4-£6 million range). See Scardamaglia, “Banksy,” 419.

their portraits to be painted. This is a portrait of a maid called Leanne who cleaned my room in a Los Angeles motel. She was quite a feisty lady.”⁵⁹

Banksy’s work conjures mixed feelings from both the public and the art world. Scholar Susan Hanson summarizes this well when she describes the average person against street art:

I am sick of “street” and “public” so-called art. If I want to see art, I’ll go and look for it. I hate, loathe and detest the way some people believe they have a right to deface property and then claim it is “art.” Let’s see how they like “art” sprayed on their property, shall we? And what gives them the right to force their art onto everyone else?⁶⁰

While one’s initial response to *Sweep It Under the Carpet* might be similar to this quotation, there is much one can biblically meditate upon through BMVA of it.

Traditionally the color of purity or cleanness, the white background is the white of the maid’s clothing. This “invisibility” of the maid highlights much of her job’s work done in the shadow and not in front of others. The efficiency of the maid is accomplished when the guest is absent from the room. Her work, though invisible, leaves a mark upon one’s experience. Yet, her actions reveal that the white background is not what is truly underneath the surface. The exposed brick wall reveals that there is dirt and trash behind, much like how Jesus called the Pharisees white-washed tombs (Matt 23:27). The invisibility and transience of this work is further highlighted when one realizes that *Sweep It Under the Carpet* no longer exists in London. Rather, the wall of the performance venue this was produced on has now been painted over. The recognition of this work, much like people’s attention, has shifted to something else entirely. Just as humans remain so easily enticed by temptations (or other gods as Moses warns in Deut 11:16), so too the removal of this piece highlights the fleeting nature of this world.

⁵⁹ Martin Bull, *Banksy Locations and Tours*, vol. 1 of *A Collection of Graffiti Locations and Photographs in London England* (Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 2011), 20.

⁶⁰ Susan Hansen, “Pleasure Stolen from the Poor: Community Discourse on the ‘Theft’ of a Banksy,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 12, no. 3 (2016): 295.

Banksy's work, intentional or not, highlights the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27). By intentionally painting those who are most often overlooked, Banksy calls to attention to dignity and worth of every human as one, though marred by sin, created in the image of God. By painting a woman of a minority race in the United States, Banksy's portrait of Leanne harkens the emphasis of Puritan portraiture as a celebration of God's crowning work of creation—the human being. The myriad of prophetic statements against the rich for exploiting the poor, being unjust, and disregarding kindness (Isa 1:23; Ezek 22:29; Amos 6:12; Mic 3:9), and even the statements of Jesus speaking woe against the Pharisees for neglecting true religion (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42), is heightened by a simple graffiti portrait of a lower working-class maid at a motel in Los Angeles, California.

The calls for justice are further highlighted by Leanne sweeping dust and dirt under the carpet. Through this work, Banksy asks what other issues are being swept under the rug, are pushed out of sight, and eventually “painted” over and forgotten by those in power to the detriment and injustice of the poor. Yet, God sees and takes account of what is unfolding. In an increasingly polarized and politicized American culture, both in and out of the church, how does one approach issues? Banksy warns against pushing it away, ignoring it, and pretending it is not there.

As Banksy is a popular artist today, his images garner much attention and discussion, both at the formal and popular level. When one views *Sweep It Under the Carpet*, it may first appear to be crude street art. But even if it is deemed as such, when one views this with the application of BMVA, several connections to the Bible's teachings of God and humanity arise. How does the character of God challenge what is being portrayed in this image? God, who sees the poor and outcast, is also the Great Judge. Observers may also ask, “How does this image reflect human nature?” or “What spiritual lessons can I learn from this piece?” As this woman hides dust under the carpet, this also challenges participants of BMVA to recognize the importance of integrity in all areas of one's life as an ambassador of Christ and child of God.

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God* (2007)

Damien Hirst's 2007 *For the Love of God* (figure 9) falls in line with his signature bombastic style.⁶¹ This piece, a platinum cast of a human skull (from between 1720-1810 and obtained from a London taxidermist), is studded with 8,601 pavé diamonds and features the original teeth from the skull. The jaw has been arranged that the skull appears to be smiling or laughing. A prominent diamond weighing 52 carats is featured in the center of the forehead, with large diamonds (though much smaller than the central diamond) decoratively patterned around it. This piece weighs 1,106 carats and cost £15 million to produce; it sold for £50 million.

Controversial conceptual artist Damien Hirst is known for the shock value of his work. With his art installations of preserved carcasses of animals, including a shark in formaldehyde or a preserved cow with golden horns and hooves aptly titled *The Golden Calf*, and his famous spin paintings and spot paintings. "Hirst proved that a multimillion dollar market for artworks incorporating rotting meat, maggots, dead sheep and all manner of other unique materials that stretched the boundaries of the physical manifestations of art," declares artist and consultants Jörg Reckhenrich, Jamie Anderson, and Martin Kupp.⁶² Hirst continues to influence the art world in the 2020s.⁶³ Hirst is among the United Kingdom's richest living artist with an estimated net worth of \$384 million. Born in

⁶¹ Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007, diamond and human teeth on platinum, White Cube Mason's Yard, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://whitecube.com/exhibitions/exhibition/damien-hirst-masons-yard-hoxton-square-2007>.

⁶² Jörg Reckhenrich, Jamie Anderson, and Martin Kupp, "The Shark Is Dead: How to Build Yourself a New Market," *Business Strategy Review* 20, no. 4 (2009): 46.

⁶³ Most notably, Hirst burned an estimated \$10 million of his own art after selling a series of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) on October 11, 2022. Part of a project titled, "The Currency," Hirst sold 10,000 NFTs; each NFT corresponded to one of his physical spot paintings (usually sold for \$2,000). He livestreamed this burning on Instagram. The day prior to the livestream, Hirst posted a video of the stack of artwork and wrote in the caption, "A lot of people think I'm burning millions of dollars of art but I'm not, I'm completing the transformation of these physical artworks into nfts by burning the physical versions, the value of art digital or physical which is hard to define at the best of times will not be lost it will be transferred to the nft as soon as they are burnt." Damien Hirst (@damienhirst), "Tomorrow I will be burning my 1,000 The Currency artworks," Instagram, October 10, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CjihhFegg4s/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=ba14447b-2ba6-495e-b0c8-8cec9bc1fcd1.

1965, Hirst was educated at Goldsmith College in London, an innovative school that “encouraged its students to engage with the art market early on, for example through actively approaching dealers in order to counteract governmental subsidy cutbacks,” according to Marisa Enhuber of Maastricht University in the Netherlands.⁶⁴ This encouragement led to a group of artists called the Young British Artists (YBA) that dominated the UK’s art scene in the 1990s. Art critic Adrian Hirst describes the YBA as having had “more impact than any preceding British art movement.”⁶⁵ Centered around Hirst, the YBA has shifted the art world’s understanding of art. His influence is profound. Economist Don Thompson describes Hirst as one of only a few artists “who can claim to have altered our concept of what art and an art career can be. . . . The story of Damien Hirst—his art, his prices, his shark and his client Charles Saatchi—is a good introduction to . . . conceptual art and to the role of the artist in marketing.”⁶⁶

Despite Hirst’s notoriety as an edgy and contemporary artist, *For the Love of God* continues the long tradition of *memento mori*. Life is a mist, and death is coming; Hirst presents this concept, however, in a postmodern context. An inescapable subject of human thought and obsession, Hirst created his piece as a reflection of his artistic style, a “Neo-gothic [style] due to his insinuations on the divine eternity and apocalyptic mortality,”⁶⁷ says Enhuber. Contrasting the subject matter with the economic value of the materials, Hirst evokes questions surrounding death.

⁶⁴ Marisa Enhuber, “How Is Damien Hirst a Cultural Entrepreneur?” *Artivate* 3, no. 2 (2014): 11

⁶⁵ Aidan While, “Locating Art Worlds: London and the Making of Young British Art,” *Area* 35, no. 3 (2003): 256.

⁶⁶ Don Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 67.

⁶⁷ Enhuber, “How Is Damien Hirst a Cultural Entrepreneur?,” 13.



Figure 9. Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*

For the Christian, death is the gateway to the believer's soul going to heaven that will later be followed by a bodily resurrection and life in the New Heaven and New Earth upon Christ's promised return and God's judgment. Although Hirst is not seeking to present a theologically right understanding of death, Christians can glean and be reminded of Christian truths through BMVA of this piece. Hirst's artistic themes heavily feature life and death. In his analysis of Hirst's work, art critic Luke White writes, "Being largely about life and death, his artworks are consequently based on anthropological and psychological concepts such as primordial fears and horror but also ecstatic joy, visualized in an iconic form and transmitted to the viewer through the experience of shock and

excitement.”⁶⁸ Hirst’s seeking to delve into uncomfortable subjects and place these ideas before his audience forces viewers to reckon and emotively respond to his work. Similar to the prophetic actions of preaching naked, marrying a prostitute, or wearing soiled undergarments, the shock is a tool for further introspective, spiritual realization, and response. Hirst, in his interview with Sotheby curator Gordon Burn, says, “You don’t like it, so you disguise it or you decorate it to make it look like something bearable—to such an extent that it becomes something else.”⁶⁹ Hirst, while not having a right understanding of death himself, recognizes the human fear of death without God. The obsession to redecorate it to reduce its horror, fight against it by preserving youth and amassing wealth as if it will prevent it, or ignore it and pretend it will not come, remains rampant in today’s society, particularly as digital, medical, and scientific technology evolves.

Art critic Aleksandra Jasielska describes this piece as a “metaphorical way of coping with thoughts of death. Terror is thus deprived of its turpistic quality and takes on a glamour form, which, as in therapeutic methods of removing anxiety.”⁷⁰ Rampantly evident in today’s image-obsessed culture, the Christian can respond to this fear-based flurry with the Christian theology of life and death. Yet, death is result of sinful behavior (Gen 2:17) and is inevitable (Eccl 3:2). The “symbols of luxury and transitoriness [that] may induce reflection on mortality and release terror potential—an existential fear of death,”⁷¹ as Jasielska continues, reveals the deceitfulness of wealth and the equal fate of all one day. God, as the author of death and life, pronounces his judgment against sin.

⁶⁸ Luke White, “Damien Hirst’s Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime,” in *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication (2013), accessed April 21, 2023, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/researchpublications/the-sublime/luke-white-damien-hirsts-shark-nature-capitalism-and-the-sublime-r1136828>.

⁶⁹ Gordon Burn, “Conversation,” in *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever Sotheby’s 15 and 15 September 2008* (London: Sotheby’s, 2008).

⁷⁰ Aleksandra Jasielska, “The Representation of Models of Emotion in Damien Hirst’s Works of Art,” *Critical Arts* 33, no. 1 (2019): 23.

⁷¹ Jasielska, “The Representation of Models of Emotion,” 23.

For the Love of God reveals the despair and emptiness of a life without God. Echoing Lady Wisdom in Proverbs, *For the Love of God* reminds Christians of the vain pursuit of wealth, the fear of death, and the avoidance of the inevitable. “Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices” (Prov 1:29-31). Even when masked with diamonds and wealth, platinum and strength or durability, death is relentless and all will experience eternity, whether in the presence of God or in the darkness of hell.

The jaw’s positioning in *For the Love of God* intentionally highlights Hirst’s condemnation against society’s view of death. The skull laughs at the viewer and at society. While Hirst may be mocking the culture for its view of death, believers do recognize the fate of those who reject God, an eternal judgment of great and terrible rebellion (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev 21:8), a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:50). While upholding the seriousness and sad reality of eternal damnation and separation from God, Christians can, like the skull’s “happy” positioning, joyfully await the day in which they are absent in their bodies but present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-8), and through the reconciliation of Christ, Christians await a future bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:23). The jaw’s positioning also highlights Isaiah’s words, later quoted by Paul—that death has been swallowed up in victory (Isa 25:8; 1 Cor 15:55). God swallows up death; Christians embrace this truth in stark contrast to the world’s hopelessness. One must include Revelation 21 in this discussion. This beautiful vision John sees in which death is no longer (Rev 21:4), for God has righted all things, man lives with God, and God dwells with man. This new city is incomparable to the wealth displayed in *For the Love of God*, for she is made of gold adorned with “every kind of jewel” (Rev 21:18-21). An exclusive city, only for those whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life, “nothing unclean will ever enter it” (21:27).

Thompson observes that Damien Hirst’s titles are a significant part of his work,

for “much of the meaning flows from the title.”⁷² Religious ambiguity marks Hirst’s piece—is this a provocative implication of God, a prayer, or a usage of the common exasperated idiom? Though not for Hirst or most of the viewers of the piece, perhaps this work can become a humble prayer for the believer. An invocation, a plea for God’s justice in a world of injustice, is particularly highlighted by the usage of diamonds, an industry historically fraught with human rights issues, violence, and slavery, a cry for God’s restoration—asking God for maranatha, come, Lord Jesus! This piece also spurs a humble prayer for the continued spread of the gospel as people die rejecting the salvation message. *For the Love of God* indeed reminds not only of “death and transitoriness, or about the fact that luxury alone will not lead to happiness, especially as death awaits us all,”⁷³ as art history professor Isabelle Graw observes, but the much deeper theological implications surrounding death.

Hirst has not created *For the Love of God* as a Christian declaration of God’s salvation, justice, and sovereignty. However, Christians believe that the completed work of Christ has defeated death and Christians await his return when he makes all things new. Thus, BMVA of this piece, starting with asking how this piece compares to Scripture’s testimony of God and humanity, allows for the observer to reflect upon several aspects of God—his Word (in particular what it says about death), his works (the accomplished work of salvation by the Triune God), and his ways (his sovereignty, his judgment, and his grace for the believer). Taylor Worley rightly notes, “By facing the finality of death in the stark manner that Hirst affords his viewers, each individual is left desperate for some hint at salvation from such a dark and decisive annihilation.”⁷⁴

Christian theology is given this reminder, a gift, through *For the Love of God*. This piece

⁷² Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, 63.

⁷³ Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art between Market & Celebrity Culture* (London: Sternberg, 2009), 38.

⁷⁴ Taylor Worley, *Memento Mori in Contemporary Art: Theologies of Lament and Hope* (London: Routledge, 2019), 213.

allows the believer to respond with a meditation on the frailty of humanity and the brokenness of sin. In turn, may believers become further committed standing for justice, embodying Christian charity, and most importantly, sharing the gospel to an unbelieving world.

Conclusion

This chapter provided examples of BMVA. Moving from the progression of explicitly Christian to non-Christian art, this chapter demonstrated how one can biblically meditate upon the Word of God through the visual arts. Combining art analysis, art history, and practices of biblical spirituality, BMVA offers a unique method of meditation in a society in which images constantly bombard individuals' daily lives. This practice serves a variety of purposes. First, it demonstrates the breadth of meditation and its powerful effectiveness in the sanctification process of the Christian life. Second, BMVA joins the longstanding tradition of Christians' relationship with the visual arts as means to teach and spur others toward godly thought, action, and lifestyle. Third, it seeks to redeem the consumption of images by cultivating a greater awareness and pause for reflection and thought in today's social media, image-driven society. By analyzing several pieces, BMVA has achieved these objectives while also serving as a model for others to apply this method of biblical meditation.

As believers in a corporeal body in a physical existence, one cannot escape the "real" world. The visual arts help to process and reflect on the human existence, the search and creation of beauty, and the cries for justice, all of which point to humanity's ultimate longing for the transcendent, Triune God.

This chapter demonstrated how to implement BMVA through a process of analyzing a series of pieces of visual art, ranging from explicitly Christian to non-Christian art. In this demonstration of BMVA, I emphasized the theocentricity of biblical meditation, first asking how the piece spurs meditation of God, then discussing how it reflects the biblical understanding of humanity. This process also demonstrates how BMVA can be

applied to any genre of art and can be implemented by individuals whether or not they have an understanding of art or art history. Most importantly, BMVA can be of benefit to the spirituality of believers and their quest to become more biblically meditative people, particularly as today's society is increasingly image saturated.

The next and concluding chapter of this dissertation will discuss the relevance and value of the BMVA for the local church, Christian institutions, and for the individual believer. Presenting how the visual arts can serve a sanctifying purpose through BMVA, the next chapter develops a practical exhortation for the church today.

CHAPTER 6

THE VISUAL ARTS AND BIBLICAL MEDITATION: ITS RELEVANCE AND IMPORTANCE FOR THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH TODAY

As the case for the importance and theological richness of the visual arts has already been established, this final chapter will present a practical discussion of the contemporary relevance of art for the church and biblical spirituality. In a fast-changing society with sweeping technological advances constantly unfolding, how can Christians continue to practice a robust spirituality—a spirituality that stands in stark contrast to the lauded busyness of twenty-first American society—that is marked by biblical meditation and biblical faithfulness? This chapter will present the contemporary necessity of biblical meditation (and BMVA in particular), make an appeal to Christian leaders, and provide an easy-to-incorporate practical guide for churches, Christian institutions, families, and individuals to incorporate BMVA in their regular spiritual practices.

Contemporary Necessity of Biblical Meditation

As the distinction between postmodern forms of meditation and biblical meditation has already been clarified, this section will dually focus on how today's society reflects a deep need for biblical mediation *and* advocate for the revitalization of explicitly teaching and promoting this practice in the church by Christian leaders and pastors alike. A host of societal issues are symptomatic of an increasingly post-Christian society in the United States today. Paired with the technological and digital revolution, the twenty-first century has been rife with changes, further necessitating the teaching and training of biblical meditation in the church.

Despite the many medical, technological, and societal advances present in the twenty-first century, the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the frailty and fleeting

nature of human life. The resulting almost seven million deaths (as of July 2023)¹ has reminded believers and nonbelievers alike of the hubris to falsely boast about one's own importance. Life is indeed fleetingly fragile, as Job laments in chapter 14 of his namesake book, "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not" (vv. 1-2). The discussion of the importance of mental health has increased as the effects of the pandemic lockdowns, the struggles of students completing school amidst an online/in-person hybrid model, the disappointments of pandemic disruptions in everyday life, and the sad reality and nearness of death because of COVID-19 became inescapable. Physician and researcher Omnia El Omrani and her team state, "The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of young people around the world. . . . This has heightened fear, isolation, helplessness, sadness, worry, disappointment, and anger as well as other psychological distress among adolescents."² As society emerges from the pandemic, many believers and nonbelievers alike are pondering the purpose of life. Biblical meditation links the Word to life transformation, and as unprecedented issues and dilemmas arise, biblical meditation equips believers to respond in a discerning and godly fashion.

The rise in the normalization of therapy in the culture at large and the recognition of the importance of good mental health can be applauded and encouraged. However, the rise in anxiety and fear within society, and particularly within the Gen Z generation, perhaps reflects a society that continues to move further away from the Christian worldview and thus no longer possesses a cohesive moral center. Church leaders must recognize this trend and seek to address and respond to the various issues in

¹ World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," accessed June 27, 2023, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

² Omnia El Omrani et al., "COVID-19, Mental Health, and Young People's Engagement," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 72, no. 1 (2023): 18.

an informed, biblical manner. By teaching and modeling biblical meditation, Christian leaders can not only be obedient to the godly practices affirmed and commanded in Scripture but can also reshape Christian youth to place God at their moral center. Such teachings reject societal forms of coping and minimizing difficulty that center on the self (which only disappoints and remains unsatisfactory) and embrace what it means to be Christian—to die to self and become more like Christ, to suffer faithfully, and obey God by following his commands. Thus, pastors and church leaders can and should be practicing biblical meditation privately while also publicly and actively instructing believers to become more biblically meditative people.

Furthermore, as social media continues to shape how individuals view others, themselves, and the world, the image-saturated and image-obsessed platforms of Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok provide little balm for weary souls. Rather, they often promote a wrong view of humankind and self and laud idleness—the opposite of Ephesians 5:15-16, in which Paul states, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” This debilitating disengagement from the world promoted by social media obsession reflects a lack of discernment that indicates a lack of biblical meditation. While social media encourages arguments on Twitter, preoccupation with the latest influencer on Instagram, or the endless “doom scroll” on TikTok, the Bible teaches believers instead to be wise. Christian leaders should, again, be convicted to embody this by being biblically meditative people and encouraging the practice of the personal spiritual disciplines in their ministries to other people. Christian leaders must recognize the centrality of biblical meditation to living a holistically godly, faithful life. Especially as the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) technology can construct information, news stories, and even images to appear as truth when not, Christians should seek to be, as Jesus commands, “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).³

³ Interestingly, Geoffrey Hinton, a pioneer of AI, publicly left his position at Google and continues to warn of the dangers of misinformation and security issues because of AI. While people continue

The lure of AI to be the “easy way out,” as it can write one’s essay and complete one’s homework (or Bible study or even sermon), the Bible’s teaching on wisdom, and the Christian leader’s meditation upon the Word can serve as a check to this burgeoning technology and the Christian response (and use) of it.

The result of expressive individualism has not in fact created a robust, free society but has led to, as historical theologian Carl Trueman observes, “authoritarian forms of social control.”⁴ He continues his observation and notes,

All of this obviously has serious implications for the church. . . . The world where freedom of religion, let alone freedom of speech, is now regarded by some (many?) as a problem for a free society rather than a basic foundation of the same is indeed a strange new world. But, strange and new as it is, it is also our world, the one to which we are called to respond.⁵

So how does one respond to this new ethos? Biblical meditation, as already discussed, not only is a necessary discipline for the individual Christian life but has massive ramifications for the corporate body and its apologetic and evangelistic efforts. Amidst the cancel culture and rise of extremists on every societal and political spectrum, biblical meditation helps believers recognize godly voices, embrace dialogue, and not be fearful of fleeting societal changes in light of kingdom eternity. Biblical meditation helps cultivate the Christian virtues of gentleness, kindness, and love, for such are the promised fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5:22-23 that arise from a biblically meditative life.

Biblical meditation teaches Christian leaders how to lead well, and how to stand distinct from the post-Christian world with firmness and grace. Instead of becoming overcome by or promoting fearmongering, Christian leaders should remain biblically stout.

to lobby for global regulations, the technology continues to develop. See Zoe Kleinman and Chris Vallance, “AI ‘Godfather’ Geoffrey Hinton Warns of Dangers as He Quits Google,” *BBC*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65452940>.

⁴ Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 124.

⁵ Trueman, *Strange New World*, 124.

Trueman notes the failures of the church in history and warns against this in history present:

At a very practical level, the way Protestantism has often failed to reflect historical concerns of the church in its liturgy and practice, most obviously the megachurch movement and manner which has frequently adopted the aesthetics of the moment in its worship, is arguably a sign of the penetration the anticulture into the sanctuary of historic Christianity. Christians today are not opponents of the anticulture. Too often we are a symptom of it.⁶

A lack of biblical meditation has created a subset of professing Christians who have been hoodwinked by the trends of the age rather than hold to the traditions of the faith. Instead of reflecting Christ, such people reflect the culture. Biblical meditation helps Christian leaders to not be consumed by the latest fads and trends, becoming wayward in their ultimate objective and focus of their ministries. To reiterate what has already been stated in this dissertation, biblical meditation is not the sole means through which the spiritual problems of the age will be resolved. Biblical preaching and teaching, Christian fellowship, and the practice of both the personal and interpersonal spiritual disciplines exert major influence on the sanctification of the Christian believer and leader. Coupling biblical meditation with other spiritual practices in community with other believers will strengthen individual Christians unto greater godliness and spiritual preparedness as they are called to the service of the Lord in society. Whatever the cause, the lack of biblical meditation results in veering off the biblical path. Whether in issues of gun violence, racial tension, sexuality, or free speech, without biblical meditation Christian leaders are more likely to become either legalistic, pharisaical mouthpieces, unloving bigots, or naïve participants in worldly beliefs. Paul's wisdom regarding love as the highest virtue rings loudly amidst the infighting in Christian circles today. Without love, the Christian is merely a noisy gong; he or she is nothing (1 Cor 13:1-2). Biblical meditation reminds leaders that leading is not

⁶ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 337.

merely spouting facts but teaching followers how to respond with right answers *in* kindness and truth.

Lifeway Research reports that only 32 percent of active Protestant churchgoers read the Bible every day, and 12 percent rarely or never read their Bibles.⁷ Such statistics should alarm Christian leaders and cause them to consider why this may be the case. As both biblical illiteracy continues to remain high and progressive Christianity and deconstruction increase, how can the church respond? The lack of teaching on biblical meditation perhaps reflects why many people remain distant from their Bibles, have seemingly insurmountable questions about Christianity, and walk away. While many teachers advocate for Bible reading and prayer, one often does so without practical instruction on how to engage the Word and prayer well. Yet, the church has a wonderful opportunity to engage the current and next generations. Gen Z's high interest in religion and spirituality shows an openness that is unique to their generation. Barna reports, "Curiosity about Jesus is widespread in the open generation. Teens in the U.S. are far more intrigued than their global peers, with 77 percent being at least somewhat motivated to keep learning about Jesus throughout their lives."⁸ Christian leaders can encourage this interest in youth groups especially, as Barna continues, "A teen's personal commitment to follow Jesus goes hand in hand with their motivation to study him. . . . Even among teens who are non-Christians or don't know who Jesus is, however, over half is at least somewhat motivated to keep learning about him."⁹ While the interest and lure in New Age meditation and spirituality remains (and has already been discussed), the church has

⁷ Lifeway Research, "Few Protestant Churchgoers Read the Bible Daily," July 2, 2019, <https://research.lifeway.com/2019/07/02/few-protestant-churchgoers-read-the-bible-daily/>.

⁸ Barna, "Over Half of Gen Z Teens Feel Motivated to Learn about Jesus," February 1, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/teens-and-jesus/>.

⁹ Barna, "Over Half of Gen Z Teens Feel Motivated."

a better solution. Christian leaders can foster Gen Z's interest in these matters by teaching, encouraging, and modeling biblical meditation within their ministry settings.

The contemporary necessity of biblical meditation, paired with the opportunity for Christian leaders to teach it, has been outlined. As this dissertation contends for the use of the visual arts as an application of biblical meditation, this next section will make an appeal for Christian leaders to engage this medium.

An Appeal to Christian Leaders to Engage the Visual Arts through BMVA

As the petition for biblical meditation has been made toward Christian leaders in the first section of this last chapter, this section will bridge the helpfulness of the visual arts in this meditative endeavor. Christian leaders may agree on the necessity of biblical mediation, as well as the helpfulness of the visual arts, but may still question the use of BMVA. After all, most people neither possess an art history background nor are they familiar with (or have much interest in) the arts at all. Is it not more profitable to meditate directly upon Scripture rather than spend time analyzing art? Yet, BMVA can be a creative solution to an ongoing issue in Christian spirituality today, namely the wide misunderstanding and wrong practices of meditation. Meditation is too often woefully under-practiced or unbiblically implemented and the addition of BMVA to the methods of meditation based on Scripture can help the practice of this spiritual discipline and thus be of great benefit to the church.

Christian leaders should recognize the undeniable embodied nature of the human existence, teach the holistic call of the Christian life, and call others to increased awareness of beauty. Art forms can help shape these objectives of Christian leaders both through verbal and cognitive methods, but also through nonverbal and spatial forms (which are just as, if not perhaps more, effective) as well. Moreover, as embodied creatures that live a visually-rich existence, the visual arts remind believers of the world in which they live. The arts reflect the culture in which it is produced, the breadth of human existence,

and creatively express the *imago Dei*. Appreciating and interacting with the visual arts cultivates skills that help to warm one’s affections, and hone the practices of pausing over, reflecting upon, and appreciating beauty. Christian thinker and artist Makato Fujimura echoes this idea:

Christians have many presuppositions about what Christianity is that are often based upon an analytical approach to understanding truth as a set of propositional beliefs, such that understanding and explaining take dominance over experiencing and intuiting. But that grounding is based less on a biblical, generative path than on the mechanistic, postindustrial thinking of utilitarian pragmatism.¹⁰

As a theology of beauty is grossly underdeveloped in the West amidst this post-Enlightenment age in which reason is placed as the crown of human development, the arts help to quietly enforce the powerful apologetic and important theological concept of beauty. Christians should reckon with the power of experience and allure of beauty to proclaim the gospel.

In a 1962 television interview with BBC journalist John Bowen, J. R. R. Tolkien explained how the world of Middle Earth of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was created. The renowned author and philologist stated, “Because being made by a Creator, one of our natural factors is wishing to create. But since we aren’t creators, we have to sub-create, let’s say. We have to rearrange the primary material in some particular form which pleases, which isn’t necessarily a moral pleasure—it’s partly aesthetic pleasure.”¹¹ Whether a person is writing about fantasy worlds, creating welcoming spaces, or painting art, it is not merely the craving for more knowledge, but the urge to flex one’s creativity is also an innate quality of human beings as creatures made in the image of God.

“Imagination, like art, has often been seen as suspect by some Christians who

¹⁰ Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2021), 4.

¹¹ BBC Archive (@BBCArchive), “The writer explains how he is 'a meticulous sort of bloke' during an intense, candid and revealing interview,” *Twitter*, January 3, 2022, 7:00 a.m., <https://twitter.com/BBCArchive/status/1477973020903821313>.

perceive the art world as an assault upon traditional values,”¹² observes Fujimura. He continues, “These expectations of art are largely driven by fear that art will lead us away from ‘truth’ into an anarchic freedom of expression. Yet after many decades of the church proclaiming ‘truth,’ we are no closer as a culture to truth and beauty now than we were a century ago.”¹³ Fujimura rightly questions this strategy. Christian leaders must recognize that ministries should not solely be focused on the transfer of information, but also convey that the Christian life is holistic and cultivates beauty, a true, pure beauty that reflects the Triune God and his glory. To be people committed to the Book—Scripture—is not to imply that Christians only read. Of course, for evangelical Christians, the Word remains central in its importance; *sola Scriptura* is not merely a phrase but a fundamental cornerstone of the evangelical faith. Atop this foundation, Christian leaders should cultivate habits and spaces that reflect the beautiful rhythms of the Christian life and teach churchgoers that spirituality extends far beyond Sunday services or weekly Bible studies. Trueman observes, “When Christians engage in the practices of hospitality and Sabbath keeping, singing and forgiveness, simplicity and fasting, they are engaging in a way of life that is formative and constitutive of Christian discipleship. These ‘practices beyond Sunday’ are further opportunities to rehearse a way of life, to practice (for) the kingdom.”¹⁴ The visual arts can be a way to cultivate these weekday practices. Because believers are Word-centered, they should embrace and welcome the arts. By recognizing and interacting with the arts, believers can express how the Christian life itself is a statement of beauty. In this way, Christianity welcomes smaller forms of beauty, for they ultimately point to God himself.

In today’s digital age when individuals see hundreds (if not thousands) of

¹² Fujimura. *Art and Faith*, 5.

¹³ Fujimura. *Art and Faith*, 5.

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 288.

images daily as they drive by storefronts, billboards and scroll through their phones and televisions, the richness of the visual arts helps Christian leaders redeem images as they incorporate biblical meditation and BMVA more specifically. In other words, Christians can incorporate the questions and principles of BMVA as they interact with images in their everyday life instead of passively consuming ads and social media posts. As modern advertisements and secular social media influencers often reflect and glorify the trivial, banal, and even sinful, asking the BMVA questions of how these images (or videos) reflect or contrast who God is, who humans are, and how Christians can respond to the core issues can develop healthy critical thinking, wise discretion, and right interaction (or avoidance) with such platforms. Humans are consuming images drastically more than any other period in history. This unprecedented trend in human existence should not be overlooked by Christian leaders in how it shapes oneself and one's flock. As such, these leaders should be cognizant and active in their response to this current moment. Art forms play a substantial role in human formation, both in the church (as already discussed in chap. 4) and in culture at large. History has demonstrated the effect art possesses in affecting social change for better or worse. In recent history the arts have become grossly sexualized to seek to normalize (and desensitize people to) certain behaviors. Trueman credits art as a "signal influence in challenging sexual norms and in bringing explicit sexual content into the realm of public discourse and common social consciousness."¹⁵ As Christian leaders lead the charge of the ministry of reconciliation, perhaps the visual arts can be redeemed as a positive tool for the kingdom of God. Images affect how one thinks about and reflects on oneself and the world. BMVA brings together the necessity of biblical meditation with the visual emphasis of this age.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus writes about the importance of the eyes. In between laying up of treasure in heaven (Matt 6:19-21) and the warning that one cannot

¹⁵ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 236.

serve both God and mammon (Matt 6:24), Jesus says, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt 6:22-23). New Testament scholar Jonathan Pennington observes the dual ancient understanding of the sense of sight both as the eye absorbing the external world *and* the eye as reflective of the inner self—both views could be applied to these verses. He notes, “The eye is a metaphorical window between the inside and the outside of a person.”¹⁶ If believers minimize the importance of images and the enormous effect their views have on their formation, then their formation will be stunted. Spirituality is not merely composed of intellect and knowledge, but what one experiences, sees, and senses enrich the foundation that is based upon knowledge of the Word.

Thus, Christian leaders can gladly join the Christian tradition of cultivating, creating, and expressing beauty in art forms. As today’s culture boasts its greatness and progress, as well as its emancipation from the bondage of so-called uncultured, archaic forms of society, humanity still desperately seeks within its restless, godless soul-searching and yet never seems to find true answers. Trueman reflects this tension well: “The break with the past that modernity represents is decisive. . . . With no higher order to which we might look in order to understand human existence teleologically, we both are isolated from the past, where ends transcending the individual were assumed, and are left free floating in the present.”¹⁷ In a self-centered society, Christian leaders would be wise to point to beauty as a reflection of the larger church tradition, a transcendence that exists beyond time. The fast-paced society, the search for bigger, newer, and better is endless without God. James K. A. Smith echoes a similar tone: “The thrilling drug of novelty is drunk deeply by such presentism; but it is a narcotic with diminishing returns. . . . While

¹⁶ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 204.

¹⁷ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 336.

such CNN-ized time is hungry for what will happen next, strangely it fails to be expectant about the future. It is an orientation to what's coming that lacks hope; instead, it simply records the onslaught of events."¹⁸ Christians can respond to this with great substance. Using the appeal for beauty and greater meaning, the visual arts can become a starting point for deeper conversations. BMVA can become a gift for the weary. While the world's offerings are fleeting and superficial, divine beauty is eternal and endless.

Art possesses the quality of requiring the viewer to slow down, gaze, and reflect upon the piece. Though a measure of art history has been presented in the previous chapter, one does not need formal training in an art history degree to practice BMVA. The practitioner can ask the basic, simple questions—what does this piece reveal about God? What does this piece reveal about humanity?—to use as tools for biblical reflection and worship of the Triune God. Coupled with the joy of learning new skills, this process can introduce a new avenue in which one can worship God as well as enjoy interaction with the arts. Modern evangelicals often shy away from the arts because they do not understand it and are sometimes afraid of interacting with its “strangeness” (particularly when looking at modern art). However, even facing this discomfort could be of spiritual benefit as it helps believers reckon with the brokenness of this world and yet also the promise of restoration by Christ our King in the future.

Christian leaders should thusly recognize the importance of spaces, such as worship centers, Sunday school classrooms, youth areas, and even church foyers. The aesthetics of any room matter, not in a shallow sense but because spaces reflect the larger philosophical values of the building it is in. Christian leaders can challenge themselves to think about how art and beautiful décor shape a space, not as pieces of veneration but paintings or sculptures that point to God and provide moments of biblical meditation for churchgoers. In the West, in which respect and reverence are sometimes not as highly

¹⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 211.

regarded as in many parts of the Global East or South, the arts help promote divine reverence.

This dissertation challenges church leaders to be mindful in choosing art and décor for their gathering places and sanctuaries. For in this manner, pastors can serve churchgoers by gifting them means to meditate on God the moment they set foot into the building. BMVA cultivates greater faithfulness, and thus Christian leaders can seek to adorn their houses of worship or ministry spaces to reflect the Christian tradition of embracing the arts as another avenue of worshiping God and inviting others to join in worship as well. Such pieces can help increase (and train) people to pause and revere God. This God is not a buddy but the majestic, eternal Creator, Savior, and Triune God.

A Guide

This last section provides a guide for how Christians can implement BMVA in large corporate gatherings, in smaller Christian communities, for evangelistic and apologetic purposes, within the family, and for the individual. Practicing BMVA does not require an art history degree or even a seminary education. As already outlined in chapter 4 and demonstrated in chapter 5, BMVA is an accessible tool for believers to meditation upon Scripture through an application that is often avoided in Christian circles but is ever-present in human culture.

For Christian Institutions and the Local Church

Christian institutions, denominations, and the local church can utilize and celebrate art through both overt and subtle means. Again, the purpose of such is not to elevate art for art's sake but instead to use the visual arts as a tool to worship God holistically. Institutions and church building committees should recognize the importance of architecture and spaces. Often, particularly in fellowships with a congregational polity, churches construct their buildings from a democratic, utilitarian philosophy. While good stewardship is commendable, as a building budget should not be frivolous and should fit

the needs of the congregation, the artistic direction of the building should also be considered. Whether the church installs a large stained-glass piece, hangs simple paintings, or arranges flowers to place around the church, consideration should be given as to how the architecture or décor of the room can reflect the reverent worship due to the transcendent Triune God. While such a church may not construct a building that resembles the grand European cathedrals of the Gothic period, changes, even the smallest of adjustments (through architecture, design, or furnishings) can adorn their sanctuary in a way that aids, in a non-verbal but powerful manner, the worship of the local church. Such adjustments should not be ignored or treated as an aside. Whether in a nursery room, youth group space, or the sanctuary, churches often hang art on the walls. BMVA helps Christian leaders be more mindful of what to display and how its presence might affect passersby. Adding visual arts engages all senses and different parts of the brain and can encourage churchgoers to engage in BMVA while they also hear, speak, and sing the Word on a Sunday morning. Creating beautiful spaces in churches can exhort Christians to cultivate beauty not just in physical spaces but in action and thought.

Moreover, the visual arts can be employed in Christian curriculum as a tool for teaching. Teaching BMVA and introducing churchgoers to the visual arts can become a pedagogical tool for teaching the Bible *and* for strengthening one's faith. Like the saints of old, applying the visual arts and engaging paintings of biblical scenes can aid younger (whether in age or spiritually) believers as they learn the story and metanarrative of the Bible. As the Bible can be overwhelming to many, utilizing the plethora of Christian art available can help form a cohesive, biblical understanding of the stories and teachings in the Bible. New believers can engage the art and apply BMVA to both learn the content of the Bible and apply it to his or her own life.

Utilizing the visual arts and BMVA can also become a useful tool for discipleship. As Christians and non-Christians alike possess doubts and questions regarding the validity of Christianity, disciplers can appeal to the visual arts to evoke questions as a

basis to promote deep, honest conversations about the philosophy of this current era, the scriptural response, and how believers should respond (and thus engage others to be formed by the Word). By presenting a painting or sculpture, discussing it, and then using it as a catalyst for conversations about spiritual truths, teachers and disciplers can engage in deep topics more readily than simply trying to dive in immediately. Since art, and especially modern and contemporary art forms, often presents pieces that are much more than the image or object it presents and is arguing (or questioning) a larger philosophical question, BMVA can become a useful tool to strengthen believers in their own faith and also equip them to respond to nonbelievers in conversation as well.

Furthermore, utilizing BMVA in the church can have apologetic and evangelistic ramifications. As the visual arts spur discussion, church leaders can utilize the visual arts not only to respond to humanity's great questions within the church but also do such for seekers and nonbelievers. A means to have discussions about the meaning of life, the problem of evil, moral authority, or the role of justice (just to name a few), the visual arts can become a starting point to have engaging and ongoing dialogue for a vast spectrum of issues. As already stated, people remain curious about spirituality and religion, so perhaps the visual arts can be a common ground in which Christians can converse with people of differing religious backgrounds. By starting the discussion with a piece of visual art, perhaps the nonbeliever will feel less threatened, less judged, and less as if they are being proselytized. The visual arts can jumpstart a larger discussion naturally, for one of art's inherent properties is its commentary and reflection of the culture and society in which it is produced.¹⁹ This can easily lead to the Christian sharing their BMVA in a natural, non-obtrusive manner. BMVA, thus, not only can shape the believer in their own personal sanctification, be shared in fellowship with other believers, but also be a powerful means of sharing the gospel with others in an era in which evangelism is often seen as a social

¹⁹ See appendix 1 for pieces to discuss in both a discipleship-oriented or apologetic-focused context.

faux pas and avoided by many Christians as undesirable and too awkward to engage. Moreover, as one practices BMVA, one can not only become more sanctified but also potentially grow more knowledgeable about the visual arts. As the art world is famously progressive and un-Christian, BMVA introduces the possibility of great benefits for the individual in his or her personal spirituality and can become a common ground for developing relationships with those in the community of those who produce art or pursue art appreciation.

Christian institutions and local churches can advocate for the celebration and inclusion of the visual arts in their ministries. Recognizing that many Christians' exposure to art and art history could be low, churches, Christian organizations, and even Christian homeschool co-ops could invite trusted, biblically-sound believers who are knowledgeable about the arts to speak at an event or gathering. There, local Christian artists, Christian professors, or art teachers can share about the value of the arts, teach a short course of art appreciation, or survey art history from a Christian perspective.²⁰ Many such seminars and classes could be conducted through the use of free resources from the scholars' or artists' website, YouTube, or books. Pastors and ministry leaders should discern what is appropriate. However, simply because some forms of the visual arts emphasize the profane or grotesque certainly does not mean that all visual art should be avoided. Rather, churches must recognize that everyone, including their own leaders, are being shaped by images in some manner. Whether in the news, on one's phone, or even (and perhaps especially) through the online scourge of pornography, images have a profound impact upon the human psyche. Churches can joyfully reclaim the influence of images by adorning their teaching, their settings, and their corporate worship with individual, corporate, and

²⁰ An increasing list of Christian resources on this subject is growing. InterVarsity Press's ongoing academic series Studies in Theology and the Arts, as well as lay resources from Andrew Peterson's organization The Rabbit Room, are readily available to utilize. Most recently, The Rabbit Room offered a class by British artist-writer Alastair Gordon entitled "Created to Make" on the Bible's relationship with the arts. See The Rabbit Room, "Created to Make," accessed October 30, 2023, <https://www.rabbitroom.com/created-to-make>.

evangelistic BMVA.

For the Family or Small Groups

BMVA can be of great spiritual help for the family or small group unit as well. The family head or small group leader can implement pieces of art with biblical passages. After reading and meditating on the passage itself, artwork can be incorporated amidst the discussion to further aid meditation and application. One can utilize art to converse how art expresses life. Whether an explicit rendering of a biblical scene or not, analyzing and responding to the visual arts exercises a different area of the brain that can further cement biblical truths in one's mind. For families with teens or young adult children, this can be a helpful part of family worship. For singles, young couples, and empty nesters, partaking of this exercise with a small group or accountability group can be a new, unique method of applying meditation on Scriptures.

For families with small children, both parents and children can even respond to the passage by drawing their own picture and talking about what they drew and why. In doing so, they create their own art pieces that are evidence of biblical meditation in their young minds. By creating artwork, this can also help parents reinforce the biblical truths discussed, as it provides continuous reminders of the biblical meditation, as it may be magnetized on refrigerators or taped on the wall in a playroom, and ongoing teaching moments with children.

BMVA can easily be incorporated into regular family worship or small group gatherings. After reading a biblical passage and asking questions about the text (such as what does this passage teach us about God? What does this passage teach about humanity? Or what does this passage teach us about God's people?), the family or small group leader can choose a piece of art that connects one of the questions regarding the text and use it to apply BMVA. For example, if a family is studying Psalm 1, the father can employ a landscape painting or still life to illustrate how blessedness is portrayed in the psalm upon the initial discussion of the text. Multiple paintings can be utilized if time allows.

Afterwards, the father can invite the family to describe personal spiritual fruitfulness and respond with a time of drawing how fruitfulness is developed in each family member's life. Each drawing can be displayed in the family room or kitchen with ongoing conversations for the week (or longer) about Psalm 1.²¹

Additionally, families and small groups can plan outings to a local art museum or gallery. The leader should do some preparatory work beforehand. Looking on the museum website, the leader can assess which exhibits or pieces can be highlighted and determine which pieces to apply BMVA. After a few pieces are chosen, the leader can assemble a list of Bible verses that the pieces exemplify, whether about beauty, creation, God's sovereignty, his justice, or whatever attribute of God or characteristic of humanity. Upon arriving at the museum, the leader can encourage participants to simply view the painting for a few minutes to familiarize themselves with the pieces, look at the identification placard, and meditate on what biblical truths and concepts this affirms or denies. If time allows, participants can apply BMVA to other pieces to which they are drawn and share their thoughts with the group as well.

For younger families (or a children's Sunday school class or youth group outing), spending a full afternoon at an art museum may not be feasible, but a fun, easy family activity can be to find local murals and public art displays. Oftentimes, local governments invest in public art in downtown areas of cities. Like the museum, the family head or small group leader can do prior research and prepare Bible verses and enjoy an age-adjusted conversation about the piece. Doing so will help train children and teens to apply biblical meditation, and more specifically BMVA, in the images with which they interact in daily life.

For Individuals

For the Christian individual, he or she can also utilize the list of images in

²¹ See appendix 1 for a list of images that can spur BMVA.

appendix 1 as an addendum to their personal Bible reading and meditation directly from the Word. Individuals can begin looking at art and implement the process of BMVA. As believers practice BMVA, they can begin to compile their own collection of art (whether physically or digitally) for meditative purposes. BMVA can be utilized on the same piece of art multiple times, and thus believers can curate their own collection to repeatedly revisit. Additionally, Christians can ask a series of reflection questions: What role does art play in my life? What kinds of images do I interact with on a regular basis—what am I consuming in the digital sphere? How do images shape what I think and believe? What do my personal spaces (home, bedroom, office) reflect about my value of aesthetics? How can my personal spaces reflect the gospel and God? Asking such questions can be of great benefit to one’s general spirituality, not only in regard to BMVA specifically. As corporeal creatures that are lured toward beauty, these questions can cultivate gospel embodiment and Christlikeness.

Creating meaningful spaces does not require a large budget or cause one to hang artwork on every empty inch of one’s walls. But if images and spaces both shape and reflect oneself, then Christians can challenge themselves to create inviting, warm spaces that reflect the gospel and ministry of reconciliation given, experienced, and commanded to express to others. By being more intentional in what fills spaces, especially amidst a materialistic, consumeristic era of human existence that is heightened even more so in American culture, Christians can embody the results of BMVA—a faithful life that engages images and the arts well.

BMVA helps provide the Christian with greater discernment as he or she navigates a strange, turbulent time. As the believer awaits Christ’s second return, BMVA offers the gift of applying and exercising biblical meditation in an image-saturated and image-obsessed culture. For the believer who seeks to no longer be “children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph 4:14), BMVA is a particularly helping practice in a

society lacking biblical meditation. Believers can stand firm, trusting in the “God of peace himself [who will] sanctify you completely, and [keep] your whole spirit and soul and body . . . blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). We cry, “Maranatha!” until that day.

Conclusion

This chapter petitioned Christian leaders to reconsider the importance of biblical meditation and its method using the visual arts, with practical guides to apply this in ministerial and familial settings. The imperative to biblically meditate continues to assert itself as Western society rapidly shifts toward a post-Christian worldview. Amidst these changes, Christian leaders can utilize the tools of the visual arts to embody, teach, and model to both believers and non-believers alike the beauty of the gospel and the meditative life the Triune God invites believers to enjoy.

This dissertation has presented the scriptural view of meditation and applied the visual arts as a method of biblical meditation. As those created in the image of God and predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son are called to meditate, may believers, just as the psalmist David “[gazes] upon the beauty of God” (Ps 27:4), do so by meditating upon God through his Word with increasing faithfulness and regularity.

APPENDIX 1

LIST OF ARTWORK FOR BMVA

Art relating to God and Creation:

William Blake, *The Ancient of Days* (1794) *

Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave* (1831)

Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam* (1512) *

Claude Monet, *Impression Sunrise* (1874)

Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night* (1889) *

Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas* (1656) *

Art related to the Brokenness of Humanity:

Banksy, *Sweep It Under the Carpet* (2006) *

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510) *

Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) *

Francisco Goya, *The Third of May* (1808) *

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God* (2007) *

Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1910) *

Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937) *

Art related to Salvation and Sanctification:

Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus* (1601)

Eugene Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) *

Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors* (1533) *

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (1646 [2]) *

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1661-1669) *

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper* (1495-1498) *

Art related to the Christian Life:

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Harvesters* (1565) *

Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm* (1836) *

Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434)

Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss* (1907–1908)

Georges Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–1886)

J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway* (1844) *

Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665)

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* (1871)

Grant Wood, *American Gothic* (1930)

*** These images are particularly helpful for an apologetic or discipleship context**

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ABSTRACT

BIBLICAL MEDITATION AND THE VISUAL ARTS: A METHOD OF BIBLICAL MEDITATION FOR A POST- CHRISTIAN, VISUALLY-SATURATED AGE

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In this post-Christian, visually-saturated age, Scripture-guided meditation on the visual arts can serve as a helpful method of biblical meditation. This dissertation argues that a method of biblical meditation—as outlined and practiced in Scripture—can make use of the visual arts as a biblically faithful and exhortative means for healthy biblical spirituality. This dissertation first establishes a strong definition of biblical meditation, contrasting biblical meditation with popular methods and understandings of meditation in today’s culture (particularly transcendental meditation), then presents its definition from Scripture and analyzes it throughout church history (paying special attention to the Puritans). Biblical meditation—a God-centered command for believers—is the careful thinking and pondering primarily upon God’s Word, but also upon God’s works (including his work of creation) and God’s ways, in accordance with Scripture. Biblical meditation is derived from and directed to a Triune God and is a God-given gift for the purpose of the believer’s maturity and sanctification.

This project asserts a spirituality based primarily and predominantly upon *sola Scriptura* that *then* informs and transforms the understanding of all other avenues of learning as biblically-sound spirituality. Clarifying that the visual arts do not and cannot present new revelation, this dissertation argues that visual arts can be a healthy means for expressing biblical truth and encouraging believers. The dissertation then surveys the varied relationship of the church and the visual arts throughout history, after which a

connection from the visual arts to biblical meditation is suggested as one possible method of biblical meditation. Examples are given from various periods of art history, including pieces by Rembrandt van Rijn, Thomas Cole, and Banksy. The last chapter discusses the relevance of applying biblical meditation to the visual arts and its value for the church and individual believers as they navigate a visually-saturated culture in the twenty-first century, as well as provides suggestions on how to implement this method. A development of the relationship between biblical meditation and the visual arts can become a healthy, regular practice for believers to incorporate as they grow into more mature, thoughtful followers of Jesus Christ.

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