

LEROY FORLINES ON THE ARTS, LIFE & CULTURE

by Daniel Webster

In describing the profound impact of F. Leroy Forlines (1926-2020) on students, pastors, and laypeople, one writer said that “his most valuable contribution was a theology that is big enough, deep enough, and meaningful enough to impact all of life.”¹ Forlines is known for his profound contribution to Arminianism, but he has also had a *big, deep, and meaningful* impact in the area of the arts and specifically how the Christian should pursue and/or interact with the arts. To understand the theology of Forlines one must understand his love for art—good art. In *Quest for Truth*, Forlines spoke of how he enjoyed visiting art museums with his wife. What a wonderful and hopeful thought—this respected theologian moseying around an art gallery in the middle of Russia. But art was not a mere hobby; for Forlines, art is part of his approach to theology, life, and culture.

In his beloved book, *The Quest for Truth: Theology for a Postmodern World*, Leroy Forlines makes several references to the arts. While his primary goal is not to prove the value of the arts, his frequent references to the arts makes a case for his approach to the arts as foundational to the human—and especially the Christian—experience. In this essay, these references will be evaluated in order to assemble Forlines’s view on painting and music in light of the cultural mandate.

Forlines on Painting

¹ Jackson Watts, “F. Leroy Forlines: Theology for All of Life,” Helwys Society Forum, entry posted February 25, 2013, <http://www.helwysocietyforum.com/?p=3359> (accessed August 16, 2016).

As already mentioned, Forlines expresses his appreciation for painting by recounting his time in Russia with Fay (his wife) in 1996: “We had toured many art museums throughout Russia and marveled at the paintings of many master painters, including Rembrandt.”² It is no surprise that Forlines mentioned that he admires the beauty and excellence of the art of Rembrandt (1606-1669), the Dutch painter and etcher whose intricate biblical scenes define the Dutch Golden Age. (This modern American theologian tends to agree with Dutchmen).

Forlines goes on to critique the other art present at the Russia Museum in St. Petersburg. “We saw a display of art from Great Britain produced in the 1990’s. One of these works was simply a canvas painted white.” He continues, “Compared to the great classical works of art, these recent British works were pitiful.”³ Forlines’ unexaggeratedly describes the rapid decline of painting over recent years, specifically how it mirrors modernity’s view of the truth. It is reported that in 2014, an untitled 1961 work by American conceptualist Robert Ryman sold at a New York Auction for \$15 million.⁴ (Other than texture in the paint, Ryman’s piece was little more than white paint on a white canvas.⁵)

The response of this theologian is full of grace, seasoned with salt: “Instead of ridicule for these artists and their works, we should have compassion... We cannot simply condemn this kind of art out of existence... We must learn to address the despair and hunger in people’s hearts

² F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life's Inescapable Questions* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 2001), 411.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Leonid Bershidsky, “Why Pay \$15 Million for a White Canvas?” *Bloomberg*, November 14, 2014, accessed August 17, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2014-11-14/why-pay-15-million-for-a-white-canvas>.

⁵ Ryman’s work can be viewed here: <http://tinyurl.com/Ryman-untitled-1961>

with the Truth that sets people free.”⁶ This gospel-centered tone is the usual response from Forlines at the intersections of the arts, theology, the gospel, and culture.

Something should be said at this juncture concerning the art *created* by the high culture in comparison to the art *created* by and/or *enjoyed* by the general culture. Throughout his book, Forlines calls for a high view of beauty and excellence, but never does he call for *artistic snobbery*. When children create refrigerator art, their parents do not sneer at their art work. They treasure it, and even admire it. In a similar way, when one hears reports of Christians in a foreign land coming together to build a place of worship in the fashion of their straw-roofed mud huts, Westerners still see beauty, even though it does not match Western forms of architectural art. Here are two important conclusions that Forlines (before his death) commended:

- A person with limited abilities, opportunities, and resources should seek to do their best in spite of these limitations, striving for beauty and excellence within their contexts, while not despising the higher forms of their art. This takes humility.
- One who has achieved a high level of excellence in the arts due to their abilities, opportunities, and resources may still find beauty in “lower” forms, and should not despise the ones who have not attained to this higher level. This takes humility as well.

In the midst of his call for beauty and excellence, in a section entitled *The Need for Balance*, Forlines states “The complication presented by sin, the shortage of time, money, ability, help, etc. limit what we can do. We cannot do everything that we would like to do. Frequently, we need to look at a situation from several different angles... the best is not always possible.”⁷

⁶ Forlines, *The Quest for Truth*, 411-412.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

Forlines on the Cultural Mandate

Rather than considering Forlines' view of the arts, let's consider a theological subject that aids his view—the Cultural Mandate. At the close of his discussion on sanctification, Forlines argues that “Sanctification is to extend to all of life's experiences.”⁸ He goes on to say:

In determining the scope of sanctification, we need to go back to the meaning of being created in the image of God. We were designed to be in the functional likeness of God. This should be seen in the entire scope of human experience. All our experiences in every area of life are to be affected by the divine likeness that we are to manifest. The design of sanctification is to restore the functional likeness of God that was lost in the fall. We were designed to be in the moral likeness of God. When we speak of the moral likeness of God in this context, we are using the word moral in its broadest meaning. We are to be holy, loving, and wise because God is holy, loving, and wise. We are to be concerned about ideals, beauty, and excellence because God is the quintessence of the high and the lofty. This likeness of God is to be highly evident as we carry out the divine mandate to exercise dominion over the earth and its inhabitants, and as we obey the Great Commission.⁹

Because “we dare not forget that God is a God of *beauty, majesty, and excellence*,”¹⁰ and since “every human being has a potential, and that potential should be developed to its fullest and highest level of achievement,”¹¹ Forlines issues as plea for a revival of Christian Humanism. He acknowledges that the humanities are generally viewed as architecture, art, music, and literature, but his “aim in calling for a revival of Christian Humanism is to include these areas, but also to extend the concern for beauty, excellence, and order to every area of life.”¹²

Forlines roots this philosophy in the Cultural Mandate found in the Genesis narrative, when God commands mankind to exercise dominion over the creation. “In carrying out this mandate, we are to aspire to the high ideals that are set for us by our responsibility to be in the

⁸ Forlines, *Quest*, 229.

⁹ Ibid., 230.

¹⁰ Ibid. Forlines cites Philippians 1:10 and 4:8 as support.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 232.

likeness of God. We are to aspire to bring the entire scope of life under the Lordship of Christ.”¹³ It is a tendency among Christian thinkers to unnecessarily label certain aspects of this *world* as worldly. Forlines acknowledges that while “fallen man cannot bring all of life into conformity to the likeness of God,” the “image of God is not completely silent in fallen human beings.”¹⁴ Many achievements have been attained within the arts and sciences by non-Christians; believers should “study these achievements and critique them in the light of the revealed truth in the Bible.”

Forlines on Music

Forlines’ view on the music of the general culture is seen in this statement: “Nothing reflects the spirit of the age as much as people’s attitude about the areas covered by ideals, beauty, and excellence. It is reflected particularly in the way people dress and the kind of music they listen to.”¹⁵ Not only is this an accurate statement, but it has a nuance that may be misunderstood if not read carefully. Notice that he specifies the music that people *listen to*, as if to suggest a difference in the music that is *created* by artists and the music that is *enjoyed* by the general culture.

This is important because Forlines’ main reason for bringing up music, specifically the music which is *listened to*, is a sign of postmodernism which has crept into the general culture. Other than one passing statement, he does not mention the music of high culture (as he did with painting). This one reference seems to indicate that he appreciates folks forms of music as well as the forms of high culture. In speaking of his childhood, he states, “I wish I had a dollar for every museum, historical landmark, and exhibit that we saw. Our exposure to music, good

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Forlines, *Quest*, 231.

music, was very broad. I learned to love the arts, flowers, and beauty in general because of the continual influence of my mom.” This sentiment also indicates that there are certain forms of music that Forlines would not view as *good* art.

As we continue to evaluate Forlines’ references to music of the general culture, it is interesting to note that he groups together “the way people dress” and the “music they listen to” in the quote at the beginning of this section. He does so three more times. The “rejection in our culture of the traditional concern for ideals is a manifestation of the spirit of the age. This rejection is seen in matters like *music* and *dress* [emphasis added].”¹⁶ He groups these two things again: “The areas that have been hit the hardest on the grass roots level are *music* and *personal appearance* [emphasis added].”¹⁷ And again: “They suffer internally over the deterioration of *music, dress, and civility* [emphasis added].”¹⁸ In this last time, the mention of “civility” (formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech¹⁹) indicates all the more that he is thinking in terms of general culture, not the music of high culture.

This lumping together of *dress* and *music* is a suggestion that the expression of the culture through appearance and art enjoyment should be taken seriously. This thinking on the part of Forlines is in keeping with Francis Schaeffer's “line of despair” given in *Escape from Reason*, a work with which Forlines is familiar (he cites it in *Quest*). Schaeffer suggests that the

¹⁶ Ibid., 248.

¹⁷ Ibid., 460.

¹⁸ Ibid., 428.

¹⁹ “Civility,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed August 25, 2016, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/civility.

line of despair starts “first in philosophy, then art, then music, then general culture, which could be divided into a number of areas. Theology comes last.”²⁰

So, why does Forlines make an issue of the music of the general culture? He emphatically states that believers “underestimate the damage that postmodernism has done to the cause of Christ when it undermines ideals.”²¹ We have a tendency to take a *boys will be boys* approach to these matters—*these habits of the general culture are not that big of a deal*. Forlines pushes up against this mindset when he says, “It is not as easy as saying these things do not matter. This negative attitude crosses over into the non-negotiable moral areas.”²² This is exactly the point made by Schaeffer in *Escape from Reason*.

Forlines recognizes that the music practiced and enjoyed within the general culture will have an effect on church worship:

Many try to pass off the whole matter in the area of ideals as just a matter of culture. Culture is viewed as value-neutral. The thing for the church to do is to adapt to this harmless change in culture. It is all a matter of taste. The saints should be willing to make these changes for the sake of reaching more people. It is thought that the key to reaching today's people is to make changes in the style of music and a few other things in the way that the service is conducted before the pastor brings the message. Regardless of what value there may or may not be in these suggestions, I think that the matter of reaching people who have been conditioned by postmodernism is much deeper than that. It is a tragic underestimation of what is involved in rescuing those who are held captive to postmodernism or the modernism mood to think that the major factor involved in reaching these people is a change in worship style.²³

Lest he be misunderstood and viewed as overly rigid, Forlines concedes that we will not all “agree on matters of form.” His call is that we come to “agreement on substance.”²⁴ In other

²⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason: a Penetrating Analysis of Trends in Modern Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 58.

²¹ Forlines, *Quest*, 248.

²² *Ibid.*, 248.

²³ *Ibid.*, 428.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

words, he is not calling for conformity to one style of music (or one style of dress); he's not suggesting that we only listen to and worship with classical music. What we must agree on is that the style of music (and dress) we choose for worship should not distract or take away from doctrine and truth, and while doing so, should be an example of beauty and excellence. "Both the long-list legalists and the short-list legalists have failed to give proper emphasis to substance...To give proper emphasis to substance will not erase all differences about form, but it will make it easier to discuss the question of appropriate form."²⁵ The Church must evaluate which practices of the general culture it adapts, because, if Schaeffer is correct, these practices will eventually impact the Church's theology.

Summary

When Forlines issued his call for Christian Humanism, his concern was not that we strive solely for excellence in the areas of architecture, art, music, and literature, but also that we "extend the concern for beauty, excellence, and order to every area of life."²⁶ By examining Forlines' view on two art forms (painting and music) in light of the Cultural Mandate, we have become more enlightened on these subjects, but also challenged to carry this philosophy to all of life.

Leroy Forlines is a practical theologian, a very *in the trenches* kind of thinker. In the midst of his discussion on beauty, excellence, and majesty, he shows grave concern for the ones created in God's image who remain entrapped by sin. He warns believers: "If your church does

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 232.

not have people who were saved out of deep sin, it is not because you are doing a good job, it is because you are not ministering to today's world.”²⁷

The approach to life that Forlines advocates is not just for the middle to upper class professional man, who began playing cello at the age of eight, attended a state university, and is chairman of the deacon board at the First Baptist Church. Beauty, excellence, and order can be attained by the drug-addicted, single mother who dropped out of high school and has never darkened the door of a church. This change is possible because she is made in the image of her Creator. “If sin had not entered the picture, there would be no problem in living the whole scope of our lives in complete conformity to God’s likeness. Sin changed things.”²⁸ But, that’s what redemption and sanctification are all about—seeing the beauty, excellence, and order restored as God originally intended.

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²⁷ Ibid., 248.

²⁸ Ibid., 232.