Foreword

Unlike most researchers, the author came to work on a doctorate at St. Andrews with already considerable experience behind him in campus ministry and in university teaching and administration. So far from the resultant age difference being a disadvantage, it gave a depth to his reflections that they might not otherwise have had, not least because his chosen topic was spiritual formation and how the visual arts might contribute to such ongoing discipleship. It is no exaggeration to say that most viewers think art appreciation a relatively simple matter of like or dislike, with the meaning and significance of a particular painting easily deciphered in a relatively short space of time. Indeed, as one watches tourists race through major galleries snapping their cameras as they go, one wonders if the intention is simply to prove a particular viewing rather than to really engage with the painting in question. Jim McCullough rightly rejects such a shallow approach, insisting not only that there is much more involved for proper aesthetic appreciation but that sustained viewing can also reap profound spiritual rewards in increased religious self-understanding. As he puts it, ascesis (spiritual training) can work hand in hand with aesthesis (art perception). At St. Andrews he spent much of his time working through the practical implications of such a claim in respect of two major contemporary artists, the Scottish painter Peter Howson and the American artist Makoto Fujimura: wise choices, as their artwork could not be more different, the former being a representational artist and the latter working mainly with abstract forms. The result was that McCullough not only became an expert on the two artists but was also able to demonstrate how, irrespective of the

form of the art, it could be used to develop Christian discipleship (both artists are themselves Christian). Meditations needed to be directed, but at the same time open, so that self-discovery could be an important element in the process. It was a technique that he employed with a number of student groups to remarkable effect.

In what follows, however, the main focus is on the theory behind such practice, and that too is important. While the twentieth century saw a marked growth of interest in the visual arts among more Protestant and Evangelical Christians, it would be true to say that an element of suspicion remained. Art could at most illustrate the truths of Scripture. Here Jim McCullough tries (successfully in my view) to take us well beyond such a position. Reflection on, and contemplation of, particular works of art has the power to deepen our understanding of the Christian faith. In this project he harnessed a number of scholars to his aid, most notably among them David Baily Harned. The result is that readers will learn as much about the views of other major writers in the field as they will be carried along (hopefully) by the skill of McCullough's own arguments and the obvious enthusiasm he demonstrates. Reading about theoretical foundations for particular practices can of course be at times difficult and even frustrating, but readers will soon be relieved by the clarity of McCullough's exposition, as by the admirable way in which he draws out the practical implications of what he proposes. Nor should the originality of what he writes be discounted. There are plenty of Christian books on moral formation, but here with aesthetic formation we are onto much rarer, and I believe highly fruitful, ground.

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