

Testing Christian taste: Twelve guidelines

by [Frank Burch Brown](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

1. There are many kinds of good taste, and many kinds of good religious art and music. In view of cultural diversity, it would be extremely odd if that were not true.
2. Not all kinds of good art and music are equally good for worship, let alone for every tradition or faith community. In terms of worship, therefore, it is not enough that a work or style of art be likable; it must also be appropriate.
3. There are various appropriately Christian modes of mediating religious experience artistically—from radically transcendent to radically immanent in a sense of the holy; from exuberantly abundant to starkly minimal in means; from prophetic to pastoral in tone; from instructive to meditative in aim.
4. Every era and cultural context tends to develop new forms of good sacred music and art, which to begin with often seem secular.
5. Because every musical/aesthetic style calls for a particular kind of attunement, no one person can be competent to make equally discerning judgments about every kind of music. Yet almost everyone is inclined to assume or act otherwise. That impulse is related to the sin of pride.
6. It is an act of Christian love to learn to appreciate or at least respect what others value in a particular style or work that they cherish in worship or in the rest of life. That is different, however, from personally liking every form of commendable art, which is impossible and unnecessary.
7. Disagreements over taste in religious music (or any other art) can be healthy and productive; but they touch on sensitive matters and often reflect or embody religious differences as well as aesthetic ones.
8. The reasons why an aesthetic work or style is good or bad, weak or strong (and in what circumstances), can never be expressed fully in words; yet they can often be

pointed out through comparative—and repeated—looking and listening.

9. Aesthetic judgments begin with, and owe special consideration to, the community or tradition to which a given style or work is indigenous or most familiar. But they seldom end there; and they cannot, if the style or work is to invite the attention of a wide range of people over a period of time.

10. The evaluation of art used in worship needs to be done jointly by clergy, congregation, and trained artists and musicians, taking into account not only the aesthetic qualities of the art itself but also the larger requirements and contours of worship, which should at once respond to and orient the particular work of art or music.

11. While relative accessibility is imperative for most church art, the church also needs art—including “classic” art of various kinds—that continually challenges and solicits spiritual and theological growth in the aesthetic dimension. This is art that the Christian can grow into but seldom out of.

12. Almost every artistic style that has been enjoyed and valued by a particular group over a long period of time and for a wide range of purposes has religious potential. That is because life typically finds various and surprising ways of turning religious. As Augustine said, our hearts are restless until they rest in God.