



Faith and the Arts

Challenges confronting Christians

In the last 40 years, a social, cultural and religious revolution has taken place in the West and caught Christians off-guard, unable to understand or explain what has happened and why. And while change continues at a rate unsurpassed in history, the Christian consensus has been lost. Few Christians seem concerned – most have been taken captive to postmodernism's non-stop diet of change, anti-intellectualism, commercialisation and glitz. Most find themselves living for entertainment and personal ease in an image-driven, soul-shrinking time bubble, without any real reference to the past or interest in the future.

Cultural change on a scale of this magnitude, challenges us on many fronts. We shall look at four:

- The challenge confronting consumers
- The challenge confronting the Church
- The challenge to raise the level of discernment and debate among Christians
- Challenges confronting Christian artists

The challenge confronting consumers

As we have already seen, works of art have a strange power to touch and affect people's lives as they directly and indirectly urge us to see and experience the world through the eyes and experiences of their makers. When, for centuries, works of art were largely the works of people of high principles and often godliness, this was laudable. Today, given the degree of secularism, self-worship and angst, it is a concern, and especially now that modern artists have at their beck and call high-tech reproduction and instant communication, and an entertainment appeal that embraces sport, fashion, Rock, etc.. Now add to that commercialisation.

A U.N. Development Report in 1998 stated that the growth in global advertising expenditure '*now outpaces the growth of the world economy by one-third*'.¹ What is being advertised above all else? The imagery of Coca Cola, Nike, Disney, Starbucks, Tommy Hilfiger, McDonalds, etc. where profit is the motive, and the creation of a world of hallucinations the means. These multinational companies are selling a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea. Nike is selling a feeling of success. IBM isn't selling computers, but business 'solutions'. Swatch isn't selling just watches, but the idea of time. Tommy Hilfiger is selling style: the company doesn't own a single manufacturing business. It owns nothing and sells a name – a name that will make its owners feel good.

And the multinationals are promoted by celebrities like Michael Jordan, Elizabeth Hurley, Jonah Lomu, etc. Unsurprising, then, the fact that global corporate sponsorship increased over 300 % in the 90s, and now stands at over \$20 billion US.²

Commerce has taken captive the arts and continues to do so through their image appeal. They cause the consumer to salivate for a mesmerising world of desire. The end result is that the consumer is taken captive to trivia and sex, and the mind shrinks accordingly.

The challenge confronting the Church

An art student once commented, '*My College doesn't understand my faith and my church doesn't understand my art. Where do I fit as a whole person?*'³

In the 1960s, Dorothy Sayers remarked, *'In such things as politics, finance, sociology, and so on, there really is a philosophy and a Christian tradition ... But oddly enough, we have no Christian aesthetic – no Christian philosophy of the Arts. The Church has never made up her mind about the Arts, and it is hardly too much to say that she has never tried. She has, of course, from time to time, puritanically denounced the Arts as irreligious and mischievous, or tried to exploit the Arts as a means to the teaching of religion and morals ... And, of course, there have been plenty of writers on aesthetics who happened to be Christians, but they seldom made any consistent attempt to relate their aesthetic to the central Christian dogmas.'*⁴

*'It is an irony of church life that those who give themselves most ardently to what they see as fulfilling the Great Commission leafleting, street preaching, Bible study, intercession - are usually those who end up with having the least point of contact with their non-Christian neighbours. In a recent survey (quoted in 1997) non-Christians assessed Christians as, among other things, 'more boring, more isolated, more unfashionable, having fewer interests, less involved in the real world, less happy'. And then we suggest they come and join us!'*⁵

Part of the problem is that Christians are often too simplistic in their sharing of the gospel and too simplistic in their understanding of today's culture. Charles Colson has written, *'It is not enough to focus exclusively on the spiritual, on Bible studies and evangelistic campaigns, while turning a blind eye to the distinctive tensions of contemporary life.. Turning our backs on the culture is a betrayal of our Biblical mandate and our own heritage because it denies God's sovereignty over all of life.'*⁶

For us all, whether we be artist or consumer, a proper stewardship of talent and time is laid upon us. In a parable that Jesus relates about the use of money (talents) and time,⁷ the departing nobleman instructed his servants to occupy themselves till he returns. The nobleman is Christ Himself. He has placed us in appointed positions where we, each one, should be living in the light of His return, able to give a good account of the stewardship of time and talents bestowed upon us. *'God has given us richly all things to enjoy'*.⁸ Whatever we do, therefore, whether in the name of work or leisure, all is to be done for the glory of God. *'God has given us **richly** all things to enjoy'*. Every dimension of the artistic enterprise creativity, excellence of technique, artistic content, originality, wholesome enjoyment becomes a way of glorifying God. And such a goal saves Christians from making the things of art into an idol.

The challenge to raise the level of discernment and debate among Christians

How do Christians stand in the battle for the mind? Not well, it must be admitted. The arts do not teach truth as such, but one of their values lies in their being a catalyst to thought. *'The arts, for all their beauty and delightfulness and value as entertainment, are not intended as the occasion for us to take a holiday of the mind.'*⁹ Rather they are an occasion to 'test the spirits to see if they are of God' – to rigorously scrutinize and discern. If this flies in the face of postmodernism's political correctness, and disdain of judgment, so be it!

We are to be aware of how the arts work on us. Literature carries most clearly the artist's perspectives on life, because words allow for the greatest scope and clarity of communication. Music carries the least intellectual meaning, and the visual arts fall somewhere between the two. But the power of television, film and video, brings a mix which grabs and rivets ones attention, mind-boggling but mind-shrinking at the same time. As one film director commented, *'You have to hit your audience **before** they think.'* Another ploy is the constant shortening of shots. The mind is left breathless trying to follow the action, with no time to discern.

Works of art connect us with life when they model life, but they can also disconnect us from real life. Film and television increasingly lead us to live in their 'virtual reality,' and we become dream-like characters (like Peter Sellers' Chancy Gardner in *Being There*), instead of people of character and substance. *"Repeatedly it has been shown,"* Wolterstorff points out, *"that, under certain*

conditions, where person A observes person B preferring some action, that serves to develop in A the **ability** (and the **tendency**) to perform that same action.”¹⁰

It is imperative, therefore, that Christians learn to be more discerning. If we still need further convincing, let us take to heart the importance of what Simone Weil once observed: In life “*nothing is so beautiful, continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good: no desert is so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy it’s the other way round. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of fun.*”

Meaningful ethical debates of our day no longer generally arise from church settings. They arise from chatter over coffee cups, out of what passes for news, and from the latest must-see telly programmes so highly commended by worldly critics; and the challenge is for each believer to learn how to become a mini-Christian-apologist, taking up the issues as they arise from secular settings and entertainment.

“Christians are responsible for the furniture of their minds,” Ryken reminds us. *“What they take into themselves is not morally neutral. It is like food that they digest and that becomes part of them. Some food is poisonous to the system. So are some forms of art, literature, music (and film) ... In the long run, we are the sum of our indulgences...”*

“How does art (especially literature) embody an immoral perspective toward its subject matter? Essentially it does so by offering an immoral attitude for the audience’s approval: making immoral acts attractive; leaving goodness bereft of its proper beauty; generating sympathy for immoral characters and actions; belittling characters whose actions and attitudes are moral; omitting models of morally good behaviour; treating immoral acts in a comic tone; prompting a reader to refrain from moral judgment; portraying immoral acts as something people have no choice in rejecting.”¹¹

Things to consider with respect to discerning works of art

1. If contact with a specific work of art is likely to have a negative effect on your Christian beliefs, values and behaviour, leave it alone.
2. Beware of exposing yourself to emotional experiences that are contrary to sanctification, and indulge the pleasures of the flesh and private world.
3. If you do not find enjoyment in any particular art, don’t bother with it. Be yourself, but be open to learning.
4. Is an art work technically good or inferior? If you don’t know, begin to find out.
5. Is an art work communicating truth or falsehood? The ideal is truth, technically well expressed. The tragedy with much Christian culture is that it is often shallow or sentimental, and badly expressed artistically.

The on-going challenge is to develop your mind, enlarge your experiences and empathy for others, delight in the good and multiply the good of your neighbour, and honour God.

Challenges confronting Christian artists

Here let me be brash enough to address artists, and offer a few thoughts, for what they’re worth.

Be realistic about assessing your talent. As in the Parable of the Talents,¹² there are very different giftings but whatever the gift, great or small, the responsibility to use it is laid on the recipient. That parable should not be read in isolation from two others, however: the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard¹³ and the Parable of the Pounds.¹⁴ These balance other considerations with talents, those of time and opportunity. Just as our talents vary, so do opportunities to develop and use them, and these tie in with the time one is free to spend. To fail to see the relationship between these three will cause endless frustration.

It is not really sufficient to just have a general desire to practise art, though this will yield its pleasures and delights when pursued even in a limited way. Just to dabble in the realms of creativity can be refreshing and enjoyable, but for the serious artist, desire must be backed by other things, such as mastery of technique. This involves learning, observing, practising, persevering, perfecting. Pursue your own search through trial and error, and experimentation coupled with patience. Learn to be your own judge and jury – and don't be soft on yourself. Don't be afraid to write off much of what you do. You set the standard of what you will launch into the public arena. Poorer craftsmen rush for recognition: the really good never do. Seek to steadily improve and mature. Appreciate something of the history that lies behind your pursuit. Hunger and thirst to know and learn more.

The best will have a real sense of 'calling', and know it, in contrast to a lot who will *think* they have it. One proof of the genuine thing is perseverance – stickability, through decades. It won't really matter much if you never get much recognition or make any money from your interest. Such things will not stop you creating. Your mind will be continually switched on, and your desire to create will not depart if this is God's calling upon your life.

If you don't want to be a mere copier, you've got to find your own way of expressing the truth and passion within you. You've got to *feel deeply* and try to find your own particular style and niche. I think of someone like the American artist, Andrew Wyeth. His father was a well-known artist before him, and taught him, but Andrew became much more than an echo of his father. He worked much in isolation, and was never bored with his own company. He loved nature, and especially the landscapes of a couple of particular districts. He loved much whatever he painted. He revisited the same landscapes, and repainted many times characters that he admired. He was often mocked for this, but he ignored the criticisms. *"I can't get any great feeling without a very strong connection with a place,"* he said. *"Really, I think one's art goes only as far and as deep as your love goes."*

*With respect to portraits, "A lot of portraits all look alike – the artist's conception of what a girl looks like – same eyes – details without passion. It's awful. The artists – their personalities – are so strong in front of their **paintings**, you never get to their **objects** – **which should exist with a life of their own**. They are actually saying, to hell with the object. But I feel that the subjects I paint are far bigger than I am – I mean, to feel that I'm the creator, I'd have to be a half-wit. The finest compliment I ever had came from an art critic at a show of my work in Buffalo. I told him I didn't want to get in his way, and he said, 'Don't worry about that Mr Wyeth. You're no competition for your work.'"*

Wyeth made an astute comment about high prices paid for art, which I like, for he generally wasn't interested in money. He only wanted his works of art in the hands of people who really loved them, as he did. But he has said, *"There's one good thing about high prices – it makes people feel that art is important. America is so money-conscious. I mean, if I had Christina's World here, (one of his most famous paintings) and told people there's a tempera that's worth thousands of dollars, oh, how they'd really look – and maybe get something out of it. But when I first painted it, people walked right by it."*

If you've any real talent, strive for the best. Wyeth was always after that, which is why he was only satisfied enough with about two temperas and twenty water-colours a year to let them go to the public. You've got to feel deeply – be moved within – and express that. Meditate much on your subject – meditate alone. Value silence and aloneness – and use them for reflection. Reflect, meditate, rearrange things in your mind. Let your imagination run. Open up your emotions. Give yourself time. Don't allow yourself to be cluttered with the unnecessary. If you have a creative spirit and a burning urge to express it, give yourself the space you need to do that. This is where the support of others comes in. They can help you get the space you need and see that you're not interrupted. The silent supporters make a unique contribution which the artist never takes for granted and without which his works would be much the poorer. (One may wonder if Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* would ever have been published had it not been for the warm private encouragement and singular support of C.S. Lewis.)

You will meet people who are not the slightest bit interested in your work but, on the other hand, there will be some who wished they knew more about art and “where you’re coming from.” You have no obligation to the former but you will do well to try to help the latter, where you can.

Beware lest a social life destroys your creative life and, if you’re married, this is a cost for your partner to bear and share. Spare much time with God and His Word. Meditate on what He wants you to be as a person as well as an artist. Primarily, He calls you to be. What we are and what we do must be at one, if we are to please God, and the measure of this is the measure of our integrity.

Let me end with some words from Nicholas Wolterstorff:

“In the Christian view, man’s uniqueness among his fellow earthlings lies in his vocation and destiny, and his glory lies in carrying out that vocation. Man’s obedience is his glory! In such glory all can share. It is open to all to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with one’s God. It is this glory of obedience that the artist is called to share.”¹⁵

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Endnotes:

¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Flamingo, 2000

² Ibid

³ Brand & Solway, *Art & Soul*

⁴ Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*

⁵ Brand & Solway, *Art & Soul*, p.72

⁶ Charles Colson, *How Now shall we Live?*

⁷ Luke 19:11-27

⁸ 1 Timothy 6:17

⁹ Leland Ryken, *Culture in Christian Perspective*

¹⁰ *Art in Action*

¹¹ *Culture in Christian Perspective* p. 248

¹² Matthew 25: 14-30

¹³ Luke 20: 9-18

¹⁴ Luke 19: 12-27

¹⁵ *Art in Action*