



Creators for the Creator:

A Biblical reflection on the Christian and the arts

Have you experienced the joy of listening to Handel's oratorio Messiah, which, using verses from the scriptures tells of the coming, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in so doing, tells the story of our salvation? Have you had an opportunity to view some of the great works of art which reflect the glory of God's creation? Have you been challenged, educated, excited and entertained by reading some of the world's great works of literature? Have you enjoyed planting and tending a garden? Have you enjoyed selecting decoration for your home? Have you watched one of your children with great excitement show you splashes of paint on a piece of paper and say 'Daddy this is for you', will you put it on your office wall so you can look at it?

When you hear on the radio that one of the Government agencies has spent a great deal of money on a work of art that you don't like, how do you feel? When you hear that your taxes are going to support artistic endeavours that are clearly sinful, what is your response?

When a member of your family tells you that rather than working at a job which will make them a lot of money, provide them with security and respectability in the eyes of society, instead they are choosing to pursue a career in music or writing which will require long hours, may not have large financial rewards and which may not be seen as a "real job", what is your response? All of these situations and questions should cause us to examine our attitudes and responses to the arts in general and more particularly to our own creative impulses.

In the October 1997 issue of *The Monthly Record* Dr. Eric Mackay raised some interesting questions with regard to the areas of fantasy and imagination and touched on the arts as one aspect of our lives where our imaginations are employed. It is important that we begin to think more on the place of the arts in our lives and on how we as a Church should be relating to them. We need to ask ourselves how we can be supporting and encouraging the arts in general and specific artists of our acquaintance in particular.

The place to begin is to ask the question: how does God expect us to use the creative talents and abilities that he has given to us and what should be their place in our lives? As we examine the issue of the Christian's relationship to the arts I would like us to have our thoughts guided by two Biblical passages. First, the account of creation in Genesis 1 and then the passage in Exodus which tells of the detailed work which was to go into the building of the tabernacle.

Art in the Bible - the creation

It is remarkable when you think about it, that so much of Scripture is taken up with what might be called the arts of one form or another. The Bible is full of the most beautiful poetry, much of which we sing every week. There is art, drama, dance, philosophy and history all described for us in God's word. The Bible is itself a work of literature. It is God's WORD to us.

The Bible begins with the great act of creation. We are told in Genesis 1 that *"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth."* We are told here of the first things, the beginning of time, the creation of our world and the entire universe. We are told of our own beginnings and God's intention in creating us. The first thing that we learn about our God is that He is a Creator. He makes things. He begins from nothing and produces the universe and our world.

The crowning act of His creation is related in verse 26 of Genesis 1.

"...Let us make man in our image, in our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

As the final act of creation, God who has made a universe displaying vast variety and beauty, then makes man in His own image AND gives him something to do. He told Adam to be fruitful, to increase, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to rule over it. Then we are told that *"God saw all that he had made and it was very good"*.

In 31 verses we find the master artist, architect and artisan, creating and producing by the power of His word all that we are and all that we see around us. These verses are rich with information and have things to tell us about who God is, what our world is like and who we are. One of the things that these verses tell us is, that you and I are called to be creative people.

Since we are made in God's image, then one of the implications of this is that we share in God's love for, and ability to create. Specifically, God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and to multiply. It was to be left to them to rule and subdue God's creation not as despots but as God's delegates. In doing so, God equipped them and their descendants with all the talents and gifts that would be needed.

In subsequent chapters in Genesis we find various skills such as building and working with bronze and iron and the ability to make music being developed. In chapter 4 verses 21 and 22 we read of Jubal who *"...was the father of all that play the harp and flute"* and of Tubal-Cain who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze. It is interesting to note in passing, that these skills developed through the wicked line of Cain which tells us something of the common grace of God at work in His world. But their development through Cain's descendants does not mean they are less important. In fact, the continuance of these gifts after the flood shows they were part of God's permanent plan for the world.

Bezalel and Oholiab

The second scripture passage which will help us to think through some of the issues regarding the place of the arts in the life of the Christian is found in Exodus chapters 35 and 36 where we hear about the call and work of Bezalel and Oholiab. At the opening of chapter 35, Moses begins to relay to the people what he has heard from the LORD on the mountain, beginning with the instructions concerning the Sabbath. Next he tells the people in verses 4 through 29 that they are to bring an offering to the LORD so that materials for the tabernacle may be gathered. Note that in verse 10 the people are told that *"...all who are skilled ... are to come and make everything the LORD has commanded"*.

Then the community withdraws from Moses' presence and begins to gather and work on the necessary materials. It is in this context that we learn of the call of Bezalel. God has given His law, given His instructions on how He wishes to be worshipped and now tells His people how this is going to happen. Surely the very context shows us the value that God places on the creative gifts he has given to his creatures. In verse 30 of this same chapter Moses tells the people;

"See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts."

We see first of all that Bezalel owed his gifts to God. God had taken Bezalel, given him abilities and set him apart to carry out specific work. We should not conclude that God took someone who had no talent, had ten thumbs and was colour blind and turned him overnight into an artist. Rather, Bezalel had been gifted, perhaps had been trained and had had an opportunity to work on some of the great artistic developments of Egypt, and was now being given a specific commission to use his talent for God's glory.

Secondly we note that God has specifically gifted Bezalel with skill, ability and knowledge. Skills and abilities are great things and we often take them for granted. None of us are alike and have the same combinations of these. These skills or abilities are really potentials for something. But simply having potential is not enough.

We are told thirdly that Bezalel had knowledge or intelligence. It is not enough to have a particular talent. All too often we find very gifted people squandering their talents, in part because they do not know how to use what God has given to them. One of the lies of some artists in our day is that art is irrational and should not be expected to say, mean or teach anything - that all is chaos and the artist therefore should reflect this. Further we are led to believe that creativity comes, as it were, unbidden and so we have the popular image of the artist sitting in a studio throwing meaningless globs of paint onto a canvas, giving it a name and then selling it to the highest bidder. What we learn here is that the creation of anything is the combination of having a particular talent, developing it and then using it in an intelligent way.

Fourthly we are told that Bezalel had knowledge in crafts, or that he was a craftsman. This means that he had mastered the techniques of his trade. He was the master over his materials just as God is the master over His creation. One of the images that we have of God in the Bible is of the Potter working over his lump of clay to produce what he has willed. For example in Isaiah chapter 64 verse 8 the prophet acknowledges that

"...O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay you are the potter we are all the work of your hand."

Fifthly, we learn from this account that God has given both Bezalel and Oholiab the ability to teach others. As we have already mentioned, the ability to create comes from God the Creator. But having said that, it is also true that ability is improved by learning and teaching. So in preparing the ground for the construction of the tabernacle God arranged things so that the work would go forward in an orderly way.

We have seen then the gifts and abilities that were given to these particular craftsmen. We need to ask the question, why were they so equipped? From the context it is obvious that God had chosen to dwell with His people and His desire was for them to have a beautiful place for worship. It is also clear that God did not desire to be worshipped outdoors as was the custom in some pagan religions, nor were His people free to worship wherever they chose. In Deuteronomy 12: 2-5 God told his people that when they entered the promised land they were to

"Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods.... You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose."

The place of worship that God told His people to make for Him, was to be a beautiful place. Look at the list of things that the people were asked to bring that we read earlier. There is gold, silver and bronze, various colours of yarns and skins and cloths, there is wood, spices, oils and precious stones. All who have something to contribute may do so and all who have talents, gifts or abilities, were welcome to join in this great project. The Tabernacle then which was designed both to glorify God and instruct his people was to be a place of great beauty. This surely teaches us that God takes delight in the beauty of his own creation and also in the creativeness of His people. And so it was to create this beautiful place that God gifted Bezalel and the other craftsmen and women of Israel.

As we think about what this passage means for us today we need to be careful to avoid two extremes. The first of these would be to equate the arts with the sacred as if there is something inherently godly about the arts or that they can be used to substitute for true worship. If we do this we will end up engaging in idolatry. In fact this very thing happened in Exodus when the people made the golden calf. From the same kind of material which they would be called upon to use in the building of the tabernacle and using the very same skills they would also use, the people committed a sin which brought the judgement of God upon them. This has certainly been a danger

in the history of the church. Many times people have taken created things and worshipped them rather than worshipping the One who creates.

The second extreme that needs to be avoided is the belief that the creative arts are unimportant. We might be led to this conclusion because of our own view of how God commands us to worship Him. We hold to the biblical principle that in Christ, all that the tabernacle and temple represented has been fulfilled and that worship in a particular place with God-ordained ornamentation is no longer necessary. That our worship is to be in "Spirit and in truth", simple in its form, confined to what God has authorised.

Even though forms and patterns of worship have changed, we are unwarranted in jumping to the conclusion that the creator God no longer takes delight in His creation, or that we His people, made in His image, should no longer use the artistic impulses that have been planted in us. In arguing against the use of images in the worship of God, John Calvin was careful to warn his readers that

I am not gripped with the superstition of thinking absolutely no images permissible. But because sculpture and painting are gifts of God, I seek a pure and legitimate use of each, lest those things which the Lord has conferred upon us for his glory and our good be polluted or perverted by perverse misuse...¹

Calvin then goes on to say that the purpose of art is to teach, admonish and give pleasure.

It is worth noting that much of the flowering of the arts in the late 16th and early 17th centuries had to do with the fact that the Reformers released the church's hold on the arts and gave the arts back to the people. It is no coincidence that artists like Rembrandt, with their pictures of everyday life; the increase of literacy and the printed page; all happened in this period of history, when all of humanity were being encouraged to use all of their talents and gifts for God's glory. Perhaps the greatest example of this is in the work of J.S. Bach. He believed that what he was doing was making use of his gifts to glorify God and at the end of most of his works he would write these words: "*Sola Deo Gloria*", To God Alone be the Glory.²

The Christian and the arts

In conclusion we need to think about how the arts should be used by the Christian and how do we relate to those who are particularly gifted in these areas? As in all areas of life, any and all of our creative acts should be done under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and as an expression of our desire to "*glorify Him and enjoy Him forever*". Paul was communicating a very important principle when he told re people in Colosse in Colossians 3:23 "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men.*"

Sometimes we tend to view our salvation in purely private terms. The good news of Jesus Christ is far more than we have been forgiven. That is just the crucial first step. We must also see that if we are in Christ we are a new creation. We have not just had a change of heart, but every area of our lives is being renewed. We are new creatures who are here to serve our God in whatever area of life he has placed us. We are therefore not permitted to divide our lives into a religious section and a secular one. All that we are, all that we do must be to serve the Lord. We have been saved from sin and also saved to serve.

As we think about how our creative gifts may be used for God we should not conclude, based on our theology and practice, that New Testament worship and the life of the church is uncreative, drab and artless. There is plenty of room within our reformed churches for the use of literary gifts in the development of psalm settings, the creation of educational resources in carrying out the teaching ministry of the church and the writing of devotional literature to cite just a few examples. Musical gifts may be employed in the improvement of our praise and the gifts of the architect and visual artist may be used to make places of worship which are both pleasing to the eye and conducive to the worship of God.

While we need to find ways to make use of the creative gifts of people within our churches, we do not need to think that all of our creative talents and energies must be of a specifically religious nature or always contain religious themes. But anything we do produce should reflect the fact that we as Christians are different from those in the world.

How we view who God is, who we are, and what our destiny is, is radically different than the way that our culture does and this should be reflected in what we create. Christians are also the only people who can talk about true hope since our hope is in God. So in what we create we need to communicate this as well. As we saw earlier, God by the very act of creating told us a great deal about Himself. So too, will people learn much about us when they examine the works of our hands in whatever area of life we are called to. One of the questions we asked at the outset, was how we should react to certain manifestations of art which are contrary to God's will, laws and purposes for His people. All too often, the church has condemned these and made an end of it there.

In light of what God told Adam and Eve in Genesis about ruling and having dominion over the created order, this approach would not seem to be enough. When God created us and we then sinned, God chose to provide a way of salvation in Jesus Christ that makes us into new creatures. Not only that, but as Paul tells us in Romans 8 that one day all of creation will be remade and that one day *"...it will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."*

God has responded positively in love and mercy to the sin that He saw and has prepared a way of escape both for His people and also for His creation. So as we confront the evils of our day, we also should respond positively. It is not enough to shake our heads over the sin, the godlessness and the meaninglessness of what we see around us. It is not even enough to point out the problems, rather each of us should be using all the gifts we have been given and encourage those who may be more gifted than we are to make a positive contribution to our society.

Some of us may never create a sculpture, paint a picture, write a book, or compose music. Not all of us have gifts in these areas, but we can and should be encouraging and valuing those who do. When we discover those within our communities with artistic abilities, this should be celebrated and viewed as a good thing. We need to make sure that we are making a positive contribution in this area in some way.

Finally, we should be living our lives in a way that adorns or decorates the gospel. Our very lives should be works of art. Works of truth and beauty which reflect our hope in God, our joy in Christ and we should do all of this to the Glory of the Artist who made us.

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¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chap. 11, sect. 12. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia, Westminster Press.

² Gene Edward Veith Jr. *State of the Arts: from Bezalel to Mapplethorpe*. Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1991, pp. 58-63.