

ART AND THE CHURCH¹

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Most artists who have encountered the evangelical tradition have found a glaring absence of art in the church. I speak as a Christian who also happens to be an artist, someone who has wandered through the evangelical church for many years, looking for something that just doesn't seem to be there. There is a sense in which everyone is an artist. Each and every of us has been given the responsibility of making something beautiful out of our lives. We are to create a masterpiece, to run the race as well as we can. This doesn't mean that we become a beautiful work of art in the physical sense of the word. On the contrary, by the time we are finished giving and sacrificing and working and loving we are quite likely to look like a wreck on the outside - like the wild and scribbled abstract paintings of William DeKooning that appall most of us the first time we see them. So there is a sense in which we are all artists, and we are all art objects, working in concert with God, as He shapes our lives into something beautiful.

I want to deal here with the specific gift that not everyone has, the gift of conceptualizing in the mind and then using the body (especially the hands and eyes) to give aesthetic order and symbolic meaning to mere raw materials. This can include something as traditional as the potter shaping clay, or it can be as modern as the process of shooting a movie and editing it on a computer, or as huge as the undertaking of a church building.

It has been said in reference to literature, "our thoughts become disentangled as they pass through our fingers."² I think this applies equally well to the visual arts. Art is when our hands give substance to our thoughts. So these are two separate things: We are all becoming a masterpiece, with God's help, and some of also make art.

¹ This paper is the substance of an address given in the Kingsley College chapel during Semester II, 2004. Several of its ideas are modified from those that Pope John Paul II presented in his "Letter to Artists," given as his Easter Sunday address from the Vatican in 1995. <http://tcnews2.com/art.html>

² Dawson Trotman cited by R. W. Freeman, in "Dynamics of Christian Formation," *The Annual Ridgway Lecture in Pastoral Theology*, Melbourne: Kingsley College, October 13, 2004.

Every culture on earth has produced art. Even the most primitive nomadic peoples made designs on their bodies or clothing or baskets or pottery, for no apparent practical reason. Art seems to be a universal need among people. I have found that as an artist who is also a Christian, it is only in the process of making art that I am able to experience the fullness of life, and realize my God-given mission on earth. Those who cannot find a way to use their gifts become frustrated and feel unfulfilled. So I want to ask why the artist *needs* to make art, and why frustration and a lack of fulfillment result when he or she cannot.

When the Fine Arts Center at Houghton College was nearing completion a few years ago, the President of the college asked the art faculty for a passage of scripture or a quotation to be placed on a dedication stone outside the building. We thought long and hard, and finally settled on the phrase, "In the beginning God created." (Genesis 1:1) This short, half-verse, seemed to sum up the things we were thinking about, and was also very brief, *so* short that it focuses most readers on just two words: "God" and "created." A fundamental part of how we experience and understand God is as Creator. So, at the very beginning of God's written revelation to humanity, we see the process of creation. In the verses of Genesis that followed, God undertook a series of creative acts, and one of the things He made was humanity. In these few opening verses of scripture, we see the act of creating raw materials, we see the process of conceptualizing (the Spirit of God was "hovering" over the waters – v. 2), and we see that God was inspired. He was inspired by his own character to make humanity in his own image. Psalm 19:1 reminds us that the skies proclaim the work of his hands; a clear day is a spectacular picture of God shaping and forming.

This combination of creating through thinking, speaking and doing is analogous to the creative process human artists use. Some of us "need" to create for the simple reason that God is a creative being who has made us in his creative image. So what does it mean for the artist that God made humanity in his image? Does it mean that God and human artists create equally? God in his wisdom enabled people to share in his creative power, and yet at the same time, there is an infinite distance between God's creativity and human creativity. As Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa said, "creative art, which it is the soul's good fortune to entertain, is not to be identified with that essential art which is God himself, but is only a

communication of it and a share in it.”³ In other words, between God’s art and human art there lies an infinite gulf. We cannot simply say that it is merely a quantitative difference: that is, we cannot merely say that God creates a lot or totally, while we create only a little or partially, although this is certainly true. We must also say that the difference between the way God creates and the way we create, is a qualitative and a profound one. Andy Goldsworthy can arrange the flowers he found on the ground into a beautiful composition, but only God could make air and water and soil and sunshine, and then combine them to make the leaf.

God creates actual substance from nothing, the ultimate act of creativity. We, on the other hand, merely manipulate already existing matter. We order and give meaning and form to something that already exists. As the artist creates, she mirrors the image of God. God *is* creativity; we merely reflect that creativity. Where the human artist comes closest to mirroring God’s gift of creativity, is in the conceptual or design process. In this arena the artist uses previous experience and ideas and artistic skills, combining them into something that approaches newness and originality - as close as a person can ever hope to get to creating something out of nothing, yet a very long way from how God creates.

So does all of this talk of the supremacy of God’s creativity mean that the creative work of humanity is unimportant and insignificant? Yes and no. The works done using the creative gifts from God can be profound, because they come from God. They are Spirit-breathed and point towards God. On the other hand, the creative work of the Almighty surpasses all understanding. We must always bear in mind that infinite gulf between the two. One relies upon other things for support; the works from God are self-generated, self-sustaining, and essential.

So the question remains, does art deserve a place in the church? The statement from Genesis 1:26 that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the water”, has a close affinity between the “breath” of life we find elsewhere in Genesis, and the idea of “inspiration.” To inspire means to “breathe-in” and to infuse. This is a powerful picture of the mystery of God’s creative process. When God creates, we see the supernatural. When artists create under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, even human art can take on a supernatural dimension. Many of us have experienced this supernatural moving

³ *Dialogus de Ludo Globi*, lib. II: Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften (Vienna 1967), III: 332, cited at <http://tcrnews2.com/art.html>

of the Spirit while listening to a great sermon or choir. Fewer of us have experienced it while listening to a violin solo, or looking at a marble sculpture. I'm afraid that some of our senses have gone numb. One thing that allows some people's artistic awareness to fall asleep, is that we're suspicious of the human presence in art. In a way that seems to border on the miraculous, the artist's personality actually makes its way into the work itself. We shouldn't be afraid of this; we should celebrate it. God has created the model: His personality has made its way into his work by imbuing all of us with creativity as well as other of his attributes, such as love, peace, mercy and patience. We should rejoice whenever we see God's good gifts enmeshed in the human experience. God is forming of each of us into a masterpiece and in this lifelong process artwork becomes an expression of one's spiritual growth. This gives new meaning to the idea of "the mature artist." In the work of many great artists, both those who made overtly Christian art and those who didn't, we can see a correlation between spiritual and artistic maturity. It is this presence of the Holy Spirit in us and in the artist that argues for art in the church.

So how did art make its way into the church? And more importantly, how did it make its way out of the church? As already suggested, there is an affinity between the creative spirit of God and the spiritual interests of the church. Art speaks (to those who are willing to listen) through feeling and emotion more than through logic and analysis. Art, like faith, is a different kind of language. It functions at the level of mystery, combining what the senses perceive, and reaching beneath physical reality, even though art has a physical dimension. One aspect of the creative gift God gives to artists is an alertness to beauty and epiphany. Because the work of Christ is the ultimate act of beauty and epiphany, it was inevitable that artists would be drawn to the gospel and to the church as a source of images, and for inspiration. Art is a search for truth, and the gospel is the unlimited source of truth. Consequently, the church is a natural fit for artists.

How then was art lost to the church? In the early church there was considerable reliance upon the classical artistic heritage of Greece and Rome. For example, in the ancient catacombs under the streets of Rome we find images of shepherds remarkably similar to sculptures of Greek athletes such as the discus thrower and pagan gods such as Dionysus. But the shepherd was a symbol of relationship to Christ, and it wasn't long before other symbols began to appear. The fish, the loaves, the shepherd's crook, the two-

fingered gesture of deity, to name but a few. These were powerful, symbolic images. After 313AD when the edict of Constantine was issued, art rapidly became a powerful means of spiritual expression within the church. So the artistic heritage of the Greco-Roman tradition was rapidly expanded to fit the needs of the growing Church. For example, the Roman basilica that had been the Roman courthouse became the church. Gifted architects gradually evolved a building style that started with the basilica, progressed to the Byzantine and the Romanesque, and culminated in the grandest of the Gothic Cathedrals, capable of holding an entire community.

The anthropologist Jacques Maquet has suggested that every culture has an aesthetic locus from which each culture's motivation to produce great art, and its artistic criteria radiates.⁴ For example, in late 16th century Japan, this was the tea ceremony. Lacquer ware, furniture, painting, ceramics and architecture were all inspired by the tea ceremony. In 12th century Europe, that aesthetic locus was Christianity. The 11th century monk Raoul Glaber said "all the world is putting on a white mantel of churches."⁵ There are a couple of fine examples of inspired architecture in downtown Melbourne. Although they are not as grand as the great European cathedrals, they are beautiful examples of the Gothic Revival style. I was deeply moved by both St. Paul's and St. Patrick's cathedrals. Even though they are modern revivals of former styles, their very bricks and stones reach beneath physical reality and touch the inner person. This can happen because the Holy Spirit had a hand in their inspiration.

Now I know that I am talking about things many evangelicals would prefer to leave behind. I have heard and read several accounts by Christians who have visited Chartres or Notre Dame who said they felt cold and empty and dead. But that was not my experience at all. For me, the Gothic vaulting that is meant to soar the worshipper's thoughts to a higher heavenly realm does just that. The colorful light coming through the stained glass windows, penetrating the darkness, is meant to be a metaphor for the presence of Christ - the light of the world - in the midst of our earthly experience. But we can only hear the music if we listen. It's not the cathedral that is cold and dead; it's the closed mind. The way these

⁴ Jacques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁵ *Quinque libri*, 3.3.13, ed. 116 cited in Richard Landes, "Giants with Feet of Clay: On the Historiography of the Year 1000," <http://www.mille.org/scholarship/1000/AHR9.html>

700-year-old buildings can still stir the soul, is a powerful testimony to the power of the gospel. A couple of years ago one of my students told me that she was considering Catholicism because of its use of art in worship. So what is one to think of a church that ignores the creative gift and denies the supernatural work of the Spirit through a human artist?

What happened to art in the Protestant church? Music seems to have survived, provided there are words. And maybe some would even say that art has survived in the form of banners and bulletins. But is that the kind of art the Spirit can use to probe the depths of the human soul? There are those who will argue that the scriptures are enough to probe these depths. But many artists work closely with scripture, and with scriptural narrative, and the scriptures themselves point to nature, and to much of human experience, as a means to probe the spiritual depths. What is the person who knows she has been gifted as an artist supposed to do about ministry within a church that says we don't need you, or your ministry is no longer appropriate? I think it is reasonable that an artist would not want to waste her talent, but rather to develop it and see it put into service. That's just good stewardship. I rub shoulders with many artists, and I fear that many of them have shaken the dust from their sandals and left the evangelical church behind. This is not the way God intended for the church to function.

Another part of the answer to the question of why art has become an endangered species inside the evangelical church has to do with literacy. In the early church many of the biblical narratives, and the principles God was conveying through them, were most readily taught to a largely illiterate congregation through visual images-paintings and relief sculptures, sculpture in the round and stained glass. I have had the privilege of visiting many cathedrals and churches and 'listening' to the great Bible stories told again by way of visual imagery. I think of the stories from the life of Christ brilliantly illustrated in the rich mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, or the scenes from the Old Testament carved from wood into high relief in Chartres Cathedral. I still remember the power of those stories as the flickering candlelight dramatically illuminated and brought them to life. I was astounded by what I learned from these stories that I thought I knew so well, told in a new and visual way. These were not mere illustrations; rather, they were personal interpretations inspired by the Spirit of God and formed with God-given artistic talent. I know this the same way I recognize the Spirit in a sermon or a piece of music - because of the power with which it stirs and

enlightens me. Literacy is a good thing, but overcoming illiteracy doesn't eliminate the need for art.

Others argue that the arts are too readily used for evil purposes; and it's true that they can be. This is surprising, but there is such a thing as pornography that is also very high quality fine art. I know this sounds like a contradiction in terms, but unfortunately, an image can be both. And the same is true of idols and graven images. In Deuteronomy 27:15 God curses the craftsman who makes an idol and sets it up in secret. God is not to be worshipped as an idol or image. No sculpture or image can substitute when it comes to representing the ineffable qualities of God. And yet in Exodus 35:35 we see that God has filled Bezalel and Oholiab with skill to do all sorts of work as master craftsmen and designers, weavers and embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, along with the ability to teach others. So is Deuteronomy to be interpreted in such a way as to say that Michaelangelo was wrong to portray God when he painted the Sistine chapel ceiling? He certainly didn't like all the politics. He didn't like to paint because he didn't think he was any good at it, and he especially didn't like painting the chapel ceiling because he was miserable the whole time. Here is Michaelangelo's account of painting while laying on his back:

I've grown a goiter while lying in this den-
As cats from stagnant streams in Lombardy,
Or in what other land they hap to be-
Which drives the belly close beneath the chin:

My beard turns to heaven; my nape falls in,
Fixed on my spine: my breast-bone visibly
Grows like a harp: a rich embroidery
Bedews my face from brush-drops thick and thin.

My loins into my paunch like levers grind:
My buttock like a crupper bears my weight;
My feet unguided wander to and fro;

In front my skin grows loose and long; behind,
By bending it becomes more taught and straight;
Crosswise I strain me like a Syrian bow:

Whence false and quaint, I know,
Must be the fruit of squinting brain and eye;
For ill can aim the gun the bends awry.

Come then, Giovanni, try
To succour my dead pictures and my fame;
Since foul I fare this painting is my shame.⁶

This poem demonstrates the struggle and the physicality of the artistic process. Art is where spirit, mind and body work in harmony. I believe Michaelangelo was blessed and affirmed by God precisely because he was not making a portrait of God. Rather, he was interpreting and designing a visual narrative. He was not creating an idol for worship. He was showing how a mere mortal might imagine things looked when God breathed the breath of life into Adam, or when he gave the angel a sword to keep fallen humanity out of the garden. Michaelangelo was not creating an object to worship. Rather, he created an environment to enhance the process of worship. He was contextualizing the Gospel. Michaelangelo knew very well the admonition of Acts 17: 24, 29 that “God does not dwell in shrines made by human hands,” and “we ought not too think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, a representation by human art and imagination.” Michaelangelo was not interested in representation; he used art to probe the depths of what it means to be a person reconciled to God, and I have a deeper understanding of reconciliation because of his work.

So, why is this experience not a possibility in my own church in Castile, New York? Why is my visual experience limited to an over lit, white shell of a room with a banner that says “God Bless America” during the month of July and a quaint, gutless picture of a white church by a brook, most of the rest of the year? When I was in the Sistine Chapel I saw images of the ungodly being judged and tormented, alongside images of believers entering paradise. Some of the images are very beautiful, and some of them are hideous, but it was important to see the pleasant and the unpleasant side by side. While in Egypt several years ago, I went to the Coptic Church at Abu Mina. This is the oldest church in Africa, established some time in the late second century. There were Egyptian Christians weeping and praying over an altar rich in visual imagery. I watched as a businessman took a letter from his briefcase and touched it to an icon painting of a New Testament saint. Some might accuse this man of superstition or even idolatry, but it was one of the most humble and disciplined acts of worship I have ever witnessed. Abu

⁶ Michaelangelo, “On the Painting of the Sistine Chapel,” trans. John Addington Symonds. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/7086/msistine.htm>

Mina is a large church with a functioning monastery, new construction going on and lots of busses in the parking lot that had brought Egyptian Christians so they could worship. These people were on pilgrimage. And I suppose I was too, in a sense. I was actually hoping to find the original building from the second century. I was quite surprised to see a relatively new building and all this activity. After searching for an hour, I found someone who spoke English that pointed me out into the desert (which really wasn't very helpful since we were already in the middle of the desert). But I drove off in my borrowed jeep in the general direction he had pointed. And after several kilometers over a road-less stretch of desert, I found blocks of beautifully carved stone scattered over an acre or two of sand. I had the place completely to myself. Eventually, I rolled over a block of stone to have a better look, and there was a piece of paper with a prayer written in Arabic. Every stone had prayers tucked beneath them. After 1800 years this church is still alive - what a testimony. If I hadn't already been a Christian, I think I would have converted on the spot. And now I think of my own church with its glaring white walls and emptiness. To me it is a miracle that anyone is ever drawn to God in that sterile environment. And I suppose it *is* a miracle, and a tremendous witness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

There have been other difficult times for art, even in the Catholic Church. During the iconoclast crisis, the role of images in the church was violently challenged. In 787, the Second Council of Nicaea finally settled the matter in favour of icons, reasoning that when Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4), he became an image of God that we could see. Jesus was the bridge between the invisible and the visible. It was deemed reasonable that artistic portraits of Jesus and the saints were analogous to this mystery and to this bridge. Today the role of art in worship is once again threatened, especially within the mainstream, evangelical church of the developed world. The artless church is not a place that holds very much interest for me. I know many Christian artists whose faith is closely tied to their art - they're rapidly losing interest in the church. (Of course the church will survive. None of us is indispensable.) When I was an undergraduate at a large state university, I had a world religions professor who said "the main reason I might consider becoming a Christian, is because Christianity has survived." In other words, he was saying that if people were ultimately responsible for the life of the church, it would not survive; therefore, it has to be God. This is another tremendous,

though somewhat negative, testimony to the power of the Church. With or without art, without theatre, even without music, the church will survive. But this misses the point about fullness of life and how deeply we need to worship.

To conclude on a more positive note, the evangelical church has made some progress more recently. I have a friend who serves on the art acquisition committee of a large church in Michigan. They *actually use a portion of the offering* to purchase sculpture and painting, and install it in the sanctuary as an aid to worship. Mark Driscoll who is a pastor at the Mars Hill church in Seattle, Washington explains the approach of his congregation to the arts.

We need to recover beauty as an attribute of God. Dance, video, and music all need to be redeemed. At Mars Hill, we take that redemption seriously. That's why we have candles everywhere. It's why we feature paintings by the professional artists in our community. It's why we burn incense, hitting all the senses for a full experience. Everything in the service needs to preach: Architecture, lighting, songs, fellowship, the smell, it all preaches. Being creative is tough work, but we believe art is that region between heaven and earth that connects the two. To *experience* God often is the highest form of knowing and the entire worship experience must be more than a presentation about God.⁷

God gave us our senses to use and to enjoy and to celebrate the fullness of life. He gave us artistic gifts to further His work, and to help us “do Church” better. If we would let the Holy Spirit use the arts again, the worship experience for all Christians could be enhanced and the testimony of the church greatly expanded.

⁷ Quoted in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendricksen, 2003), 103.