

Artist as Theologian

“I have always thought there was something inherently noble about the high arts. Be it music, dance or the visual arts these forms of communication have always seemed to strive towards the heart of the human condition; but, not through polemics or trite rhetoric. The arts always seemed to be a pure pursuit of what it means to be human. They seemed to seek, not just to describe the nature of humanity, but to display it for all to experience.

I feel so naïve.”

Artistic Crisis of Faith

- 9/11
- Dad's Presidential Medal of Freedom
- Dave Hickey's Air Guitar- the frivolity of art

End of Grad School

- Art not frivolous
- An act of worship

But, that alone wasn't enough.- Next 10 years

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Indonesia

- Artists do Theology
 - o Theology is Study of God. Artists through our creative efforts study God in a way theologians don't
 - God didn't just create Ex Nihilo (from nothing)- The Garden

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Visual Theology (A weird idea?)

- Millard J. Erickson
 - o that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the scriptures, placed in the context of the culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life.

1) Coherence

“that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith”

- Coherent Body of Work- Giving a coherent statement...it can be nuanced and complex but not contradictory
- Logos vs. Rhema
 - o Logos= “the expression of thought”
 - o Rhema= “that which is spoken, what is uttered in speech or writing.” (Rhema is a subset of Logos)
 - Basketball Analogy
 - Logos- “You are going to lose”
 - Rhēma
 - o Yelling, “You are going to lose”
 - o Emphatically dunking the basketball
 - o Blocking a shot sending it into the rafters

What is the clearest expression of that Logos?

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- Communication through metaphor
 - o Each Rhema is a metaphor for a logos
 - Dog, Perro (Spanish), Hund (German)
 - o I believe all linguistic structures (Verbal, Aural, Visual, & Physical) function through metaphor pointing to the logos.
 - then the apprehension of knowledge is available through all such linguistic structures
 - One may know about wind by being told about it, seeing the effects of it, hearing it, or feeling it. All are epistemologically valid ways to know about wind.

- However, the least personal and profound is the verbal. One can even argue that the verbal is, in this case, the least reliable way of knowing.

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- For something to be a statement of doctrine does not require it to be said in the same linguistic structure in which scripture exists. It just needs to be consonant with scripture.
 - “The heavens declare the glory of God.” (Psalms 19:1a)
 - Scripture (verbal)
 - Sitting under a sunset (Physical Visual)
 - Painting of a sunset. (Visual)
 - Music that reminds you of a sunset (Aural)

2) Context of Culture

“that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the scriptures, placed in the context of the culture in general,”

- Our culture is increasingly visual
 - There is now less reading and more visual thinking through TV, Internet, movies, magazines, billboards, etc...
 - In a visual culture, an approach to theology that neglects visual language is akin to missionaries insisting that the natives learn English before receiving instruction.
 - William Dyrness, “Art inevitably reflects this struggle between the goodness of creation and the disorder and rebellion caused by sin, and so it is invariably theological in this sense.”
 - Ed Knippers, “art is spiritual by its nature in the same way that water by its nature is wet.”

- “In the Old Testament, God talked to us in words but in the New Testament he came as an image in order for us to understand who he really was...God sent his prophets in order to turn us to His way- to save us from our own destruction. But we didn’t listen, we didn’t understand. So then He sent Christ, the icon, the True Image of God.”
- Christ as performance artist-
 - Miracles, signs validating himself and pointing to the truth of his claims.
 - Ultimately the Cross is putting an image in front of us so that we can understand the truth.

3) Contemporary Idiom

“that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the scriptures, placed in the context of the culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom”

- Closely related to Context of culture.
- Our culture once had a Christian consensus (not a Christian nation)
- With a language that was codified by the King James Version of the Bible we had common cultural idioms.
 - We are now post Christian and need to speak those idioms.
 - The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism “The time is ripe for Christian faith communities around the world to be intentional in their commitment to engage the arts... as a strategic resource for bridging to the various cultures in which our faith communities are found.”
 - Given the loss of lack of connecting idioms between the church and the broader culture and the universality of visual art, it seems reasonable that art can, at least in part, bridge the gap providing relevant idioms for theological reflection.

4) Related to Issues of Life

- Related to previous: in a culture that is increasingly dependent upon visual language a failure to speak fluently in this visual language fails in relating to the issues of life.
- Many believe it is impossible for the church and thus theology to relate to the issues of people's lives without an engagement with the arts. For theology to truly engage issues related to life it must find expression beyond merely the verbal as the verbal represents only a small portion of human cognition.

Visual Theology

- Visual theology will function differently than verbal theology
- Each language has its own rules and idioms.
- Neither forms a complete understanding of God the work together to form a more complete understanding.
 - o Art does not preach well
 - o Art can allow someone to think differently even if just for a moment

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- o David Buschart writes in relation to the artwork of Edward Knippers:
“Theologians struggle to speak of these things. The risen Christ can never be fully assimilated, least of all in the jargon of our theological vocabularies. Edward Knippers’ work is thus a welcome resource, since it can teach us another rich language with which to speak – or at least to stammer – of the reality of the risen Christ, and of the life that takes form in him.”
- o Art is elusive and indirect but can point powerfully to profound truths.
 - Story of Knippers’ godchildren.

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- Makato Fujimura writes of the importance of visual theology, “So visual theology, and our consideration of beauty, is more than a surface problem that requires a cosmetic solution. If we do live in a visual culture, then lack of beauty leads to a dehumanized state of our entire culture; and, I might add, poverty of our theology.”
- “I see my paintings as creating a space where shalom can take place and, as they hang on the wall, extend that into the viewer’s space. My works are not complete until they are the backdrop of shalom, an arena where this dialogue and renewal can take place.” Fujimura Objects of Grace p. 169

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If this is true, what does this mean for Artists?

1) Art is important.

Artists don’t just make pretty pictures.

2) Artists need to be thoughtful and grounded in their faith & in community

3) Express the full Biblical Narrative.

- a. It doesn’t begin at redemption it begins at creation.
- b. Redemption without the fall is meaningless.
- c. Anything that does not contradict our faith is a worthy subject matter.
- d. Music on iPod example

4) The quality of our work reflects God.

Steve Turner in reaction to the quality of art by Christians, “Because the work that bore the name Christian was often poor in quality and naive in understanding, Christianity by implication seemed insipid and uninspiring. How great was this God who allowed such work to represent him? How exciting was this life that seemed to prefer drabness to color, shallowness to complexity, security to risk?”

a. Beware of Kitsch & Sentimental

- Kitsch pretends to have depth which it does not in fact possess.

b. Beware of Poor Quality

- Turner “It takes a different sort of talent to sensitively explore, in art, the issues surrounding the cross. If someone does it enthusiastically but badly it can have an adverse effect.”
- “Painting is easy when you don’t know how, but very difficult when you do.” Edgar Degas
- “People err who think my art comes easily to me. I assure you, dear friends, nobody has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I.” Mozart

- c. Engage the conversation
 - “Some years ago I was at an arts conference with a group of journalists discussing our work as Christians at national newspapers. On the last day someone arrived who had produced a newspaper for a drug charity. He came late, pulled up a chair and literally threw a bundle of his papers in the center of our circle. This is what a lot of Christians do in the art world: they don’t listen to what has already been said; they don’t sit for a while on the sidelines catching the drift of the arguments; they just assume that the world is waiting to hear what they have to say.”
- d. Beware of Inauthenticity
 - We need an authentic relationship with our God, with our art, and with ourselves.
 - Self-Criticism
 - Self-Editing

What about Beauty?

Contemporary Art World is often afraid of beauty.

Transcendental- Beauty via Natural Theology, scripture, the garden, the temple.

Beauty is reflective of the Character of God.

Beauty is disinterested pleasure/contemplation = Faith is disinterested belief

Close

“The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts.” R.G. Collingwood

“There are two kinds of people in the world. There are philosophers and drug addicts. And, Christianity is the drug of choice for a lot of people.” Jack Crabtree