

THE CURIOUS WORKS OF BEZALEL: RECONSIDERING THE ROLE  
OF THE ARTIST IN THE EMERGENT CHURCH

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Summary:

This paper establishes a high standard for artists in the church. There is significant focus on emergent contexts. Included as an appendix is an original short story: *New Clothes*. If you wish to reprint this story, please email the CCWS site moderator ([dale@ccws.ca](mailto:dale@ccws.ca)) for permission.

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*Reconsidering the Call for a New Christian Aesthetic*

In *The Younger Evangelicals*, a survey of the changes occurring among evangelical leaders in the new millennium, Robert Webber devotes a chapter to describing the move from “constraint” to “expression” in the church’s attitude towards the arts. Beginning with a lament over an artistically deprived religious up-bringing—a common prologue to evangelical scholarship on the arts—Webber criticizes the evangelical tradition’s neglect, indifference and hostility towards artists and their work. He follows this evaluation with an exhortation that evangelicals must “come to a good theology of art making.”<sup>1</sup>

Though this indictment seems to ring true, on closer examination it is not clear why. There is certainly no lack of interest in the arts among seminaries, a fact observed by Doug Adams more than a decade ago when a 1987 study of 134 North American seminaries showed that very few evidenced disinterest. He predicted then that “Some 40 seminaries anticipate appointing a full-time arts-and-religion faculty member in [the 1990s].”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, contrary to Webber’s suggestion that the evangelical tradition lacks a good theology of art making, there is actually a sizable body of theological scholarship on practical and theoretical aesthetics, both within the evangelical tradition and external to it. As William Edgar suggests, “Many ... advocates of high creative standards can be cited. From C.S. Lewis to Leland Ryken, Calvin Seeveld, Frank Burch Brown, and others, voices have not been lacking”; he actually goes so far as to call the current of work on Christian aesthetics a “steady stream of writings”.<sup>3</sup> Even limiting his list of advocates for the arts to the last four decades, we might add such names as Gerardus van der Leeuw, Roger Hazelton, H. R. Rookmaaker, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Gene E. Veith and Jeremy Begbie, all of whom have Protestant affiliations that would connect them, at

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<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 205-8.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Adams, “The State of the Arts at Seminary,” *The Christian Century* 108 (March 20-27, 1991): 329.

<sup>3</sup> William Edgar, “Beauty Avenged, Apologetics Enriched,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (Spring 2001): 111.

least in the broadest sense, with the evangelical tradition. Were we to extend it to encompass the wider, historical corpus of Christian thought, this roll-call would include some notable (if controversial) theologians. Barth, Tillich, Kierkegaard, Aquinas and Augustine have all burned considerable theological oil trying to illumine the significance of artistic beauty in the life of the believer.

Even Calvin was not as opposed to visual art as his iconoclastic reputation suggests. As Gene Vieth points out, “Reformation iconoclasm was not . . . anti-art. . . . The Reformed churches . . . objected to the use of religious art, but not to art as such”; Calvin saw painting and sculpture, properly used, as gifts of God; Zwingli even permitted depictions of Christ so long as they were not used in worship specifically.<sup>4</sup> In fact, many scholars have suggested that, far from stifling artistic expression, the Reformation’s return to biblical authority and its affirmation that the material world and human life were of God and thus intrinsically good had a profoundly liberating impact on visual art. This is seen in the biblically influenced and beautifully intricate engravings of Dürer, the sensitive, earthy genius of Rembrandt, the Dutch painters’ masterful manipulation of light, and the general burgeoning of portraiture and landscape painting. Schaeffer puts it emphatically: “to say the Reformation depreciated art and culture or that it did not produce art and culture is either nonsense or dishonest.”<sup>5</sup>

In terms of both its current scholarship and its historical legacy then, churches within the Protestant evangelical tradition cannot be justly accused of apathy, negligence or hostility towards the arts *per se*. Yet the anecdotal evidence Webber provides—accounts of Christian artists struggling with feelings of alienation, longing to be “released into the fullness of the life of the artist and of art-making”<sup>6</sup>—is far from anomalous. When I return to old journals I kept

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<sup>4</sup> Gene Veith, *State of the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1976), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Webber, 205.

during my time as a university student, I am reminded of my own struggles to understand an artistic vocation in light of a Christian faith: “Because something (God, did *you* put it there? Is it sin to listen?) Inside me *sings* of the beauty and Truth of creation, and because something even deeper longs to capture, magnify, reflect and thus join the beauty and truth of creation, I am a poet. ... I stare at that word on the page, and am flooded with questions impossible to answer: Can I be a poet & serve God?”<sup>7</sup> Many writers have expressed similar frustration. Robin Jensen, for example, describes a religious upbringing in which there was “little tolerance for visual art in the worship space of [her] spare, Protestant sanctuary.”<sup>8</sup> Franky Schaeffer denounces the evangelical tradition’s use of the arts as insipid “theological sloganeering.”<sup>9</sup> These writers voice a common experience among artistic evangelicals who have felt that, to be acceptable within their faith tradition, an artistic calling would have to be rejected, subdued, or at best reduced to a kind of stale utilitarianism. However, to attribute these feelings to a lack of a “good theology of art making” is to ignore or deny the significant work done by artists and theologians to develop just that. The estrangement experienced by Christians seeking also to be artists is perhaps more related to a general misunderstanding of the artistic vocation itself than it is to a lack of a useful theological aesthetic. Rather than a renewed search for a theological aesthetic, then, a way forward might be more readily found in a practical re-visioning of the role and function of the artist, one that clearly embeds him within the Christian community and informs both his artistic endeavors and the community’s response to it.

This means addressing the fact that the modern conception of “the arts”—that they exist primarily as modes of self-expression for the artist, or that they exist for the sake of their own, self-referential aesthetic contemplation—is neither biblical nor theologically grounded. Instead,

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<sup>7</sup> I wrote this in a journal entry, August 29, 1999, a year out of university.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Franky Schaeffer V, *Addicted to Mediocrity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981), 20.

a theological conception of art must be primarily ecclesiocentric, understanding it as deriving its aesthetic meaning in direct relation to the communal experience of fellowship, worship and sacrament, legitimating the artist's vocation in the context of the community of God's people. This is to recognize that the idea of the artist as distinct from *artisan*—our modern stereotype of the artist as an isolated voice in culture who uses his medium philosophically to "say something"—is really a conception of art spawned in the Renaissance, nursed through the Counter-Reformation and come of age with Romanticism, but often estranged from an historically Christian or biblical view of the arts. On such a foundation we have erected an institutional edifice some centuries old, in which art is dissociated from the practical life of people in community, cloistered instead in the shrines of galleries where it is exhibited for the sake of its own contemplation, expected primarily to evoke a subjective visceral or conceptual response, and vaguely disdained if it too closely resembles craft, or ornament, or folk-art. The effort to articulate an ecclesiocentric aesthetic is in fact an effort to return to a more integrated model whereby the arts become less the means of esoteric expression for the individual, and find their meaning instead in the symbolism, craft, ornament and even folk-traditions whereby the community expresses its experience of fellowship and worship.

### *Reconsidering the Church as a Patron of the Arts*

In light of the church's long and rich tradition of using sculpture, painting, stained-glass, wood-carving and so on to ornament its places of worship and embody its faith, it is perhaps tempting to assume that the church has long been a natural patron of the arts, and that the modern estrangement is a result of theological aberrations, especially Protestant iconoclasm and Evangelical pragmatism. Such an assumption is intimated by Keith Walker, for example, when he refers to "the centuries' long decay in the tradition of art in sacred places, and the difficulties

encountered in commissioning new work.”<sup>10</sup> It is more explicitly evident in Webber when he criticizes the common evangelical stance that art can “merely” be used “to illustrate the gospel, to assist in evangelism, and express Christian sentiment,” contrasting it to the attitude that art offers a valid expression of the image of God in people. The idea that art expresses the human situation, he claims, “is the historic view of the arts found in the great works of art associated with the ancient Orthodox Church, the mediaeval era, and the Christian artists of the Renaissance period.”<sup>11</sup> While in a limited sense such claims are valid, they tend to romantically idealize, oversimplify or misrepresent the complex history of religious art. Actually, the pre-Renaissance Church can be called a “patron of the arts” only to the extent that we can free the term “patron” from its connotation of “supporter of a self-validating cause,” and free the term “art” from its connotation of “mode of self-referential expression.” Certainly the church has historically incorporated creative, decorative and artistic objects of beauty in its liturgy and architecture, and thus employed craftsmen, artisans and skilled workers to do so, but this can be considered “patronage” only to the extent that its employment of chandlers for liturgical lighting or tailors for liturgical vestments can also be considered so.

Indeed, contrary to the modern conception of the “artist” as individual and “art” as expression, the earliest uses of art by the church were notably pragmatic, much more utilitarian than many contemporary advocates for a “good theology of art-making” tend to admit. This is evident, for example, in the case of the fifth century Roman bishop Paulinus who decorated the walls of his basilica in Nola, Italy with images of Christ and illustrations of scripture with the express purpose of enticing “the interests of the rustics by their attractive appearance.”<sup>12</sup> Though such a pragmatic use of illustration is more akin to the evangelical attitudes Webber criticizes

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Walker, *Images or Idols?* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Webber, 209.

<sup>12</sup> Robin Jensen, 76.

than to esoteric descriptions of art as an “incarnational activity,”<sup>13</sup> Paulinus’s utilitarian approach is actually representative of the early western church’s general attitude towards the arts, into and including the mediaeval era. Keith Walker records that “Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century saw the value of ecclesiastical painting as a means of instruction for the illiterate populace,” and cites the sixth century Pope Gregory’s attitude that “The image is to the illiterate what scripture is to those who can read.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the idea of the artist employing art as a mode of individual expression was conspicuously absent from the mediaeval church. Gene Veith suggests that, “What we think of as art ... was valued in the Middle Ages, but in the medieval mind, it existed on the same plane as every other kind of human labor. Medieval artists, with only a few exceptions, did not sign their work. ... The thought of attaching their names to what they made never occurred to medieval artists”.<sup>15</sup> In his film series on the great achievements of western civilization, Kenneth Clark notes with amusement that the mediaeval artisan who sculpted the west portal of the Cathedral of Autun actually signed his work—“Gislebertus made this.”<sup>16</sup> Though similar inscriptions have been found in other medieval churches, they are generally rare and seldom so prominent.

In contrast to the Western tradition’s pragmatic use of art in its worship spaces, the Eastern tradition has long had an intricate, canonized theology of visual art in its doctrine of the icon. Orthodox scholar Jim Forest shows how this doctrine is intimately interwoven with Orthodox doctrines of creation, christology and, especially, incarnation: “Christ the Word is also Christ the image: Logos and Ikon. He who became incarnate became the visible image of the invisible. And today we meet him not only with our ears but also with our eyes.”<sup>17</sup> While this

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<sup>13</sup> Madeline L’Engle, *Walking on Water* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> Veith, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilization, Program 2: The Great Thaw*, (BBC Lionheart Television, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Jim Forest in *Beholding the Glory*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 84.

seems a hopeful starting point for the evangelical church to theologically make “room for the true artist and his or her art,”<sup>18</sup> it is essential for us to understand that the Orthodox tradition of iconography is far from our western conception of art as a creative expression of the individual. Veith describes how “The style [of the icon] must follow the ancient patterns with no hint of humanist perspective or Romantic subjectivity. The artist is not to express his own individuality or to create an original work, but he must execute his craft in solidarity with the living tradition of the church.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, so strict are the rules governing iconography that secular art historians like H. W. Janson hesitate to call it art at all: “Because of the veneration in which they were held, icons had to conform to strict formal rules. . . . As a consequence, the majority of them are more conspicuous for exacting craftsmanship than for artistic inventiveness.”<sup>20</sup> Though many Protestant attempts at a theology of art look to the theological underpinnings of iconography, few acknowledge its profoundly ecclesiocentric nature which actually alienates it from the modern conception of art. Anthony Ugolnik states it clearly: “The Orthodox mind believes in a ‘salvific beauty,’ a beauty that radiates from the Godhead itself. . . . In order to grasp the notion, it is necessary to abandon the presumption that beauty is a ‘product,’ an ‘achievement’ of the great mind or the genius from Aeschylus through Shakespeare. . . . Western classicism has helped foster that notion, and even Christians are struggling to preserve it.”<sup>21</sup> We cannot look to Orthodox theology for assistance in developing a Christian aesthetic without first acknowledging the ecclesiocentric dimension—what Ugolnik calls the “social aesthetic”<sup>22</sup>—of its art.

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<sup>18</sup> Webber, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Veith, 197.

<sup>20</sup> H. W. Janson, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 280.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1989), 187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

## *Reconsidering the Advent of the Artist*

Rather than an examination of the church's historical stance towards the arts, a more useful, though seldom discussed investigation is into the advent of "the artist" himself. Indeed, the modern estrangement between art and the church can be traced as easily to the concept of the artist spawned in the Renaissance as it can to any specific historical church doctrine or epoch. As shown above, the idea that the person who paints, sculpts or designs a building performs an activity of particular genius that separates him from ordinary craftsmen, or that these tasks can in some way be expressive of an individual creative energy is essentially absent from pre-Renaissance thought. Many scholars have noted the profound impact the birth of Renaissance humanism and individuality had on artistic expression. Keith Walker writes that the Renaissance "stress on individuality included a recognition of the artist as a creator. Previously the artist was considered only a maker."<sup>23</sup> Wolterstorff calls this a "profound and fateful alteration" in human consciousness: "Artists, rather than following in the footsteps of their masters, began to set out on courses of 'exploration'".<sup>24</sup> The full weight of this monumental change in the understanding of the artist's vocation is conveyed by Janson, who writes: "[The artist] was acknowledged as a person of ideas, rather than a mere manipulator of materials; and the work of art came to be viewed more and more as the visible record of his creative mind."<sup>25</sup> By the High Renaissance in Italy, this had developed into what Kenneth Clark calls the view of "the hero as artist."<sup>26</sup> Janson in turn describes it as the "cult of genius": "Individuals of genius were thought to be set apart from ordinary mortals by the divine inspiration guiding their efforts, and worthy of being called 'divine,' 'immortal,' and 'creative' (before 1500, *creating* as distinct from *making*, was the

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Walker, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Janson, 445.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilization, Program 5: Hero as Artist*, (BBC Lionheart Television, 1969).

privilege of God alone).”<sup>27</sup> These developments can be seen in the works of the great masters of the High Renaissance and later the Counter Reformation, such as Michelangelo’s *David* or Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, which are expressive of a sense of individual creativity and inspiration unlike anything European art had produced before.

Such individualism was entrenched deeper yet in the Romantic movement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with its emphasis on individual emotion, experience and imagination. Though a comprehensive history of this movement and its relation to Renaissance humanism lies beyond the scope of this paper, we can at least affirm here that Romanticism added to our definition of the artist the sense that his art can and ought to be emotionally and imaginatively expressive of his own experience. Janson puts it thus: “What Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet, said of poetry in 1798—that it is ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’—applies also to the visual arts.”<sup>28</sup> If space allowed, we might chart the growth of subjectivity and individuality through the subsequent movements of Western art, up to the present day: the focus on individual perception of reality by Impressionists like Monet and Renoir, who set out to simply paint the impression light made on their individual senses<sup>29</sup>; the move away from objective representation by Expressionists like Matisse and Kadinsky, who sought to charge “form and color with a purely spiritual meaning”<sup>30</sup>; the move towards the de-aestheticization of art by modern artists like Duchamp, whose submission of urinals and bicycle wheels as “ready-made” works of art sought to express the “anti-art” sentiment that art’s value is derived from the artist himself<sup>31</sup>; the move toward mystic imagination and fantasy by Surrealists like Dali, who sought to express the personal flotsam and jetsam of the Freudian psyche in their works.<sup>32</sup> Few efforts to find a

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<sup>27</sup> Janson, 488.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 629.

<sup>29</sup> Rookmaaker, 82.

<sup>30</sup> Janson, 714.

<sup>31</sup> Wolterstorff, 61-2.

<sup>32</sup> Janson, 147.

legitimate place for the artist in the Christian community squarely acknowledge, let alone fully address the extent to which the modern term “artist” is weighted down with connotative baggage accumulated over the last five centuries beginning with the advent of the individual in Renaissance humanism, a relatively young development in the history of human artistic enterprise.

The influence of these movements on western thought and culture, especially their striking coincidence with the rise of modern humanism and nihilism, is a fascinating study which, among other things, sheds critical light on the often awkward attempts to reconcile faith with the modern understanding of the artist. One need not look hard to find these humanist sentiments expressed in Christian musings on the arts. They are explicit in Hazleton’s description of “the artist’s need to find enduring significance in his own art, to relate himself through it to the nature of things,” and his suggestion that vocationally the artist “must work out a kind of destiny.”<sup>33</sup> They are inherent in Catherine Kapikian’s aesthetic theory, when she suggests that “what is important today is the expression of the artist’s experience. Experience for it’s [*sic*] own sake is at the center of the process and its expression is central to the act of creating.”<sup>34</sup> They are implied in Scott Carins’s distinction between the practical “craft” appreciated by the “average” person and the work of the “true artist.”<sup>35</sup> Artists and their art are unlikely to find a theologically legitimate place in the church as long as we adhere to, perpetuate or advocate for this uniquely modern, historically unchristian, and particularly unbiblical image of the artist *contra mundo*, standing in contrast to his or her community. Wolterstorff shares incisive wisdom in this regard: “Whereas the traditional artist aimed to produce a work true in significant respects to what his community found real and important, our high-art artist in the

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<sup>33</sup> Roger Hazleton, *A Theological Approach to Art* (New York: Abington Press, 1967), 91.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Kapikian, “Art and the Holy: Stop, See, and Be,” *Arts* 13.1 (2001): 15.

<sup>35</sup> Scott Carins, cited in Webber, 207-8.

modern West characteristically sets himself over against his society.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Reconsidering the Artist in Ecclesial Community*

Lest it be misconstrued, let me stress that the preceding historical survey is by no means to suggest that art can never express the experience, emotion or faith of the person producing it, that it must only reinforce the sometimes banal, often unquestioned assumptions of society, or that artists must always produce works proportionate to the demands and tastes of their community. It is, however, to emphatically insist that when we follow the modern lead of finding the primary value of art in its ability to express individual creativity while dissociating the artist from community, we do a profound disservice to the Christian community and to the would-be artist in its midst, sterilizing the potency of his or her art by alienating art in general from its biblically religious and social function.

Although such a view may seem dishearteningly pedestrian to the aspiring Christian artist, an aesthetic theory that derives the meaning and value of an artistic work directly from its context in community is actually in close harmony with many recent reflections on Christian art. William Edgar notes that current inquires into Christian aesthetics “are often concerned with connecting the vocation of the artist to a local community”; he cites an issue of *Regeneration Quarterly* on the arts in which “one of the unifying themes [was] authenticity, nurtured by healthy community” as a case in point.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Kapikian makes art’s social context one of the four parameters of aesthetic experience, and suggests that “many things that were once contextualized now reside in museums. . . . [This] movement has something to do with the reason why art has become indefinable, and why it is in a state of anarchy today.”<sup>38</sup> And in a

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<sup>36</sup> Wolterstorff, 146.

<sup>37</sup> Edgar, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Kapikian, 15.

similar vein, F. Gerald Downing observes that “archaeologists tend these days to refuse any division between art and craft, but also attempt to see what we may discern as aesthetic objects in terms of their social context and function.”<sup>39</sup> More directly, theologian Frank Burch Brown writes that to develop a theory of religious aesthetics, “what seems called for is a theological critique and rehabilitation of the concept of taste, which leads into practical theological issues concerning the role of aesthetic proclivities and sensitivities in the formation of religious community.”<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he insists that such taste is “dynamic rather than static, and communal rather than strictly private.”<sup>41</sup> Increasingly theorists are acknowledging that art’s meaning and value cannot be dissociated from its social context.

To propose a theological aesthetic that embeds the Christian artist within the ecclesial community is to seek a more holistic conception of the arts, one in which all creative activity finds an integrated harmony as an expression of the celebrations, life and pathos of the community and of the self in community. While their work is generally neglected in the current discourse on aesthetics, two theologians have made significant attempts to address the disunity between art and community life and advocate for reconciliation. The first is Gerardus van der Leeuw, whose incisive study *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, traces the modern break-up of what was once a primitive harmony between art and religion, a unity in which the creative act was inherently a holy act. “There was a period,” he writes, “when art and religion stood so close to each other that they could almost be equated. Song was prayer; drama was divine performance; dance was cult.”<sup>42</sup> Because of this primitive unity, he suggests, “All primitive art is religious, but not in the sense that it is purposely dedicated to religious goals. It is, rather, religious in

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<sup>39</sup> F. Gerald Downing, “Aesthetic Behaviour in the Jewish Scriptures: A Preliminary Sketch,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28.2 (2003): 132.

<sup>40</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 11.

itself, even when specifically religious objectives are lacking.”<sup>43</sup> Through the unfolding of this intuitive thesis, van der Leeuw treats the arts in succession through dance, drama, poetry, pictorial representation, architecture and music, analyzing their primitive unity with one another—what he calls their concentricity—by showing how each art is a natural extension of the others. Dance is the archetypal drama, drama and song the archetypal poem, painting the manifestation of the archetypal poetic image, and so on. He suggests that, although this unity has been historically sundered from religious experience, vestiges of it are still observable in the church’s worship: sacred dance in the ecclesial procession, sacred drama in the liturgy, sacred song in the hymnody and so on. Recognizing that to artificially restore primitivism is neither possible nor desirable, he proposes an integrated view of the aesthetic in which “Art participates in all of life, and all life participates in it.”<sup>44</sup> Van der Leeuw’s contribution to our present inquiry is his call for holism, his insistence that the artistic act and the religious act should be considered in harmony, the beautiful betaking itself to the holy.<sup>45</sup>

A second scholar who has advocated for a reintegration of the arts with life is Nicholas Wolterstorff, with his description of art as “action.” Wolterstorff traces the disunity between art and life to the modern notion that art exists for the sake of its own aesthetic contemplation rather than for filling a space in “the fabric of human action.”<sup>46</sup> He takes issue with the notion “that works of art are composed and presented to the public for their perceptual contemplation. Virtually every statement concerning the purposes of art which come from the hands of our aestheticians . . . makes this assumption.”<sup>47</sup> As part of this critique, he questions the phenomenon of museums and galleries as the primary context for art, proposing that “It is only

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>46</sup> Wolterstorff, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.

when people are widely interested in practicing contemplation of works of art for the sake of aesthetic satisfaction that museums with its horde of works from all times and places, most of them ripped from their original intended uses, becomes a possibility.”<sup>48</sup> As with van der Leeuw, Wolterstorff’s work points us towards an integration of artists and their work with the community. He writes: “once we have developed a general perspective on art in human life, then we are in a position to acknowledge practically, and not just theoretically, that art is not all for the sake of the aesthetic, and that not all of the aesthetic is to be found in art.”<sup>49</sup>

While it may contradict the romantic idealism latent in modern phrases like “artistic license” or “artistic integrity,” the call for an ecclesiocentric aesthetic has the potential to free artists to perform a biblical function that should be central to their vocation. This is, in fact, the function of every gifting of the Spirit, and one of the functions of every godly vocation: the mutual edification of the Body, the building of the believing community (Eph 4:16). We see this in the account of Bezalel, the craftsman used by the Holy Spirit in the construction of the Tabernacle. Though he is commonly read as a prototype of the modern Christian artist<sup>50</sup>, an accurate reading must understand his work not as an expression of creativity, but as a calling by the Holy Spirit to serve the believing community in their worship of God. Far from being the product of a “creative genius,” Bezalel’s work was to faithfully follow the patterns revealed to Moses by the Lord (31:11). In Hebrews we are told that because the Tabernacle was a typological image of a heavenly reality to be fulfilled in Christ, it was essential that it follow the “pattern shown Moses on the mountain” (Heb 8:5); Bezalel’s function was eschatological, not artistic. Whatever else we take from Exodus 35:30, we need to understand that Bezalel’s craft was intensely connected to God’s work in and for the believing community. In these few places

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>50</sup> Veith, (), Walker (), and Kimball (147) are among many writers who have read Bezalel in this light.

where scripture hints at something we might take as a “theology of art,” it is always one whereby the individual relates to the community, the community to the individual, and both to God.

Robert Bellah describes this as one of the great values of art: “The interpersonal nature of all learning in the arts offers another way in which the negative possibilities of radical individualism can be moderated. We learn that we become our true selves not apart from others but in relation to them.”<sup>51</sup>

### *Reconsidering the Role of the Artist in the Emergent Church*

Thus we come finally to a practical reconsideration of the role of the artist in the community, ascribing to the Christian artist a genuine vocation in building, nurturing and serving the *ekklesia*—the “called-out” and “gathered” people of God. Though a full examination of these tasks lies beyond the limits of my thesis here, let me suggest that an ecclesiocentric art finds a number of theologically poignant tasks in which it can, and should, participate: edification—the building up and strengthening of God’s people; celebration—the remembrance and declaration of God’s goodness and beauty by his people; incarnation—the “enfleshing” of the faith for God’s people; prophesy—the declaration of challenge and exhortation to God’s people by his people; and kerygma—the proclamation of the God’s love and salvation to the world by God’s people.

A return to an ecclesiocentric aesthetic can help us in evaluating current efforts to use the arts in church, and give us direction in imagining new ones. It gives us insight, for example into the conflicts between artists and the church described by Robin Jensen. She relates accounts of an artist refusing to remove a baptistery designed for a New York Cathedral which was adorned with Buddhist symbols and verses, or of a Massachusetts arts community at odds with the local

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Bellah, “Individualism and the arts,” *The Christian Century* 110 (July 14-21, 1993): 703.

church that provided them gallery space because of “genital-imagery” in their sculptures and their refusal to sponsor a show of religious pieces, or of a German church’s struggle with the well-known artist they commissioned for a new altar-piece when he produced a painting of an upside down crucified Jesus.<sup>52</sup> As a case closer to home, I am reminded of a pastor in the rural community where I lived who was criticized by his congregation when he opened the church to be used as gallery space for an abstract artist from the city of Edmonton. Such examples represent “bad art” not because naked bodies or inverted crucifixes are inherently bad aesthetics, but because they represent art being used primarily as a mode of self-expression and significantly alienated from the community in which the artist is working (in none of these cases was the artist in question even a congregant in the church that commissioned him or her). There are, by contrast, many positive examples of intentional efforts to connect artists and their art to the life and experience of the worshiping community. Dan Kimball, for example, describes efforts his church has made to promote the arts through hosting meetings and art exhibits for artists in their midst.<sup>53</sup> A practical example from my own ministry experience is the project our rural church undertook to produce an ornamental banner for our sanctuary (see fig. 1). For this project, an artist in the church found a traditional quilt pattern in which each of the patches was an abstract representation of a bible verse; these patches were produced by different members or families in the church, and the artist finally assembled the quilt. While a less ecclesiocentric aesthetic might reject this example as mere “craft,” too “utilitarian” to be called art, it shows how art derives real meaning and value when it is intimately connected to the corporate experience of fellowship and worship.

There are, to be sure, many questions yet to be asked: To what degree can we theologically attribute a sacramental function to the arts? To what extent should we relate the

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<sup>52</sup> Jensen, 129-33.

<sup>53</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 147.

aesthetic to the ethical, and how should this inform the artist's work? Can we identify legitimate aesthetic norms for the Christian artist? These must linger as promising inquires for future investigation. However, as the emerging evangelical church becomes increasingly alive to the possibilities of artistic expression in corporate worship, fellowship and spiritual formation, we must also become increasingly sensitive to the role of the arts in building and strengthening the Body of Christ.



Fig 1. The *Tree of Life* quilt, Two Hills Fellowship Chapel, Two Hills Alberta.

## Appendix: New Clothes, A Short Story

If one could somehow know, before it occurred, that this or that experience would leave its indelible mark on the imagination, I suppose one would make a more conscious effort to absorb as many of the details as possible for later rumination. As it is, I remember very few, and those I do drift intangibly before my mind's eye like grains of dust suspended and illuminated but briefly in the sunlight shaft of my memory.

I remember especially the heat. It had gripped me like a humid fist all that day as I waited for the evening's performance. I had whiled away the sun and the time in the shade of the carefully manicured greenery of Vienna's *Stadtpark*, reading the last pages of Camus' *L'Etranger*. If I had not been laboring so hard to effect that existential objectivity I so admired in its narrator, I would probably have allowed myself to indulge in the sense of absolute Bohemianism the whole scene evoked—the drifting traveler in repose, detached and foreign, sitting and reading an existential French novel in the dappled shadows by the banks of the Donau, oblivious of the crowds rushing past him along the *Schubertring*. In retrospect, I must admit, the majority of Camus' sparse prose was wasted on my ungainly schoolbook French, but the odd phrase here and there—“*Do you wish my life to have no meaning?*” “*I had no soul, there was nothing human about me*”—whet my appetite for the profound just enough to keep me engrossed. I read and reread the final paragraph somewhat tremulously, trying to absorb the essence of those last sentences. Though I did not understand his *des cris de haine*, I knew well enough what he meant by *la tendre indifférence du monde*-- a world which had ceased to concern me.

Perhaps this is why I was disappointed that evening to find that the two Americans so annoyed me. My annoyance bore witness to the failure of my contrived detachment. We were all crowded together in the dim light of the standing-room-only section of the Vienna State

Opera House: these Americans behind me to my left, a stoic British couple just in front of me, to my right the Australian tourist who had chatted so affably at me in the line while we waited for our tickets. In this crowd, the heat of the day, not at all waning with the evening, swarmed oppressively. Many had already accorded their programs into fans and were desperately trying to wave it away. My *Lonely Planet* had assured me that *Stehplatz*—standing room only admission—to the Vienna State Opera House could be purchased for a mere 20 Austrian schillings, and the cultured exoticism of it all had been irresistible to me. It may be that I was not the only pseudo-bohemian traveler looking for a taste of the exotic after spending the day reading French nihilistic literature by the banks of the Donau, for the standing-room-only section densely packed.

At any rate, these Americans annoyed me. They had struck up a conversation of the most transparent kind with the woman standing next to me. She was a girl, really, perhaps twenty, and the tone and tenor of these two young tourists was particularly grating: “Have you been to the Opera before?” “Are you from Vienna?” “We’ve been traveling through Austria for two weeks now.” Without effort the image came to me of these two college kids back home in Connecticut regaling their friends with stories of the time they had with that girl they met at the State Opera House in Vienna, like some trophy snapshot in a sordid photo album captioned with ugly words like “score” and “chick.”

That the girl spoke English with an extreme brokenness, which she tried to hide behind fluttering, averted looks, made the whole scene the worse. They pressed her. “Are you Austrian?”

“No... not Austrian.” Her accent was German. “I always have wanted...to see... ballet.”

Because of the crowds, I could not help but notice her. She was quite lovely, in a timid way. Her complexion was porcelain-white, and the hair that fell in dark curls past her shoulders,

together with the wide darkness of her eyes, exaggerated its fairness to pale. She smiled faintly at their conversation but something about the hint of nervousness in the gesture, the furtive movement of her eyes as she did so, suggested to me a mother bird feigning a broken wing to distract a predator from the vulnerable hatchlings in her nest.

Her figure, too, though graceful, had a fragility about it that was accentuated by her unusual attire. A simple white dress hung straight from her shoulders, curvelessly to her feet. Aside from the obvious newness of the dress—its stiffness and brightness—there was nothing remarkable in it alone. Even the platform sandals she wore, though they gave the impression of a child playing at dress-up in her mother’s high heels, were not especially unusual. It was the brilliant sash bound about her straight waist that caught the eye. A bright, lime green silk, it seemed all the more green for being the only swatch of colour she wore: a brilliant star of green in a perfect night of white. On any other figure, in any other setting, this combination would have seemed eccentric, even clownish. In her it somehow gave her loveliness a bashful naïveté, pitiable perhaps, but not laughable. I could close my eyes and imagine this timid young innocent donning this plain white dress, her newest and best, for her first time at the ballet, scrutinizing herself before the mirror with a look of humble dissatisfaction, and then, with artless triumph, completing her ensemble with this garish green sash, blissfully ignorant of the glaring effect, and all the more lovely for that ignorance.

“You speak German?” one of the Americans was asking.

“Yes...German.”

“We’ve never seen ballet before.” The other was confessing. “Do you like it?”

Again the mother-bird fluttered her broken smiles: “I always have wanted...to see... ballet.”

“Well, when you’re in Vienna, you have to go to the Opera House at least once.”

“Yes. It is so... beautiful.”

“I’m Josh.”

“And I... I am... Sofia.”

The British couple ahead of me was mumbling placidly to one another about the pending performance: “It says here the show tonight, ‘*L’Existence*’ is an experimental modern ballet.”

“Experimental and modern? I wonder what we should expect then.” “Something deep, I’d say. Interpretive, no doubt.”

Next to me the effusive Australian was imposing on my attention some anecdote he had read in his tour guide about the Emperor’s commissioning of the *Staasoper*. “Look here, mate,” he was saying, “it says the architects of the Opera House committed suicide after the Emperor Franz-Josef made some off-hand remark about the building being too low to the ground. Can you imagine?” Apparently the foundation had been laid before the surrounding street was finished, and the street ended up being higher than planned. In his chagrin over his role in their deaths, the Emperor sought to avoid the self-destruction of other artists by confining all subsequent aesthetic judgments to a simple: “*Es war sehr schön, es hat mich sehr gefreut*”—it was very nice; it pleased me very well. “Not much of an art critic, was he?” laughed the Australian as he recounted to story.

All the while I listened to him I kept the corner of my attention fixed on that strange girl and the two Americans. Before my annoyance could pin itself to a justifiable excuse, however, the ballet began.

The lights faded and the noise of the crowd dimmed to silence. For a few moments my eyes and ears gaped wide in the perfect darkness as we waited for something to happen. Then, the faintest scratch of a bow on a violin moaned distantly, and ceased. It scraped again, ceased again, and then the sound began in earnest. To call it music would somehow fall short in

conveying the dark, swirling chaos of tonal textures— staccato creaks, piercing wails and guttural groans—that escaped in irrational intervals from that unseen horsehair scraping wire somewhere in the darkness. It was not unmelodic. It was deliberately and calmly antimelodic. Though no doubt these noises were all carefully contrived, the ear sought vainly for some pattern which it might cling to and call rhythm in the sinuous bursts of sound. In the back of my mind I wondered if this was what was called atonality.

Whether my eyes had begun to grow accustomed to the dark, or whether somewhere on stage a light had come up, I couldn't tell, but peering ahead an image slowly materialized: two hunched forms occupied opposite corners of a large square platform elevated some four feet off the main stage. In the hazy but growing light it appeared to be hovering there, suspended in a void of nothingness. It was lit, I now felt certain, from above with a grim grey light, but what made the scene hazy and indistinct was a transparent veil or curtain that was apparently hung in the darkness before the stage. In the centre of the platform sat a large, white cube.

Still the sound writhed around us.

For what seemed an unbearably long time, nothing happened. Then the figures rose and began their movements. Their black leggings and the shadows along the muscles of their naked upper bodies gave them a sinister air in that gloomy light. The music having no perceptible rhythm, it was somewhat difficult to discern a dance in their gyrations, but as they moved toward one another, the most unexpected thing happened. The platform began to tilt with the shifting weight of their bodies, pitching and heaving like some enormous, two dimensional scale. As it did so, the white cube in the centre began to move and slide with it.

Once the movement started, it could not stop without threatening to dump one, the other, or the white cube off into the pit. So the two figures drifted continually through the gloom and shadow, sometimes chasing, other times grappling each other, or else twining together to form

some subtly grotesque tableau before flinging apart. And every movement was somehow punctuated with that eerie, formless sound.

Gradually the randomness of the scene wore off and a story, or perhaps more accurately, a pattern, could be made out. The two men were in competition, but this was only clear from the way one would attempt to tilt the platform such that the other came precariously close to disappearing over the edge. They were also striving for control of the white box; and through manipulating the scale just so, one might cause it to slide to him, only to have it wrested from him by the machinations of the other. At times the two would lock together leaving the cube to slide itself dangerously close to the infinite abyss of the edge, only to be spared this just in time by further shifting of the platform's angle. This continued through no clearly defined progression until, after a time, by some chance coincidence of vectors, friction and forces, the cube came to rest safely in the centre of the platform again, the two figures balanced on opposite corners. There they hunched again to their original positions.

The violin heaved itself to a near-rhythmic tattoo, dropped darkly to a long whispered sigh, and stopped abruptly. The faint light was snuffed out and darkness again descended. With it fell a palpable silence.

The lights rose and for the briefest glimmer of a pause, the audience digested what they had just witnessed. Then a knowing ripple of applause began. It was not enthusiastic, but neither was it obliging. It was an ovation of assent, not an approval, as if in one voice the audience was merely saying, "*Es war sehr schon, es hat mich sehr gefreut,*" without passing any aesthetic evaluation on what had passed on stage. Clearly refined, the only thing the crowd seemed eager about was to prove there was not an uncultured Philistine in all their midst.

I stood there for a while after the applause had died, suspended between consternation and bemusement. “Well then,” the Australian interjected at my right, “That was unexpected.” His words brought me from my indecision and settled me squarely in bemusement.

In the row before me, the British couple had begun to ponder the performance between them, their voices quiet with a taciturn, if somewhat cadenced detachment. “But what did it all mean?” she asked him, her voice betraying not the least hint of disquiet.

“I suppose that’s entirely the wrong question,” he answered knowingly. “Or a question impossible to ask. It meant nothing. Or rather, that there is no meaning.”

She nodded acquiescence: “But it was experimental?” “Indeed.”

Indeed. The faintest hint of a thought glimmered in me: if it was truly so, with what could it have possibly been experimenting? Even as that revealed darkness dimmed, I stole quick glance across the crowd and seemed to see the whole mass of humanity in new light, blithely rationalizing the irrational. With mild interest they had already assented to it, uncrumpled and consulted their program for the next piece, as if to say, “Well, even so, life must go on.”

Then she began screaming.

*“Nein! Es ist eine Lüge!”*

And there is not a word sufficiently clear of cliché to convey the piercing cry. Frenzied, hysterical, lunatic, even bloodcurdling, haunted: it was all these things at once, and yet none of them. It was feral, to be sure, yet so precise, so oracular was its tenor, it came more as a clarion call than a howl of horror.

To make it worse, everything I heard in her cry was garbled with that enigmatic ecstasy of an unknown tongue. *“Nein! Nein! Das kann nicht sein! Wie können Sie diese Spöterei schön nennen?”*

As usually happens when the unconventional shatters the nice platitudes of manners that keep the pond-water of society serene, it took a moment for the multitude to agree on an appropriate response. I could see people looking at one another with uncertainty and censure, and, concealed beneath them, that ancient terror of the weird. At first they gestured with their chins and condescending nods: “What is the matter with that one?” But like a pebble breaking pond water, a ripple spread concentrically from her, the standing crowds pressing back until there was a clearing around her of considerable radius.

And all the while she cried out: “*Es ist eine Lüge! Können Sie das nicht sehen? Es ist Hässlichkeit und Leere! Eine nackte Lüge! Es ist nichts drin!*” Even those in the auditorium general, down below our crowded section, had begun to turn, look up, and murmur against the commotion in the standing room only pit.

But I found myself somehow paralyzed by the cry of this strange young sibyl: I could not press back from her with the others. For a moment it seemed as if my whole consciousness had narrowed on her cry, or that somehow the radius of the clearing around her and I had stretched to infinity. I looked nervously for those two Americans, but they had disappeared completely.

Then she turned her eyes on me, and as she did so, her body collapsed against the wall and she slid slowly to the floor. The look in her eyes trembled between pleading and defeat. She was weeping now. I felt her reach up and clutch my hand. And those fingers, their strange flesh, felt like ice against my skin. Her eyes held me frozen. She was babbling now, spent, though even subdued her voice had an inexorable urgency: “*Wieso? Warum können sie es nicht sehen? Das ist nicht Schönheit oder Wahrheit! Es ist nur eine nackte Lüge!*” I could not escape the lowering impression that her eyes were imploring something of me. Some response, some sympathy was expected of me. I stood there stupidly.

She rose up on her knees, still clutching my hand in that icy grip. She turned her voice one last time over the crowd, and shouted a final indictment: *“Können Sie es nicht sehen? Das ist nicht Schönheit oder Wahrheit! Es ist nur eine nackte Lüge!”* Then she collapsed again against the wall, weeping exhaustedly, her chin drooped on the breast of her new white gown.

The confused murmurs of the crowds trickled towards me; part of me longed to discretely shake my hand free of her grip and join their condescending indignation at the disturbance. But I stood there, still stupidly.

*“Was ist denn mit Ihnen los?”* The voice of the usher broke the tension. Surely someone had summoned him to discretely usher away this impropriety.

Her face was ashen as she lifted trembling eyes to him: like one stirring from the dead.

*“Kommen Sie, lasst uns gehen. Sie sind wohl betrunken?”* That he spoke German could not veil from me the utter contempt in his voice.

*“Ich bin nicht betrunken.”* Her voice was subdued now, but her eyes cast about with still a hint of their previous wildness. *“Aber was war denn das? Ich dachte, es sollte schön sein.”*

*“Kommen Sie, Fräulein. Lasst uns gehen.”* He reached out his hand, a menacing invitation.

She rose resignedly to her feet. Her hand was still against my fingers, but it felt now like air, not ice. She let it slip away, and my fingers were left haunted by the frozen imprint it had burned against them.

*“Aber es war nicht schön....”*

The usher snorted. *“Nein, das war Kunst.”*

She left a kind of awed stillness in her wake. Slowly the crowd pushed back to fill in the void of her passing, as if in one mass they were trying to shrug off the memory of her. The

hushed murmurs rose up again, but more subdued this time. “What was that all about?” they asked, expecting no real answer.

Behind me I heard one of the tourists who seemed to have a smattering of German translate for another. “She asked about the ballet... what it meant. He said it was just art.”

Her knowing “Ah” at this information crept across my spine.

The lights were dimming a second time, signaling the end of the intermission and the start of the next performance. I tried to focus my reeling concentration on the music that was now rising with the falling light.

This was a ballet in the fullest tradition of that word. Flowers, ribbons, tight silk stretched across taut bosoms and terse thighs pirouetted across the stage through a music that washed over all with a lush, fecund, somehow verdant sensuality. The gyrations and leaps of horn and flute and string were echoed and echoed by the luxurious movement of those carefully honed bodies.

My ears rushed with it, until it became a roar. Even as I watched, I felt my body convulsing with the urge to vomit. The heat, the press of the standing-room-only crowds overwhelmed me. I groped for the exit frantically, burst almost gasping for breath into the foyer of the Opera house, and rushed out into the moist night air, swirling with the traffic on the *Opernring*. My hand still burned with cold.

When the convulsions finally left me, and I was able to somehow compose my self, I began making my way slowly through the pressing, hot night towards my lodgings. But every step was a labor, and those eyes—like the haunted eyes of one who has looked behind a veil, a torn veil, and seen the gaping void of nothingness behind—pleaded with me through the darkness. And in my burning ears, as if it would never leave me, rang that forlorn howl of execration.

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