

## **Art for Faith's Sake**

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Worship has always been an artistic enterprise. We know that ancient Jewish worship was centered in the Temple, an architectural masterpiece, and that it was musically elaborate and replete with ritualistic art. The religious environment of Rome during the earliest days of Christianity, as Larry Hurtado has recently shown, was rich with architecture, statuary, and painted imagery: artistic artifacts created for worship of pagan idols.<sup>1</sup> In this Roman setting, Christianity emerged, borrowing heavily from Jewish, but also pagan culture. From the Jewish synagogue, Christian worship borrowed numerous artistic elements: readings from the Prophets and other Hebrew writers, the singing of psalms and spiritual songs, traditions of ritualistic prayer, and ritual furnishings. Images of God were not allowed in Jewish worship, however, so when painted and sculpted images of Jesus began to appear in Christian worship, in this particular aspect, Christian worship resembled Roman pagan worship, where images of deities were common.

Since its emergence, Christian worship has continued to find expression through artistic means. In large measure, the histories of western art and music run parallel to the history of the Christian Church. And today, regardless of denominational or liturgical tradition, Christian worship is made up of artistic forms. In most traditions, music holds central place as, to use Luther's term, the handmaid of the Gospel. Whether Christians sing hymns, settings of the psalms, spiritual songs, anthems, or praise choruses, music is the principle artistic form that shapes Christian worship. But, many others are involved. We gather in architectural structures, we enter rooms sunlit cobalt and ruby through stained-glass filtered light, we sit in well-fashioned furniture, we listen to the literature of the

Scriptures, we hear aesthetically crafted messages, we move in processions, and we view images of the symbols and historic figures associated with our faith. When we gather for worship art is all around us, and even within us. We even claim that worship is an art in itself. Just as in opera, which is made up of dance, orchestral music, vocal music, literature, and visual art, worship is a distinct form of art that combines many elemental forms.

Clearly, the forms of art that relate to worship function in the public interest. When people gather for public worship, art draws them together, instructs them, unites them, enlightens them, and provides the means for personal expression and transformation. The numerous artists and artisans that create opportunities of Christian worship do their work for the sake of the people of God who gather to have an encounter with their Creator and Redeemer. Worship art is created for a clear purpose.

### **Art for Art's Sake**

Throughout its history, art has regularly been used as a tool for accomplishing particular purposes. In medieval churches, stained-glass pictures of biblical narratives were presented in order that the illiterate public might know the stories of their faith. Pictures have long been painted to commemorate historic occasions or to reinterpret significant events. Statues of great persons have been erected to serve the purposes of honoring a memory or creating solidarity for a nation's populace. Using art as a means of meeting public needs was, in fact, a typical reason for creating art up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Christopher Witcombe has summarized the prevailing attitude: "The so-called academic painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed themselves to be doing their part to improve the world

in presenting images that contain or reflect good conservative moral values, examples of virtuous behavior, of inspiring Christian sentiment, and of the sort of righteous conduct and noble sacrifice that would serve as an appropriate model . . . to emulate.”<sup>2</sup> But in that era, as the moon of progressive thought rose, its light began to reveal an emerging reaction against the way that art had been used.

The use of art for public purpose began to change as artists began to exercise a sense of artistic freedom. Rebellious against the conservative notion that the purpose of art was to safeguard tradition, a wave of “avant-garde” modernists began to encourage artists to educate the public in a new way, by depicting political and social problems. Art still served a public purpose, but its function was not to uphold the status quo or preserve tradition. It was to raise to public view the plight of humanity and to illuminate exploitation. (A characteristic example of this use of art can be seen in the novels of Charles Dickens, wherein the deplorable social conditions of Victorian England are vividly depicted.) But, even this noble purpose was soon abandoned as artists exercised greater freedom. They began to seek release not only from academic art, but also from any demands of the public. Before long, artists claimed that their work should be produced not for the sake of public enlightenment, but for the sake of the art itself. The watchword of this movement was “art for art’s sake.” It stood for an artist’s freedom from the tyranny of purpose.

Since that time, artists have enjoyed the freedom to express themselves in ways that explore and stretch form without regard for inherent meaning or purpose. Still, some forms of art have continued to function in public service. Among these are film, as it has been used to present news or to propagandize. Visual art and photography are, and have long been used for the purposes of advertising and amusement. And music can be used for many

things, such as the expression of nationalism (as in “*La Marseillaise*” or “The Star Spangled Banner”), social commentary (as in 60’s folk music or modern rap), or lament (as in settings of certain psalms or the moaning of the country western singer).

One of the settings where art has continued to serve a public function is in Christian worship. Worship consists of art that is *not* created for its own sake. It is created and brought into liturgical use precisely because it serves a good public purpose. It gives expression to people’s experience; it teaches the faith; it serves as a vehicle of the Spirit and a means of communication with God. Why is it that worship consists of artistic forms that serve such particular functions? The answer is a theological one.

### **The Wellspring of Worship**

God’s people assemble for worship to enter into a communion and a communication that runs along vertical and horizontal axes. Vertically, there is the encounter between God and God’s people. The lines of communication run both ways. God speaks to us when the Bible is read and when the Word is proclaimed by the preacher and the choir. God speaks to us also as we wait upon the Lord and listen for the stillness within. God’s word comes to us in Scripture, sermon, song, and silence. And, the communication runs in the opposite direction when God’s people pray. Heavenward flow our pleas and petitions, our praise and thanksgivings, our confessions and confusions, the emptying of our deepest reservoirs of human concern.

By what measure can we determine whether this communication and encounter is effective? It would be impossible to invent an empirical means by which to measure the quality of such a highly subjective experience. But, we do know that when God speaks to us

it is about matters of the soul. Worship is not concerned merely with our minds and moods. It is not about education or entertainment. We do not go to worship to learn math or science or how to spell Ecclesiastes. And we do not worship in order to be made to laugh or cry or be moved by music. God's people worship because we long for an encounter with the God of the universe. We seek a deep sense of meaning and belonging and to enter into a dialogue with the One who knows us better than we know ourselves. The communion of worship is no shallow stream, but a deep river into which our souls dive to find comfort and contentment. This cannot be measured, but it can be known and felt.

The horizontal aspect of worship is also deeply enriching. We assemble not only for communion with God, but also to be with God's people. They are the body to which we belong. To worship together means that we meet God together and that we share God's love with one another. Again, this is no trifling encounter. It has greater potential for intimacy and depth than the average PTA or Rotary meeting. Worship is not only the place where we experience God's love, but also the moment where it finds immediate expression. Here, we pray for one another, sing in solidarity with one another, share the kiss of peace, and open ourselves to one another through the transforming power of Word, Water, and Wine. To calculate the success of such an experience is also beyond science. But, the soul knows when it has been reached.

Worship, when it is effective as vertical and horizontal communion, is about matters that are soul-deep. The psalmist knew this, who said "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. . . .Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your waterfalls; all your waves and your billows have gone over

me.” (Psalm 42:1, 2, and 7) Worship is a wellspring from which we draw and dispense living water.

### **The Function of Art**

But, the question remains, why art in worship? We use art in worship because worship is about the deep issues of faith and life. In fact, we *need* to use art in worship for precisely that reason. How else could we reach the depths of human experience than through art? This is what art is uniquely able to do.

To calculate the function or meaning of art is another mercurial task. It may mean and do many things. Artists themselves find it difficult to point to precise meanings in their own work. What it means to them may be far from what it means to or how it affects the percipient. But, they do know that art has something to do with their emotions and their experience with the world. They observe human experience, filter it through their own, and find symbols of expression that present those feelings and experiences to the world through artistic creations. Somehow in the process, something deep is said. Deeper, in fact, than can be put into words. Ask a painter what a work means. She will likely tell you to look at the painting. *That* is what it means. Words cannot better describe what she has to say. They can only capture a fraction of what the art is about. Words fail, unless your artistic medium is the use of words. And even then, a poem means what it says and not what one might describe it to mean. Poems create images that describe real things better than pages of detailed, accurate reporting can. For example, imagine trying to describe a flower. How could you improve on this: “If you’re not familiar with the trillium, imagine the flower that would come from a flute if a flute could make a flower. That is the trillium, a work of God

from a theme by Mozart.”<sup>3</sup> We are used to using words in worship, but not in a technical way. Words in worship are poems. What does it mean to say that “my soul longs for you, O God,” as a “deer longs for flowing streams?” It means so much more than you can say in more precise, less poetic language. The range of emotion and faith indicated by these words cannot be calculated. The meanings for author and reader cannot be reduced to so many digits or word units on a page. The key to art is that it speaks of many things, deeply held things, deeply personal things, and richly true things. Art speaks of human emotion and experience on a stratum that other, more discursive media cannot reach.

Why do we need art in worship? Because faith resides on that soul-deep level of human experience. To reach that depth in human or divine communication, or to unleash the secrets of the heart in prayer, we need symbols that get us to that level. Mere words will not suffice. We need music, the flow of aural symbols that set us upon “the river whose streams make glad the city of God.” (Psalm 46:4) We need the narratives of biblical life which are the aesthetic analogs to our own lives. We need the poetry of sermon and prayer which are the metaphors for our experience and concern. We need imagery that draws our imagination into the sphere of revelation. We need movement and dance, so that our soul’s deepest held yearnings can find physical expression and release. In worship, we need art that has a purpose. Without it, we are mute. When we attend worship that does not work, we do not realize the failure empirically. It comes to us as an unkept promise. Something wells up that finds no expression: a volcano that cannot erupt; a stroke victim who has much to say but cannot find speech. That kind of worship is frustrating on the deepest level. What it needs is the art. Therein lies our voice, our fluency, our exclamation, our eruption of praise.

## Art's Liturgical Purpose

Not all art today is made for particular purpose. In many cases art is still made simply for its own sake. But, the art that we use in worship is made for liturgical purpose. It is the expression of things deeply felt. Art that has this kind of purpose does not correspond to the notion of “art for art’s sake. But, it does correspond to another apt phrase. It was coined by art collector and church musician Jerry Evenrud. He refers to art in worship as “art for faith’s sake.”<sup>4</sup> Precisely. That is what we need: worship that is art-filled for the sake of the faith of the people of God who gather for communion with God and with one another. This means, of course, that preachers and worship leaders are artists. Or, they should be. Perhaps the articles and examples in this issue of *Theology, News, and Notes* will help to point the way for those who seek to understand how Worship, Theology, and the Arts can work together for the good of God’s people.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 19-26.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, “Art and Artists: Art for Art’s Sake,” [www.arthistory.sbc.edu/artartists/modartsake.html](http://www.arthistory.sbc.edu/artartists/modartsake.html), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> James Kilpatrick, *The Writer’s Art* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1984), p 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Evenrud, former Director for Music, Worship, and the Arts in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, describes himself as “a freelance advocate for music and art in worship.” His lectures on the use of art and music in worship are given under the title, “Art for Faith’s Sake.”