

CULTURAL STEWARDSHIP

Art as Witness



Last November, over 3,000 visitors came to PCPC, drawn inside our walls by the musical and visual arts. In 10 days, PCPC hosted the juried art show Justice & Mercy, the Amazing Grace concert, and one of the largest pre-college piano competitions in the Dallas/Ft. Worth region. As I watched guests from all walks of life, faiths, backgrounds, and linguistic cultures behold both sight and sound, I could not help but reflect on Abraham Kuyper's comment, "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'"

Indeed, art and the Church have a long history together. Ancient Christian tradition holds that Luke (the non-Jewish evangelist) was a painter who illustrated his gospel as well as painted several portraits of Mary, Peter, and Paul. Both Eusebius (third century) and Jerome (fourth century) mention portraits made of Christ and His apostles. In the divinely-inspired Gospel of Luke and in Acts, Luke's writing style is one of an artist's mind, capturing the nuances often not included by other authors. For this reason, Luke has always been a favorite among Christian artists. He relates to their creative need to make God incarnate in all details of life—to "see" and "hear" the Christian faith in the every day.

Archaeological evidence shows that as late as the second century Christian imagery was appearing as representational art even though a deep suspicion and fear of idolatry remained from Judaism. Cautiously, early Christianity developed a visual language that distinguished them from the culture of Judaism. The earliest surviving Christian art, found in Roman catacombs, is relatively small-scale and meant for private tombs with an emphasis on hope and comfort. The focus was on protection and deliverance rather than the violent death of the crucifixion. More often images of the Good Shepherd were present than any reference to the suffering of Christ. The second and third most recurrent visual messages in this early Christian era were the Last Supper (Luke 22:7-39) and the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-39). After the official recognition of Christianity by the

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Roman Emperor Constantine in 313, these Christian images were established publicly and changed focus to the triumphant Christ.



The shift in political and economic power allowed for Christian visual language to become part of secular culture as a witness to the Gospel. The Church became the dominant patron of the arts. Missionaries used illustrated narratives to explain the gospel stories. By the seventh century, almost all public buildings (both sacred and secular) were centered around the image of the *Pantokrator* (Blessing Christ). This term was used by Paul (2 Cor. 6:18) and also in the Book of Revelation.

However, the relationship between the Church and the arts has not been an easy one. The eighth and ninth centuries were filled with fierce political and theological debate over the role of images. During this controversy, icons were systematically removed from all churches and destroyed until the Second Council of Nicea in 787 supported the use of visual imagery. An imperial edict in 843 definitively favored visual arts as a valid witness to Christ. From then on, Christian art was firmly embedded into the Christian life. It was not to be seriously challenged again until the fifteenth century when reformers reacted against the perceived extravagance of Catholic church interiors and what was considered as an over-reliance on images at the expense of the Word.

Art and the Church in the Reformation

It is a commonly held perception that John Calvin was opposed to the arts. However, it was not the arts per se that Calvin preached against, but their misuse. He sought to encourage the arts by defining their proper place and purpose. He argued that public (communal) worship was not the proper sphere for the arts (visual or instrumental) to supersede the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin emphatically reminds us that Scripture speaks of the first appearance of art (in the tents of Jubal) as “excellent gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Calvin declares that in the artistic instinct, God had enriched Jubal and his posterity with rare endowments. And Calvin continues to state that these inventive powers of art prove most evident testimonies of the Divine bounty. According to Calvin, these precious things are owed originally to the Holy Spirit. Calvin clearly stated, “The invention of the arts, and other things which serve the common use and convenience of life, is a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation.” He viewed them as instruments of instruction and admonition, not to be used as vehicles of worship or preaching. Those were reserved for the spoken Word of God alone. He felt that the arts could enlarge our understanding, extend our experience, and, “not least of all, bring delight to our hearts.” Calvin rationally saw the incalculable value of the arts as witness to those who were unacquainted with Christ and the importance of the church as promulgator of the arts in secular society. It is evident that Calvin fully grasped the profound effect worked by art upon the life of the emotions; he appreciated the end for which art had been given.

Many reformers shared John Calvin’s view regarding the abuse of arts. Churches quickly turned bare; there was a lack of color, and the public worship became an intellectual experience. In fear of abuse, some churches overlooked the importance of the joy of the Lord. Indeed there were dangers in services of public worship to introducing what the *Westminster Confession* calls “the imaginations and devices of men.” The imaginative creation can be more of a barrier than an aid to worship. However, fear can also keep us from augmenting our Christian life as it was intended.

PCPC strives to be a culture-maker, patron, and host for the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Our Visual Arts ministry began in 2007 and consistently ministers to approximately 1,500 local artists. More than 85 percent of those artists are outside of PCPC and include all Christian denominations—Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and non-religious. Art is the common language that opens the conversation to deeper levels, and the PCPC Visual Arts ministry has become the resource for comfort, prayer, and encouragement for many as they struggle with their artistic calling.

PCPC has hosted the Dallas Piano Solo Competition since 1998 (15 years). It is the premier pre-college piano competition in the country and the largest competition in the piano-rich Dallas/Ft. Worth region. For the second year in a row, the piano competition and juried art show came together to offer hospitality and witness to 400 pianists and their families for almost 1,000 people during the one-day event. Stephen Nielson states that “PCPC is unanimously considered the finest host for this competition, from our warm welcome to accommodating facilities and the best stable of pianos in the city.”

Reflect on the role of the arts within the Christian life and consider becoming a culture-maker in your own right. The Church is called to be a good steward of culture, to recognize its strong power of witness, and to establish all that is good, beautiful, and truthful in it—claiming the entire creation as belonging to Jesus Christ.

—Lawan Glasscock

Further reading on the subject:

Bustard, Ned. *It Was Good, Making Art to the Glory of God*. Baltimore: Square Halo Press, 2006.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ford Lewis Battles, translator. John T. McNeill, editor. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.

Kuyper, Abraham. *Six Stone Lectures*. Princeton Theological Seminary Library, 1899.

Dryness, William A. *Visual Faith, Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Romaine, James. *Art as Spiritual Perception*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012



The 2013 Arts Festival ribbon winners with their families at the opening reception