

In the image of the Creator

A Theological Framework for Creativity from Genesis 1-4

Does God care about the arts? What place does art have in church? It is sadly true that often the church has over-emphasized creativity, exalted artists on a pedestal, worshipped the art or the artist, rather than the God who makes the art possible. Even now there is a risk in the western church that we exalt musical worship-leaders to an almost god-like status “if only I could go and hear Matt Kendrick (or whoever) lead worship then I could *really* meet with God.”

But the other extreme which the church has more often fallen into is to totally down grade the arts. This can be seen in the puritan anti-aesthetic of smashing icons and having very plain churches. But it is also evident in our Evangelical heritage; thinking which sprung from the enlightenment, Modernist mindset which believes truth can only be expressed by carefully worded doctrinal statements, by preaching, or at the very least through long wordy hymns. Many people assume that preaching and doctrine are the most important things, and that art is just the warm up for the sermon, or just for entertainment, or something frivolous best saved for the children.

Culturally, much of our society has moved on from this very Modernist view, into a Post-Modern approach. People in today’s society believe, far more than a few decades ago, that art *can* speak truth. We have realized that actually we can’t know everything through rationalism and words and books, that life can’t be explained completely by science. The arts help us explain the unexplainable – people watch films, go to concerts, read novels, visit art galleries and they allow these art forms to give meaning to their lives. People are used to being communicated with creatively, via colours, fonts, sounds, and abstract images through TV, the internet and advertising far more than they are by prosaic words.

The Bible itself has within it some carefully worded doctrine; we should be grateful for much of our Evangelical heritage and not lose sight of the counter-cultural nature of objective truth, the spoken word and the rational argument. However the Bible also has a huge amount of artistic writing, and examples of God using art to speak to his people or allowing his people to speak to him through creative means. In the church we need to go back to the Bible and see God using the arts to help explain the unexplainable. Indeed we have a theological framework for creativity right there in the first four chapters of the Bible.

Genesis 1 – Creation

Our God is the ultimate creator – the ultimate artist. He made the entire universe out of nothing – darkness, formlessness, emptiness (1:2). In Genesis and in much of the world around us we can see that his design works – it hangs together, there is a cycle and a completeness to creation. However he doesn’t just make things for functionality, so that they work efficiently and in good order. He makes things which *look* amazing, *sound* fantastic, *smell* intoxicating, *taste* magnificent and *feel* incredible. When he creates, he has fun with shapes and sizes and colours and lines. He can work in minute detail on the smallest of flowers, insects and microbes, and at the same time paint huge panoramas of mountain ranges or seascapes or galaxies with broad strokes of his brush.

God’s idea of good creativity is not limited to the “Christian poster” aesthetic of puppies and flowers and sunsets – ours is the God who made cockroaches and hippos, and pouring rain and pitch black nights, and the ridiculous baboon and the majestic stallion, and even the downright frightening things like sharks and lions and steep cliffs and crashing waves. If you look at a

painting by someone like Mark Rothko and say “what is that supposed to be, its not of anything”, then just remember that God loves colour. Look up at the sky and see a huge canvas of blue and white and consider that God made it and calls it beautiful. Or perhaps you listen to a piece of music and think “Ooh I don’t like that, its not very cheerful, and it’s a bit loud”, then consider that God made thunderstorms – dramatic booming dissonant sounds. God is the ultimate creator, and whist of course we are all entitled to our own opinions and tastes, I believe that our vision of God will grow the more we open up our minds to how he has created the world, and how this is reflected in the work of artists, Christian and non-Christian, around the world.

Genesis 2 – Human creativity

The triumph of God’s creative act is humankind, made in his own image, called us not just “good” like the rest of creation, but “very good”. In what way are we made in his image? And why are we “very good”? There are a multitude of answers to those questions, but among them are the fact that we too are called to be creative beings like God is, using our imaginations and making aesthetic choices. No other animal can do that the way we can. It is something unique to humankind.

Genesis 2:19 says

“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.”

God’s first task given to Adam is a *creative* one. The God who made the huge range and variety of living creatures, brings them to Adam *to see what he will name them!* Think of a parent, who brings a child into the world, nurtures it, and then gives it pens and a piece of paper, and thinks “I wonder what they are going to make?” The anticipation is contagious, and the child’s drawing will always surprise and delight the parent (if not necessarily everyone else!) The passage says God brought the animals to Adam “to see what he would name them.” Can you picture the look of anticipation on God’s face? He has that kind of anticipation when each one of us creates something. He invented paints, and building materials and architecture, and video, and instruments, and language, the colours and images required for branding, the human body and music required for dancing, and then he gives it to you, and wonders “what are they going to do with this?”

Notice that God delegated that responsibility to Adam - *whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name*. He didn’t say “if you give this animal a stupid name I’m going to change it”. He gave creative responsibility to Adam. And he gives it to us too. Sometimes we can get too spiritual about these things “God gave me this song” (some would say “yes I can see why he didn’t want it...”!) God works collaboratively with us, he may inspire or nudge us in certain directions, but he doesn’t use us like a puppet. He gives us the responsibility of being creative with all that he has given us, whether that is in a work context, in relationships, just for fun and relaxation, and even in our worship of him.

It is a sad fact that many people have given up on ever being creative, because of the divide we have in the West between the gifted artist and everyone else, and in particular because of what someone in authority once said to them. It is interesting, isn’t it, how you never see a class full of young children given paints and paper, only to hear a large proportion come back and say “Sorry, I can’t draw”. And yet as adults we pigeon hole ourselves, we limit what God has made us to be, by believing lies spoken over us. “I can’t draw”. How do you know? “Because my art teacher told me.” “I can’t sing”. Your voice doesn’t seem that bad. “Yes but my mother ridiculed my singing

and I've never enjoyed it since." John L Bell in his book *The Singing Thing*, says this about the power of words over people's confidence to do creative things.

"No matter how sophisticated, cultured, articulate or capable people are in their adult lives, the voices they heard in their childhood can still disable them... it is as if the memory takes and audio-visual recording of the incident, which can be action-replayed at the drop of a hat."¹

God's truth is that we are made in the image of God. Part of that image is an ability to be creative. Not all of us are called to be artists. But each one is called and gifted to be creative. We have precious creativity inside us which God is longing to see come out.

Genesis 3 – The fall

The fall brings a new dynamic into all this. The things which God created good can be used for evil. The ground is cursed, God's creation is marred and life becomes hard for humankind (3:17-18). Death is introduced into God's world which was designed for life (3:19). Most importantly the perfect relationship between God and humans is broken because of human disobedience.

Unfortunately many Christians seem to operate as if the Bible starts with Genesis 3. We are tempted to place the things of the universe into two boxes – the sacred, spiritual stuff, and the worldly, secular stuff. This leads many Christians to only give value to 'spiritual' art, which is obviously Christian, cheerfully optimistic and not about everyday life; and to reject 'secular' art forms. This is to forget that God made everyone, and values everyone's creativity. As Steve Turner writes,

"Rather than asking, Is this artist saved? ask, Is this piece of work technically excellent? Is it a valid expression of the artist's view of the world? Are form and content well integrated? Is truth communicated?"²

Christian artists can often be tempted to place the truth of the gospel message over the truth of our everyday experience. We can forget that God is interested in all aspects of our lives, not just spiritual things but the physical, the humdrum, the human aspects. It is what theologians call an 'over-realised eschatology', acting or creating as if one is in heaven right now instead of being in the kind of in-between time, where God's Kingdom is breaking in but where we still live with the consequences of the fall. In contrast the Bible is very real in its expression of both joy and pain, of celebrating the good things of life but also being real about the difficult times.

Christians can also champion certain styles as more 'godly' whilst avoiding certain artforms because of their connotations in the world (these assumptions change with culture – when the organ was introduced people renounced it as the devil's instrument!). Genesis 1 on the other hand implies that all forms are gifts from God, capable of being used for God's glory as well as for the wrong ends. However, as Christians we need to rely on the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit to help us use each form in a Christ-like way, redeeming that which has been stolen.

Genesis 4 – Art in society and church

Genesis 4:20-22 says

"Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of all who live in tents and raise livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the harp and flute. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron."

This passage is telling us about the earliest society, you have the farmer, the techie person, and the musician. All three are part of God's plan for humanity to grow and prosper. Creativity is

¹ John L Bell, *The singing thing*, (Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow)

² Steve Turner, *Imagine, a vision for Christians and the arts*. (IVP Leicester, 2001) p 11.

placed equally amongst providing food and practical resources. We too should consider our acts of creativity as important as the more practical skills and gifts. Christian artists have a mandate to be out in society using their gifts not as simply evangelistic propaganda, but being part of the cultural landscape at a deep level effecting change and blessing the world.

I think these verses also give us a model of how art might be used in church – not elevated to a inappropriate pedestal, and yet not down-graded to merely entertainment or a kind of warm-up. The arts should be equal alongside the other gifts and facets of the church life. It should be taken seriously on its own terms, given space and funding. We need to learn from the Bible, and in particular from Jesus in his use of parables, illustrations, and symbols, how we might use the arts to help people engage with God, with every aspect of our lives, and with each other. We need to release people into their own God-given creativity. We need to help Christian artists develop in their craft and in the relationship with God. We need to see a renaissance of Christian creativity in the church so that people might be inspired to see that God is interested in all of their lives, and has a creative plan for their future.