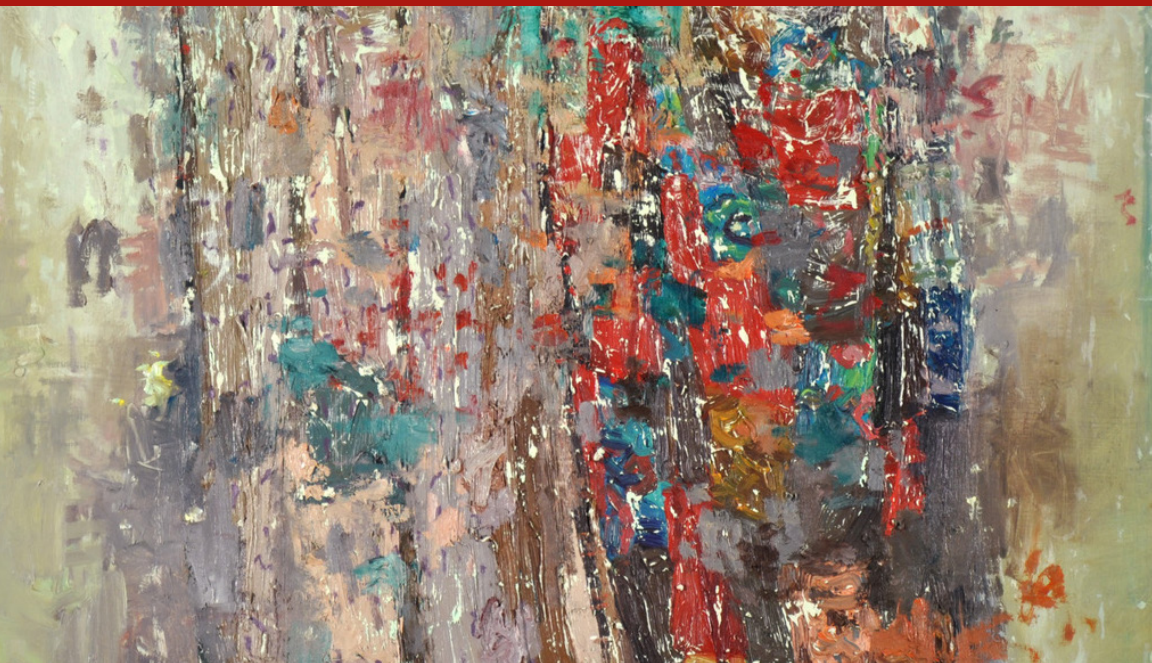


FAITHFUL LIVES

Christian Reflections on the World – Faithful Creativity



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Christian Reflections on the World – Faithful Creativity



The mission of College of the Ozarks is to provide the advantages of a Christian education for youth of both sexes, especially those found worthy, but who are without sufficient means to procure such training.

Faithful Lives: Reflections on the World is an annual journal produced by College of the Ozarks. The goal of the publication is to foster deep and substantive Christian thought in all areas of life by publishing articles that assume and explore the truthfulness of the Christian worldview perspective.

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From the Editors:

The Arts are “Useless”

The word creativity can be applied to nearly any area of study, from problem solving in STEM fields to sculpting in the clay studio. This reality is not so much tied to a pedagogical position as a theological foundation: we are not only humans being; we are humans creating. However, this issue centered upon the theme of *faithful creativity* explores creativity as it is manifested in the areas commonly known as “the arts.” The decision was not meant to downplay the role that theologically motivated creativity can and should play in other fields, but instead to champion something that is often overlooked in our culture—beauty.

While many people rarely encounter the word “utilitarianism,” they have likely been shaped by it. Forged by formal philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill from the 18th-19th centuries, the pop version goes something like this: an action or thing has value in that it produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Or, a thing or action’s worth, value—sometimes even morality—is based upon how *useful* it is, or its utility to the largest number of people. And in our 5G-paced lives, this too often results in pulsing repetitions and evaluations of all kinds of things based upon the simple question: *what’s the use?*

Like a character in a tragicomedy, I once had a student state in a class presentation, “The point of the passage is that the act was useless . . . It would be like Dr. Osborne assigning us a book to read, and then *not testing us on it!*” At which point, I interrupted to say, “To be clear, the height of wasted time is to read a book you are not tested on?” He sheepishly laughed and said, “Hmm, that sounds pretty bad, huh?” The reality is that this student did not understand why it would be valuable to grow in understanding a topic if there was not an immediate utility to the newly gained information, and sadly he is not alone.

To be sure, utility is not a vice. I am grateful for the many advances in science and art that have increased our ability to function in this created world. But usefulness is never an end to be pursued in and of itself, because it always requires a follow up explanation: useful to do what? The above statement spoke of the greatest good, but who defines the greatest good? This question alone has resulted in numerous divisions among utilitarian

philosophical proponents. The bottom line is that utility in and of itself never functions as a sound guide in leading us on a path of virtue and beauty.

In the opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote provocatively, “all art is quite useless.” When an intrigued student followed up with Wilde asking him about the line, he wrote in a letter, “Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct or influence action in any way. . . . A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We gain a moment of joy by looking at it. That is all that is to be said about our relations to flowers. Of course man may sell the flower, and so make it useful to him, but this has nothing to do with the flower.”¹

While Wilde may have overstated the case by describing art as not influencing action, what he captures is the way that beauty and art have a power over us because there is something there that cannot be co-opted. True and profound beauty is beyond us . . . like trying to capture the Grand Canyon with a camera lens. And it is that sense of grandeur, or transcendence, or awe that reminds us that there are realities in this world that profoundly affect us and all we can do is be affected. We can buy and sell beauty, but we all know something is lost in those transactions. Beauty draws us out of ourselves, and in so doing, tills the hardened sinful soil of the human heart. Its presence is an ever-present whisper that it exists . . . in a harrowing world of headlines and genocide . . . beauty exists. In a world of cross carrying and persecution, beauty exists and leaves us longing for more of it.

In his classic work *The Idea of a Christian College*, Arthur Holmes takes up the discussion of “usefulness” in the arts by distinguishing between what he called intrinsic value and instrumental value.² While, recent essays have argued that the arts have a real utility, even in our technologically driven culture,³ they are deeply invested in the discovery and growth of intrinsic values like beauty, knowledge, and goodness. It is the creative cultivation of these values that steers our understanding of usefulness. So, in a real sense they are extremely useful, but not in the short-range, fast-

¹ See the full letter transcript, “Letters of Note,” January 4, 2010, <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/01/art-is-useless-because.html>.

² Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 28.

³ Willard Dix, “A Liberal Arts Degree Is More Important Than Ever,” *Forbes*, Nov. 16, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/willarddix/2016/11/16/a-liberal-arts-degree-is-more-important-than-ever/#56afe0e9339f>.

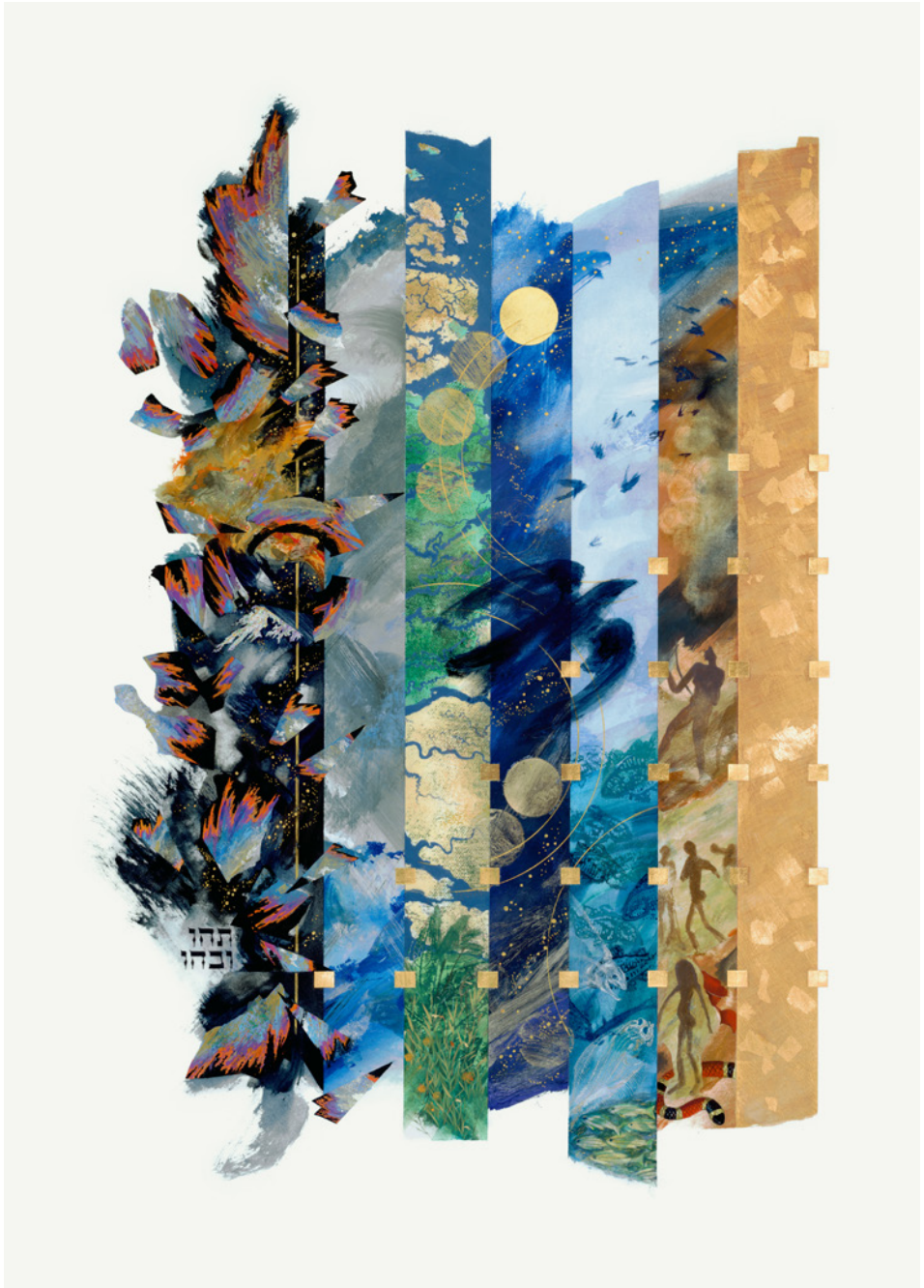
paced way that we often live our lives. “Liberal learning therefore takes the long-range view and concentrates on what shapes a person’s understanding and values rather than on what he can use in one or two of the changing roles he might later play.”⁴

This issue of *Faithful Lives* focuses on faithful creativity and the ways that Christians should engage in creating beauty, goodness, understanding, and truth in the arts. In the first essay, Richard Cummings sets out a theology of creativity that draws deeply from the Bible’s creation account. Cummings argues that we are created to be creators and that the Spirit guides us in our culture-making endeavors. Next, Louis Markos explores the writings and thoughts of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien to see how their imaginations created the compelling worlds of Narnia and Middle Earth. Then Curt Wilkinson explains the reality of filmmaking from a Christian perspective and calls for Christians to approach this craft through a sacramental framework.

In the fourth essay, we have included an intriguing interview with artist Sedrick Huckaby, a Christian artist teaching at the University of Texas, Arlington. Richard Cummings and Huckaby discuss his background, influences, testimony, and how his faith continues to shape his art. The next article is one I have written exploring the metaphor of improvisation as a beneficial way of faithfully enacting Christian doctrine. Then Mark McVey offers a performer’s perspective on the theme of grace woven throughout Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. The final essay by Collin Messer explores Walker Percy’s *Love in the Ruins* and how Percy used the novel as a way to display the brokenness of the human condition, and simultaneously draw us out of it. The issue ends with several reviews of recent works by Christians striving to better understand creativity and beauty within the body of Christ. My hope is that this volume reminds us of the intrinsic value of beauty and the human creativity that produces it, so that we live the words of Paul: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

Soli Deo Gloria
William R. Osborne

⁴ Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 29.



Creation

Donald Jackson with contribution by Chris Tomlin

Ink and gold leaf on vellum

©2003, *The Saint John's Bible*

Image courtesy of The Saint John's Bible

FAITHFUL LIVES



Essays

Living Worship: How God's Revealed Story of Humanity Informs a Theology of Artistic Creativity

Richard W. Cummings*

Introduction

This paper, though focusing on artistic creativity and specifically oriented towards visual art, provides implications for human creativity in all disciplines. Believing one's discipline is an isolated, independent field of study undermines the essential reality of the holistic, integrated individual and the broader plan of God for humans to live in community with one another and in community with their triune Creator. I believe that God's revealed story of humanity informs a coherent theology of artistic creation. It is only necessary to possess a basic theological understanding of Christianity and a basic understanding of God's revealed interaction with and plan for his creation within the broader story of God's past, present and future intentions to, hopefully, draw value from this paper.

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This paper is designed to demonstrate how human creativity, specifically original, artistic creation, is situated within the overall context of God's revealed story. This story has often been broken down into four periods: *creation*, *fall*, *redemption*, and *restoration*. This established structure is where I will situate my biblical and theological exploration of God's mandated and blessed human creativity in the specific discipline of visual art.

I believe that all human endeavors fall within the broad category of human creativity. Human creativity, in turn, is one essential facet of our holistic human flourishing. It is the well from which all human expression flows. In this paper, I will argue that our gifted creativity is a key component of who we are as image bearers of our triune Creator. I hope that this exploration might be insightful for others into how they might situate their particular creative human endeavors within God's story for his creation. Knowledge of the story of God begins with the Bible, and it is there that we will explore how the creation, fall, redemption and restoration stories apply to the artistic creativity.

Creation

God's self-revelation in Scripture begins with an act of creation. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). This powerful verse provides a wonderful entry into the story of God's model for and interaction with humanity. Indeed, this revelation in itself appears as immutable evidence for artists working in the material world, but the understanding of human creativity before the fall is not the context in which humanity soon found itself. A more complete understanding of what the Bible reveals about human creativity and visual art requires a more complete understanding of the entirety of the revealed story. The basic context for how my discipline fits into the revealed story of God's interaction with his creaturely humans is the holistic nature of the human creature.

Humans are made in the image and likeness of the triune God and entrusted to steward and creatively interact with the rest of creation. Two particular biblical narratives are essential to a proper understanding of artistic human creativity; the creation account in Genesis and the divine plan but human fabrication of the tabernacle in Exodus.

In the beginning the triune God created. This opening flourish to Scripture, expressed in Gen 1:1, is an overwhelmingly accepted, theolog-

ical tenet. It is important to note that, though the texts referring to God in Gen 1 do not explicitly express his triune nature, Christian theologians for millennia have proclaimed that it was the triune God who was present and active in creation. The Holy Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos (Gen 1:2),¹ and NT Scriptures repeatedly identify Christ's active role in creation. Moreover, Christ is not only active in the world's creation but also in its sustaining (John 1:1-3; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:3).

Still, God's creative nature expressed in Gen 1:1 contributes nothing to a biblical exploration of human creativity or visual art if it cannot be demonstrated that creaturely humans share in God's creative nature. This assertion must be revealed in Scripture, either implicitly or explicitly, or it is vain to assume that the human creature's identity is related in any way to the Creator. However, Scripture does clearly state that humans, indeed, are made in the "image" and "likeness" of God (Gen 1:26-27).

How the image and likeness of God manifests itself in humanity has been a matter of debate for millennia. Augustine argued that humanity was made in the image of the Trinity, approaching the Trinity as an unequal likeness through a sort of imitation.² Aquinas cites Augustine in his *Summa Theologica* when he explicitly states that the image of God is not in man, but that humanity reflects an imperfect "likeness" of God.³ For Aquinas, however, the locus of humanity's imaging of God was squarely in the intellect.⁴

Being created in the image of God is a mystery beyond simple definition or human speculation. The authors of Genesis felt no need to elaborate upon what was meant by their ambiguous statement about the image of God in humanity.⁵ They simply portrayed a God who deliberated in plurality and fashioned a creature in his own singular-in-plurality image.

The biblical commentator Hamilton presents a conception of the image of God in humanity that is sensitive to the Genesis text but is also sensitive to the totality of Scripture. Hamilton rightly concludes that, when delving into the nature of the image of God in humanity, it is important that,

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 111-14.

² Andrew Louth, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament vol. 1, Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 30.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Robert M., Hutchins, vol. 19 of *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 492.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁵ James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 281.

Any approach that focuses on one aspect of man—be that physical, spiritual, or intellectual—to the neglect of the rest of man’s constituent features seems doomed to failure....to be human is to bear the image of God. This understanding emphasizes man as a unity. No part of man, no function of man is subordinated to some other, higher part or activity.⁶

Hamilton’s conclusion, that no part or function of humanity is subordinated to any other, is a guiding principle for my educational practice. Hamilton’s picture of the image of God in humanity portrays a holistic, human creature; a unity of mental, physical, emotional, sensual and spiritual capacities. Maintaining that humans are made in the image of God does not suggest that we are divine copies of God, as both Augustine and Aquinas point out. Nor does maintaining that humans are made in the image of God suggest that the entire image of the limitless God can be contained within the limited faculties of the human creature. Regardless, the mystery of the *imago dei* seems to include more gifted aspects of our humanity than fewer.

In Gen 1, the textual content that surrounds and encompasses verse 26 describes the actions of God in unmistakably anthropomorphic terms. Like humans, God speaks (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29), God sees (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), God makes (vv. 4, 7, 12, 16, 21, 25, 27), God names (vv. 5, 8, 10), and God blesses (vv. 22, 28). In Gen 2, the anthropomorphic acts of God continue as he rests at the conclusion of his creative work (vv. 2, 3). These continuities by no means exhaust the concept of the divine image in humanity, but they do suggest clear areas of similarity and points of connection between mankind and God. It is also quite possible that the writers of Genesis may have taken these anthropomorphic similarities to be understood when they used the words “image” and “likeness” in referring to the image of God in humanity.⁷

For a Christian teaching in a creative discipline, the accounts of God’s acts of naming various aspects of his creation are of particular interest. Gen 2 contains two events surrounding the creation of humans that illumine the relationship between the image of God in humanity and humanity’s creative capacity. The first is God’s *ex creatis* forming of the first human out of the dust of the earth. The second is the biblical account of Adam’s naming of the animals.

⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 137.

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 32.

The biblical account of God forming the first human out of the dust of the earth is a significant event for a biblical understanding of artistic human creativity. Wenham characterizes the verb “shaped” (v. 7) as being related to the work of a potter.⁸ In translating the same verse, Alter chooses the word “fashioned.” But when contrasting “fashioned” to the word “built” that is used for the creation of Eve (v. 22), Alter also describes the Hebrew verb used in the fashioning of Adam as a potter’s term.⁹

The “forming” of the first human from the dust of the earth and the “building” of the first woman out of man is significant because God is expressing himself in Scripture as the first sculptor—the first culture maker and creative shaper of new forms out of the raw materials of his *ex nihilo* creation.¹⁰ In this event, God reveals through Scripture how he, as the Creator, models the creative process to his special creation, humanity. God demonstrates the making of something new out of something that had previously existed. Consequently, this artistic act of God, revealed in Scripture, is reflected and echoed within his human creation. But this is not an act of neutral formation. Instead, it is an act of divine love.

The nature of God’s process in forming Adam out of the dust denotes the love and intimacy by which God formed the man and breathed life into him (v. 7). God got his hands dirty, like a potter, as he formed the first human from the dust of the earth. Other biblical writers poetically adapted this image of God as the divine potter throughout Scripture. Often biblical writers would reference the intimate touch of God’s hands in the forming of humanity (cf. Job 10:8; Ps 119:73; Isa 64:8).¹¹

To touch is to be engaged with and, quite literally, connected to the object receiving the touch. The skillful, knowledgeable touch of the artisan crafts the beautiful object. Humanity was not just an idea to God, the greatest of all artists. Instead, humanity was a particularized and actualized material event that God brought into being out of his infinite, self-giving love.

God created us out of his love, and he made us in his image out of his love. It was also out of his love that God mandated and blessed human

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 9.

¹⁰ Andy Crouch, “The Gospel: How is Art a Gift, a Calling, and an Obedience?” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 32.

¹¹ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: from Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), 105.

creativity. The mandate for and blessing of human creativity is clearly demonstrated in the account of Adam naming the animals.

Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. (Gen 2:19, ESV)

The brief account makes two key points regarding human creativity. The first point is that God mandated for Adam, the human, to be creative. The second point is that God blessed Adam's creativity. In mandating and blessing the creativity of the first human, God, by extension, mandated and blessed the creative capacity found in all humans.

In v. 19, Scripture relates that God "brought" the animals before Adam to "see what he would call them." God gave Adam a task that he had equipped the man to accomplish. But God also gave Adam the freedom within the task to respond out of his individuality. Adam appropriately responded by providing names for the animals.

Gen 2:19 clearly relates that it was God who brought the animals to Adam. Adam did not initiate the event. God brought the animals before Adam for a specific purpose—to name. God did this because, in the wholeness of God's image in humanity, God intended for his human creature to do exactly what he was designed for. Contrary to many commentators' remarks on the verse, however, Adam did not name the animals solely out of the capacity of his discernment or even his authority.¹² Instead, Adam named the animals out of the totality of his holistic being. Adam's totality of being included the ability to creatively engage the creation and shape it into a new reality

Adam appropriately responded to God's revealed will by exercising his creative freedom. This freedom is a gift that God has given to all humanity. Adam enacted a facet of the image of God in mankind by naming the animals. In doing so, Adam reflected the precedent that God set in Gen 1, naming the various elements of his creation. God calls the light, "day" and the darkness, "night" (v. 5). God calls the firmament, "heaven" (v. 8). He calls the dry land, "earth" and the waters, "seas" (v. 10).

In Gen 2:19, Adam, who is made in the image of God, enacts the will of God by creatively naming the animals. The human, created in God's

¹² Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: Holman, 1996), 215.

image, was gifted the task and freedom to appropriately respond in the manner that God had exemplified. Adam naturally followed the pattern of naming that God had enacted.

The close connection of the two naming accounts in the first two chapters of Genesis cannot be coincidental. Likewise, the various other anthropomorphic actions of God in the first two chapters of Genesis must give at least a partial glimpse of what it means for humanity to be made in the image of God. By connecting the actions of the imaged human to the revealed actions of God, Scripture directly connects humanity's image to its prototype. By relating that it was God who brought the animals to Adam, Scripture also reveals God's mandate for humanity to be creative.

The mandate for human creativity is strengthened further when God blesses the creativity of Adam by accepting the names that he had provided for "every living creature." The acceptance of the animals' names by God is again treated matter-of-factly; "Whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (v. 19). By accepting the names that Adam, the first human, had creatively formed, God blessed not only the creative nature in Adam but also the creative nature in all of humanity.

Though the evidence from the first two chapters of Genesis provides some insight into the image of God in humanity and into God's mandate and blessing of human creativity, the ensuing exploration of Exodus will demonstrate that God's mandate and blessing of human creativity persisted after humanity had fallen into sin. Fallen hands would form the materials of this world into the tabernacle, the one place where the glory of God would immanently dwell among his chosen people, the Israelites.

The Fall

Humanity's sinful disobedience in the Garden, as revealed in Scripture, consequently altered the context in which humans enacted their creativity in relationship to the creation and in relationship to their Creator. Humans, instead of materially creating new things in the way that God had intended, could now fashion abominations; idols that expressed the lusts and depravities of humanity's rebellion against God.

In Exodus, Scripture provides the account of God's plan for the tabernacle. The tabernacle and its implements of Israelite worship, however, were left to the fallen hands of humans to construct. The use of human artisans for the tabernacle's construction demonstrates a continuation of

the mandate and blessing of God for human creativity even after the fall.

The fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden did not prevent God from blessing fallen humans with the task of preparing the dwelling place for his glory among his chosen people. The Bible relates that Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God and was equipped, as was Oholiab, to undertake and supervise the many creative tasks associated with the construction of the tabernacle. They were also gifted with the task of fabricating the implements to be used in Israelite worship (Exod 31:1-11; 35:30-39:31).

Exodus 31:3 uses the Hebrew phrase *ruah elohim*, “Spirit of God,” for the first time since the creation account (Gen 1:2).¹³ In Genesis, the phrase described the Spirit of God, who was hovering over the chaotic, primeval waters of creation. Exodus uses “Spirit of God” to describe the filling of Bezalel with God’s Spirit. Scripture relates Bezalel’s calling, “...I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft” (Exod 31:3-4).

Scripture demonstrates that God showed Moses some form of pattern for the tabernacle on the mountain (cf. Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30), but the “instructions” that made their way into the text of Exodus are quite vague. The instructions for the priestly robes will serve to illustrate the dearth of specific guidance contained in Scripture. God’s instructions for the robes are,

You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a garment, so that it may not tear. On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with bells of gold between them, a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe. (Exod 28:31-34, ESV)

To a creative person, the instructions for the priestly robes provide far more questions than answers. How large were the embroidered pomegranates on the hem of the priest’s robes supposed to be? What shape were the golden bells supposed to be? How many pairs of alternating pomegranates and bells? The text only mentions two pair. It seems, however, that two pair would be insufficient to go “around” the hem of the robe.

¹³ *Genesis 1-17.*

I reject out-of-hand any characterization that portrays Bezalel as some form of divine medium. I believe that Bezalel was free to appropriately respond to God's plans for the tabernacle. God certainly could have fabricated the tabernacle himself and caused it to descend from Heaven upon a fluffy cloud. God chose instead to bless the human artisans with the task of the tabernacle's construction.

The ESV translates the Hebrew word, *chashab*, in Exod 31:4 as "to devise." When placed within its context in the verse, the translation reads, "to devise artistic designs." The ESV translation allows not only a human capacity for creativity but also an active freedom for the human artisans who appropriately respond in the Spirit.

The tabernacle that God planned was, like Adam's naming of the animals, actualized through human creativity by human artists made in the image of God. Both accounts of biblical creativity—one pre-fall, one post-fall—follow a basic operational pattern. God commands/mandates the creativity of his human creation. Humans in the freedom of communion with God respond appropriately by enacting their creative capacity. God then blesses the creative, particularized acts of his beloved humans by accepting their creations. In Genesis, God accepted and blessed Adam's appropriate, creative response. In the Exodus account of the tabernacle, God accepted each artistic interpretation of God's plan for the tabernacle and the implements used in Israelite worship (cf. Exod 30:26-29; 40:9-11).

God restrained his superior creative nature to allow his creaturely humans to act creatively. God provided the mandates: name the animals; build the tabernacle according to the pattern that I show you. Humans took God's mandates and appropriately responded with imaginative, previously unrealized forms. God provided the framework and the objectives. Humans executed the details in the freedom that exists only in partnering with God's Holy Spirit. Bezalel, Oholiab and the many artisans of the tabernacle responded appropriately in freedom.

Redemption

God has both revealed and concealed himself in history. God has chosen how, when and to whom he would reveal himself. In Eden, God spoke to Adam directly. After humanity's fall and during the Patriarchal period, God revealed himself to a small number of individuals. After the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, God primarily revealed himself to

his chosen people through the Law and the prophets in Scripture. This period of God's self-revelation culminated in God revealing himself to many people in the regions surrounding Jerusalem through his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. Finally, we live in the current period of God's revelation through his Holy Spirit, who lives within us (Gal 5:18). Today, the holistic human, made in the image of the triune God, is empowered by the Holy Spirit to appropriately respond to God's calling through Scripture and his dynamic creation and to communicate the love of God for his creation and all of humanity.

The Holy Spirit reveals Christ's mediation of God's revelation in Scripture, but we also experience God's self-revelation through the material forms of the creation. The material forms of creation necessarily include material forms shaped by human hands and immaterial ideas formed by human minds. Human formations are part of God's dynamic, living creation. Artwork then, which is appropriately created in response to the Holy Spirit, is a valid human activity and a proper form of worship.

Our imperfect acts of worship, created appropriately in partnership with the Holy Spirit, are made holy to the Father through the Son, who sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us. We as followers of Jesus are adopted into Christ as co-heirs with him. Christ takes our unworthy acts of worship and, through his person, cleanses them and makes them holy to the Father. For Christians, the primary means of mediation between God and humanity is Christ, and we are united to Christ by the Spirit.

Steven Guthrie, in his book, *Creator Spirit*, offers a view that significantly differs from Calvin's conception of the human imagination as it is engaged in relationship and partnership with the Holy Spirit:

The work of the Holy Spirit is to restore sight: to allow humans to see truly, no longer blinded by ideology...The work of the Spirit is to restore speech: to allow human beings to speak truly and creatively...The work of the Spirit is to restore freedom: to empower human beings to not only receive creation but also to become givers who add to the world.¹⁴

The re-humanizing power of the Holy Spirit allows us to see the creation properly. Through the Holy Spirit's power and guidance, Christians are

¹⁴ Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 153.

allowed to create and add to the world's transformation. Indeed, the Spirit restores our original vocation to discern the truth and to remake the world in light of that truth.¹⁵ The responsibility and freedom to envisage, shape and remake the world has always been our human vocation.¹⁶ We were designed in the triune image of God to discern creation creatively and to transform it appropriately into what he designed it to be. God's desire for humanity was applicable before the fall; it was applicable for humanity after the fall. And it is applicable in our current, redeemed age as we await the resolution of God's story in the world.

Christian worship is participating in Christ's relationship to the Father through the Spirit, and I believe that humans acting in any way that they were created to act in relationship with their triune Creator is worship in its most pure form. This worship includes acts of artistic human creativity. All worship must be made acceptable to the Father through the only acceptable offering that the Father accepts—his Son, Jesus Christ. God restores our humanity in Christ through our faith by the Spirit. We are still sinners, but the person of Jesus cleanses us through his perfect sacrifice and presents us spotless to the Father.

When discussing the capacity and expression of human creativity, which was gifted to humanity as part of being created in the image of God, we must first realize that all human artistic expression is under the curse and consequences of the fall. How then can artistic objects, created by fallen hands, be made acceptable to God? The answer to this question is simple—through worship.

Gerald Borchardt describes worship as, “one's entire life of responding to God and divine mystery.”¹⁷ As the triune God created holistic humanity in his image, so must humanity's worship of the triune God be out of the totality of being. Francis Schaeffer rightly quips, “There are no platonic areas in Christianity.”¹⁸ God made the whole person; the whole person is redeemed in Christ. Christ is Lord of the whole person, and the whole person will have a bodily resurrection and wholly completed redemption.¹⁹ The worship of God must be genuine and, reflecting the outpouring of the

¹⁵ Ibid., 153.

¹⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

¹⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament: Divine Mystery and Human Response* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

love of the triune God, must be self-giving and flow from the totality of our lives.²⁰

Artistic human creativity must be viewed under the broader category of worship. Worship is not limited to liturgical action in a building. But in our own fallen efforts, our worship is unworthy and unacceptable to the Father. There is only one true, acceptable offering to the Father. There is only one mediator between humanity and God—the incarnate Son.

Restoration

Makoto Fujimura in his book, *Culture Care*, provides a vision of flourishing for the artist of Christian faith. This vision keeps at its forefront God’s revelation of his ultimate victory over Satan and the ultimate restoration of humanity and the creation in the new Heaven and the new Earth as culminated in the New Jerusalem.

Fujimura expresses culture care as being composed of three parts: genesis moments, generosity, and generational thinking.²¹ A “Genesis Moment” is any life-giving moment or interaction that leads to a more complete understanding of our humanity as intended by God at our creation or as we are nurtured and transformed by the Holy Spirit into our future selves until our final restoration, when all things are renewed. “Generosity” refers to living life as a gift and gifting life to others out of an abundance of love for the creation and others. Generosity works, “... against a mindset that has survival and utility in the foreground. [Generosity reminds]...us that life always overflows our attempts to reduce it to a commodity or a transaction—because it is a gift.”²² This world, even in its fallen state, is a gift, and as humans we need to think of the care of our culture not in terms of just today, but in terms of human flourishing for the time that remains to humanity in this age. This long view concept of culture care for Fujimura is “Generational Thinking.”

During my own personal journey as an artist of Christian faith, I began (as do many of my art students) with the question: What kind of artwork am I as a Christian artist supposed to make? I now fully realize that this

²⁰ Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament*, 6.

²¹ Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care* (New York: Fujimura Institute and International Arts Movement, 2015), 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

is a question that impedes a Christian artist's growth rather than nurtures it. The mindset that this question reveals is simply the wrong point at which to begin, even if the desire is sincere. Fujimura perfectly distills the problem of this question but offers its answer: "I am not a Christian artist. I am a Christian, yes, and an artist. I dare not treat the powerful presence of Christ in my life as an *adjective* [emphasis added]. I want Christ to be my whole being."²³

I liken the character of this question to the epidemic of moralism that has invaded Evangelical churches. I grew up being taught in church that being good was the goal of my faith. I was to act morally, think morally and be moral in all that I said and did, or else I would disappoint Jesus in some way. This fear of doing something wrong is the same root fear that drives the above question. The question itself implies that there is some specific imagery or form of "right" or "Christian" art to do. "Christian" in the question posed and as Fujimura pointed out is being used as an adjective. And I agree that doing so fails to proclaim the weight or glory of the truth, which is Christ's supreme power and presence in our lives. My students' material or visual answers to this poorly conceived question tend to result in ubiquitous crosses and a proliferation of overt Christian visual content that reveals the lack of depth of their Christian Faith.

A visual artist's material output *is* culture, and this culture promotes a particular view of reality. Because of this, it is imperative that we artists of Christian faith proclaim the true source of all that is good in humanity, our triune God. The goal of our lives of worship and of our humanity isn't mere conformity to a moral standard—it is relationship. The triune God exists in relationship. This relationship is often described as a *perichoresis*, an interrelated rotation or dance of unity. Through Christ's redemptive act we are invited into relationship with the triune God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In *Culture Care*, Fujimura rightly states, "...the care and cultivation of culture begins with the care and cultivation of the soul."²⁴ If "the care and cultivation of culture" is understood as an individual's interaction with the whole of the created order, in other words, a life with the perpetual potential to be lived as an act of worship, then the care and cultivation of the soul begins with the care and cultivation of our relationships, especially our relationship with our triune Creator. Cultivation of the soul by

²³ Ibid., 63–64.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

answering God's invitation to the dance is the essence and beginning of a flourishing practice of human creativity. Joining the dance puts us into direct relationship to our Creator, who fills us with his Holy Spirit so that we may know the power and presence of Christ in us; so that we are continually transformed into the image of Christ that he might become our whole being.

If the creative human can be immersed in the never-ending journey of relationship with God; if the human can begin to answer the call to the dance, Fujimura describes a model by which humans can live lives that proclaim our future restoration. We can live lives that create generative moments out of our generosity, which might impact future generations.

The strength of the approach that Fujimura puts forth is that it embraces God's revealed story for humanity and all of creation. "Generative," "generous," and "generational" all conspicuously begin with "g-e-n," Fujimura's not-so-subtle reference to Genesis. In Fujimura's conception, these three "gens" are part of our original purpose and design before the fall but also a proclamation of our future restoration.

We still live within the consequences of the fall, however, so culture care begins with, "...an identification and articulation of brokenness."²⁵ It then provides a hospitable place for "truth-telling,"²⁶ and finally, it "invites people onward toward beauty, wholeness and healing."²⁷

Without even explicitly saying it, Fujimura communicates the reality of God's story for humanity and the creation to a broad audience. He provides a vision, a worldview that coincides with God's revelation to his beloved image bearers. In his three "Gs" Fujimura provides humanity's intended model of interaction with the creation (and its model when all things are restored). In his model for culture care his first step acknowledges the fall, where brokenness is identified and articulated. I believe that this is an important step for Christians to establish relationships in a fallen world. Fujimura then proposes an attitude of hospitality, where "truth-telling" can be offered out of love. It is in this second stage that in our fractured and relativistic world that we Christians might offer a vision of truth and reality that is counter to the myriad false truths that inundate the contemporary individual. It is not that people in this relativistic,

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

postmodern age are unbelievers, it is just that they believe “otherwise.”²⁸ Fujimura’s model for cultural engagement acknowledges the reality that Christianity is one of many worldviews vying for the attention of the disenchanted, questioning individual.

Fujimura’s final step of an invitation to beauty, wholeness and healing is nothing more than an invitation to place oneself into the Story of God. It proclaims our final restoration revealed in Scripture and it presents a vision of reality that the Holy Spirit can use to draw humanity back to its source and sustaining. Our invitation to beauty, wholeness and healing, is really an invitation to the dance.

Conclusion

In a Trinitarian view of artistic human creativity as worship, we worship the Father by our creative actions offered in appropriate response to his self-revelation. In our fallen state, Christ takes our human creativity as worship to the Father in the singularly acceptable offering of himself. Through the Spirit we are joined to Christ and invited to be remade into the renewed image of God in humanity, and we proclaim the future restoration of humanity and all of creation by acknowledging the fall and inviting others into the vision of our future wholeness; the model and goal of our remade humanity being Christ, who is the perfect image of God (2 Cor 4:4). Finally, it is the Holy Spirit who is the vehicle by which our human creativity as worship is made acceptable to the Father through the person of his Son.

The model I have attempted to present in this paper, that of placing artistic creativity into the revealed story of God is a model, I hope, others may connect to in their own contexts. This integrated approach requires a basic knowledge of the revealed structure of human history from Creation, to Fall, to Redemption, and to our ultimate Restoration. It will also require a basic understanding of fundamental Christian theology. Finally, it will require some effort on the person’s part to go more deeply in knowledge, faith, but most importantly, in relationship with their triune Creator.

When my students ask their questions about what kind of art “Christian” artists are supposed to make, I answer them with this answer that I offer to you: answer the invitation to the dance. Dance in the trans-

²⁸ James K. A. Smith, *How (NOT) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 47.

forming unity of our triune God, our source of life. Trust that the Spirit will mature you spiritually and transform your human creativity through the process of being remade into the image of Christ. And may the totality of our holistic humanness be forever offered as praise to the Father through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Recommended Resources

Francis A. Schaeffer. *Art and the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

Cameron J. Anderson. *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.

Makoto Fujimura. *Culture Care*. New York: Fujimura Institute and International Arts Movement, 2015.



"Why come ye here"

Richard Cummings

Polyurethane foam, heat and chemical transfers, metal leaf

2019

Image courtesy of the artist

The Creative Spark in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien

Louis Markos*

Most fans of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien are aware that the creators of Narnia and Middle-earth were part of a group called the Inklings. Together with such Christian thinkers and writers as Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Nevill Coghill, and Lewis's brother Warren, Tolkien and Lewis would meet twice a week to read aloud and discuss their works in progress—on Tuesday mornings at a local pub known as The Eagle and Child (or Bird and Baby); on Thursday evenings in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College.

Although all of the Inklings were believers, and although their conversations would naturally have included elements of their shared faith, the group was by no means a Bible study or a forum for discussing theology, apologetics, or the Christian life. They gathered together for a specific purpose: to encourage and critique, often pointedly, each other's writing. All of the Inklings took seriously their individual callings as writers, and all, whether they wrote fiction or non-fiction, had a high respect for creativity, imagination, and inspiration.

As Christians writing in a strongly secular age, the Inklings had much need of the intellectual, emotional, and moral support they gave each

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other. There was, however, a second reason they needed that support. Most were committed to defending worldviews (Plato and Aristotle, the Catholic Middle Ages, the anti-Enlightenment Romantics) and/or writing in genres (science fiction, fairy tales, fantasy) that were not taken seriously by the literary and academic world. In order to say what they wanted to say and to remain true to the inner vision they felt compelled to share with the reading public, they needed to inhabit those discarded worldviews and make use of those despised genres.

But how is one to do so in an age that is often hostile to both? The solution that Lewis, Tolkien, and the Inklings found centered around fellowship with sympathetic writers who could help nurture the spark of creativity and fan it into flame. Lewis found his way to Christian faith by following, Socrates-like, the arguments wherever they led. He found his way into a successful and enduring writing career by likewise following the images in his head and the longings in his heart wherever they led. In both journeys, he was given vital support by Tolkien and the other Inklings.

Pictures in His Head

Though many Christian readers of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* think that Lewis set himself the project of retelling the gospel and then invented Narnia and Aslan to allow him to do so, Lewis himself gave the lie to that belief. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* does, in fact, replay the gospel story, and Aslan does represent what the Second Person of the Trinity might have been like had he been incarnated in a magic world of talking animals and living trees, but the novel did not begin that way.

As Lewis himself explains in “It All Began with a Picture” (anthologized in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*), “my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head.” In “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” (also anthologized in *On Stories*), he lists three of the seed images that would later flower into *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: “a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion.” At first, Lewis admits, there was nothing particularly Christian about the images; all that would come later.

Before Lewis the man could factor in his faith, the images needed to find the proper form or genre through which they could be brought to life. Lewis goes on to explain: “As these images sorted themselves into

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To compare the of the past
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state of culture is not favorable to vice-
barbarism. It would seem on the contrary that
knowledge, refinement and industry tend to
make men virtuous. The of the
crimes of savage and of the of the
because they do not of the of the
are not recorded, or if a recorded repel us,
since a cultivated mind can find no pleasure in
reading of crime, and murder, and brutish orgies;
whereas, unfortunately, such is the weak-
ness of man when sin loses its grossness it
seems even to those who are not depraved to
lose something of its evil.

But after all has been said it must be re-
cognized that the history of culture does not justify
us in thinking that it is able to create a pure
and genuine morality. At best it but throws
the cloak of decency over the naked which it is

St. C.S.

Tyrus Clutter

Watercolor, casein, and gold leaf on antique book page
2009

Image courtesy of the artist

events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. And the moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and ‘gas.’”¹

The kinds of literary forms that were popular in Lewis’s day—with their heavy emphasis on satire and cynicism, psychoanalysis, and sexually-explicit realism—were incompatible with the images that Lewis saw in his head. Had Lewis tried to write, say, a D. H. Lawrence-type novel, he would have betrayed the images in his head and the kind of story they wanted to tell. Lewis felt the need to service the images and to allow them to find, organically, the form best suited to them. Having sympathetic friends like the Inklings to encourage him in his endeavors gave Lewis the courage to persist with the form he had fallen in love with. (Sadly, Tolkien ended up withdrawing his support for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, not because he disliked the fairy tale form, but because he considered them, incorrectly, to be allegories, a style of writing he disliked.)

Still, once Lewis had allowed the images to find their proper form, he permitted himself the luxury of factoring his own Christian faith into the mix. He writes,

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.²

I quote this fascinating passage in full, for it takes us to the very heart of the creative process. The inspiration begins with pictures whose origin is

¹ C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said” in *On Stories* (New York: HBJ, 1982), 46.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

unknown, but the finished product runs those images through the mind of Lewis the English professor (with his specialized, academic knowledge of the strengths and limitations of each literary genre) and the heart of Lewis the adult convert to Christianity (with his personal, intimate knowledge of those aspects of religion that attract and repel the skeptic and the seeker). Lewis didn't choose the fairy tale form because it would allow him to write about Christianity; rather, once he chose the fairy tale form, he saw how it could help him to minister to Christian readers in a new way.

As Lewis makes clear in "Sometimes Fairy Stories," he never intended his Chronicles to be only for children. The only sense in which he wrote his Narnian tales for children, he explains, was "in the sense that I excluded what I thought they would not like or understand; not in the sense of writing what I intended to be below adult attention." It was, in fact, Lewis's firmly held opinion—one that he shared with Tolkien—that "a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then."³

"The Fantastical or Mythical," insists Lewis, "is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none." It has the capacity, for young and old alike, to embody the general in a concrete way. "But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life,' can add to it."⁴ Lewis does just that in his Chronicles of Narnia, but he didn't set out to do it. In the beginning, there were only the pictures and the commitment of the author to find the right form and purpose for those pictures.

Bringing Language to Life

Just as readers of the Chronicles too often think that Lewis created Narnia out of an urge to evangelize, so readers of *The Lord of the Rings* too often think that Tolkien first wrote the stories of Middle-earth and then invented his own languages to flesh out the world he had created. The process, in fact, was exactly the opposite. As Tolkien explains in the opening paragraph of his "Foreword to the Second Edition," *The Lord of the Rings* "was primarily linguistic in inspiration and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of 'history' for Elvish tongues."⁵

³ Ibid., 47-48.

⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), xv.

Lewis began seeing the pictures in his head when he was a teenager; Tolkien likewise began inventing languages when he was a boy. Those languages became so real for him, that he eventually began to construct stories to embody them in a physical world of cause and effect, creation and fall, struggle and loss, destruction and redemption. According to Genesis 1, God spoke the world into being; according to John 1, God's divine Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Tolkien, of whom it was correctly said that he had gotten *inside* of language, allowed the words he had invented—particularly his extensive linguistic trees of elvish, dwarfish, and human names—to take concrete form in the history and geography of Middle-earth.

The Inklings no more helped Tolkien write his *Lord of the Rings* than they helped Lewis write his Chronicles or his science-fiction trilogy, but they encouraged both men to bring to life their sweeping tales and vivid landscapes. Tolkien certainly would not have finished *The Lord of the Rings* were it not for Lewis's constant and indefatigable encouragement and enthusiasm. The fire out of which Tolkien's epic fantasy was born may have started with a white hot spark, but the fire itself was slow burning, taking him a full twelve years (1937-49) to complete the manuscript, and an additional five to get it published. Still, Tolkien, with the help of Lewis and the Inklings (and his loyal son Christopher), stayed true to the initial creative spark, fashioning a world that rose up out of his passion for philology and the power of words.

So much for Tolkien the scholar and master of language. But what of Tolkien the Roman Catholic who shared Lewis's Christian, and medieval, worldview? Could he factor that in to his epic fantasy while yet remaining as true to the languages he had invented as Lewis did to the pictures in his head? He could, and in a similar way. Rather than impose Christianity like a strait jacket on his world, he allowed it to bubble up in the midst of his characters and events. Religion is not an add-on to Middle-earth; it is there at the core: so deep it is almost invisible.

"*The Lord of the Rings*," wrote Tolkien in a letter to Robert Murray dated 2 December, 1953, "is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion,' to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism."⁶ In

⁶ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 172.

that sense, the religion is as foundational as the languages, an essential part of the choices made and the actions performed.

Though not widely known, Tolkien makes it clear in his letters that Middle-earth *is* our earth, but in a period that is not only pre-Christian, but pre-Jewish as well. That is to say, his epic takes place long before God revealed himself to Abraham. That is why there are no direct references to God in *The Lord of the Rings*, though there are a number of subtle references to a higher providence that lies behind and beyond the War of the Ring.

Thus, after explaining to Frodo (Book I, Chapter 2) how unlikely it was that Bilbo found the Ring after it abandoned Gollum, Gandalf goes on to explain: “Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker [the evil Sauron]. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you were also *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.”⁷

An encouraging thought indeed: one that injects Tolkien’s faith into the epic without compromising the purity of its literary design. While staying true to the essential nature of his world, Tolkien allows a greater resonance to hover around the edges of his grand narrative. That is because Tolkien, rather than trying to play the role of God the Creator, was content to be what he himself called a sub-creator.

Sub-Creation

Tolkien coined the phrase sub-creator in his lengthy essay “On Fairy-Stories,” which he wrote and presented shortly after the publishing success of *The Hobbit* and at the same time he was formulating and beginning to write *The Lord of the Rings*. At the end of the sub-section titled “Fantasy,” Tolkien shares a poem that he sent in a letter to the on-the-brink-of-becoming-a-Christian Lewis in response to Lewis’s having “described myth and fairy-story as ‘lies’”—though Tolkien goes on to concede that Lewis “was kind enough and confused enough to call fairy-story-making ‘Breathing a lie through Silver.’”⁸

⁷ *The Lord of the Rings*, 54-55.

⁸ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 54.

Here are the lines that Tolkien sent to Lewis (they represent a passage from a longer poem which Tolkien titled “Mythopoeia” and which can be easily accessed online):

“Dear Sir,” I said—“Although now long estranged,
 Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
 Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
 and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
 Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
 through whom is splintered from a single White
 to many hues, and endlessly combined
 in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
 Though all the crannies of the world we filled
 with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
 Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
 and sowed the seed of dragons, ‘twas our right
 (used or misused). The right has not decayed.
 We make still by the law in which we’re made.”⁹

Neither the Anglo-Catholic Lewis nor the Roman Catholic Tolkien cared for the phrase “total depravity”; though, to be fair to Reformed Calvinists, Lewis and Tolkien seem clearly to have conflated total depravity with utter depravity. That is to say, though Lewis and Tolkien believed fully in original sin, they insisted that the fall did not rob us of the image of God. We do, apart from Christ, stand outside of grace, but we have not ceased to participate in the *imago dei*.

The distinction is important, for it allows writers, whether Christian or pagan, regenerate or unregenerate, to have access to the creativity—to the making-power—with which God endowed us. We cannot, like God, create *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”), but we can allow the primary creative power of God to flow through us in a secondary way: in a word, we can be sub-creators who refract, like a prism, the pure white light of God.

Interestingly, while many believers are willing to celebrate human creativity when it is used to make religious art or to build cathedrals or to write hymns, there were many believers in Lewis and Tolkien’s day—just as there are many today—who are far less willing to extend man’s sub-creative gifts and abilities to works of fantasy. When the fiction gets too extreme,

⁹ Ibid.

and even dares to include magic, many believers get worried and suspicious. Tolkien, and Lewis came to agree with him fully, refused to do so.

Directly after quoting his poem, Tolkien goes on to explain and defend himself and all other writers of fantasy: “Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make.”¹⁰ Far from standing in opposition to our God-given reason, fantasy works in coordination with it. Indeed, unless we possess a rational understanding of how nature normally works, we will not recognize the fantasy *as* fantasy—just as we will not recognize the miracles Jesus performs in the gospels *as* miracles.

But Tolkien is not done. He goes on to defend fantasy even more vigorously, granting that it can be misused, but then forcing his readers to apply the same criteria to other human activities:

Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true? Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors’ own evil. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice. *Abusus non tollit usum* [Latin for “abuse does not take away use”]. Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.¹¹

For Tolkien, and Lewis, our creativity—and our desire to create—is ultimately grounded in the biblical revelation that we were made in the image of a Maker. We can, and do, abuse that nature and call, but then the same can be said of every human endeavor. The temptation to idolatry is ever with us, though it can be lessened if we humbly accept our status as sub-creators and remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, whether

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 55.



St. J.R.R. Tolkien

Ned Bustard

Linocut

From the book *J.R.R. Tolkien and the Arts: A Theology of Subcreation*

Image courtesy of the artist

he speak to us through images in our head (Lewis) or languages we have invented (Tolkien).

I quoted earlier Gandalf's assurance to Frodo that a deeper power was working through Gollum, through Bilbo, and through Frodo himself. Tolkien's letters reveal that he felt that the same was true of himself as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. The poet W. H. Auden was a fan and supporter of Tolkien's epic, and we are blessed to have some of the letters that Tolkien wrote to him. In his 7 June 1955 letter to Auden, Tolkien discusses the character of Tree-beard, the leader of the talking-moving trees known as Ents.

In a note to that letter, Tolkien explains that he "did not consciously invent them [the Ents] at all. The chapter called 'Treebeard,' from Treebeard's first remark on p. 66, was written off more or less as it stands, with an effect on my self (except for labour pains) almost like reading some one else's work. And I like Ents now because they do not seem to have anything to do with me. I daresay something had been going on in the 'unconscious' for some time, and that accounts for my feeling throughout, especially when stuck, that I was not inventing but reporting (imperfectly) and had at times to wait till 'what really happened' came through."¹²

Now, there have been some authors, most notably the author of *Don Quixote*, who have claimed that they were not writing their novel directly but editing the work of some other fictional writer. In most cases, the authors who make such claim are being facetious. Not Tolkien, who sincerely saw himself as a conduit through whom Middle-earth took shape. That is not to say that Tolkien considered himself a prophet taking dictation from God or even that God was using him to reveal hidden secrets about the pre-Abrahamic history of our world. Still, Tolkien took seriously his role as sub-creator and believed that God *did* work through his creativity and that he was ultimately answerable to the Creator.

Indeed, lest someone think that Tolkien was being facetious in his letter to Auden, we possess proof that at least the character of Faramir came to him from outside rather than being solely a product of his imagination—and that the appearance of Faramir actually slowed down the story Tolkien wanted to tell, turning it in different directions.

Tolkien's son Christopher served in WWII, and Tolkien wrote him often on the progress of his epic fantasy. In a 6 May 1944 letter to Christopher that Tolkien never intended for others to read, he had this to say

¹² *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 211-212.

to his son: “A new character has come on the scene (I am sure I did not invent him, I did not even want him, though I like him, but there he came walking into the woods of Ithilien): Faramir, the brother of Boromir—and he is holding up the ‘catastrophe’ by a lot of stuff about the history of Gondor and Rohan.”¹³

In a letter that he had sent Christopher just one week earlier (30 April 1944), he describes the scene where Faramir appears, but has nothing to say of Faramir. These two letters, to my mind at least, offer proof that Faramir was “given” to Tolkien as a gift of inspiration rather than being planned by the author himself. Which is not to say that Tolkien was a passive writer who took dictation from God. Once the creative spark was vouchsafed him in the form of Faramir, it was up to Tolkien to nurture and fan it . . . with the support, encouragement, and criticism of Lewis and the Inklings.

Living the Legacy of Lewis and Tolkien

Like Lewis and Tolkien, there are many Christians today who are dismayed by the current state of imaginative literature (and film). While criticizing modern science-fiction and fantasy for embodying a relativistic and even nihilistic worldview and for brimming over with gratuitous sex, violence, and profanity, literary-minded Christians tend to ignore, ridicule, or deride Christian-made novels and movies for being poorly constructed, overly sentimental, and unsubtly didactic.

If we are to remain true to the vision and practice of Lewis and Tolkien, then we must cease to complain about the work of secular humanist writers and filmmakers and to look down our noses at the work of our Christian brethren. Instead, we must seek to nurture the creative spark that God has implanted in us and allow the Holy Spirit to fan that spark into a roaring fire. But, in doing so, we must not fall into the trap of using our creative gifts merely to prettify a moralistic sermon. Bad literature is bad, whether it is written by a Christian or an atheist.

Let us, like the creators of Narnia and Middle-earth, fall in love with fantasy, with the richness of its form and the possibilities it offers for exploring the beauties of nature and the wonders of man in a perpetually fresh, strange-but-familiar way. Let us fashion worlds where outer realities

¹³ Ibid., 79.

provide windows into the inner workings of the human heart and soul, and then, and *only* then, irradiate those worlds with the light and grace that flow from the gospel.

And let us gather ourselves into writing groups where we can encourage each other to stay true to the strictures of good writing and filmmaking while imbuing all that we do with a worldview energized by creation, by the God-given gift of language, and by the incarnation, ministry, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection of the Word Made Flesh. Our world is in great need of literature so loved and so fashioned.

Without the mutual support and constructive criticism that they received from each other and from their fellow Inklings, neither Lewis nor Tolkien would have matured into one of the finest Christian sub-creators of the modern world. The same holds true for those of us who would follow in their footsteps.

Recommended Resources

After reading, or re-reading, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, make sure to read “On Fairy-Stories” and the essays in *On Stories* referenced above. Though the recent Hollywood Narnia films were well-made, it is only *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy by Peter Jackson that captures fully the imaginative vision of Tolkien. I would highly recommend you spend twelve hours and watch a marathon of all three films in the extended edition. Do this with a group of fellow Tolkien lovers. Another way to experience the creative spark of Lewis and Tolkien (alone or in a group) is to spend a long car ride listening to the excellent radio plays of the *Chronicles of Narnia* (made by Focus on the Family) and *The Lord of the Rings* (made by the BBC).

To get inside Lewis’s head as he constructed his Narnia books (and his science-fiction trilogy), read Michael Ward’s magnificent *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford, 2008; reissued in a simpler, more accessible format as *The Narnia Code*). To do the same for Tolkien, I would suggest Peter Kreeft’s *The Philosophy of Tolkien*:

The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings (Ignatius, 2005) and Ralph Wood's *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (John Knox, 2003).

Of my own books, the ones that best complement this essay are *From A to Z to Narnia with J. R. R. Tolkien* (Lampion Press, 2016), *From A to Z to Narnia with C. S. Lewis* (Lampion Press, 2015), *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis* (Moody, 2012), *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (IVP, 2010), and two sub-creative children's novels in which my kids become part of Greek mythology and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: *The Dreaming Stone*; *In the Shadow of Troy* (Lampion Press, 2015, 2017).

Creating the World in 24 Frames

Curt Wilkinson*

Film— a Metaphor for Creation

Consider what it means to make a film. Each word of dialogue, every shot, and every sound is designed to control how the story begins, middles, and ends. A film brings to life a “cinematic world,” and filmmakers obsess over the smallest details of their creation. Film has the power to bring to life what the mind can conceive—and with convincing special effects, the imagination knows no limits. Filmmaking allows you to play God! The medium allows cinematic storytellers to create with a freedom that exists outside the physical bounds of time and space—to *infinity, and beyond!*

Now we know from stories, old and new, that it doesn’t end well for those who seek to be God. Filmmakers, by nature, are control freaks, and it’s not surprising to find in their films a reality created in their own image. A good theologian must cringe. They cringe, mind you, not because they dislike film. I would argue just the opposite. Theologians are “God’s storytellers,” and few would know better, that films have significant power to move the human heart. It’s just that films are volatile, they’re like dynamite—in the wrong hands, they can be dangerous and destructive, but in the right hands, a powerful force for good.

It’s film’s power for good that motivates a thought provoking question:

What if the craft of filmmaking was pursued as sacramental work?

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Now, I'm not suggesting that this isn't already happening. Many filmmakers, often covertly, are doing a masterful job of cinematic storytelling based on the (visible/invisible) foundation of a Christian worldview. Films from all over the world have demonstrated this sacramental¹ role by re-enacting the gospel story of redemption, and other central Christian themes. We would do well to take note and recognize the films that do, and that is the goal of this essay, to begin a conversation that is intentional about identifying, not what makes a film Christian, but more importantly, what makes a film "good," and by definition therefore God's. This is the end game for filmmaking that is sacramental, to represent God's sovereignty over *all* of life, and in every story.

To begin this conversation, let us consider five key story elements that will allow us to critique and create films that pursue a sacramental goal.

1. Sacramental films present a story world where the metaphysical exists and God reigns.

In 2 Kings 6, Elisha and his servant wake up one morning to find the city of Dothan completely surrounded by the Syrian army. Elisha prays, and God opens the eyes of his servant to reveal a heavenly army of horses and chariots of fire. Through this story, the rules that govern the world of the entire biblical narrative are revealed—human circumstances always take place against the supernatural backdrop of a just and gracious God. This story, and the rest of the biblical narrative set sacramental filmmaking in a unique context where the will and work of God affect the plot in significant ways.

This is not to say that God must physically appear in a film if it is to be sacramental. God's sovereignty is often better portrayed through story events and His invisible providence. Many have attempted to represent God in visible form, but very few seem to get it right, although Lewis gets high praise for Aslan. *The Shack* (2017) produced great debate over its representation of the Trinity, and other representations like "the force" in *Star Wars* are far too ambiguous, but all controversy aside, this core theological presupposition has to govern the story. God must reign over the world of a film if it is to be sacramental, and how we choose to represent Him requires great care.

¹ Sacramental for the purposes of this essay borrows from Calvin's description that suggests an ability of an earthly sign to represent a promise from God or a means of grace. Sacramental filmmaking is the retelling of God's story through the events and drama of a new story.

2. Sacramental films present a story world where the best choice is holiness.

I'm not suggesting that the characters of the film must be saints or even identify themselves as Christians. What this characteristic does require is that the controlling principle of right and wrong be present in the story—that sin will ultimately produce a bad outcome, and genuine holiness is something good to pursue. Identifying the presence or absence of this fundamental assumption exposes the theme that drives the story of a film. We often identify theme as the “spine” of the story, and just like the human body, even though we can't see the spine, we know it's there, and without it, the whole thing falls apart.

“Spine” serves as a good metaphor. A person without a “backbone” is considered to be a person of weak character and is unable to stand against the tests of life. A film needs an invisible spine to assert a universal truth if the story is to stand from beginning to end. In screenwriting practice this concept is described as a character's “need,” and this invisible “need” lives in juxtaposition to the character's very, real and tangible “want.” Every film represents a unique context for the characters of the story to demonstrate a struggle to get what they want. The “want” may be anything—a desire to get into college, to return from an alien planet, to find a cure for cancer, or overcome the guilt of killing your brother.

The challenge of filmmaking as sacramental work is to create a cinematic world where our natural human behavior (our wants) takes place in juxtaposition to the holiness of a just and gracious God (our need). This clash reveals the dilemma that causes our characters to make good or bad choices, and these choices in turn create the drama of a great story. Audiences are much more comfortable with the dominant secular narrative that places the “self” so convincingly at the center of the universe. We might be tempted to force the supernatural into our film through an act of *deus ex machina*. As much as we might want God to “open the eyes” of our audience, we would be wise to pursue a deeper understanding of the function of film and how audiences confront the truth through cinema. Sacramental film is not devoid of evil or bad choices, without them there would be no story. It only supposes that bad choices will always produce bad outcomes unless God steps in to redeem.

3. Sacramental films present a story world that is authentic, genuine, and true.

What makes a film “cheesy”? Most serious viewers suggest that it comes from a representation of life that comes across as inauthentic. That’s the accusation against the films produced by Hallmark, Fox Faith, PureFlix, and Sony’s Affirm Films. These studios come under attack for making films that present a sugar-coated recipe for life. Often our response to bad film is to be critical and snarky. It’s so easy to judge the work of others, but it takes hard work to seriously study the reasons why some films succeed, and others fail.

A mark of a good film is its ability to “suspend our disbelief” and allow us to vicariously project ourselves in the role of the protagonist. This is known as “suture theory” in cinema studies. Suture theory suggests that we can be metaphorically “stitched” into the story world of the film. It suggests that film has the power to draw us into the story in such a way that we identify with the subjects of the film. This allows us to internally experience the story firsthand. In this way, films function as the “flight simulators” of life.

Several years ago, I received a phone call from an old college friend. Many years had passed since our last interaction, and I was looking forward to catching up. When I pulled up to the address he had given me, I was puzzled. Instead of a coffee shop, it was a hotel. I walked in and suddenly found myself in the middle of a presentation for a pyramid marketing scheme!

Inviting a viewer to enter a film where they identify with the story represents an element of trust on their part, and no one wants to be tricked. The audience wants to know that the story you deliver in the next 90-120 minutes will be worth it. Unfortunately, faith-based films are notorious for blindsiding the audience with a plot line that forces the filmmaker’s worldview through a trumped-up set of story circumstances. Filmmakers may be well intentioned, but to understand how narrative films work is to understand that they are not by nature didactic. Producers in Hollywood have been known to say, “If you want to send a message, send a telegram.”

In reality, most people sit down to watch a film because they want to be entertained. It spoils the experience when we’re told what the story means or what to believe; the genius of story is that it can allow us to figure those things out on our own. Films don’t teach through the front door, but they can have a profound effect when the moral of the story slips in through the

back. Give your audience every reason to trust you as you seek to genuinely represent life in all its beauty and brokenness.

4. Sacramental films present a story world filled with wonder.

What makes a film predictable? In the case of Christian film, it often comes from the notion that we've got God figured out. Embarrassingly, that's the narrative that so many of us are looking for. We want to hear stories where God behaves in ways we expect, and in the end, He is faithful to give us what we want. So many of these films represent a world far too small, and a God far too predictable and tame. Sacramental film doesn't put God in a box, it establishes a world of wonder, mystery, and awe.

A few years ago, I was asked to teach a photography course in Israel. As part of the trip, we had the opportunity to travel to the southernmost city of Eilat on the shore of the Red Sea. Looking across the water to the east you could see the dry, colorless desert land of Egypt. As a scuba diver, I was moved by the irony of this place. To look only at the surface was to be unmoved, but to look below the surface was to see the glory of God. Vibrant color, striking coral, schools of fish and sea creatures each one begging the question, "How did they get here?"

This we believe to be the "mark" of the Maker, evidence of intelligent design, and proof of a Creator. We can insert similar evidence into our stories and films. Interestingly, film lovers call these little clues "Easter eggs," and filmmakers carefully place them in their films for those willing to seek. G. K. Chesterton bids us look for the "divine auteur" when he writes, "I had always felt life first as a story: and if there's a story there is a story-teller."² This is the imprint of God on the human condition, the archetype on which all stories are based— "Once there was a garden, and we long to return."

Wonder takes us to a vulnerable place. When we wonder, we let our guard down and allow ourselves to respond or resonate with what we experience. To "resonate" with a story can be compared to someone who calls out loudly on the open strings of a piano. Some strings "call back." A string's response is involuntary, and no stubborn resistance would allow those notes to remain silent or still. Wonder in a film functions similarly. When the strings of the soul resonate with a story, the deepest

² G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959).

thoughts and emotions are stirred and resonate with the frequencies of the *imago dei*.

5. Sacramental films present a story world where redemption is pursued and revealed.

As intentional filmmakers of faith, we would do well to go deep in our understanding of redemption and how we represent it. As artists, we work with symbols and metaphors, and sadly, many of these devices fall short. We must pursue the scholars and scholarship that inform our understanding of God and how to represent the power of redemption in our films.

My work and passion as a professor is to cultivate the next generation of faithful filmmakers who understand the power of redemption. Originally, I thought to give this essay the title, "Letter to a Young Filmmaker," but I'm convinced there is an interest and concern for film that extends beyond academia. I often compare the craft of filmmaking to studying the culinary arts or the education offered at a music academy. How do we move our film practice to "higher ground" replacing junk food for *haute cuisine*, and three chord pop tunes for symphonic orchestration? My consolation is that the medium of film as an art form is still in its infancy. I get jealous when I think of a pre-flood Jubal making music and that for thousands of years musicians have developed the music pedagogy that now informs my daughter's piano lesson. Film was invented in 1895, and the concept of editing shots in a sequence to tell a story didn't take place for another eight years (Great Train Robbery, 1903).

Today's instant access to media combined with the mindless and effortless ease with which movies can be "consumed" is reason for concern. Part of the role of film as sacramental work is to develop a more "discerning palate" and greater appreciation for film as an art form. My hope is that we may see a "turning point" (*peripetia*) in how we introduce young viewers to film. Is it possible that the finer points and nuances of genre, theme, plot, character, dialogue, sign/syntax, and sound design will become the building blocks of a child's introduction to story and film? I look forward to the day when a six-year-old will open "Filmmaking: Book One" with their teacher, the same way a child begins their first piano lesson today.

The twenty-first century brings a radical paradigm shift to media production, and filmmaking is no longer an activity for the elite few. There is a growing conviction that media literacy is an essential competency that must be taught in the early years of a child's education. The "YouTube



Justus D. Barnes (uncredited)
Still image from the film *The Great Train Robbery* (1903)
directed by Edwin S. Porter
1903
Public domain

Generation” represents a world where children not only consume massive amounts of media, but they are also capable of producing content at a very young age.

Conclusion

I have a friend who loves the cello. He grew up with the Suzuki Method, playing “Twinkle, Twinkle” and slowly progressed to more difficult pieces in high school and college. He participated in musical competitions and played with many string quartets. He loved going to the symphony. So, when he got married you might imagine his disappointment when he found out his wife didn’t share his deep passion for classical music and the orchestra. When he heard that Yo Yo Ma was coming to town, he was understandably torn. His solution made a strong impression on me. He purchased two tickets, but he and his wife only attended the first half of the concert. They spent the second half at a coffee shop talking about the music. His wife grew in her appreciation for classical music and he was able to share something he loved with his wife.

“Classics” in the world of cinema are no less intimidating. Compared to popular mainstream films they require deeper levels of engagement, plots move at a slower pace, and they often require us to read subtitles, but hopefully you might consider these poor reasons to pass on a masterpiece. A simple search of the “best films of all time,” will produce lists by The American Film Institute (AFI), The British Film Institute (BFI), and a bunch of well-known film critics with enough films to last a year or two. The top films in every list are almost identical: *Bicycle Thieves/Ladri di biciclette* by Di Sica (1948), *Citizen Kane* by Welles (1941), *Vertigo* by Hitchcock (1958), *Tokyo Story* by Ozu (1953) and *Casablanca* by Curtiz (1942).

Watch these films. Watch only half the film if you must, and then go have coffee with a friend and talk about what you observed. This is the true power of film, not in its ability to preach or teach, but in its power to pose a question. Can you determine the “spine” of the story? How did the filmmaker use the craft of film—genre, theme, plot, character, dialogue, sign/syntax, and sound design to communicate the story’s want and need? How does this story stand against the presuppositions of the Christian meta-narrative, and the elements of sacramental filmmaking? Describe the cinematic world of this film:

- Does God reign? Is the story set against the higher meta-physical reality of God?
- Is holiness honored? Do evil acts produce adverse effects?
- Are characters portrayed authentically with the freedom to make choices?
- Is this a world of wonder based on the mystery of God and the irony of His ways?
- Is the film infused with the endless pursuit and longing for redemption?

Film is a relatively new art form, and still in its beginning stages of development and expression. With careful consideration, we can intentionally pursue a theology of film that goes deeper and expects more from a movie than mere amusement. My hope is that people of faith will bring their belief and conviction to the cinematic screen just as they have through masterpieces of fine art, literature, and music. I am convinced that we must grow in our appreciation of what films can do, and I look forward to deeper discussions on how the God of the universe might fill our cinematic imaginations with Himself.

Recommended Resources

James Monaco. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Robert K. Johnson. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Brian Godawa. *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*. Rev. ed. Downers Grove: IVP, 2009.

Jerram Barrs. *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2015.

Creativity, Community, and Faith: An Interview with Sedrick Huckaby*

Richard Cummings (RC): Sedrick, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. We are so honored to have you contribute to our journal *Faithful Lives*. For this issue we could have approached the topic of human creativity in a number of different ways, but we have specifically chosen to focus on artistic human creativity. I believe that our readers will find it interesting that you are an artist of Christian faith whose work finds its expression and acceptance in the secular world.

* Sedrick Huckaby was born in 1975 in Fort Worth, Texas. His formal education in art started at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, where he studied with two excellent painters-Ron Tomlinson and Jack Barnett. He then transferred to Boston University (BFA, 1997), where he received extensive academic training in studio art. For graduate studies, he went to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut (MFA, 1999). There he immersed himself in the idea of 'art is about ideas' and expanded his conceptual horizons in art and art history. After graduation Huckaby used a traveling grant he received from Yale to explore France, Italy and Spain for two years. It was during this time in Europe that he 'came to appreciate the Old Masters' and the difference in the social conditions of art production between the present and the past. After his European residency Huckaby settled back in his hometown of Fort Worth, Texas where he has continued to make art until the present day. Huckaby has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards including a Guggenheim Award, a Jone Mitchell Foundation Grant and a Lewis Comfort Tiffany Award. Most recently he was named the Texas State Artist for 2018. Sedrick is married to artist Letitia Huckaby and is the father of three children, Rising Sun Huckaby, Halle Lujah Huckaby and Rhema Rain Huckaby.

His works are in the collections of American Embassy in Namibia: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas: African American Museum, Dallas, Texas: McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York: and the Tyler Museum of Art, Tyler, Texas" ("About," Sedrick Huckaby Studios, accessed August 2, 2019, <https://huckabystudios.com/about/sedrick>).

This was intentional on our part. There are a tremendous number of brilliant artists of Christian faith who work with more conventional Christian iconography or subjects, but for this publication we really wanted to do an article about an artist of Christian faith whose art is exhibited and marketed primarily in the secular world.

Let's start with a little bit of beginning information. Looking back, what are your first memories of art and when did you first experience creating in an artistic way?

SH: Well, I guess probably just like every . . . well, I don't know. I guess I shouldn't speak for everybody. But, as a child, I really loved art, and I liked to draw. I was introverted, so I did it all the time. And some of those experiences and memories, you know, I just remember both drawing alone, and then also drawing with my father. Sometimes I would do drawings with him. He would draw something, and then I would draw it. When we were younger, my brother used to like to draw, too. Actually, both my brothers did. So, (drawing) was just a thing that we did, and I can remember doing that since I was a child.

RC: So, you remember drawing as a child. Was it a natural thing for you to do? Was there some kind of intellectual fascination for you, or did the urge to draw just flow from you?

SH: I think of it as natural you know? I really feel like all children draw or at least make art of some sort. Even if it's making origami birds, or whatever it is, children are naturally creative. I'm sure I did more than draw, but I can remember drawing the most. And at that time, it was just like what kids do, it was superheroes, cartoons; it was the stuff that I liked. And I can remember switching from just pencil to color pencils or to colored inks. All of it was just . . . it was very entertaining, and I liked to do it.

RC: I expected you to answer that way. I can remember always drawing as a child as well. It was just something that I naturally did. Drawing was as natural as going to church for me. I just remember always doing it. Did you grow up with a church background?

SH: I did. My parents had me in church ever since I could remember. We're members of the Church of God in Christ.



Sedrick Huckaby in Front of *Just a Few Patches*

Image courtesy of the artist

RC: When did you first know that you wanted to become an artist?

SH: You know, at a young age. I knew I wanted to do something with art; I just didn't know what. And at one point, I thought I would go to the art institute and do graphic design, but in high school, I took this class. It was a program actually. It was initiated by a group called The Imagination Celebration. And they would do creative things in conjunction with the Fort Worth Independent School District. One of their programs was called The Young Artist Apprenticeship Program. The idea of the program was that they would take a local artist, and that artist would give lessons to talented students in the school district. And so, I won. I guess it was kind of like you have to be selected for the program, and I was one of the ones selected. So, I started taking these classes with one of their local artists named Lon Tomlinson, and my first time ever painting was under Lon.

RC: When you did finally get into painting, was it sort of like, "Wow, I kind of like this. This is what I want to do now," or was your entry into the painting medium a bit more gradual?

SH: Well, it was just an extension of what I was already doing. And as a young person, I didn't have any kind of barriers to doing anything. For instance, I knew I liked art, but I also knew that I hadn't tried a lot of things, and if I could try something, I would. And so, I won these classes to do painting and you know painting wasn't necessarily usually a part of the stuff that I did. But every now and then, you know, we got to paint, and it usually wasn't with oil paint. It was usually with, maybe gouache, or maybe some kind of acrylic, and most of the times when I (painted), I didn't have very much instruction. You just take it and do what you can. And I had that kind of painting experience, I'd done that, basically throughout art classes before studying under Lon. But this was the first time that I got to paint with oil paint *and* under instruction. And so, you know, it was just an extension of what I was already doing. I was already doing drawings and stuff, and then I got this opportunity, and I really looked forward to it.

I used to watch this show called "Good Times," with Deana Walker, and there was this artist on the show, or there was an actor on there who was acting like an artist (the actual art is by an artist named Ernie Burn). But those pictures—the paintings—they always were pretty creative and very interesting to me. You know there was this one where the (paintings)

coming on and you can see all of these people in it. It was like a club scene or something, but there was also another one that was like a family thing—a family portrait of them. And if you watched the show, there were times when the artist was painting one thing or another, and I was always fascinated by that. So, the opportunity to learn how to use oil paints, which is what I thought that he was using, that was right up my ally.

RC: That is so interesting. I can remember watching “Good Times” as a kid, and I vaguely remember one of the characters painting. I have a master’s degree in painting as well, and even though I work in assemblage now, every time I smell oil paint, you know, I can feel the texture of the paint, and I can feel the brush in my hand. The turpentine and . . .

SH: And the memory comes back.

RC: It sure does. Funny how those memories can illicit visceral feelings inside of us. So, your formal schooling after high school—where did you go to after high school?

SH: The teacher that I was telling you about, he taught at a local college, and when I first went to school, I went to college to learn under him, since I had already been learning under him. But after being at that college for two years, they were ending the resident artist program, and he wasn’t going to be teaching there anymore. When they dropped him, I left the school. That’s when I transferred to Boston University, which is where I received my undergraduate degree.

RC: Okay, you go from a university in Texas, which is a Christian college, to Boston University and then onward to Yale for your MFA. Did you experience any external challenges or internal conflicts as a developing artist due to your Christian faith as you are progressing through those environments?

SH: Definitely. Definitely. First, even a school like my first college, although it had that (Christian) name, it didn’t necessarily abide by Christian rules. You know what I mean? A lot of schools have Christian names, but don’t necessarily abide by those principles. But me, myself, even though I was raised in a Christian household, I hadn’t wholeheartedly just given my life over to Christ either. So, at both times when I started school, one school

to another, I sort of had accepted my Christian upbringing and Christian principles. But at the same time since I hadn't given my life all the way to Christ, I was kind of, you know, one foot on one side of the fence and one foot on the other. And because of that I was subject to a lot of stuff in college. The first thing I remember after going to Boston University was one of the professors sort of introducing me to the theory of evolution. I can remember having long conversations with him about it—back and forth—and he would sort of treat it like I should have known this already, you know. This was a thing that if you don't understand this, we can't keep going back to reteach people *like you*.

You know they didn't teach us this stuff in school. I was running into all of this stuff. . . . I think Texas was a little bit of a safe place because I knew so many people, and the people that I knew sort of existed in a certain circle. When I left Texas, I was all alone, you know, and that was a different story.

And you know it's interesting too, because, in terms of our conversation, we're looking at it in terms of being Christian, but I mean that bubble, it's a really wide bubble. I remember going to a debate at Boston University and the debate essentially had to do with the assertion that because of evolution, African-American people were just naturally less. They had less mental capability than other races because maybe they were earlier on in the evolutionary chain. And this was the debate. One person was debating pro and another person was against it. But those are the kind of things you wonder to yourself just like, wow, really.

RC: I can't imagine what that would even be like.

SH: It was just the strangest thing. They were debating, and my mouth was just dropping. That there were people out there that thought maybe African-American people were not as smart as other groups because of evolution. I didn't know what to say.

RC: So how did you go through that environment and end up solidly Christian in your faith? You said that you hadn't fully given your life to Christ—so can you take me through how that process [of being fully devoted to Christ] happened for you?

SH: So, you know, you're meeting people, you're learning stuff, whatever, it's all a learning process. Through it all, I would say in some ways I was

placed in my faith, wondering if the things I had learned growing up were right. I still thought about those [Christian] things as well. I think it probably is that you're taught certain things and that even when, or if, a person loses faith, they'll never let go completely. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm sure there's some examples out there, but I would imagine that maybe some of the ethics, the Christian ethics, they wouldn't let go of me.

So, there were things that I just couldn't let go of even in those environments. I think I was struggling—I know I was struggling—in some areas of faith. I would even say maybe to a certain degree that I had lost my faith. It's not like I didn't believe, but I thought there was more to things than what I knew. But, I guess the thing that happened is, there was always someone, periodically, that I would run into.

For instance, I was at Yale you know basically in a pretty large secular group. People did whatever kind of thing—everything. But I met a young lady who was a Christian, and she invited me to a function that [her Christian group] was having. And it was a function that had to do with whether you were called to do the thing you had been doing or if you were driven to do it. I thought that'd be interesting, so I went with her to this thing. It was something—a little thing—that sparked in me, that made me think about—for instance that young lady who invited me, she made me think about the young lady who I was currently dating at the time. Because I was looking at this young [Christian] lady saying, “Wow, look at how nice she is, how respectful she is.” You know the church environment, it was really engaging some of the stuff that they were talking about. And the young woman who I was currently seeing, was just—she was radically different. Let's say it that way.

So, [this event] made me think, “Wow, you know, I think I'm going the wrong direction here.” I saw the right direction in her, and it made me see that some of the other stuff might not be the right direction. So, there were always people like that [showing up]. I ran into her at Yale. Then after Yale, I remember some time after I came back to Texas, there was a friend of mine. One night we sat up talking, and he made me think a little harder about everything, you know? We talked and talked and talked. I don't know whether he was right or wrong, but we talked about everything in the world.

He made me think about—basically, he made me think about love again, made me rethink about love—the truth about it. And he made me think about, for instance, how some of the professors and classes that I was taking in school made certain conclusions, and new information



Her Hands on the Word

Sedrick Huckaby

oil on canvas mounted on wood panel

2008

Photo by David Wharton

disproved [those conclusions]. The professors were wrong. And if I came back to them and questioned them years later about them being wrong they'd say "Oh well, we just made a mistake. Sorry, man. Oh, this took you off the deep end of life? Well, we're sorry about that, but we were wrong."

Then I thought about my parents who, you know, you think about them—they gave birth to you. You think about how they cared. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they cared, and they loved me. And I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they would want me to solely embrace the Christian faith, and I put myself in their position for a moment. In thinking about if I had a child—and I know my parents loved me as a child—if there was anything that was sort of wrong, you would guide the child the best way that you know how. If you saw your children half-knowing something, you would let them know that—they'll have to figure this out a little bit. But there are certain things you teach that child that you are definite about.

And I thought about the things my parents were definite about, and the one thing they were definite about was our faith. And faith was a sure thing that had been able to bring us through situations as a family. Faith took my parents' parents through certain situations and allowed us to make it, you know? Generation after generation. And my friend, in questioning me, said, "You know, this faith . . . you know it brought your great-grandparents through. It brought your grandparents through, and it's bringing your parents through, but it's too good for you?" And that made me rethink. I had to step back and think about that. And that's why I said love—love was the difference, because I had to think about love as I sat and thought about it all. Love is the start. And so, it sent me looking back at the Bible, and it sent me back looking for answers. And, you know, one thing leads to another, and it led me back to Christ. And back to faith.

RC: Sometimes, unfortunately, that's not how the story ends. Often times young persons who go into the secular environment who have come from a Christian background—it doesn't always end that way.

SH: Right now, one of the things is that my niece, she is going off to college. One of the things that I was advising her, I was like, "Look, you should do this. When you go to college, get connected with some of the Christian groups and the young people who believe." I didn't do that. Had I done that, it would've made a lot of difference.

RC: Excellent. Thinking about the motivation and the content of your artwork, why do you do the artwork that you do?

SH: It is complicated. I found that I really enjoy making art, and that it gives me a particular voice—a sort of certain artistic voice. And, with that artistic voice, I am able to project maybe louder and with much more, if I could say this, poetic articulation than I could just by talking. And so, I found that I love talking with visual language.

RC: Talking with a visual language: that's so true. So, what are the stories that you feel compelled to talk about in the visual language of your work?

SH: One of the things about visual language is that, in something like painting, it's a medium that can be layered, and it's one that can reveal itself slowly versus things that might be more immediate. There is always an immediate thing. You walk up to a painting, and there it is. You can see it and take it in in a moment's notice. But, there's also something that can happen as you slow down and look at a painting; and so, through painting, I talk about my relationships. I talk about people. I talk about love. I talk about God. I talk about issues of faith. I talk about issues of family. I talk about heritage. In a nutshell, I guess that's some of the content. If I were to break it down, you know, I would say, "Faith, family, and maybe the African American community."

RC: I absolutely understand that is only a general breakdown. Now, you talked about speaking in a visual language – visual language being a different medium than speech. So, the content and the message of the painting *is* the painting and the various layers and meanings that go within that. When you start laying that out in a list of words, it can really minimize what is actually happening in the painting. But, it's the only way that we have to actually express it—by talking about it.

SH: It's interesting because I started by saying that, for example, as you paint a person, you say to yourself, "Okay it's a painting of a person." But one of the things that stands out as important to me when I'm painting an individual is that [the painting] has a sense of movement to it. If you look at the picture and, instead of being almost a photographic image, I usually paint with a lot of paint. When you look at it, the pieces have a sense of—I wouldn't say "impressionism" because it's not impressionism—but, it has

a sense of movement. And that little sense of movement, to me, speaks to something of life. Something of the sense that there's someone there—it's a replication, a painting of someone, but that little sense of movement; it speaks to this creative force that's in people—that people are living; that they move.

And so, a person would have to look at the picture and (not knowing all of the art language or whatever) what they would literally see is . . . maybe it's something about the paint. They really liked it. And then something about the way that I painted it, and it could be that it's *a lot* of paint. It's sort of like luscious layers of paint. But, what it is, as they look at it, there's a sense of a realistic image and they're convinced by the imagery. But other times there's this movement, and the movement of the paint and the mark. And I hope sometimes that they can get lost in that.

All of that speaks to looking at things creatively, and if I can shift lenses here, I think about God as a creator. God is making stuff, and you know how you mix a little bit of this and that, what a difference it must have been when he pulled [clay] up out of the ground and started forming it. I think you see this creative element in my work. And that creative element, that moving element—creativity, the movement in it—it's a subtle way of a creative being exploring the creativity of a created being . . . if that makes any sense?

RC: That makes tremendous sense. So, what role does your community and sense of place play in your work?

SH: It's pretty important. That was the one thing that kind of caught me. When I left the area on the way to school, it was sort of like being tossed into the fire to some degree. I was out there and didn't know anybody and I was right in the middle of a different, secular community. What I learned . . . ? I think the saying is: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." So, when I was away, I constantly thought about the people back home. I thought about situations back home. I thought about the things that we went through. I thought about the things that the people [at home] go through, and I thought about the struggles and the hopes that people have. I thought about all of those things.

When I was at Boston University we were required to paint from models. Models would come in and we would just paint them. Once

I got to Yale, I was able to choose the people I wanted to paint, and, subconsciously I believe at that time, I was looking for people who looked like people from home—that reminded me of the people I knew. I didn't realize it at the time. I didn't know that I didn't want to paint this person, but I wanted to paint that person right there. But, all of it was because of a concern and a love that I had for my community.

So, at some point I came back home to paint paintings of my family and paint paintings that deal with place. I think in my mind I thought it was to paint paintings that deal with family, but I think, looking back it was less about family, it was more about place. It was about community. What I've discovered is that place has become an important part of who I am and the way I think about art. I have learned—I have embraced some of the struggles I've seen in my community and in communities like it, like the community that I grew up in. So, now, I am interested in talking about and dealing with those issues, and seeing how I can look at and deal with certain things.

RC: So, when you choose somebody to paint. First of all, how do you determine who you are going to paint in any given portrait that you are going to do?

SH: Different ways. For example, If I'm doing a certain project, then the project dictates who I am going to paint. For instance, one of the projects that I am doing now is painting people wearing funerary t-shirts. A funerary t-shirt is a thing I've noticed in Texas, and I think it happens in other parts of the nation as I look around. At a funeral, people make t-shirts with the deceased person on the t-shirt and you wear it to the wake or to the funeral. So, I noticed at first this was a thing that a lot of people in the African American community did, but then I also noticed it in Latino communities, and then I also started to notice it in other communities. That's one of the projects I'm working on. The project starts to dictate the choice of person.

So, what I usually do, and what happens in most of my projects is, I start at home and go abroad. I start with the people I know, and the people closest to me, and I spread out to those family, friends, community, and then to a larger community. It sort of spreads from there. The short answer is, sometimes the project will dictate the people I'm going to paint. Another piece that I'm doing, and this is a piece that was commissioned, is called "The Huckabys." It's about family, but in an interesting way. In



Our Lamentations: Never Forgotten Daddy

Sedrick Huckaby

Oil on canvas

2018

Image courtesy of Valley House

our day and age there's a lot of ancestry going on, and people are looking up their ancestors, wanting to know about their family tree. Well, I have been doing individual portraits, painting everyone individually, but I have bunched them all together, and the bunched together paintings are the piece. What "The Huckabys" is about—there are three black Huckabys and three white Huckabys. We all spell our names the same way, H-U-C-K-A-B-Y. We all live in this area, but I never knew them, and they never knew us. So, it is a bit of a project of discovering how we are connected, and then putting us together for a portrait. Again, the project dictates the person painted, and every now and then I'll do a portrait of someone.

RC: Moving into a little bit more directly with faith. Your paintings find acceptance in the secular world, and in secular markets. How is the content of your work informed by your Christian faith? Is there a direct connection or an outflowing of your faith in your work?

SH: I think that the way I think about it is—I don't know if I think about being a Christian first when I'm thinking about work. Everything as a Christian, all of your thoughts, will automatically inform your interests: What you want to paint, what is important. And all of the issues in it are—they're a part of you. They are a part of the way you think. They are a part of why you choose something and why you don't choose something. And so, I do think about it, and then I don't think about it. I do both, which is kind of funny.

For instance, the t-shirt project that I was just telling you about. In that project I was interested in mortality in the Black community. In the African American community, the mortality rate is higher than other racial groups. I wanted to talk about t-shirts that spoke not just to ordinary deaths but also to infant deaths and speak to issues that happen in our culture. You know, all sorts of issues, all sorts of types of issues that are happening in the black community. But faith means it doesn't stop there. It also goes into questioning death itself. And so, as a Christian, I started to think, "Well, hold on. What about that Scripture? 'O, death, where is thy sting?'" And so, the Apostle Paul says in the New Testament (and he's speaking about death), the sting relates to how Christ says, "Those who come to Me will never die." So, then my work calls into question death itself, looking at it and thinking about life and death.

What happens is that I think about all of those things at the same time. The pieces become this weaving together of thinking: "How does

my faith affect the way that I see death?” But then, how do I process all these different ways that people are dying? And what do we say about these things? And so that’s how I go into it. And it’s all mixed in there together.

RC: So, a person who views your work, who may be irreligious or have different religious beliefs—how much do you think about someone who’s not a follower of Christ or not a believer in Christ? Do you think about how they might view your work differently than, say, someone who might be a person of Christian faith? I guess my question is: Are you considering, in the broad audience of your work those who characterize themselves as non-Christians?

SH: Well, I have thought about it. And I try to be a bridge where the work can speak to a person right where they are. I usually never just hit a person over the head or think that just because you saw this work this one time that’s going to, you know—now you’re going to be a Christian. But, I do put in things that might make one think about those things, sometimes directly, and sometimes indirectly. So, for example, an indirect form might be some of my quilt pieces, or it could be even a portrait. If we were talking about the family portraits of the Huckabys—it’s about people who are different, seeing that they are not so different, and seeing how connected we are. And that connection, that seeing that we’re family—there’s something about that that comes from a Christian perspective. Not all the way, but you could say that this is a positive picture compared to all of the negative ones out in the world.

On the other hand, like in the quilt project, someone will look at the quilt as an object—many different groups associate with quilts. It’s just a thing that people are familiar with, and they can be comfortable looking at. But from that area of comfort some people, who are more art savvy, look at the quilts and think about how . . . the large ones . . . they look like abstract paintings almost if you crop them a certain way. Other people look at the quilts because they grew up with quilts, and their grandmother quilted, etc. But then, there is the reason why I hung this one quilt a particular way, and why I let light in on this one. What is this painting of a quilt actually about? Many times, my quilts will have difficult titles that talk about different issues of faith which are referenced through the way I hung the piece, by the way the light falls on it, by the way that I composed it. So, there is this subtle sense of faith in my work that you have to discover, and one of the ways of discovering it is exploring it.

For example, I did a large piece called “A Love Supreme.” I took that John Coltrane song named “A Love Supreme,” and I did an eighty-foot-long quilt piece called “A Love Supreme.” Its ideal configuration is a twenty-five-foot box where you can come in at any of the four corners. It’s four twenty-foot long panels that totally encompass the viewer. And when you’re inside, it’s like looking at quilts left, right, up, and down—quilts all over. But they are larger than you and have no beginning and no ending. They totally surround you, and it’s almost as if they are embracing you. They go from winter, to spring, to summer, and to fall. Each wall has a season associated with it. The piece is a metaphor. [On one level] maybe by calling this thing “A Love Supreme,” maybe someone will think about the Coltrane song. But if we think more deeply about the piece, maybe we think more about the love of God. It’s bigger than you. It totally surrounds you. Maybe we go through seasons, but God’s love is still there. It’s all encompassing. It changes looks, but it’s still there. It’s kind of woven into that as a theme.

RC: That’s beautiful. Artists have been described as world builders, prophets, visionaries, etc. Do you see yourself as any of those, or do you identify your role as something different than one of those categories?

SH: Well I don’t see myself as a prophet. I do kind of see myself as a visionary and the place that I’m at in art right now, I’ve got one form of the art that I do that goes out into the world, and it goes out, about, and around. Another form of the art that I do is based in the community, and the city, and the place where I live. That art is about community, and ultimately, I’m hoping that the art can have a great, transformative effect upon the various communities here. So, I look at myself as working at home on one hand and pushing abroad with the other. I hope that the art is an influence and finds ways that help.

RC: So, subjectively and spatially, your images are often simple in their composition, yet viewing them, one gets a real sense of the presence of the individuals you are depicting. It seems like there’s a sense of holiness or sacredness to the pieces (as far as the original sense of the words holy or sacred in that they are set apart). Are you thinking about the sacredness of the ordinary as you work, or do you somehow view the people in your work as being intentionally set apart in some way?

SH: It's not all Christian people that I paint, but, I feel like whoever you are, man was made in the image of God. So, something of the representation of God is in every last human being, and so I look at people with that as a base. Every person is incredible. Every person bears in some sense this image of God. That's part of looking at a person and seeing that this is God's creation, you know? Out of all of the things he created, he built everything around people. So, I have that fascination for people and so, I guess that's what I see when I look at people. If it's other things that I'm painting, it's about painting with a sense of wonder. It's about the material. I move the material, and I play around with the material, and I have this sort of openness and playfulness and sense of creative wonder with my materials. For instance, if I painted an eye and I came back around on another day, and I paint that same person's eye again it will probably be different. I would have made different decisions. I would have created that eye, even though it is the same eye and I still painted it the same way, but on that particular occasion it's all about when you get in with the materials and you are playing around with them that there's this certain playfulness, this creativeness about how you resolve and make a thing.

RC: I have just one more question. I am an educator of undergraduate students in an art department at a Christian college. So, what challenges do you see for the next generation of artists of Christian faith who would like to see their artwork find acceptance in the secular world?

SH: Well, one thing is: try to look through the eyes of other people. As Christians we are called to love. There is a certain love that God has for the world that we ought to have for the world. We care for a dying world, and in that sense, we have to be sensitive to what's going on. We need to know what's going on; we should know the issues—the things people are facing.

As an educator at a secular university, I run into the opposite all the time. I'll get people in my class and the issue is not that they're not making Christian art, but they're making art against Christianity. I'll run into that sometimes. When that happens, I'll talk to the student like, "What's going on?" I usually find that stuff has happened in their life that not only caused them to walk away from Christianity but caused them to actually hate it. So, it's important for us to be sensitive to what's going on in the world so that we can be a bridge. We're down here, and I'm one person talking to another person, but at the same time I should be thinking about and talking with God, and how do I communicate [God] to this student who's

down here on this earth and going through all of these things—things that are ungodly in nature?

So, I guess the advice I would give would be: be sensitive to what's going on, to what issues and problems people have with the Christian faith. Understand [the issues]. Be sensitive to people so that you know how to bring your word to them—how to present what you're trying to present to them. Many times, it's a case of finding a certain platform that you share and starting right there at that platform and then being able to go from there to a deeper and deeper state. Or, if there can be an opportunity to share the gospel message, because sometimes that can happen, it's important to understand what's going on in the world that makes people not want to share [our faith]. It's our job as artists, as creative people to sometimes say, "Let me tell you this thing from a fresh perspective."

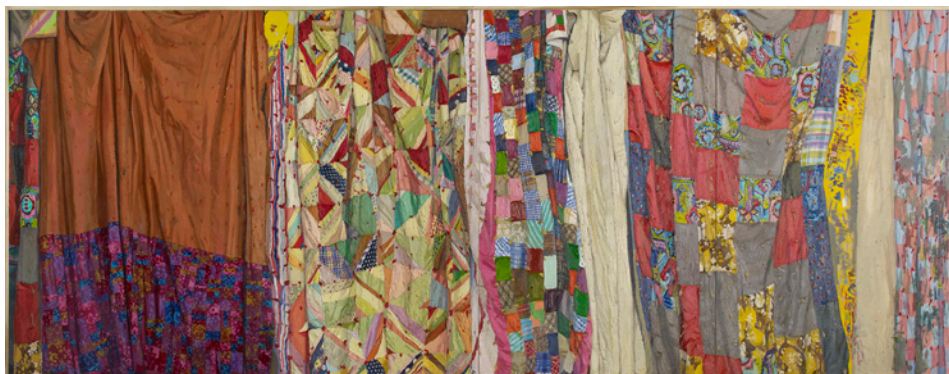
So, to answer that question briefly, I would tell students to be sensitive to the world and what's going on and think about ways of presenting their thoughts and ideas to people of this world. And we can find ways of doing that without being of the world.

RC: I am so grateful to you, Sedrick, for again allowing me to take your time and speak with you about your faith and your art. I think that it's so important for us, who have thought about the integration of the Christian faith and art to open this conversation up to the students that we have and the people and communities that we come into contact with. And I think the thoughts that you have shared provide an insight into this important conversation for people who are outside of this art world who are wondering how Christian artists live, survive, and thrive in a world that is essentially antagonistic towards us and our faith.



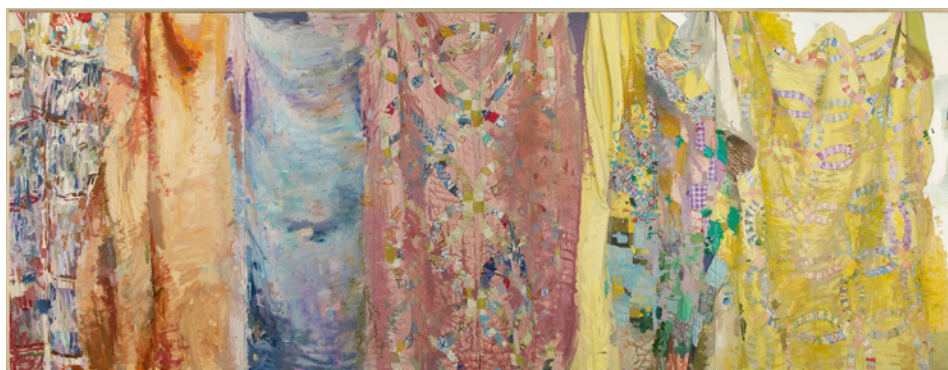
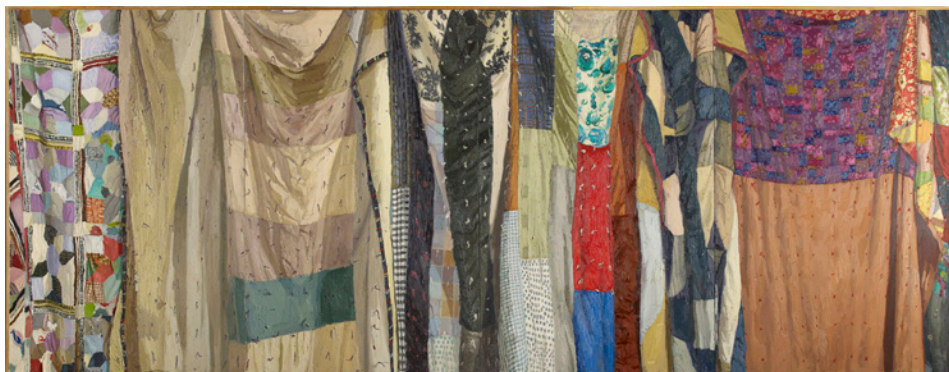
Study for Fred Huckaby,
Sedrick Huckaby
Oil on Panel
2019

Image courtesy of the artist



A Love Supreme: Summer
Oil on canvas
2001-09

A Love Supreme: Winter
Oil on canvas
2001-09



A Love Supreme: Fall
Oil on canvas
2001-09

A Love Supreme: Spring
Oil on canvas
2001-09

Sedrick Huckaby
Photos courtesy of Michael Bodycomb

Theological Improv: Creativity, Improvisation, and Faithfully Enacting Christian Theology

William R. Osborne*

Given I am a Bible professor, many of my students are shocked when I tell them that my motivation for learning to play the guitar was a face-melting solo by Slash, the lead guitarist of Guns N' Roses. I'll never forget seeing Slash wail on his sunburst Gibson Les Paul in what seemed to my 14-year-old mind like the rare air of a musical Mount Olympus. Moments later I ran out of my room and stared at my mother with all of the teenage seriousness I could muster and blurted, "I *have* to learn to play the guitar! Can I *please* have guitar lessons?" While, I am sure some groveling and discussions about practicing and responsibility ensued, the final verdict was, "Yes."

As I progressed in my knowledge of the instrument and music, I became rather intrigued by the great jazz and blues artists of the mid-twentieth century. Specifically, I found the act of improvisational music fascinating. At the time I thought these magnificent artists simply walked into a studio or onto a stage, tuned up their instrument and proceeded to spontaneously deliver melodies that could break your heart and make you smile all at the

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same time. This is how I wanted to play the guitar. So, the process began but not the way I envisioned. Much to my surprise, my early dues to the world of improvisational guitar playing were paid with hours of *scales!* Of all things, scales had to be the antithesis of a soulful blues solo. But that's where we started mastering the fingering, picking strokes, and timing. Eventually, these scales would be played over my instructor's background strumming with pathetic and infantile attempts at creatively "mixing up" the scales so as to produce a string of notes that was as much solo as an egg is a chicken. As the years went by, and the practice continued, something began to develop in me as a guitarist. Yes, I had developed a few canned riffs that I could plug in as needed. But more importantly, I was starting to develop an ear for what sounded "good."

The Struggle of Theology

The experience described above is by no means unique to me, and anyone who has spent some time learning an instrument has likely encountered a similar process. So, the questions follow: "What is so significant about this process, and what does it have to do with living the Christian life?" In this essay, I will answer both these questions building largely on the work of Kevin Vanhoozer. Vanhoozer, more than many other contemporary theologians has reflected upon and explored Christian theology as something to be lived and embodied.¹ "Theology without spiritual formation is a recipe book from which we never cook."²

All too often in Christian circles, the word "theology" brings to mind large, bug-squashing tomes that represent the doctrinal content of historic Christianity. Theology is perceived as only a body of knowledge to be ascertained and memorized. Definitions and concepts to be mastered. But for many in the church today, this large body of information seems to have relatively little use in the everyday Christian life. Keith L. Johnson is exactly right when he diagnoses the problem saying,

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014); *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016); "Improvising Theology According to the Scriptures: An Evangelical Account of the Development of Doctrine," in *Building on the Foundations of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Honor of John S. Feinberg*, ed. Gregg R. Allison and Stephen J. Wellum (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 15-50.

² Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 180.

It is possible for a Christian to participate in the church for years and never engage in disciplined theological thinking about core Christian doctrines or the history of the church's debates about them. It also is possible for academic theologians to devote their careers to the discipline and never be asked to translate or apply the content of their scholarship to the concrete realities that shape the daily life of the church.³

Theology and the day-to-day task of following Jesus seem to exist on different planes of existence, rarely intersecting. For some this means the church is wasting its time with “theology,” and needs to get out of the ivory towers of formal education and back to the real world of “experiencing Jesus.” For these people, theology is a liability to Christian growth and discipleship, not the impetus. In sum, the struggle is real.

It is in the face of this challenge that I believe the metaphor of improvisation is highly beneficial for helping us reframe our conceptions of theology and Christian discipleship. In this essay we will first explore a few important components about *doing* theology (or theological method) and then turn our attention to how improvisation, creativity, and wisdom are helpful ideas in framing engagement with Christian doctrine.

Doing Theology

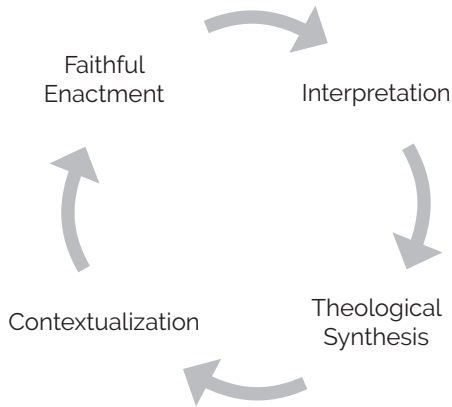
Perhaps it is the archaic Greek “-ology,” but theology is rarely perceived as something we Christians *do*. In our Western categories any “-ology” is a subject to be studied, with necessary key words, methods, and concepts. And in some ways, theology shares these qualities.⁴ However, Christian theology is unique in that it is something all followers of Christ *must do*. Vanhoozer's definition of theology highlights the active nature of Christian theology: “Theology is the art and science of living well. Stated more fully: *theology is the serious and joyful attempt to live blessedly with others,*

³ Keith L. Johnson, *Theology as Discipleship* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 12.

⁴ Really this is the question of whether or not “theology” should be considered a “science.” Millard Erickson concludes that while theology exhibits common ground with other scientific disciplines, “theology has its own unique status” (see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013], 20).

before God, in Christ, through the Spirit.”⁵ The question then becomes, “How does one *do* theology?”

For anyone familiar with the discipline of biblical interpretation, Grant Osborne’s book *The Hermeneutical Spiral* is a classic. In his final discussion on systematic theology, Osborne provides nine “hermeneutical principles” that should guide the interpretive process from reading the biblical text to applying theological systems. As the name implies, Osborne understands that these principles coexist in a revolving process that leads us ever closer to understanding and living truth. I believe these nine principles can be summarized into a four-component process for *doing* theology.



Being a cycle, one enters this process at different stages, but for the sake of explanation we will begin with interpretation. All theology has its foundation in the inspired and inerrant words of God found in Scripture. If theology is in its most basic form “thoughts about God,” such thoughts must be bound to the revelation of God found in the Bible. This component in the process of doing theology is governed by interpretative processes that seek to uncover the meaning of the biblical author, both divine and human. Through the tools of historical, lexical, grammatical, and syntactical study, one can discern the intended meaning of a particular unit of the biblical text in its historical and literary context.

However, in order to move toward living Christian doctrine, we must begin to arrive at what the whole Bible has to say about certain teachings by carrying out theological synthesis. Within this category of theological

⁵ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, xiv.

synthesis, I am including the traditional disciplines of biblical theology and systematic theology. The former wrestles with questions such as “How do we synthesize the Bible’s view of covenant?” or “How does one trace the theme of divine love through the whole canon of Scripture?” While systematic theology starts the synthesizing program from a more contemporary question: “What does the Bible teach about human sexuality?” or “What does the Bible teach about angelic beings?” Both types of questions and the theological approaches that follow are equally valid and necessary for the contemporary church to faithfully synthesize the coherent theological teachings of the biblical text. To jump from interpretation to contextualization without taking theological synthesis into account can quite easily produce dangerous proof-texting that does not line up with the whole Bible’s teaching.

Contextualization is the necessary but tricky work of transitioning from the biblical doctrines produced by biblical and systematic theology to the church’s understanding of the doctrines throughout history, up until the present. This might seem strange at first, but all theology is in a sense historical theology. When we approach a question like “What does the Bible teach about election?” we must recognize that we are stepping into a theological stream that has been flowing for millennia. Not only are we not the first to ask these questions, but our initial inclinations and answers are equally shaped by the historic and cultural forces at work in our context. Osborne notes, “While the *content* of biblical revelation is unchanging, the *form* in which it is presented is ever changing.”⁶ Since no culture is inherently “Christian,” the church in every location and in every time *must* be engaged in the process of contextualization for the gospel to be proclaimed faithfully in word and deed before the world.

Faithful enactment describes what is commonly termed “application” or certain “implications” of a doctrine. This process of *doing* theology wrestles with questions like “How does the doctrine of the atonement affect the way we live in Christian community?” or “Does the Trinity shape the way we live in our homes?” Faithful enactment serves as the theological high ground in Vanhoozer’s definition of theology. It is “*the serious and joyful attempt to live blessedly with others, before God, in Christ, through the Spirit.*” However, in order to attempt this blessed life, one must believe and understand Trinitarian realities presented in the biblical text. The path to this type of life is best walked through the processes of biblical inter-

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2006), 411.

pretation, theological synthesis, and contextualization. And as the cycle indicates, biblical interpretation is shaped by one's faith and practice. The person committed to living the Word of God is best situated to interpret it, for it is a Word to be lived, not simply read.

Improvisation and Fixed Knowledge

While one can easily fill bookshelves with theological works published on interpretive skills and methods, biblical theologies, systematic theologies, historic theology, and contextualization, far fewer volumes guide us through the next step in the process. Each one of these former categories is necessary and needed but none of them explain how we are to faithfully live out Christian doctrine. This is where Vanhoozer's work helps fill a theological void. Adopting the metaphor of the stage, Vanhoozer writes that the world is the theatre of God's glory, the church is the theatre of the gospel played out by a Spirit-filled cast, the script is the revelation of God's redemptive theodrama revealed in Christ and the Scriptures, and the setting of the stage is the current culture.⁷

As modern, made-for-tv Bible movies have shown us, the Bible does not make a complete script. When trying to retell the biblical story in film, the writers must fill in gaps that the various stories leave out. However, our lives present even more gaps! Faithful enactment is not dressing in ancient robes, adopting ancient Near Eastern customs, or stepping into the world of the Bible. It is living faithfully to the theological truths of Scripture in a world and culture far removed from the text itself. So, how does one fill in these everyday "gaps" in the script? How do we play our role on the stage when the script provides us with no lines? This is by no means intended to communicate a deficiency in the Bible, only the reality that unless we want to walk through life reciting memorized Bible verses or creeds every time a tricky conversation comes up, there must be another way to play our part.

The idea of improvisation brings together these concepts of fixed knowledge, contextualization, and performance. Peter Goodwin Heltzel has developed the relationship between improvisation and living out Christian theology. He writes:

⁷ Ibid., 23-24.

Like jazz, Christian thinking and acting are improvisational, creative, and hopefully forward-looking. Like jazz, they exemplify a dynamic of constraint and possibility. Constrained by the norm of God's Word, Christians seek to creatively engage their world in light of the Word. In their work and witness, Christians use the materials at hand — principally the language and example of the prophets and Jesus in the context of their life — to creatively riff for justice, love, and shalom in the present and thereby open up a new future.⁸

Improvisation rightly encapsulates the challenge of Christians living lives that are biblically-bound yet Spirit-liberated. We are people of the book but powered by the Spirit. When exploring improvisation within the context of music, one discovers that talented improvisational musicians are highly skilled and often have remarkable training. While I certainly do not belong in this category of musician, my ability to improvise on the guitar improved as my understanding of chord structures and my proficiency in playing scales improved. There is a fixed body of knowledge that must be understood and mastered in order to build upon it and alter it in new and exciting ways. Most forms of improvisational music, especially jazz, do not deny the fixed structures of music, and these structures provide boundaries to improvisational pieces.

Similarly, faithful theological improv demands that we too enroll in the school of biblical truth. Christian theology contains true propositions that we must be able to reproduce like scales on an instrument. However, just like scales do not make a song, theological propositions don't comprise the Christian life. Too often we let our theological study end at this point and then go through life wondering why our G-major scale (theologically speaking) doesn't really seem to make much of a difference in our everyday lives. Masterful improvisational performances are true to scales, but they never simply equal scales. So, we begin to fill in the "gaps" in the script by improvising—a process of creatively and faithfully living out the script by the power of the Spirit.

⁸ Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 29.

Improvisation and Contextualization

Interestingly, while improvisation builds upon the fixed structures and boundaries of music, those structures and boundaries are shaped by genre and culture. Therefore, it stands in the gap between the fixed knowledge of music and contextual setting driving the improvisational performance. Good improv is musically fitting and contextually fitting as well. Similarly, theological improvisation always possesses a gospel-fittedness (that is, it resonates with the message of the biblical text) and a cultural-fittedness (that is, it resonates with the receptor culture of the performance).

Current research on musical improvisation recognizes the social and formative nature of improvisational practice. “Recent scholarship tends to emphasise improvisation as a form of social practice . . . and seeks to understand it in terms of *the dynamics of communication*. . . . Paul Stapleton understands improvisation as an ‘opportunity to both challenge and further develop our personal and cultural identities’ (Stapleton 2013: 7).”⁹ Improvisational acts cannot be removed from the context of the actor, and they work to develop our own self-understanding and identity. Who we are shapes the way we improvise, and how we improvise shapes our understanding of who we are. The Christian gospel simultaneously confronts every culture, while it also can belong in every culture.¹⁰ The transcultural, multinational fabric of the Christian gospel celebrates a risen King who is King of all kings and peoples. However, to faithfully witness to all the kingdoms of the earth, the church must faithfully enact the gospel. This missional aspect of faithful enactment requires the flexibility and spontaneity of improvisation. I cannot teach my students what the major crisis facing the church will be in thirty years when they are well into their ministry. I don’t know what will happen! All I can do is school them in the historical, orthodox “scales” of Christian theology in preparation for them to riff gospel-fitting solos when God calls upon them to play.

⁹ Franziska Schroder, “Performing Improvisation: Weaving Fabrics of Social Systems,” in *Soundweaving: Writings on Improvisation*, ed. Franziska Schroder and Mícheál Ó hAodha (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), x.

¹⁰ Michael W. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scriptures, History and Issues* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 283.

Improvisation and Faithful Enactment

One of the most significant benefits of the improvisational metaphor is that it highlights the critical role that creativity plays in the Christian life. Some might challenge this, insisting that the Christian life is about sticking to script, not making things up as you go. Creativity in theology is what gets people in trouble, not what moves them forward in living out the gospel. To these potential interlocutors I would disagree. Christian heresies over the centuries are frequently described as people grabbing one doctrine, holding on tight, and “riding that horse right out of town.” Heresy fails to synthesize biblical doctrine and its rigidity often precedes its downfall. Secondly, we have already seen that creativity in living the script is a necessary requirement for all peoples in all cultures. We are already filling in the “gaps” because the Bible doesn’t give us imperatives to cover every area of life. The question is simply how are we presently filling these “gaps” in our lives? Creative improvisational enactment is willing to go back to script and envision new ways of playing our piece. “Disciples are to imitate, but not replicate, Christ. To replicate is to make an exact copy, a duplicate. To imitate means to continue a pattern. . . . Imitation requires both fidelity and, in some cases, creativity if one is to continue the *same* pattern in a *different* situation.”¹¹

If we remove the word “creative” from its modern associations with the creative arts, we are struck with the root idea of the word—create. Second Corinthians 5:17 states, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Through our saving union with Christ, we are simultaneously new creations and painfully aware of our indwelling sin and weakness. Improvisational faithful enactment leads us into the uncharted waters of a new chord progression with a new band and calls to us to participate. We are told by our Savior, this is our part to play and with a sanctified imagination, we play—always striving for a gospel and cultural fittedness. Unfortunately, our early attempts at living out Christian theology often feel as clumsy as my first guitar solos. It seems forced, canned, or even mechanical, which leaves us puzzling “Is this what being a Christian is all about?” The answer is yes and no. In one sense this is *exactly* what being a Christian is about. A new life with new desires producing a new character. But these forced attempts at spiritual growth are not the achieved goal of the Christian life.

¹¹ Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 189.

As we grow in our understanding of who God is and who he has created us to be, our ability to creatively live out the pattern of the gospel in a dark world develops. One final quote by Vanhoozer wonderfully brings together the creative work of theological improvisation with Christian discipleship:

Disciples who play Christ in new places must therefore be not replicators or innovators but improvisers: those who can express and enact theodramatic understandings in new situations. Indeed, this is what it finally means to be ‘biblical’ in performing the drama of doctrine. The aim of doctrine is to discipline the believer’s mind, heart, and imagination to think, desire, see—and then *do*—reality as it is in Jesus Christ, and we come to understand this reality by having minds, hearts, and imaginations nurtured by the canonical Scriptures.¹²

Improvisers not only riff over the gospel of grace, they must believe it. Anyone who has spent time improvising, whether on stage or musically, will tell you that no one performs perfectly all the time. Improvisation requires an ability to accept failure. If you want perfection, get a piece of sheet music and practice it for a year and there you go. If you want improvisation you have to deal with failed attempts. Whether your preferred metaphor is walking onto a stage or stepping up to play an instrument, the sheer thought of these harrowing situations produces cold sweats for many! “What! Me . . . just play something! What? What am I supposed to play?” Such mental regurgitations are common and, for those not prepared, demonstrates some wisdom. However, while we can simply opt out of these scenarios in our lives, we cannot opt out of faithfully enacting the Christian faith. The time will come when we will play our part, and more than likely, we will feel like we did not do the script justice. In these moments we must remember the message we are living is one of grace. We perform in freedom, joy, and confidence knowing that we were never brought into the company or band of the faithful because of our skills.

¹² Ibid.

Improvisation and Christian Wisdom

Vanhoozer rightly recognizes that calling Christians to improvise is not sufficient in and of itself. There must be some way of determining whether disciples are actually walking the same path as Christ. His answer to this dilemma is Christian wisdom.¹³ Indeed, hear the similarities between Vanhoozer's definition of theology and David Reimer's definition of wisdom: "*skill in the art of godly living, or more fully, that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God's ordering of the world.*"¹⁴ Both definitions reflect the life-oriented end goal of conformity to God's Word, will, and world. However, both acknowledge that there are skills to be mastered and artfully applied.

The book of Proverbs is filled with wise maxims that reveal a pattern of life befitting of God's people in God's world. These proverbial truths are often framed in the dualistic portrayal of the wise and the fool—the wise person does x, but the fool does y. Consequently, the book presents what many have called a "character-consequence" view of reality. It is not so much a deed-consequence picture—do x and then z happens. But character-consequence portrays the world as do x and become the type of person to which z happens.¹⁵ Proverbs does not frame wisdom as a list of actions to do, but a way of life that corresponds with God's created order.

Christian wisdom guides us through the difficult, amoral decisions of life. Do I do good thing A or good thing B? These are the tricky moments where we don't have a clear idea that "this is the biblically right thing to do and to do otherwise is sin." However, our growth in wisdom and faithful improvisation is not something developed in our own strength and hard work. In Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays that God "may give you [Ephesian Christians] the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him." Wisdom is a gift given, not a badge earned, and the good news is that James tells us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (Jas 1:5). Wisdom and revelation find their theological fulcrum in Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Keith Johnson writes, "If being a disciple of Christ is following after

¹³ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴ David Reimer, "Introduction to Poetic and Wisdom Literature," in *ESV Study Bible*, 866.

¹⁵ Tremper Longman, III, *The Fear of the Lord is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 180.

Christ—and if the practice of theology takes place as we share the mind of Christ—then the discipline of theology should be the organized practice of thinking after Christ.”¹⁶

Empowered by the Spirit of Christ, we grow in our understanding of the will of God revealed to us in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This is the way Paul prays earlier for the church in Colossae that they “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (1:9). He is praying that by the Spirit’s power they would be able to lead a faithful life of theological improvisation, discerning the will of God in new settings and unanticipated struggles.

Conclusion

There are multiple ways of approaching Christian theology, and improvisation is simply one illustrative way of reflecting on the life-oriented *telos* of historic Christian doctrines. Even if improvisation is not a metaphor to which you can relate, the driving force of this essay is to reinforce the message of Mark 10:9 (theologically speaking), “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Theology and the Christian life are not at odds with one another, and as Beth Felkner Jones eloquently says, “[T]he study of doctrine is an act of love for God: in studying the things of God we are formed as worshippers and as God’s servants in the world. To practice doctrine is to yearn for a deeper understanding of the Christian faith, to seek the logic and beauty of that faith, and to live out what we have learned in the everyday realities of the Christian life.”¹⁷

However, if you are like me, the metaphor of improvisation holds significant explanatory power. I see the fusion of fixed knowledge and creative novelty that so often pervade my life, as helpfully framing my experience around the unshaking certainty of God’s word and ever-changing life in the Spirit. While my teenage guitar hero aspirations never fully ran their course, I am ever grateful that my new improvisational performance is not for a stadium full of screaming fans but a loving God who moves me daily to play for him. I eagerly await the day when my life will no longer be plagued with wrong notes or missed strings. But until then, I will keep playing.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Theology as Discipleship*, 149.

¹⁷ Beth Felkner Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

Recommended Resources

Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014.

_____. *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016.

Beth Felkner Jones. *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014.

Keith L. Johnson. *Theology as Discipleship*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015.



Paul Gauguin as Jean Valjean
Dedication: "to my friend Vincent"
Paul Gauguin
Oil on canvas
1888
Public domain

Transformational Grace in *Les Misérables*

J. Mark McVey*

I am grateful to get the opportunity to share my thoughts exploring the theme of transforming grace in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. While I am, by no means a literary scholar, I have had the great honor and pleasure of portraying the role of Jean Valjean, one of the heroes of Hugo's story, in the musical adaptation of the novel more than 3,200 times. It is my belief that if I, as an actor, am doing my job to the best of my ability, it is impossible not to be moved to study the story and the supporting text in such depth as to uncover the truth of the characters and their surrounding circumstances.

The theme of transforming grace is apparent throughout the entire text of *Les Misérables*, especially when considered from a Christian worldview. Of course, it is pointless to try to separate the beliefs of the author from the characters, especially the hero Jean Valjean. Hugo's vast knowledge, his perspective of society and his true heart for reform in France (if not that of the world), is demonstrated beautifully throughout. Taking this desire for reform one step further, Victor Hugo uses his knowledge and perspective to shape the fictitious characters within the confines of actual historical events. I believe this unique stylistic approach to storytelling is what made the story come to life and lends itself so richly to the musical adaptation. After all, prior to *Les Misérables*, Hugo's most notable works were plays and poetry.

* J. Mark McVey made his Broadway debut as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* after having won the Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Actor while on tour. He was also the first American to perform the role in London's West End. Mark reprised the role with the Los Angeles Philharmonic to sold-out crowds at the Hollywood Bowl and again for the 25th Anniversary Tour of *Les Misérables* where he won the Ovation Award and the BroadwayWorld.com Award on his way to eclipsing 3,268 performances in *Les Mis*.

Grace Embodied in M. Myriel

In the beginning, we get a brief look into the heart of a true servant, M. Myriel. While being born into the aristocracy, he is forced to flee during the French Revolution of 1789. Some years later he returns to France as a priest. After a chance meeting with Napoleon, Myriel is made the bishop of Digne, complete with a small staff and a lavish palace. M. Myriel, after seeing the unsatisfactory living conditions of the sick and wounded at the hospital next door, is unable to feel comfortable living in luxury. So, M. Myriel gives away a large part of his salary to the poor and trades his palace for the hospital building. The only items the bishop keeps of any value are a set of silverware and two silver candlesticks.

M. Myriel continues his charitable way when he encounters Jean Valjean on the steps of the church. M. Myriel, showing mercy on the ex-convict, takes in Valjean, giving him a meal and a bed for the night. However, at this point in the convict's journey—newly released from 19 years in prison and having been shunned by society—he is not even capable of recognizing the kindness and generosity he is afforded and steals the silver, running out into the night. When Valjean is later caught and returned to the church to face the bishop he is certain M. Myriel will denounce him as a thief, condemning him once again to prison. Instead, the bishop, who is known for the depth of his love and charity, not only defends Valjean but also covers his crime. Then to seal the deal and remove any doubt from the crowd or police the bishop gives him the two silver candlesticks. It's as if the bishop looking into the darkness of Valjean's soul can somehow see a flickering light and knows that there is good somewhere in him! Never had anyone shown such compassion for Jean Valjean. As the crowd departs, the bishop sets forth his terms, "you must promise to become an honest man." Additionally, in the musical, the bishop tells Valjean, "I have bought your soul for God!" I believe this statement is a beautiful and ultimate indication toward the price paid for all of us by the self-sacrificial obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, to our omniscient, omnipresent, all knowing and all-powerful Father God. In order for us to truly comprehend such grace we need to understand the depth and breadth of the love God has for all humanity.

Jean Valjean almost misses this opportunity to receive this grace. Upon departing the Bishop's residence, shamed and confused, he accosts and steals a coin from a young boy. As the boy runs off crying, Valjean finally realizes the depth of his depravity and the darkness of his soul. He tries

to find the boy, but to no avail and begins to cry for the first time in 19 years. Hugo describes it as Valjean collapsing under the weight of his own conscience. He travels back and prays on the steps of the church. This moment marks the beginning of Valjean's transformation by the grace of God, but it does not happen overnight. While it is not explicitly stated, I understand this moment as Valjean beginning his new life choosing to make God his priority and Jesus Christ his Savior!

Grace Transferred through Valjean

When we next see Jean Valjean, he is a totally transformed man! In fact, we find him to be a person very similar to his mentor the Bishop. Valjean has learned his lessons well. Being the beneficiary of the bishop's love, compassion, and grace, Valjean has thrived despite the harsh social circumstances of nineteenth-century France. Living under an assumed name, Monsieur Madeleine, he is an enormously successful industrialist, employing nearly the entire village. The King is so impressed by his philanthropy, he appoints Madeleine to be mayor of the provincial town of Montreuil. Perhaps most importantly, through his love, compassion, and bravery in service to the less fortunate, Madeleine has become famous throughout the region.

Valjean's or Madeleine's demeanor has changed so dramatically, as well, we would not even recognize him had the author not informed us as to his real identity. His willingness to take responsibility and correct his missteps sets him apart from others in the community. This is best demonstrated through a series of selfless acts and commitments to the character of Fantine. Madeleine, the consummate champion of the social outcasts of society, finds himself in a, "right place-right time" situation. He recognizes a woman, who was once in his employment, clearly in distress and about to be arrested and sent to jail by none other than Javert. His instinct not to get involved due to possible exposure is strong; however, his ability to sense a deeper need in the woman's circumstances leads him to intervene. Giving thought only to correcting an injustice, Madeleine overrules the inspector and has Fantine taken to the hospital where he vows to correct any injustice and promises to raise her child Cosette as his very own. Through his act of compassion, Madeleine absorbs a great deal of vitriol from Fantine and suspicion and innuendo from the inspector. A lesser man, without the understanding of the saving grace of God, would

most certainly have looked the other way. However, Madeleine's unwillingness to walk away is reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan from the Bible.

The grace continues as once again, giving little thought to self-preservation Madeleine frees Fauchelevent from the crushing weight of a runaway cart. Exposing his superhuman strength in plain view of the crowd, including Javert, Madeleine single handedly lifts the cart so the man can be pulled to safety. This act fuels the fire of suspicion in the hardhearted Javert!

Finally, most certainly knowing the act will cost him his freedom, Madeleine, learning from Javert of a man being tried for Valjean's crimes, is unable to bear the burden of letting another man take the fall for his crimes. Confirming Javert's suspicions, Madeleine comes to court to identify himself as the convict Jean Valjean, prisoner 24601!

In these three selfless acts Hugo solidifies his earlier assertions and opinions. Valjean appears more like a saint than a mere man. Hugo's heroes demonstrate his own compassion for the less fortunate, or even unconsidered members of society, that are the very people our Lord served and identified with during his own ministry. These passions of Hugo and the theme of grace continue to resurface in the seemingly most unimportant of ways.

Grace in Comparison to the Thénardiens

After Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, during an attempted corps robbery, the victim, Georges Pontmercy, suddenly awakens and vows never to forget the thief for saving his life. The grace given in this act is unearned and obviously unmerited. Even more, the recipient of this grace is the true villain of *Les Misérables* and any other story where we find human beings taking advantage of one another in this manner. The scoundrel Monsieur Thénardier is a wretched character, and few men are as void of decency as Thénardier evidences here and in his abhorrent care for Fantine's child Cosette. The author's brilliant use of this truth richly reminds us that, in this life, things are not always as they seem. Nor should we ever expect life to be fair! This is also only part of the story, as the author uses this truth to create conflict in future chapters. Hugo gives us a very powerful, yet not so pretty, view of society as he juxtaposes the character of the Thénardiens with that of Valjean. Valjean clearly embodies superior

character traits, yet his reward is persecution as opposed to Thénardier, who receives praise and credit where it is not due.

After two more years in prison and a subsequent escape while rescuing a sailor from certain demise, our hero Jean Valjean resurfaces again with a singular focus to rescue Cosette from the hands of the Thénardiens, those being paid to care for her. The Thénardiens abuse Cosette and treat her as a slave, forcing her to sweep and mop the tavern floors and only feeding her enough to keep her alive to serve them. However, one Christmas Eve, Cosette is sent into the woods to collect a bucket of water for the tavern visitors. Valjean, very innocently, stumbles upon the child as she struggles to carry the bucket of water. As Cosette cries out to God for help, Jean Valjean reaches down and lifts the bucket with ease and helps the child back to the tavern. Along the way he discovers that the child is actually Cosette.

The picture of grace throughout this section of the story is beautiful and indeed sacrificial. Hugo tenderly describes the care that Valjean takes as he learns to love Cosette unconditionally, just like any father would. His protection of the child and the dedication to her is exceptional, and even more lovely in comparison to the corrupt motives of the Thénardiens. Indeed, Hugo portrays him as Cosette's savior. However, it is also quite plausible to view Cosette as Valjean's savior as well, adding to the transformation of his spiritual journey. Despite this new heartfelt relationship, we continue to get the feeling that there remains a persistent unrest in Valjean, due to the ongoing uncertainty of his circumstances.

Always conscious of protecting Cosette, Valjean must be both flexible and mobile. There is freedom in mobility, but there is also confinement, as they are unable to settle and grow roots. Obviously, any father would want to protect his 8-year-old daughter from the evils of society, but it's quite different in this case. Valjean is protecting her from societal evils, as well as the circumstances for which he unfortunately still carries a lot of guilt. I believe most of us have similar issues. Sometimes we don't feel worthy to accept the grace given.

In the midst of despair and guilt, Hugo drives us to see a higher power of providence and grace unfolding in Valjean's circumstances. Valjean runs into Fauchelavant, the man he earlier rescued from the cart, a second time and this time is the recipient of *his* kindness. Fauchelavant provides Valjean and Cosette refuge in the convent where Cosette is educated and Valjean is able to take on another new identity, changing his name and working as a grounds keeper inside the convent.

Grace Triumphs over War and Law

The story of Valjean and Cosette becomes intertwined with a young suitor named Marius, who is wrapped up in a student uprising. The barricades are being constructed and the students are gathering guns and ammunition. Leading up to the attempted revolution, Marius not knowing if he will ever get to see Cosette again, writes her a note expressing his heart-felt love and his decision to fight with the other students to free the poor from oppression. Eponine, the daughter of the Thénardiens, agrees to deliver the note, but it is intercepted by Valjean. As he reads the note, he discovers two very important pieces of information. The first, unbeknownst to him, Cosette has met and fallen in love with Marius. The second, Valjean discovers a necessary element of Marius's character. Marius is a man of God. In the letter he writes "pray for me I pray for you." These are the only bits of information our hero needs to take the final step on his spiritual journey and his commitment to God and his adopted daughter. Determined to do all he can to secure the future for Cosette, Jean Valjean is ready, willing, and able to sacrifice himself for another.

As Valjean arrives at the barricade he finds there are a few loose ends needing attention. The students have captured and plan to execute a government spy named Javert. During the battle Valjean proves himself a worthy soldier and asks for the task of executing Javert. The student leader obliges him and Valjean proceeds to fake Javert's execution, and in an act of unfathomable mercy, sets his long-time captor free. During the next battle Marius is wounded, and as night falls, the government soldiers storm the barricade killing all the students. Only by God's amazing grace is Valjean able to escape into the sewers of Paris with Marius in tow.

Unaffected by Valjean's graciousness in releasing him, inspector Javert is still pursuing his prisoner, and the two meet as Valjean resurfaces to find help. Valjean pleads with Javert to let him save the boy's life as he has done no wrong. Javert conflicted lets him go! This act of mercy comes to destroy the inspector's world, which had so long been shaped by the law. How could he, a man who had lived his whole life according to the law be aided by a criminal? How could he then repay this kindness by letting a criminal go? What kind of man had Javert become? The priest's grace given to Valjean transformed him into a new man, but the grace shown to the law-abiding Javert crushed him! In the end, he would rather die than live in a world of grace.

Marius and Cosette were married soon after his rescue and Cosette helped Marius heal from his wounds. But Marius did not know who it was that saved him that night on the barricade. When Valjean was near death he decided to confess his sins to Cosette and Marius, who at first, were so shocked they were distant. Then one day Thénardier, trying to extort money from Marius, produced a piece of cloth, saying he had ripped it from a man's garment that his father-in-law, Jean Valjean, had drug into the sewer to rob. Little did Thénardier know, Marius was the supposed corpse and he still had the garment. As all the pieces finally fit together, Marius and Cosette visit Valjean asking for forgiveness for their mistrust. Valjean, with his heart full of love grants their request and dies.

I must say I prefer the musical adaptation, by Claude Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil, to the book . . . Mostly because of the length! Though the through line is not quite as strong, the music and the lyrics more than make up for the missing material. Trevor Nunn used Hugo's symbolism masterfully! Songs such as "I Dreamed A Dream" and "On My Own" are laden with beautiful and strong images of love and disparate resolve. "The People's Song" and "One Day More" bring hope and faith-filled determination in the midst of sorrow and loss. Grace and love, not revolutions and bullets, will be what ushers in a glorious future for God's world. The song "Bring Him Home" is one of the most well-written songs I know. The words of a dying Valjean plead to the Lord:

God on high
Hear my prayer
In my need
You have always been there
He is young
He's afraid
Let him rest
Heaven blessed.
Bring him home
Bring him home
Bring him home.

I would not trade my experiences and the opportunity to deliver this message of grace for anything. I became a better singer, a better actor, a better person and a better Christ-follower from the lessons I learned while delivering this exceptional piece of theatre.

The theme of transformational grace is abundant throughout the novel of *Les Misérables*. Like a golden and divine baton, grace is passed from one character to the next. After his encounter with the Bishop, wherever Jean Valjean goes, we find him in the service of others. I believe this is what God intends for us. We are to be in service of one another. After washing the disciple's feet, Jesus then looks at his followers and tells them, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

The Bible says we are created in God's image for relationship with Him, and when Christ was asked about the greatest commandment in the law, his answer was clear: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:37-39). The transformational grace of God revealed in Scripture and observed in Hugo's story is all about the love God shows to us every day, and how we are commanded to do the same for one another.

Recommended Resources

Victor Hugo. *Les Misérables*. Translated by Charles E. Wilbour. New York: Random House, 1992.

Mike Cospser. "Law and Grace in 'Le Mis.'" *The Gospel Coalition*, December 20, 2012. Accessed July 30, 2019. <https://www.thegospel-coalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/law-and-grace-in-les-mis/>.

John Morrison. *To Love Another Person: A Spiritual Journey through Les Misérables*. Cheshire, CT: Zossima Press, 2009.

Joel S. Woodruff. "Les Misérables: A Story of God's Hospitality, Grace, and Redemption." Pages 1, 12-15 in *Knowing & Doing: A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind* (Winter 2012). Accessed July 30, 2019. http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/1744.

Walker Percy and the Aesthetics of Paradox

by H. Collin Messer*

“Any theory of man must account for the alienation of man. Judeo-Christianity did of course give an account of alienation, not as a peculiar evil of the 20th century, but as the enduring symptom of man’s estrangement from God. . . . The difficulty was that in order to accept this anthropology of alienation one had also to accept the notion of an aboriginal catastrophe or Fall, a stumbling block which to both the scientist and the humanist seems even more bizarre than a theology of God, the Jews, Christ, and the Church. So the scientists and humanists got rid of the fall and re-entered Eden, where scientists know like angels, and laymen prosper in good environments, and ethical democracies progress through education. But in so doing they somehow deprived themselves of the means of understanding and averting the dread catastrophes which were to overtake Eden . . . [when Eden] turned into the 20th century.”¹

Nearly 30 years after his death, Walker Percy’s novels and essays continue to provide timely and persuasive insight regarding our troubled

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¹ Walker Percy, “The Delta Factor,” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 23-24.

and glorious predicament as human beings.² I think this is chiefly because he was onto something when it came to his view of himself and of all of us. One of Percy's favorite terms was "anthropology." For him, this term did not denote the academic discipline which classifies and studies groups of human beings as we live out our lives as members of various cultures. Rather, anthropology for Percy meant simply "a theory of human nature." All of Percy's writings are premised—either implicitly or explicitly—on an old, old story about human beings, one given to us by Judeo-Christianity. In another of his essays, Percy asserts that "What distinguishes Judeo-Christianity in general from other world religions is its emphasis on the value of the individual person, its view of man as a creature in trouble, seeking to get out of it, and accordingly on the move. . . . Such a view of man as wayfarer is, I submit, nothing else than a recipe for the best novel-writing from Dante to Dostoevsky."³ At the heart of Percy's project is the conviction (inspired by Dante and Dostoevsky, among others) that philosophical problems can be elucidated by the "predicamental" and creative features of literature, particularly the novel. Even as the brief excerpts above demonstrate Percy's great facility as an essayist, his abiding aim and passion was to dramatize our shared predicament as creatures "in trouble . . . and accordingly on the move," using the extended prose narrative.

Thus, we might best understand Percy as a philosophical novelist. However, this designation is ultimately fruitful only if we understand the central philosophical paradox that animates his creative commitment to the novel genre. In "Prozac and the Existential Novel: Two Therapies" scholar Carl Elliott describes *The Moviegoer* and other works by Percy as "novels of alienation," which make the novelist a kind of "doctor of the soul":

² While he is often grouped with his southern colleagues, Walker Percy (1916-1990) is first and foremost a writer whose work is deeply informed by a devout Christian faith; inspired by St. Augustine, Dostoevsky, and others, he writes in what we might call an existentialist mode. If William Faulkner's best writing is the dense, high modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, Percy's is a postmodern literature, written after World War II, and preoccupied with the profound dislocation and deracination of the self. Where Faulkner is haunted by history, Percy is more preoccupied with the perilous task of living in the present, or, as he often put it, "making it through a regular Wednesday afternoon." If Faulkner dominated American literature in the first half of the last century, no southern writer (perhaps other than Percy's friend, Flannery O'Connor) has exerted as much influence on our literature since 1960 as Percy has. Indeed, beyond the South, Percy arguably provided a unique haven to the American scene as one of our most morally and philosophically serious (and winsome) writers from the Kennedy era to the Reagan years. Before his death in 1990, Percy produced six novels, the first of which, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award in 1962. He also wrote dozens of essays on culture and language.

³ Walker Percy, "The Holiness of the Ordinary," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 369.

There is a radical difference between the way the novelist looks at the man who feels bad and doesn't know why and the way medicine ordinarily does. . . . The difference is this: the medical standpoint looks at the man who feels bad and doesn't know why and says: "This fellow is in bad shape. What he needs is to develop his self-esteem, reconcile himself with his past, develop a meaningful relationship, get on a serotonin reuptake inhibitor. . . . Whereas . . . the novel can say: Of course you're lonely and alienated and filled with terror and anxiety. Take a look around you: it would take a moron not to be. . . . What is going on [in such a novel] is what Percy calls "the reversal of alienation by art," which is not exactly a cure for the alienated reader, but a way of identifying alienation and thereby turning it around."⁴

As Percy often suggested, suppose the only thing worse than being an exile is being an exile and not knowing that you are. Or the only thing worse than being homeless is living under the delusion that you are in fact quite at home. Søren Kierkegaard, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, puts it this way: "the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair."⁵ Thus, at the heart of Percy's artistic enterprise is the remarkable reversal that Carl Elliott so aptly describes. In this essay, my aim is to offer a reading of Percy's third novel, *Love in the Ruins*,⁶ with a view toward understanding and appreciating this aesthetic of paradox.

In *Love in the Ruins*, we certainly find what Percy describes as "a man in a predicament and on the move in a real world of real things, a world which is a sacrament and a mystery; a pilgrim whose life is a searching and a finding."⁷ If many readers continue to find Percy approachable and enduring, perhaps it is because he acknowledges that he too (like most of his protagonists) is, in Marion Montgomery's words, "a malady bearing pilgrim," who "ostensibly witnesses to us our own burden of that malaise,

⁴ Carl Elliott, "Prozac and the Existential Novel: Two Therapies," in *The Last Physician: Walker Percy and the Moral Life of Medicine*, ed. Carl Elliott and John Lantos (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 65.

⁵ This aphorism makes its way into *The Moviegoer*, serving as a telling epigraph. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941), 19.

⁶ Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971).

⁷ Percy, "Holiness," 369.

[which is] almost universal to us”⁸ When Percy talks about our shared lot, I think many of his readers have a keen sense of his deep solidarity with us. Of course, there is nothing new here. In my own work on Percy I’ve long been fascinated by how much he draws on thinkers like St. Augustine and Dante, who frequently make common cause with their readers. In many essays and interviews over the years, Percy offered comparisons to both (and especially to Augustine).⁹

In addition to these usual suspects, Percy was also in conversation with contemporary authors and kindred spirits. In fact, Percy’s first surviving letter to his best friend, the southern novelist and historian Shelby Foote, outlines his plans for this novel:

But I am in a low estate. I have in mind a futuristic novel dealing with the decline and fall of the U.S.; the country rent almost hopelessly between the rural knotholed right and the godless alienated left, worse than the Civil War. Of that and the goodness of God, and of the merriness of living quite anonymously in the suburbs, drinking well, cooking out, attending Mass at the usual silo-and-barn, the goodness of Brunswick bowling alleys (the good white maple and plastic balls), coming home of an evening, with the twin rubies of the TV transmitter in the evening sky, having 4 drinks of good sour mash and assaulting one’s wife in the armchair etc. What we Catholics call the sacramental life.¹⁰

⁸ Marion Montgomery, *With Walker Percy at the Tupperware Party, in Company with Flannery O’Connor, T.S. Eliot, and Others* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009), 142-143.

⁹ Percy frequently mentioned the Bishop of Hippo as being among the writers he read as a catechumen in the early 1940s. In a 1962 interview with the *Charlotte Observer*, Percy forthrightly acknowledges an Augustinian line of thought—even a literary line of descent—leading back to Augustine: “The following writers have meant most to me and in this order: Dostoevski, Kierkegaard, St. Augustine, Lawrence, Joyce, Gerard Hopkins, Marcel.” Harriet Doar, “Walker Percy: He Likes to Put Protagonist in Situation,” in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 5. In Book I of his *Confessions*, Augustine is mystified and distressed by the alienation endemic to his very existence: “What, Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death.” Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 6. In this disquiet, or “shakiness” (to borrow one of Percy’s favorite terms), Augustine figures a type of pilgrim who becomes a recognizable headliner in Percy’s novels. Even after Augustine’s conversion, his biographer Peter Brown asserts, Augustine’s story is “not the affirmation of a cured man: it is the self-portrait of a convalescent.” Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 177. This description perhaps captures Augustine’s ongoing appeal and relevance to those of us who often keenly feel our own displacement in the (post)modern world.

¹⁰ Shelby Foote and Walker Percy, *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, ed. Jay Tolson (New York: Norton, 1997), 129.

This concept would come to fruition in 1971 with one of the great titles in American literature: *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. *Love in the Ruins* is a raucous and sprawling novel (Percy's longest), at once dystopic and satirical, apocalyptic and comedic. In the late 1960s, a novel about the U.S. being "almost hopelessly rent" between Right and Left must have seemed all too timely. Even so, Percy might well have been describing our contemporary scene and its profound political turmoil. As we read it today, we find *Love in the Ruins* to be a suitable lament for a country painfully torn apart now as much as it was then. Such discontentment and racial violence as characterized the United States in the 1960s was for Percy a sign, prompting his curiosity then as it perhaps would now. How to explain such alienation in the most materially blessed and scientifically advanced country in human history? It's a fair question, and Percy knew that broken politics was likely nothing more than a symptom that pointed to answers to be found elsewhere.

However, Percy's letter to Shelby Foote is not merely a lament. Rather, its blunt political realism is tempered by a surprisingly frank and paradoxical philosophical hopefulness. In just one sentence, Percy uses the words *well* or *good* 5 times. The echoed cadences of Genesis 2, in which God again and again declares his creation good, and then *very* good, are hard to ignore. Whatever cultural chaos in the scene he surveys, Percy is more than comforted by the blessedness of the everyday; amid the societal ruins there is yet "the merriness" of a life in which the quotidian gifts of existence are frankly relished as holy signs of God's grace and good will towards us his creatures. This sacramental life, as Percy calls it, discovers the holiness in the ordinary.

Taking a few cues from Percy's letter to Foote and from the novel's title, in what follows I offer a reading of *Love in the Ruins* from three vantage points. As Percy does in his letter, I begin with lamentation: that is, with the ruins, both political and spiritual. Next I consider the state of love, which during the racial and sexual revolution of the 1960s, was (and remains) a mixed bag. Then, finally, I point out a few signposts this novel offers us regarding ultimate reality, that is God and the "sacramental life" that proclaims God's nearness.

Part I: More Babylon than Boston

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy is just as concerned with the predicament of our country as he is with that of his protagonist. And he's clearly not in a good mood. Percy surveys the ruins with a sharp pen in hand. In a speech shortly before the novel's publication, he warned that

Love in the Ruins is satirical but I wish to assure you that in its satire it does not discriminate on grounds of race, creed, or national origin. What I mean is, there is a little something here to offend everybody: liberal, conservative; white, black; hawk, dove; Catholic, Protestant, Jew, heathen; the English, the Irish, the Swedes, Ohioans, to mention only a few. Yet I trust it is not ill-humored and that only those will be offended who deserve to be.¹¹

Percy spares no one as he decries our failed politics, satirizes behaviorism and other forms of scientism, skewers the hippies and their sexual revolution, and writes with gleeful scorn about the fecklessness of the Christian Country Club set.

Taking stock of America in the late 1960s, and distraught at what he observes, Percy here dares to ask, is America truly immovable and indestructible? Or is it, in fact, subject to the vicissitudes of history as much as any other country in history? He raises this question on the very first page of the novel:

Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last? . . . Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the roller-coaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes, carries us out and up toward the brink from that felicitous and privilege siding where even unbelievers admitted that if it was not God who blessed the USA, then at least some

¹¹ Walker Percy, "Concerning *Love in the Ruins*," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 249.

great good luck had befallen us, and that now the blessing or the luck is over, the machinery clanks, the chain catches hold, and the cars jerk forward? ¹²

The eponymous “bad Catholic” who wonders about his and his country’s fate in this novel, much as the bad Catholic Dante does in his poem, is not Percy himself, but Dr. Tom More—aged 45, gifted scientist and physician, hapless romancer, and a descendant of the pious Catholic Englishman who honorably served King Henry VIII but who ultimately found himself out of royal favor and on the chopping block in the Tower of London in 1535. You may recall that *Saint* Thomas More also tried to imagine a “utopia” in his work by that name in 1516. In *Love in the Ruins*, his descendent, *Doctor* Tom More, describes his namesake as “that great soul, the dearest best noblest merriest of Englishmen. . . . merry in life and death. . . . He loved and was loved by everyone, even his executioner, with whom he cracked jokes.”¹³

Our Tom, on the other hand, confesses early on that he is *not* a saint “Why can’t I follow More’s example, love myself less, God and my fellowman more, and leave whiskey and women alone? . . . My life is a longing, longings for women, for the Nobel Prize, for hot bosky bite of bourbon whiskey, and other great heart-wrenching longings that have no name.”¹⁴ To be sure, Tom is a man in trouble. When we meet him at the outset of the novel and hear his recounting of the troubled years of his recent past, we realize that he is not well. In fact, he clearly hasn’t been well for a long time. After all, his standard breakfast is warm Tang with duck eggs, Vodka, and Tabasco!

This novel is framed by Christmas Eve scenes. On the first of these holy nights [3 years before the novel opens], Tom finds himself home alone after a failed sexual encounter with a college co-ed, watching the Perry Como Christmas special. Drunk and in the throes of morning terror and depression, he attempts suicide by cutting his wrists. Significantly, Tom is the first of Percy’s main characters (from the first three novels) to make

¹² Ibid., 3–4. Readers of Dante might hear the very deliberate allusion to the opening lines of the *Divine Comedy*: “Midway in the journey of our life/I came to myself in a dark wood,/for the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell/the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—/the very thought of it renews my fear!/It is so bitter death is hardly more so./But to set forth the good I found/I will recount the other things I saw.” Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 3. We’ll circle back around to this shortly.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

such an attempt. His despair is harrowingly real. We will have good reason to recall this scene at the end of the novel when we consider the second Christmas Eve scene.

Meanwhile, Tom's own dark pilgrimage is tied closely to his citizenship in the "dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A." The novel's opening chapters are capacious in scope, offering a severe indictment of the city of man, the cultural ruins of which are evidenced in both politics and religion. The United States—its politics and churches—are in a bad way. Tom remarks that "Principalities and powers are everywhere victorious."¹⁵ The world we discover at the outset of *Love in the Ruins* smacks more of Jeremiah's Babylon than John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" in Boston. Percy describes the town plaza, sweltering in the summer sun, in which "a green line wavers in midair above the pavement, like the hanging gardens of Babylon."¹⁶ In its dreadful latter days, our country is over ripe, decadent, alienated, and often abstracted. At the Geriatric rehab center, melancholy old folk are placed in "Skinner Boxes," a favorite device of behaviorist psychologists who seek to recondition cranky senior citizens by neurologically rewarding positive socially acceptable responses and punishing asocial behavior via shock therapy. Oldsters who don't respond favorably to the Skinner box are shipped off to the Federal Complex off the coast of Georgia where they are eventually euthanized. Meanwhile, conservatives suffer from chronic rage and constipation, while liberals suffer from morning terror and sexual impotence. Tom sardonically admits, "It is my misfortune—and blessing—that I suffer from both liberal and conservative complaints. . . . So that at one and the same time I have great sympathy for my patients and lead a fairly miserable life."¹⁷

At its worst, this society is utterly secular, and when the Church does appear, it proves to be largely co-opted by a banal civic religious impulse. Except for a small Roman Catholic remnant, the community's most influential liturgies are the catechetical questions of the Rotary Banner (Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships?) or, else worse, the new rite of the American Catholic Church (the A.C.C.), "which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of neighborhoods, retains the Latin Mass, and plays *The Star-Bangled Banner* at the

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

elevation” of the host.¹⁸ “Property rights Sunday,” Tom later opines, “is a major feast day in the A.C.C. A blue banner beside the crucifix shows Christ holding the American home, which has a picket fence, in his two hands.”¹⁹

Tom “comes to himself” on July 4, 1983 (not quite Orwell’s prophetic year but close enough for us to get the point). As Tom hunkers down and waits for the end to come, he surveys a besieged and imperiled landscape that gives us a preview of the false utopias that Percy will deem ruinous. Years ago, in an interview with Win Riley, Robert Coles made a great observation about Percy: “He uses humor as a mode of introspection This takes a genius!”²⁰ In his satirical and tragicomic send ups of this southern town and its environs, Percy—with a nod to Saint Thomas More’s most famous book—gives us four utopian enterprises, all of which Percy regarded as deeply flawed: the hippy, love communities and counterculture of the swamp, the provincial southern small-town, and, as Percy described them in another letter to Foote, the “silly, radical student-professor Left and the country-club Christian Right.”²¹ Whatever his whipping boys, Percy, like Augustine and Dante, is extremely suspicious of any meta project—political or otherwise—founded on a faulty anthropology.

Percy’s reference to Dante at the beginning of this apocalyptic and dystopian novel is notable because of Dante’s late medieval perspective *and* the poet’s comedic hopefulness. On the one hand, Percy implies the United States’ undeniable mutability and its ties to a fading Western civilization. Percy subordinates any versions of our national myth to the deeper claims required by a sound theological interpretation of God’s providential relationship with nations. However, he also invites us to see ourselves as part of a greater and more hopeful cosmic redemptive story that offers us more comfort than any nationalistic Enlightenment story. Even with its frightful opening lines, Dante’s poem is comedic in the best sense of the word. All will be well, he assures us, even as we must begin our prodigal journey with Dante and Virgil by descending into the dark regions of the self.

Eric Voegelin, the German-born philosopher whom Percy read avidly, often remarked that the great temptation for national Enlightenment

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 181.

²⁰ Winston Riley, *Walker Percy: A Documentary Film*. DVD. Directed by Winston Riley. New Orleans: Winston Riley Productions, 2011.

²¹ Foote and Percy, *Correspondence*, 146-147.

liberal projects like our own is their hubristic tendency to “immanentize the eschaton.” Around the time that Percy was finishing his novel, William F. Buckley made this phrase from Voegelin so popular that many young conservatives actually wore political buttons with the phrase “Don’t let them immanentize the eschaton.” Voegelin’s worry was that when partisans or ideologues of any stripe (especially political ones) try to bring in the Kingdom of God via their political program or platform, they’ll end up doing more harm than good.²²

To be sure, such discontentment and racial violence as characterized the United States in the 1960s were for Percy troubling signs worth discerning. Percy begs the question: How to explain such alienation in the most materially blessed and scientifically advanced country in human history? Here, the aesthetics of paradox cuts both ways. In his dogged exploration of our American unhappiness and restlessness, Percy is suggesting something about the displacement that is arguably the truest and most universal aspect of our existence. Remarkably, Percy sees our American unhappiness *not* as something to be gotten rid of, but rather as a fact of human existence that might prompt us to consider, as Elizabeth Amato puts it, “what our lingering discontent may indicate about ourselves.”²³ Amato continues “The liberal pursuit of happiness,” [which all four of the false utopias we see in this novel ultimately aspire to] “does not properly understand the human being as a needy, dependent being who, above all, needs other people to live well.”²⁴ Percy thus, as he himself put it, “calls into question modern man’s fondest assumption, that he has made the world over for his happiness and that therefore he must be happy.”²⁵

²² Buckley deeply appreciated *Love in the Ruins*. On his PBS show *Firing Line*, in late 1972, he remarked that “all future presidents should be made to take a double oath of office. They should swear not only to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America but also promise to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest *Love in the Ruins*. It’s all there in that one book—what’s happening to us and why.” *Firing Line*. PBS Broadcasting, December 12 1972.

²³ Elizabeth Amato, “Walker Percy’s Critique of the Pursuit of Happiness in *The Moviegoer*, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*,” in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian Smith (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁵ Walker Percy “Which Way Existentialism.” Unpublished essay, ts. Walker Percy Papers. University of North Carolina.

Part II: The Failure of Love

So, what does *love* look like in the ruins? The boldest statement that Percy makes about love in this novel is about a failure to love our neighbor, particularly the failure of white southern Christians to love their black neighbors. Woven throughout *Love in the Ruins* is a fascinating subplot regarding a radical black revolution by the Bantus (an Afro-centric minority) on the one hand and the hope for true community between blacks and whites on the other. With considerable humility and hopefulness (again held in dynamic tension), Percy offers a stark assessment of the church's passivity and fecklessness during the Civil Rights movement. In a 1965 essay entitled "The Failure and the Hope" Percy described this "failure of love":

Those of us in the South who call ourselves Christian have come face-to-face with the most critical and paradoxical moment in our history. The crisis is the Negro revolution. The paradox lies in this: that the hope for the future—and both the hope and the promise, in my opinion, were never greater—requires as its condition of fulfillment the strictest honesty in assessing the dimensions of our failure. . . . Our failure has been a failure of love, a violation of that very Mystical Body of Christ which we have made our special property at the risk of scandalizing the world by our foolishness. A scandal has occurred right enough, but it has not been the scandal intended by the Gospels.²⁶

Rather, Percy asserts, white southerners have scandalously refused to view their black neighbors as members "of the same Mystical Body, freed and dignified by the same covenant which frees and dignifies us."²⁷ This failure threatens to have the most rueful of consequences. Tom (in a very Percy-esque voice) worries that this could be the one issue that might finally do us in:

What a bad joke: God saying, here it is, the new Eden, and it is yours because you're the apple of my eye, because you the lordly

²⁶ Walker Percy, "The Failure and the Hope," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 327, 329.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 329.

Westerners, the fierce Caucasian-Gentile-Visigoths, believed in me and in the outlandish Jewish Event, even though you were nowhere near it and had to hear the news of it from strangers. But you believed it and so I gave it all to you, gave you Israel and Greece and science and art and the lordship of the earth, and finally even gave you the new world that I blessed for you. And all you had to do was pass one little test, which was surely child's play because you had already passed the big one. One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, and all you have to do is not violate him. That's all. One little test: you flunk! ... Flunked! Christendom down the drain. The dream over.²⁸

Beyond this broadly social and historical dilemma regarding loving one's neighbor, Percy of course deals at some length with romantic love. Especially for first time readers, this novel often proves scandalous in its frank treatment of sexuality.²⁹ In *Love in the Ruins*, it is not just the country that is rent hopelessly apart. People are too, and their brokenness most often reveals itself in their approach to sex. Practically every character in the novel is not fully themselves. Rather, everyone is split in two between higher and baser desires, which Percy insists makes love impossible. Their very being—Percy the philosopher uses the term ontology—is at stake. Because this is a satire, Percy uses caricature to present characters who are not embodied souls but only all spirit or all body, angels or beasts, but not men or women capable of making love in the ruins.

For example, Doris, Tom's first wife, insists on a purely spiritual life after the death of her and Tom's daughter Samantha. Understandably heartbroken and scandalized by the bodily disfiguration and horrible death brought about by the young girl's brain tumor, Doris forsakes the contingency of embodied life by embracing Gnostic philosophy and an affair with a homosexual-English-Buddhist guru. Tom laments, "Somewhere Doris got the idea that love is spiritual," and her infidelity became, "somehow more elevating than ordinary morning love with her

²⁸ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 57-58.

²⁹ I have many friends who have never been able to get past this aspect of the book. However, Percy argues that the demise and impoverishment of the individual in the West is largely tied to a faulty view of sexuality and the person, thereby it "becomes the proper domain of the serious novelist." Walker Percy, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 214. Percy's aim is not to glorify explicit sexuality but to portray human sexuality in the integral role it plays in the health or trauma of the person.

husband.”³⁰ So abstracted is Doris from her own embodiment, love for her is only attainable without reference to the physical world and with no regard for biology or human warmth.

Doris’s clearest opposite in this regard is Moira, one of Tom’s girlfriends when the novel opens. Moira is no better off! If Doris aspires to love spiritually, Moira (at least as Tom views her) is only sensual and utterly unreflective regarding romance and sex. Her relationship with Tom is characterized by hackneyed clichés of love. Fittingly, Moira works at the Love Clinic, and through her character and others, Percy offers his most scorching critique of love as understood by the behaviorists, who treat people as if they were like any other animal—merely organisms in an environment who respond to external stimuli. Indeed, Percy treats the behaviorists more roughly than he does the hippies. In Percy’s mockery of Masters and Johnson,³¹ the husband and wife team (later divorced) who conducted their famous experiments at the University of Washington in the mid-1960s, the supposedly liberated and unself-conscious Eros celebrated at the Love Clinic actually reeks of Thanatos (much like the death-dealing brand of science practiced next door at Geriatric Rehab). Alas, there is no love at Love and all involved are diminished. It is fitting therefore that Dr. Kenneth Stryker, the chief of staff at the Love Clinic, resembles “a funeral director in a dark suit . . . and sober tie . . . whose fingers are . . . withered” like some erstwhile grim reaper.³² What we observe at Love Clinic are matters not of the heart but of the glands; not generative or life giving, but death-dealing, what Percy often called “death in life.” In a novel with many dark moments, there are none darker than those Percy dramatizes at “Love.”

Part III: A Different Center

If Percy were to survey our current political and cultural scene, he might conclude that there is indeed nothing new under the sun. We’re still up to our old tricks. At least when it comes to our politics, Percy is perhaps more insightful now than ever. Now, as then, left and right have run amok and

³⁰ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 71.

³¹ See William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1966).

³² Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 125.

seem on the verge of turning on one another like scorpions, destroying each other and our poor country in the process. Meanwhile, our current turmoil and confusion about sexuality and gender has devolved with startling intensity and speed. There has always been a strong American tendency toward Gnosticism. Simply put, we become functionally Gnostic when we decide that our defining core *is the self that we choose to express (without reference to tradition, to community, or even to biology)*. Therefore, no difference between ourselves and our acts of self-expression can be tolerated. Such radical autonomy is rampant, particularly regarding sex and gender.

All of this brings us back to Percy's letter to Shelby Foote. By the way, for readers who haven't yet encountered *Love in the Ruins*, Percy's vision of the sacramental life in this letter is like the *Cliffs Notes* version. I find it remarkable how closely he ended up following this early outline, especially in the novel's epilogue. Five years after the troubles that comprise the main action of the book, we find Tom on Christmas Eve once again, but how blessedly different is his predicament now from that night several years before when he tried to kill himself. For Tom, it is a new day, and we actually follow him throughout this Christmas Eve day from early morning until after midnight. He has married Ellen Ogleshorpe, his nurse, and the only chaste woman in the book. He and Ellen have had two children and she is pregnant with their third. The threatened Bantu revolution, which has been an ominous potentiality throughout the novel, has finally come about but not by violence. Instead, the Bantus' discovery of oil underneath the swamp land on which they had long squatted in poverty has left Tom and his family poor, pricing them and most of their white neighbors out of the Paradise Estates real estate market. Tom now lives in old slave quarters on a limited income.

A joyful particularity marks this closing section. If disembodied Gnosticism, loveless sex, and insensible rage have marked the main action heretofore, we now find "a real world of real things, a world which is a sacrament and a mystery; a pilgrim whose life is a searching and a finding."³³ Specifically, three evocative images from this coda bespeak a wondrous grace and ordinariness: a breakfast, a box, and a bed.

On this Christmas Eve morning, we find Tom at breakfast:

Ellen calls from the doorway. Breakfast is ready. She sets a plate of steaming grits and bacon for me on a plain pine table. . . .

³³ Percy, "The Holiness of the Ordinary," 369.

Sunlight creeps along the tabletop, casting into relief the shiny scoured ridges of pine. Steam rising from the grits set motes stirring in the golden bar of light. I shiver slightly. Morning is still not the best of times. As far as morning is concerned, I can't say things have changed much. What has changed is my way of dealing with it. No longer do I crawl around on hands and knees drinking Tang and vodka and duck eggs. My stomach leaps with hunger. I eat grits and bacon and corn sticks. After breakfast, my heart leaps with love.³⁴

I love grits, and I'm always happy when I encounter grits, even in a book. However, what I appreciate even more in this scene is that Tom actually eats the grits. Many times in this story, Tom sits down to a meal, but he just can't eat. In fact, there are few if any properly shared meals between any of the characters. So, this breakfast with Ellen is a good sign, especially as it inspires him to love Ellen with an ordinary morning love.

The second image is the box. As Tom and Ellen arrive at midnight mass on Christmas Eve, Father Smith (himself the most mundane and ordinary of priests), invites Tom to make his confession: "Time to get locked in the box," he says. "Coming?"³⁵ By my count this is the first of three Catholic sacraments that appear in the course of just three pages in this final section (Reconciliation, the Eucharist, and Marriage). There is much to be thankful for here as Percy provides such a rich and predicamental picture of true human flourishing. We should notice as well the subtle comparison and critique implied here as we recall the Skinner boxes in which Tom and others have been locked earlier in the story. Unlike the behaviorist boxes, which do not address the human being as a self in the world but only as an organism in an environment, the confessional conversation between Tom and Father Smith allows Tom to speak the complex and convoluted truth about himself and, more importantly, to hear a word of liberating admonishment and grace. Having been shriven, Tom celebrates Mass with a motley but faithful crew:

There is some confusion in the chapel. The Jews are leaving—it is their Sabbath. The Protestants are singing. Catholics are lined up for confession. We have no ecumenical movement. The services

³⁴ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 384.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

overlap. Jews wait for the Lord, Protestants sing hymns to him, Catholics say mass and eat him. . . . Father Smith says mass. I eat Christ, drink his blood. At the end the people say aloud a prayer confessing the sins of the Church and asking for the reunion of the United States. Outside the children, including my own little Thomas More, a rowdy but likeable lot, shoot off firecrackers. "Hurrah for Jesus Christ!" they cry. "Hurrah for the United States!"³⁶

In our discussion of this passage, my students—who are so fretful about our country—were most struck by the winsome humility portrayed here. In an age of audacious hubris, they found the idea of confession, both individual and corporate, to be deeply moving, as should all of us.

Finally, a bed. Having made peace with himself at breakfast, having recovered himself through the means of grace, and having prayed with and for his neighbors (and his country), Tom turns with a leaping heart to his lovely wife—marriage being yet another sacrament and the ultimate earthly expression, St. Paul tells us, of God's nearness to us. Tom's gift to Ellen on this Christmas is a new, king-size brass bed, ordered from the Sears and Roebuck catalog for \$603.95. If the endings of *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* hinted at hopeful resolution, the close of this novel is unabashedly affirmative:

Barbecuing in my sackcloth.

The turkey is smoking well. The children have gone to bed, but they'll be up at dawn to open their presents.

The night is clear and cold. There is no moon. The light of the transmitter lies hard by Jupiter, ruby and diamond in the plush velvet sky. Ellen is busy in the kitchen fixing stuffing and sweet potatoes. Somewhere in the swamp a screech owl cries.

I'm dancing around to keep warm, hands in pockets. It is Christmas Day and the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all one needs.

³⁶ Ibid., 396, 400.

On the other hand I want a drink. Fetching the Early Times from a clump of palmetto, I take six drinks in six minutes. Now I'm dancing and singing old Sinatra songs and the *Salve Regina*, cutting the fool like David before the ark. . . .

The turkey is ready. I take it into the kitchen and grab Ellen from behind. She smells of flour and stuffing and like a Georgia girl. . . .

To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but home in bed where all good folk belong.³⁷

So clearly reminiscent of his letter to Foote several years before, this scene is telling in several ways. We should note that Tom's anthropology is the same—he is still a bit shaky, still a convalescent, still given to drink and still somewhat of a bawd—but we find him here a pilgrim with others, in what Percy deems a blessed intersubjectivity. Nevertheless, Tom's marriage is by no means the eschaton. No merely human marriage or family is, and Percy suggests that we make idols out of these good gifts at our peril. Still, biblical marriage is foundational to Percy's social and sexual ethics, and so this marriage is assuredly a hopeful shadow—a signpost presaging the promised reconciliation of all things.

In his 1971 remarks about *Love in the Ruins* to a group of publishers, Percy admonished those who might misread the novel's eschatology: "I thought about using as a motto for the novel W.B. Yeats's line about the center not holding. For indeed, in the novel, the center does not hold. But even to say that is misleading. It suggests a political satire which attacks right and left and comes down on the side of moderate Republicans and Democrats. I had a different center in mind."³⁸ We might ask: *What* is the center that hasn't held and how might it be recovered? Percy's point here is paradoxical but comforting. Only in recovering our true center, that is, the fact of our identity as embodied pilgrims who are called to a *sacramental* life even in the ruins—only then might we live responsibly and even joyfully, as citizens in the here and now, no matter how vexing the circumstances.

³⁷ Ibid., 402-403.

³⁸ Percy, "Concerning *Love in the Ruins*," 248.

Recommended Resources

- Shelby Foote and Walker Percy. *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, edited by Jay Tolson. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Farrell O’Gorman. *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2008.
- Jay Tolson. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.
- Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land*, edited by Patrick Samway. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.
- Walker Percy. *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to do with the Other*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975.

FAITHFUL LIVES



*Reviews &
Resources*

For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts

edited by W. David O. Taylor.
Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010.
204 pp. US \$18.00, softcover.

For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts was written after a symposium held in 2008 exploring how the relationship between the church and the arts can transform culture. David O. Taylor, former Arts Pastor for Hope Chapel and then theological student at Duke Divinity School, orchestrated the symposium in an effort to inspire both the hearts and minds of those attending. Since the publication of this volume, Taylor has joined the faculty of Fuller Seminary, and his latest work on the subject, *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Eerdmans), is to be released this fall. The contributing authors represent different traditions and insight into culture, all with the intention of inspiring the church with a vision for the arts (p. 21).

Both theologians and art practitioners contributed essays in the book. Taylor confesses a general consensus that, for many, Protestantism does not provide a theology or a tradition indicating how art and the church could be held together (p. 21). The lack of vision for combining beauty and theology left Taylor and those under his care with a sense of duality. Although each of the essays in the book contributes different ideas in the conversation, there is a general agreement that when art and theology are both seen as significant, the church can offer unique insight to God and culture. Pastor Eugene Peterson, for example, points out that he had knowledge about God and doctrine, but it wasn't until he was in relationship with artists that he was able to encounter God by seeing the expressions of their vocation. It was in the unique perceptions of the artists in his midst, some of whom were outside of the church, that his theological habits broke free of abstraction into beauty and perception of Christ in the presence of people (p. 101).

Barbara Nicolosi, a screenwriter in Hollywood, compares the artist's role to that of a priest. Nicolosi says artists, like priests, edify large groups of people, speak prophetically through the beauty they are producing and offer the sacrifice of their own bodies and minds (p. 113). Nicolosi borrows from Thomas Aquinas when defining the nature of beauty as "wholeness,

harmony, and radiance” (p. 106). Wholeness and harmony are both facets of God’s triune nature, thus when image bearers experience beauty, they are able to connect more deeply with God.

Art practitioner and spiritual director Joshua Banner encourages pastors to recognize and nurture the artistic gifts of those in their midst. Banner borrows an agricultural metaphor from Wendell Berry saying that just as a farmer should nurture the soil, rather than exploit it, a good pastor does the same for artists and their creations (p. 124). Artists need the leadership of pastors in order to promote and produce a sustainable environment where both the congregation and the artist thrive.

A struggle discussed throughout the book is the dichotomy between the artmaker and those who experience the art. Whatever the artform, whether dance, poetry, painting, sculpture, literature, drama, or even music, the intention of the artist’s presentation may or may not be received by others. Clarifying boundaries are more apparent in theology than in art, and the intuitive experience of art is as varied as the human beings viewing it. John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, shares that when art is experienced corporately it allows for a deepened sense of covenant relationship with God and others. At the end of his chapter, Witvliet provides a list of guiding questions for artists and pastors to discern the nature of both the artistic elements and the context of the congregation. The criteria in Witvliet’s chapter is one of the more practical pieces in casting a vision for the arts.

The last chapter is written by Jeremy Begbie, Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, and a professionally trained musician. Begbie talks about the future of the church with the thesis of the book in mind: “to inspire the church in its life and mission, with an expansive vision for the arts” (p. 21). Begbie believes that God’s glory is not merely a rational process but an intuitive experience as well (pp. 178-179). Theology is the rational means to understanding God, and art provides a way for the Holy Spirit to expose the depth of God’s work. His hope is that in the future both pastors and artists work together in providing beautiful opportunities for people to meet with God.

The book was well organized in terms of addressing a broad subject, but it takes more work and research to create a vision for the arts in the church than this short volume is able to accomplish. Many contributors addressed potential problems when art is brought into worship, but were not as forthcoming in providing answers. For example, Nicolosi is adamant that art should not be used as a political motivator, or a distrac-

tion, or a way to make people feel good about themselves (pp. 111-112). Banner believes that art should not be seen as an efficient way to accomplish or promote a task (p. 126) because it offers no nurturing to the artist, nor does it promote long term growth in the intuition or imagination in the body of Christ. Witvliet cautions that art must avoid sentimentality in order to resist incorrect ideas about God. Interestingly when providing possible answers, little was said about the rich tradition of art in the church pre-Reformation.

I enjoyed the book in the context of worship planning and Christian formation. I would not use it as a textbook in a class but might suggest some of the chapters to share stories of how people have been shaped by the beauty of the arts. Pastors who are open to intuitive expressions of worship will appreciate this book and artists who have a desire to serve the church will also gain from reading this book. Any person with a discerning taste for beauty will benefit from this collection of explorations into the role of art in the life of the church.

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Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God

by Jeremy Begbie.

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018.

x + 212 pp. US \$18.00, softcover.

The association of art with transcendence is certainly nothing new, but in conjunction with the increasing secularization of Western culture, there has been a rising interest in the notion of transcendence, i.e. *otherness* and *uncontainability*. Jeremy Begbie, a classically trained pianist, author of several books, and Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, notes that the recent interest is “seen in various efforts to come to terms with, or compensate for, the perceived loss of traditional theological transcendence” (p. 8). Begbie’s primary purpose in *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts* is to connect transcendence in the arts to a Trinitarian theology. He writes, “How, if at all, might the arts bear their own kind of witness to divine transcendence?” (p. 2). The answer to this question is understandably multitudinous, but Begbie does provide lucid insight and some thoughtful conclusions. In one such conclusion, Begbie states that the arts, “remind us that we live in a world possessed by a manifold meaningfulness that exceeds what can be said or thought with one kind of language...through their multiple allusivity...[the arts] shake us out of the illusion that we were created for an ever greater grasp or command of the world...In short, they can remind us that we are not God” (p. 164).

Begbie’s four chapters offer distinct perspectives on transcendence, both in terms of art and theology. In the first chapter, “Stirrings of Transcendence?,” Begbie introduces several representative examples of theological commentary by authors who “generally show an eagerness to respond to what they see as signals of transcendence in artistic culture at large, beyond the conventionally or explicitly Christian” (p. 16). The commentary ranges in topics from the paintings of Mark Rothko, to films such as *The Tree of Life*, and of course, music. Begbie points out that these authors all cling to the notion that “the arts possess unique capacities to evoke in us a sense of divine transcendent presence, and in some cases to be media of God’s transcendent activity” (p. 35). While not “doubting the drive and motivations behind the majority of this writing,” Begbie admits that, “I

have major concerns about some of what is being argued” (pp. 38–39). He is quick to point out that he shares their interest in exploring divine transcendence, but believes the approach can be more correctly founded in a view that is Biblical and Trinitarian.

In chapter two, “Sublime Transcendence,” Begbie describes the historical link between the arts and the sublime, a common notion of the nineteenth century. To experience the sublime is to be overwhelmed by something beyond our cognition or perception. Begbie points out that aestheticians, art historians, philosophers, and cultural theorists, both historically and presently, write about the sublime in art, especially music, using language replete with religious and theological allusions. Begbie laments the lack of substantive truth in these writings and is surprised by the absence of a Trinitarian view of transcendence. He observes that the historical experience of the sublime is one “of fear...the overwhelming is threatening. A classically Trinitarian account of God, by contrast, secures the belief that love is internal to who God is; to be overwhelmed by this infinite deity is to be overwhelmed by God’s holy love” (pp. 73–74).

Begbie reiterates this point in chapter three, “Disturbing Transcendence.” In reference to the prologue of John’s gospel he writes, “God’s transcendence over the world is a function of love-in-action” (p. 86). He further describes this transcendence as “God’s infinite life that the world cannot possess or contain...a life of generative outgoingness, rooted in the very character of God as love” (p. 97). Begbie argues that God’s uncontainability, i.e., divine transcendence, is exemplified by the resurrection of Jesus.

The final chapter, “Redeeming Transcendence,” brings the focus back to the arts and the question of how the arts might bear their own kind of witness to divine transcendence. Begbie begins by reminding us that the world is not divine and that “transcendence is a function of God’s dynamic presence to and for the world” (p. 131). He posits that, “the arts testify to the transcendence (otherness) of God most potently when they are fully creaturely, when, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, they point to, share in, and contribute to the created world becoming more fully itself” (p. 131). The arts, Begbie argues, “can serve as compelling witnesses to the way in which the richness of meaning we encounter in the finite world always exceeds our grasp” (p. 165). Begbie offers several more observations, all of which are fascinating and compelling. He reminds us to be wary of idolatrous exaltation of the artist, our role as covenanted people who are created in God’s image, the way music can open our ears to a distinctive kind of space, etc.

Connecting philosophy, the arts, and theology into a clear and conclusive argument on any topic, much less transcendence, is not easy to accomplish in a book of this length. Begbie certainly raises excellent questions and provides answers that Christian artists would find relevant, potent, and inspirational. However, when specific examples of art and music are offered, there is little substantive discourse about style or quality and whether or not transcendence is impacted by these attributes. Tackling this topic from that direction would certainly be more polemical and confrontational in tone. Begbie avoids this approach, instead leaving specifics to be worked out by each reader. While the lack of conclusiveness in some areas could be potentially frustrating to some, I admire his care to invite more discourse instead of promoting a singular, exclusionary view. Though, Begbie is certainly conclusive with the truthful reality of the gospel and a correct way of defining and implementing the concept of divine transcendence in the arts. As a resource, anyone creating art would benefit, especially students or faculty engaging with issues of what art can accomplish for God in our increasingly secular society.

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The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings

by Zaleski, P. and Zaleski, C.
New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.
643 pp. US \$18.00, softcover.

Aptly named with one of the defining characteristics of the band of writers, artists, and intellectuals called the Inklings, *The Fellowship* traces the interconnected lives of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, and Charles Williams. Authors Philip and Carol Zaleski highlight these four men among the members of the Inklings because of their fame, but also because they “are the most original, as writers and as thinkers, and thus most likely to be read and studied by future generations” (p. 12). Striking though the differences between these four men may be, their fellowship—indeed their deep friendship—transcended the boundaries of style, genre, philosophy, and theology. As “iron sharpens iron” (Prov. 27:17), these four men shaped one another in ways that would eventually influence readers and thinkers around the world.

The Zaleskis begin *The Fellowship* with detailed accounts of the early lives of Tolkien, Lewis, Barfield, and Williams. They discuss the influences of family, war, the arts, education, the church, and friendship. Weaving together these pieces of biography are threads of friendship that form between the four men—first between Lewis and Barfield (1919), then Lewis and Tolkien (1926), Barfield and Tolkien (1927), and Lewis and Williams (1936). While the founding of the Inklings is credited to Oxford undergraduate David Lean sometime in the early 1930s, the Zaleskis write that “Barfield always insisted that the Inklings began, de facto if not de jure, in the late 1920s, long before the group received its formal appellation, in the walking tours and other gatherings of the early principals” (p. 195). Indeed, the chronicling of the early educational and professional years of Tolkien, Lewis, Barfield, and Williams reveals near endless letter writing, walking and talking, philosophical debate over meals, and criticism of one another’s work. The Zaleskis write of the Inklings’ early meetings:

Conversation was crucial to each session; if the stated purpose of the Inklings was to read and critique one another’s writings, the implicit but universally acknowledged aim was to revel in one

another's talk. Often gatherings had no readings at all, only loud, boisterous, back-and-forth on a vast range of topics. Among the Inklings, pen and tongue held equal sway. (p. 196)

It is perhaps this *fellowship*—deep, meaningful dialogue and debate on all matters of life—which strikes the reader most profoundly in reading the Zaleskis' characterization of the Inklings' inception and unifies the chapters to follow.

After a discussion of the establishment and function of the Inklings, *The Fellowship* follows the prolific writing, developing thought, and circle of influence of each of the four Inklings in view. Relationships between the four men ebb and flow, beloved works are rejected and accepted for publication, and professional hopes both diminish and come to fruition. Throughout the discussion of each man's personal and professional blows and triumphs, however, remains the thread of fellowship which deeply affects each man. The final chapters of *The Fellowship* detail the dwindling meetings of the Inklings, and the last significant works and eventual deaths of Williams, Lewis, Tolkein, and Barfield.

In their goal of explaining and examining the deep fellowship of the Inklings—and the relationships between Tolkein, Lewis, Barfield, and Williams in particular—the Zaleskis succeed unhindered. *The Fellowship* is not only an impeccably researched account of the lives, friendships, and literary contributions of these four famous men; it also demonstrates how “the Inklings’ work has a significance that far outweighs any measure of popularity, amounting to a revitalization of Christian intellectual and imaginative life” (p. 510). The reader is left with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the work of these Inklings, and is compelled to continue carrying the torch in Christian dialogue and scholarship.

One question arises for the contemporary reader in relation to the prolific dialogue (carried on both through pen and tongue) that pervades the relationships and meetings of the Inklings: how can one achieve such intimacy in friendship, such depth in conversation, in today's detached, fast-paced, task-oriented world? In a world of social media and the *faux amis*-Facebook phenomenon, the rich interaction of the Inklings is arresting. To replicate their community in the 21st century seems impossible, but perhaps there is room for a new representation of their fellowship.

If there is critique to be offered upon reading *The Fellowship*, it must be that there is such a depth of information offered in each chapter that the reader unfamiliar with any one of the men in view may feel overwhelmed.

Many readers will be more intrigued by extending their knowledge of Lewis and Tolkien—the more notable of the four—than trailing along the history, thought, and contributions of Barfield and Williams. Due to the amount of material produced by these four Inklings, the Zaleskis' lengthy descriptions of literary works also slow an otherwise enjoyable read. Finally, readers may struggle with placing events and figures in the correct chronological order due to the organization of the chapters.

Despite its sometimes weighty content, *The Fellowship* is beautifully drawn together at its close by highlighting the lasting influence and implications of the Inklings' work. The Zaleskis have produced a text that will undoubtedly enrich the intellectual and spiritual life of any willing reader.

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The Christian Imagination: The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing

ed. Leland Ryken.
New York, NY: WaterBrook Press, 2002.
465 pp. US \$24.99, paperback.

The subject of Leland Ryken's anthology, the Christian imagination, is a large and complex topic but the diverse sources he has brought together, both classic and contemporary, effectively accomplish the two aims that the editor has set for himself: to present a "theory that will clarify thinking about the nature and value of literature" and to provide "practical . . . tips for reading and writing literature in the best ways possible" (xii). Readers will find much here to provoke thought as they encounter reflections on and examples of great writing by a wide range of Christians who have devoted their lives to literature and other creative endeavors.

The book is organized into ten parts, each addressing a different facet of imagination and creativity. These sections address broad conceptual issues, such as "A Christian Philosophy of Literature" (Part 1), the perspectives and experiences of writers and readers respectively (Parts 4 & 5), and specific genres such as realism, myth and fantasy, poetry, and narrative (Parts 7-10). Each part begins with one or two longer essays on the theme of that section and then a series of shorter "Viewpoints" from major literary figures such as C.S. Lewis, Annie Dillard, Walker Percy, and Wendell Berry. Several parts also include a "Reflections" section containing many short quotes on the topic.

One of the unifying threads throughout the volume is a compelling apologia for literature and the creative arts, not just based on their beauty or utility but as essential for understanding and engaging the world around us. As Ryken argues in one essay, "Literature takes reality and human experience as its starting point, transforms it by means of the imagination, and sends readers back to life with renewed understanding of it and zest for it because of their excursions into a purely imaginary realm" (24). Imagination is not some secondary attribute that adds color to life; it is rather

at the heart of who we are (anthropology) and how we know the world (epistemology) (11, 346).

Contributors also challenge the postmodern approach to the arts so pervasive in our contemporary culture, which Peter Leithart describes as “the triumph of the reader, which corresponds to the so-called ‘death of the author’” (209). He notes that the word “author” (*auctor* in Latin) is etymologically linked to the word “authority” (*auctoritas*), an important point for all readers but particularly for Christians who believe God is the author of creation, that the Bible is divinely inspired, and that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Leithart makes use of a helpful analogy, the musician’s relationship with a musical score: “Reading is a creative act [not merely passive], but it is genuinely creative only to the degree that the reader creates in submission to the creator, only if the reader ‘plays the notes’ that have been written by the ‘composer’” (220).

Many of the included pieces reject a narrow definition of Christian art that focusses only on “religious” subjects, what one writer calls the “reign of the explicit” (45, 251). Indeed, much so-called Christian art is deficient both aesthetically and theologically. As Flannery O’Connor put it, “The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality” (164). Rather, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, “Christian art is the expression of the whole life of the whole person who is a Christian” (46). The contributors also consistently affirm the value of and truths within even secular literature, both ancient and contemporary.

Another consistent theme in the book is that we as consumers of art and literature must use our critical faculties, assessing creative works through the lens of a Christian worldview. As T. S. Eliot noted already in 1932, “I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for ‘amusement,’ or ‘purely for pleasure’ that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us” (204). In his essay “Redemption in the Movies” Brian Godawa applies this same warning to the visual media that is the primary fare of so many people today.

As the subtitle of the book, “The Practice of Faith in Literature and Writing,” suggests, the primary focus of the anthology is Christian imagination in the sphere of literature broadly conceived. Readers interested in Christian art in other media will not find as much material as they might desire, although many of the insights provided here have broad application. C.S. Lewis, probably the most frequently quoted author in the volume, declared, “We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with

other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own. . . . We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors” (51). Leland Ryken’s *The Christian Imagination* provides readers with many such windows through which to look and doors leading on to paths for further exploration.

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