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A CALL TO RECOVER THE ARTS

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*To Margaret, Jeff, and all their children;
to the sons and daughters of Jubal and Bezalel;
and to the beautiful Savior who puts the truth in their
work and the joy in their song.*

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1996 I traveled to New York City to see paintings by Makoto Fujimura. The exhibition was called *Images of Grace*, and I was dazzled by what I saw. Fujimura has mastered the ancient Japanese art of *Nihonga*—in which mineral pigments are applied to paper—and wedded it to the Western style of abstract art. The results are magnificent. The use of mineral pigments gives Fujimura’s work a shimmering depth of color, and as I moved through the gallery, I was stirred by the transcendent beauty of the paintings. His artwork also carries deep meaning, especially since each mineral pigment has a symbolic value. Gold represents eternal transcendence; silver—a precious metal that tarnishes through time—represents both the value and mutability of human life; and so on. Fujimura uses this traditional symbolism to give clear expression to his Christian faith. As the title *Images of Grace* suggests, the paintings in this particular exhibition

were about the grace of God: his common grace in creation, redeeming grace for the city, healing grace for downcast souls, and sacrificial grace for sinners.¹

At its best, art is able to do what Fujimura's paintings do: satisfy our deep longing for beauty and communicate profound spiritual, intellectual, and emotional truth about the world that God has made for his glory. Is it any wonder that the best artists are celebrated?

But there is another side to art—a more difficult side. It is never easy to be a painter, a poet, a musician, or any other kind of artist. While every calling has its own unique trials and tribulations, the life of the artist seems especially hard. There is the difficulty of the art itself—of creating, executing, and perfecting a design or a composition. It is always costly, in personal terms, to produce a work of art. Then, once the work is produced, it is sometimes undervalued. People fail to hear its message or appreciate its artistry. To be an artist is often to be misunderstood. There is also the inescapable fact that many artists are underpaid. But even highly successful artists may struggle with feelings of isolation and inadequacy, with frustration over the elusiveness of expressing transcendent beauty, or with the heavy sadness of their sympathetic identification with human pain. These are some of the sufferings that artists must endure.

If anything, things are even more difficult for Christian artists. Some churches do not consider art a serious way to serve God. Others deny that Christians in the arts have a legitimate calling. As a result, Christian artists often feel like they have to justify their existence. Rather than providing a community of support, some churches surround them with a climate of suspicion.

These common tensions were exposed in an article from the student newspaper at a Christian college featuring a senior art student who reveled in her calling: “God made me to be an artist. He gave me that talent. . . . That’s my response to God, to his world, to his message of salvation. When you see something that’s so wonderful, you want to join.” Unfortunately, as the artist learned, not everyone wants to join after all. “By the end of her sophomore year,” the paper said, “she was sick of her peers’ indifference to her calling. She was fed up with comments that suggested art is a waste of time, a field for slackers and weirdoes.” The artist wrote in her journal, “I felt I had to justify myself. . . . That is a terrible thing. I am a child of God. God made me a person who sees the world in a manner that is different from most perceptions. He gave me the urge to create.”²

What hope does the gospel give to someone who has this urge to create?

ART AND THE CHURCH

There are many reasons why some churches have a negative view of the arts. Art trades in images, and images easily lend themselves to idolatry. Artists know this from their own experience. In their work they encounter the glory at the foundation of things, and they feel its power over the heart. But the danger is especially acute when objects of art are brought into the church for religious worship. At various times in church history, such as during the iconoclastic movement of the eighth century or the Protestant Reformation in Europe, church leaders have tried to smash this form of idolatry by taking statues and other works of art out of the church and destroying them. Generally speaking, they were not opposed to the use of art, only its abuse. But some Christians failed to understand the difference, and there was a lingering suspicion about the visual arts.

Other forms of art have come under suspicion for different reasons. Nearly all Christians acknowledge the worth of music in public worship, but some are skeptical of its value in other venues, where it is seen as unessential entertainment. The theater has long had an unsavory reputation for immorality; so too the cinema, with its dubious connections to Hollywood decadence. Then there is poetry, which is not so much opposed as ignored. Often the church's antipathy betrays an underlying ignorance about the arts, but sometimes the suspicion is justified. Art is always tempted to glory in itself, and nearly every form of art has been used to communicate values that are contrary to Scripture. Art is as fallen as any other aspect of human existence. This fallenness perverts the arts against fulfilling their original purpose and prevents us from embracing them uncritically.

More recently, many Christians have objected to art on the grounds that it is dominated by an anti-Christian view of the world. They rightly perceive that over the last century or more many artists, writers, and musicians have become increasingly cynical about the possibility of knowing the truth. In many cases, they have abandoned the quest to discover and express transcendent meaning. Art has also suffered a tragic loss of sacred beauty, as many modern and postmodern artists

have been attracted instead to absurdity, irrationality, and even cruelty. Stuart McAllister was right when he wrote that “much of the energy and effort of our artists and cultural architects has gone into debunking, dismantling, or deconstructing all that is good, beautiful, and respected, to be replaced with the shallow, the ugly, the ephemeral.”¹ In many ways the art world has become—in the words of critic Suzi Gablik—a “suburb of hell.” At times the pervasive sense of unhappiness is palpable. Anyone who doubts this should attend the senior exhibition at nearly any art school in America, or view the subversive artwork of recent winners of the Turner Prize,² or consider how much trouble major orchestras have capturing an audience for dissonant work written since 1950. There are exceptions, of course, but a good deal of contemporary art is the art of alienation, which, if it is true at all, is true only about the disorder of a world damaged by our depravity. God can use transgressive art to awaken the conscience and arouse a desire for a better world. But as a general rule, such artwork does not reveal the redemptive possibilities of a world that, although fallen, has been visited by God and is destined for his glory.

Yet even Christians who are dismissive of art continue to use it. Doing so is inescapable. Every time we

build a sanctuary, arrange furniture in a room, or produce a brochure, we are making artistic decisions. Even if we are not artists in our primary vocation, there is an inescapably artistic aspect to our daily experience. The question becomes, therefore, whether as Christians we will aspire to high aesthetic standards. All too often we settle for something that is functional, but not beautiful. We gravitate toward what is familiar, popular, or commercial, with little regard for the enduring values of artistic excellence. Sometimes what we produce can be described only as *kitsch*—tacky artwork of poor quality that appeals to low tastes. The average Christian bookstore is full of the stuff, as the real artists will tell us, if only we will listen.

Ultimately this kind of art dishonors God because it is not in keeping with the truth and beauty of his character. It also undermines the church's gospel message of salvation in Christ. Art has tremendous power to shape culture and touch the human heart. Its artifacts embody the ideas and desires of the coming generation. This means that what is happening in the arts today is prophetic of what will happen in our culture tomorrow. It also means that when Christians abandon the artistic community, we lose a significant opportunity to communicate Christ to our culture. Furthermore, when we set-

tle for trivial expressions of the truth in worship and art, we ourselves are diminished, as we suffer a loss of transcendence. What we need to recover (or possibly discover for the first time) is a full biblical understanding of the arts—not for art’s sake, but for God’s sake. Then we will be able to produce better art that more effectively testifies to the truth about God and his grace. This goal is important not just for artists, but also for everyone else made in God’s image and in need of redemption.