
THE ARTS IN PROTESTANT WORSHIP

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Even those not particularly attuned to trends and currents in popular culture can hardly avoid noticing the contemporary fascination of western, Protestant Christians with the eastern and Orthodox practice of using icons for worship. Icons seem to be everywhere we look these days. From affordable images of Jesus or one of the saints mounted on particleboard, to precious, hand-painted images made by artist-monks in the most traditional way, they are for sale in nearly every abbey gift shop, theological bookstore, or liturgical supply company. Similarly, the traditional styles and subjects of the Greek and Russian churches are sharing space with contemporary and less “orthodox” portraits of Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., and Harvey Milk of San Francisco. Such images are finding their way into the offices, parlors, classrooms, and even the sanctuaries of Protestants who might have found these holy pictures disturbing twenty years ago.

What is happening here? Is it some kind of widespread liturgical, theological, or aesthetic rejection of a fundamental Protestant principle? Some may ask whether those who use these images for their private or even public worship really understand what it is that they do and what is at stake. Others might worry that Orthodox Christians could be anxious about what might seem a lack of appreciation for their ancient, sacred tradition as its stock rises in the marketplace of the spirituality movement.

NEW TRENDS IN REFORMED WORSHIP

Despite these concerns, the interest in icons is actually only part of a whole, growing movement in Protestant churches in the past decade or so. To be unaware of the almost overwhelming interest in, and even demand for, worship forms that incorporate the visual, sensual, and spiritual would be to have our heads in the sand. Labyrinths are appearing in even the most ordinary church basements, and suddenly even those ubiquitous seasonal

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banners hanging along aisles and in chancels no longer seem fresh or innovative. Video screens are mounted behind praise bands and sermons supported by PowerPoint are prepared for the wired pulpit. Something certainly is happening, and church leaders need to discern what that is and why it is being sought, and to take it all very seriously.

These developments call for some serious theological reflection on the place of art in worship and the ways we might channel all this interest and energy into something simultaneously rooted in the tradition and theologically integrated—both lasting and meaningful. Even though worship forms are ordinarily conservative (liturgical changes are controversial and usually strongly resisted), this call for more creative and art-filled worship has been around for a while and is gaining momentum. Change seems inevitable, and potentially good, but only if we undertake it thoughtfully and faithfully, if not gradually and cautiously.

Most of us can remember back to the days when worship in the Reformed churches was truly “plain.” Sanctuaries were largely unadorned and functional places, no matter how architecturally pleasing they might or might not be. Sunday mornings were solemn, and worship, although often grand and glorious, was also serious and sober. Worshipers came to church dressed in their best clothes for an audience with God and expected to be enlightened through the ear and the mind, hearing words prayed, read, sung, and preached. Congregants arrived devout and disciplined (children sat still and were quiet) and went away exhorted, edified, comforted, and intellectually energized. The sermon was the centerpiece of the service and also the minister’s most important moment during the week. The memorial floral arrangement on the communion table provided the only really brilliant spot of color in the environment.

Today, however, many worshiping congregations seem to have questioned the Protestant maxim “word alone” and are practicing less verbal forms of prayer, praise, and pedagogy. Churches are filled with colors and sounds that might have driven earlier generations right out the doors. Restraint is no longer a general desire or even an expectation. Decency and good order have slipped down some notches on the value scale. Now congregations are filled with energy. They are active, excited, and hoping to be filled with joy, emotionally touched, or spiritually enriched. In some services, worshipers are on their feet more than on their seats. Dance, drums, and dramatic presentations enliven Sunday mornings. Chancel, narthex, and nave display all kinds of visual art, permanent and temporary. The people who come to church expect to leave, not only edified, but also uplifted.

Most of us realize that even though we might not be aware of them, worship patterns have always been in the process of change, responding to cultural forces of all kinds including the ethnicity of a congregation, its social location, the prevailing “styles” of an era, and even important historical events. Any survey of hymnbooks from the twentieth century will demonstrate that “We have always done it this way” is simply a figment of our imaginations.

CREATIVITY AND THE GLORY OF GOD

Some general principles have historically guided the ordering of Reformed worship services. Since the sixteenth century, Protestant churches have held that worship should be essentially word-oriented and plain (clear and simple). Liturgists and theologians alike have cited John 4:23–34 to assert that the truest form of worship was that in spirit and truth—which generally meant that Protestants rejected most external forms, especially visual art, liturgical or architectural “trappings,” vestment, and other adornments of the church space as too distracting, too “Catholic,” or too secular.

Clearly the reformers’ belief was that the medieval Catholic liturgy had been derailed by practices that were akin to superstition and idolatry. Moreover, most of these practices seemed dangerously sensual and materialistic. Visual images, especially sculpture in the round, were deemed particular stumbling blocks, since they drew the worshiper’s mind to the sensible and temporal material creation rather than directing it to the invisible and transcendent Creator. The efforts of the early reformers aimed to focus worshipers’ eyes inward to the soul and tune their ears to words of Scripture read and gospel preached. In this way, God’s revealed word would illuminate minds through its spiritual truth, instead of human-made objects stimulating senses or affecting emotions through their physical beauty.

Yet, among the reformers we find a variety of opinions about what should be rejected and what allowed. Even Ulrich Zwingli, often placed at the end of the spectrum of the early reformers in respect to his rejection of arts in worship, espoused a modified iconoclasm. Zwingli permitted stained glass in his churches and tolerated a somewhat restricted use of art for the purposes of devotion and instruction in private homes. Luther and his successors were more open to the arts than Zwingli, arguing that the arts could be a means of glorifying God and thus could be given a place in the church space and included in the liturgy. Luther condemned Andreas von Karlstadt’s destruction of art and, in his treatise against this particular opponent, essentially argued that visual images might be a means to grace, akin to the preached word, and—like grace itself—were irresistible in any event:

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears on the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin, but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?¹

Although the word-centered liturgy of Calvin’s Geneva exemplified Reformation simplicity and order, and the singing of metrical psalms was

¹Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 40:99–100.

understood as a didactic aid, Calvin himself believed that visual art might present biblical stories or historical events and reinforce Christian morals (through teaching and admonition), and so he tolerated it for the sake of its proven benefits, particularly for certain members of his flock. So long as viewers might be edified or God might be glorified, Calvin allowed that sculpture and painting had positive elements. Moreover, rhetoric (particularly in preaching) was itself an art, albeit a form of art that deployed words through effective techniques designed to move people to think, feel, and understand something essential that might be lost in ordinary speech.

Therefore, we can argue, the Reformed church always has had a place for the arts, even in communal worship. But, given both history and continuing tradition, the place of art (especially visual art) needs to be understood and managed, both faithfully and sensitively. Thus, the central question is, not whether, but how Protestants should incorporate art in liturgy. In order to avoid misuse (for this is possible), we need again to construct a theological basis for art's place in Christian life and practice and to develop a strategy for integrating it that respects both larger tradition as well as the sensibilities of particular congregations but yet allows our patterns of liturgy to be enriched and our style of worship to be transformed by incorporating all the art forms.

Certainly, Christian theologians all agree that Scripture is God's revelation and a primary witness to God's truth. The texts of the Scriptures themselves testify also to the importance of the visual manifestation of God. The writings of the apostles and prophets assert that we see the glory and beauty of God with our eyes, however indirectly—mediated first through creation, occasionally through theophany, and finally (for Christians) in the incarnation. The God of the Bible, however, cannot be limited in space or appearance. Although evident in the world of nature, and so not exactly invisible, this God has no single image or likeness, temple or sanctuary.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul condemned the idolatry of the Romans and Greeks, arguing that only the wicked exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of humans or animals. Paul goes on to say that such people have no excuse for their idolatry, because the divine is shown forth in *all* these created things: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom 1:19–20). In addition to nature, God is known through spontaneous visions or dreams as well as the things made by art of one form or another. Art, after all, is both the human response to creation and human participation in creation.

Augustine of Hippo takes up this point, commenting on this very section of Romans in the tenth book of the *Confessions*. He imagines himself first turning to the beautiful things of creation and asking them about the God who made them: "My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty. . . . Surely this beauty should be self-evident to all who are of sound mind." Earlier, in Book 7, as he explicates the

goodness of all created things, he also outlines the way that external beauty leads the eye and mind upwards to God, the ascent being stimulated by the perception of beauty itself toward the unchangeable, transcendent, and eternal, and again cites the text from Paul's letter: "At that moment I saw your 'invisible nature understood through the things which are made.'"² Here Augustine follows the Platonic notion that the beauty that we perceive through our senses and that we come to love ardently draws us toward the ultimate source of the beauty itself. If God were not the origin and creator of beauty, these beautiful things could not have existed at all. Without them, we might not find our way to the ultimate beauty. We might not be converted.

Consequently, we may know the beauty and majesty of God through those things that we see with our eyes and even those things that we (or others) have made by hand. In fact, most of us depend upon these lesser things to draw us to the greater. For as we are in the image of God, we too are creative beings and in our creativity may make beautiful objects that reveal God's glory and goodness by their reflection of it. Because these objects reflect the beauty and goodness of God, they are both good and beneficial. Nevertheless, we must not mistake the creation for the Creator, beautiful object for the source of its beauty, nor offer it our worship as if it were divine in itself. The exception to this, of course, is the unique union of creature and God, that which we have seen with our eyes as well—the Incarnate One.

Even this, the Incarnate Christ, is a proof that all our senses help us to know the truth of God. In his opening words, the writer of the letter known as 1 John testifies to the validity and importance of seeing and touching as much as hearing: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:1–3).

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Therefore, following the apostles, we must not limit the ways we receive the word nor the mode by which we proclaim it. We come to know for ourselves, and we can effectively transmit that knowledge in

²Augustine, *Confessions* 10.9–12 and 7.22–24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 183–4; 126–8.

many different ways. In fact, one can argue that words alone are never enough. Sometimes words fail, as Paul says: “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26). We must also make use of the poetic, the visual, the sensory, the aesthetic, and the kinesthetic, stretching beyond simple prose to find a variety of ways to discover and relay the message of the gospel to speak the unspeakable. And this is art.

THE LANGUAGE AND POWER OF THE ARTS

When Jesus’ apostles asked him why he spoke in parables, he gave a clear explanation of the function and value of art for both teaching and proclamation (see Matt 13:10–17). Since mere hearing does not necessarily lead to understanding (nor mere seeing to perceiving), the heart needs to be open as well as the ears and eyes. Often hearts are dull, however, ears are tired of listening, and eyes are heavy or closed. Jesus’ teaching in parables was a way of reaching those who were ready to receive the secrets of the kingdom but whose hearts might be awakened by truths told in stories, to whom knowledge comes by means of images or stories, instead of intellectual argument. This form of pedagogy was not only effective; it worked where other techniques failed.

Jesus’ use of parables also shows us that stories are not just for children or the unsophisticated. Similarly, despite the common proverb “Pictures are the Bible of the illiterate,” visual art is specifically aimed at neither nonreaders nor the uneducated. Art functions in far more sophisticated and complex ways than such notions imply. First, art offers multiple, rich, and layered ways of speaking about and glorifying God, since art is unlimited in its range and expression. One image may tell us many truths simultaneously. No single image is enough, nor is any true image ever only one-dimensional. Second, like Augustine, we are led from the contemplation of beauty to the love of God. We are drawn from the meditation on the truth of a story to fuller comprehension of God’s will and purpose for us, or even simply of God’s self-revealing presence. Third, functioning in the way that Jesus’ parables did, art protects divine mystery while at the same time revealing it. Some will see one thing, others another, still others may see nothing—or everything. What we receive will have much to do with individual readiness, as well as with the particular ways that different people learn and know.

This is why worship requires poetry, lyric, drama, and narrative as much as (perhaps more than) exposition and analysis. We need the visions presented to us through pictures, gestures, or symbols. Music communicates what cannot be said in words, and we know that truth sometimes comes in metaphors or abstractions that are beyond explanation. The words of a text alone cannot convey its meaning. Language emerges out of syntax and grammar, and ideas come to us as images.

Similarly, the elements of visual art—light, color, line, shape, and texture—unite to become something much greater than a mere picture. Sound, smell, taste, and touch communicate immediately and intensely. Through these means, we discover, learn, and (perhaps more important) remember and recall what we have experienced. Furthermore, as Luther said so characteristically, the image is irresistible. We will form figures or images in our mental worlds in any case. Art only gives external form to that which we shape in our imaginations. Once it is objectified, we may share it with others, as well as revise, polish, or even repudiate it.

Thus, art is a kind of language that not only transmits ideas or information but also opens our hearts to receive the word, stimulates our imaginations to understanding, and imprints our memories to recall and retain in ways so effective that we dare not undervalue its function and force. Therefore, if worship is that activity we do in order to discover or experience something that we would have no other way of knowing, it must incorporate the arts. It does that by its very nature. Even the simplest and most prose-oriented worship services have an element of storytelling. With very little addition of voice, time, and action, they turn into dramas. Once music is added, we might think of them as theater, even opera. We may add props, costumes, and choreography in the most rudimentary ways. Perhaps the only real question is how consciously, how well, and how honestly we do all of this.

THE ETHICS OF THE ARTS IN WORSHIP

Art not only shapes the way we know and assists us in proclaiming our knowledge to others, it also affects the way we act in the world. So art has more than an aesthetic or even a theological dimension; it has an ethical function. We must realize that art, however essential to our understanding and communication, has the potential also to be detrimental if it misleads, undermines, or competes with ultimate truth, goodness, and beauty. We cannot afford to be uncritical promoters of art for art's sake. Just as texts can be misinterpreted or misused, so can other forms of artistic expression. One must take care with art. It has power.

First of all, as Paul asserted, Augustine recalled, and the sixteenth-century reformers forcefully restated, art is empty and meaningless unless it points to something greater than itself. Just as an analogy only works insofar as it leads our minds to a more profound reality, art must aim to illuminate and reveal a truth beyond its own existence. We must resist idolatry by insisting that our art is directed toward serving and glorifying God, not serving and glorifying itself, the performers or artist who make it, or the subject matter it brings before our eyes. Especially with regard to Christian worship, art is not its own end. Its validity—its reality even—depends on its value as a means of grasping, perceiving, or transmitting a transcendent insight. In simpler terms, this means that art, if it is authentic and valid, must not be merely decorative or primarily entertaining. More-

over, it may be both heretical and idolatrous, inviting the worship of the creation rather than the Creator, or mistaking the messenger for the message.

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Second, art not only illuminates the mind or opens the heart. It also acts upon the will. It is both means of expression and mode of exhortation, affecting both artist and audience. It changes the ways they think as well as act in the world. For this reason, we can speak of the prophetic role of art, since it not only gives perceptible form to our visions but also expresses and challenges our values. Jesus' parables were artistic creations that aimed at changing the ways his hearers behaved. Thus, congregations need to be conscious of the messages sent and received. Again, in simpler terms, art may empower, move to action, stimulate piety, arouse pity, or even righteous anger. However, art that degrades, dehumanizes, manipulates, or harms is false and even blasphemous. Art that serves only its own ends, or is aimed only at profit, is essentially idolatrous.

Perhaps the design and elaboration of our worship spaces, and the ways in which they reflect, shape, and reinforce ideology and practice, illustrate how art can be harmful, even if unintentionally. Sometimes elements in our church environments clash with and undermine the messages that we intend to send and so contradict the values we say that we espouse. Sometimes the space simply gets in our way, literally and figuratively. Sometimes objects or images are so familiar that they are taken for granted or overlooked as inconsequential, yet they are neither benign nor insubstantial. They impress themselves on our subconscious, contribute to our formation, hamper our movements, and limit our options.

Theories of art from Plato onward emphasize the imitative aspects of art. Art both imitates and generates imitation. The objects of our gaze shape our view of reality, actively and passively, for better and worse. For example, elevated or centralized organ consoles suggest the object of our worship is the music, or (worse yet) the musician. Similarly, pictorial representations of God as an elderly, enthroned father, or the mocking of Jesus by groups clearly identified as Jews (often shown as grotesque or ridiculous), have had obvious and unfortunate influence upon generations of viewers who took these images for granted. In a different way, art that is banal rather than complex may please or even comfort but rarely challenges or transforms. Borrowings from the popular culture may build

bridges but also come at the risk of losing our independence from the influences of the secular marketplace. Shock art seeks only to shock, not to offer a vision of anything transcendent or to lead us to the divine.

Of course, this raises the very difficult problems of quality judgments and censorship—problems that must be addressed, for, however difficult, art is not exempt from evaluation, criticism, and even repudiation. Like religion itself, art has been known to serve some unfortunate ends, from advertising to propaganda to pornography. Congregations have a responsibility to engage in these discussions honestly and seriously, as they incorporate the arts into their worship lives. We should strive to offer the best that we have, to reach outside of our familiar and safe forms of expression, in order to stretch our minds and to transcend the mundane. We also need to offer critique.

Augustine comments on the dangers of mistaking the medium for the message by overdelighting in the art for its own sake, as well as the importance of craft: “I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung. . . . But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place.”³

Works of art have a moral dimension, sometimes so profound as to outweigh their aesthetic qualities. Thus, we should strive to offer the best that we have, evaluating a work’s depth of vision, theological integrity, and artistic merits. In the end, the final product will have different interpretations and varied acceptance, probably all the more if it is truly prophetic or aesthetically challenging. That is the nature of a metaphor, an image, or a complete work of art—to point to a reality that cannot be contained in one explanation, interpretation, or argument. Every fresh reading, viewing, or hearing will generate new but equally valid ideas, meanings, or emotional responses. Once this process stops, and the image is reduced to a single possible significance, it ceases to be art.

Third, art that is used for worship will be experienced by (maybe even be the work of) a whole community and should reflect and strengthen that community’s life together. Even while the work of the artist may have a profound devotional aspect, the arts of worship are congregational and public, not private and individualistic. This means that art must be authentic to our particular contexts, congregations, and traditions. Some liturgical arts cannot be easily imported from another culture or communion, no matter how attractive or helpful they might be on a personal basis. Perhaps this returns us to the question of whether Protestant congregations should embrace the practice of praying with icons, chanting in Latin, or even celebrating Jewish Seder meals. The answer would depend upon whether the new forms can be effectively and faithfully integrated into the

³Ibid., 207 (*Confessions* 10.49).

theology, ecclesiology, values, and traditions of a living community in such a way as to build it up as it is, rather than to attempt to change worship into something different, or simultaneously to disrespect another community's sacred rituals.

In the final analysis, art is not about what we do, but about the way we do it. We must not think that bringing art to worship is about adding something (augmenting, supplementing, or experimenting). Instead, we need to think of it as the way we undertake the activity itself—how we understand our task and our goals. In the way that worship is essential to our being as people of God, so art is integral to us as expressive people. The two go together and, in the end, are truly inseparable. Thus, to speak of “adding the arts” to worship is rather like making a case for adding cuisine to cooking, or horticulture to gardening. This has more to do with the seriousness, love, and care of our approach than about whether we do it or not.

ABSTRACT

In spite of a history of iconoclasm and theological reservations about the place of arts (especially the visual arts) in Protestant worship, we have witnessed in recent years an increasing interest in and even demand for the incorporation of art in liturgy. However, since congregational leaders and worship planners need to do more than respond to needs or (worse yet) current trends, this article offers theological reflection on the positive role and function of the arts within a Protestant theological framework, but also counsels caution. The addition of art forms to worship can be renewing and inspiring, but without careful theological reflection and attention to both tradition and history, we risk misunderstandings or regrettable mistakes. By proceeding thoughtfully and faithfully, the worship life of congregations can be deeply enhanced by inclusion of the arts, since worship itself is a form of art that should be approached with great care and love.