

CASTING A VISION FOR THE ARTS IN YOUR CHURCH

Manuel Luz

One of the reasons why the arts don't take hold in some churches may simply be an issue of misunderstanding. While theology is vigorously taught in the seminaries that our pastors and church leaders attend and graduate from, their study typically does not include a theology of the arts. In fact, there may be an unspoken distrust of the arts imbedded in some of our faith traditions, born from the reformation, that has been unknowingly and unintentionally passed down to us. Church leaders and pastors often cannot connect the dots between the role of the church—worship, discipleship, and evangelism—with the arts. But there is a rich and comprehensive rationale that we can draw from which can provide a Biblical foundation for the arts in the local church. Pastors and church leaders may be more open to the arts in the church if they only understood the theology behind what it is that artists do.

Now the word “theology” is one of those big words that people who go to seminaries use. But really, it is simply “the study of the nature of God and religious belief.” In other words, theology is what you believe as it relates to God. So a “theology of the arts” is what you believe about the arts as it relates to God.

The following is a concise theology of the arts that might help your church leaders understand the role of the arts in a more informed way. Note that some very smart theologians and philosophers have written thick and expansive books about this stuff for many years, so this will be quite incomplete. Still, knowing what you believe about the arts as it relates to God is an essential and foundational part of what it is to be an artist of faith.

What we believe about the arts can be summarized in four sections: The nature of *God*, the nature of *us*, the nature of *our calling as artists*, and the nature of artists in *community*. Some Bible passages are included if you'd like to study this in more depth.

The Nature of God

God is by nature a Creative God (Genesis 1:1-2:2). If you look at the first five words of the Bible, “In the beginning, God created...”, you see two very important aspects of God's character: He is *timeless* and He is *creative*. So God defines Himself, right from the start, as the Eternally Creative One. All of creation is a byproduct of the nature of our God.

And that's not all. All things were created through the person of Jesus (John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-17, 1 Corinthians 8:6). Think about that for a moment: In the nothingness of the beginning of time, the creative muse of the Triune Godhead flowed through the pre-incarnate person of Jesus.

Note that the act of creation was not a chore for the God. He takes great pleasure and receives glory in the creation of all things (Revelation 4:11, Psalm 19:1-4, Genesis 1:31). You can almost picture Him smiling as He forms the stars and paints the cosmos from the canvas of nothingness. He is, in a very real sense, the Artist God.

The book of Genesis reveals one other aspect about God. When He surveyed all that he had made, He declared that it was *good* (Genesis 1:31). To be “good” in a theological sense is more than a statement of approval but more of virtue. He said it was good because the beauty of creation perfectly reflected the attribute of Goodness that is God. In a sense, God showed us what true Beauty was, as beauty is defined by God’s original intention for His universe.

So God is forever creative, forever joyful at His eternal acts of creation, and is also glorified through the beauty of His creation. What does that imply for us?

The Nature of Us

We are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26), and that means much more than we realize. We are creative beings—artists and engineers and builders and dreamers—because we are made in the image of a Creative God. In other words, we cannot help but be artists; it is who God made us to be.

God also equips us to act on our creativity. He gives us sentience, intellect, physicality (like opposable thumbs), passion, and free will. In fact, creativity is a subset of free will. Theologically speaking, free will is the ability to make choices separate from (and sometimes in opposition to) our omnipotent God. When you understand what an amazing gift free will is, you begin to get a sense of how creativity is such an important part of what it is to be human.

That’s not all. We are endowed with an innate, mysterious understanding of what is beautiful in God’s eyes. Deep in our souls, we each have this inborn aesthetic (Romans 1:20), which is another aspect of being made in God’s image. This is why we are universally drawn to the beauty of a starry night or a baby’s laughter or a red rose. It is a sympathetic resonance to beauty that points us to God.

So God *makes* us creative, and He gives us the *ability* to be creative, and then He endows us with an inborn aesthetic that allows us to *derive pleasure* from the creative act as well. And this is fitting, for we are children of our Abba God (1 John 3:1-3). Like a parent who displays her child’s art on the refrigerator door, our God takes joy in—and is glorified through—our acts of creation, our art.

Now that we understand the nature of God and the nature of us, what does that mean for artists of faith?

The Nature of Our Calling

Theologians describe a concept known as the *cultural mandate*—God’s command to us to fill, subdue, and rule over the earth. This includes acts of productivity and creativity—to be fruitful and multiply, to steward the earth, and even to form, create, and imagine (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:19-20). In fact, we would not have been able to fulfill God’s command if humanity did not have creativity as a defining characteristic.

The arts—music, dance, drama, visual arts, poetry, filmmaking, and craftsmanship in all its forms—are an essential aspect of the culture-making process. The arts are a part of the cultural mandate. So artists of faith have the very important job of expressing life in Christ, in authentic Truth and Beauty. We must steward our artistry for the good of the body (Matthew 25, 1 Corinthians 12, Luke 12:48), for our talents do not belong to us, but to God. Which brings us to our last point.

The Nature of Community

Jesus called us to become a new kind of community that He called the Church (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:42-47). This new kind of community is endowed with all manner of spiritual gifts and talents and abilities (1 Corinthians 12), and all of these are intended for one another. As such, artists of faith are not intended to live as individuals, cloistered in our workshops and art studios, but within the context of others (1 Chronicles 22-25). Thus, as artists, we have the need to create within the context of the Church and share our art for the sake of the Church (Philippians 2:1-4).

This has implications. The Church should be a place where artists are encouraged, nurtured, disciplined, held accountable, and appreciated for their essential role (Ephesians 2:19-22). And leaders and pastors of churches should create a safe and accepting place where artists of faith can serve and express their art fully. As artists of faith are called to serve the body, it is the role of leaders of churches to give artists a place to express their art for the good of the body. Artists of faith provide an essential expression of life in Christ, and the role of the Church is to allow these expressions to encourage, challenge, prophesy, edify, and point people to God.

Secondly, the arts can play a role in the spiritual formation of an individual. If spiritual disciplines—like solitude, fasting, silence, and quiet times—are external actions that can be used to aid in internal spiritual formation, then it stands to reason that the artistic disciplines can also be spiritual disciplines for the artist of faith. Songwriting, painting, writing and other creative endeavors are spiritual activities for the artist, activities where the Spirit of God meets us and can form us.

Finally, since the arts impact our culture (in both incidental and profound ways), artists of faith are called to express their faith through their art to the world (Matthew 28:18-20). In the same way that the Great Commission applies to each of us, so does it apply to artists and their art. The role of the church includes sending the artist of faith into the world to create and affect culture.

Theology and Mission

We've briefly made the argument that a well-formed theology of the arts can be helpful in informing our mission. The calling of the artist of faith and the mission of the local church must be compatible and complementary. But the arts should not exist in a church simply as a vehicle for a message. In the larger sense, the arts are an essential expression of life lived in Christ. If your church's mission is to worship God and grow disciples and reach out to the world, one of the best things a church can do is to empower and unleash the artists of faith in your congregations to simply be who God intended them to be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Manuel Luz is passionate about worship, coffee, the Oakland Raiders, and the intersections of faith and the arts. A songwriter, author, speaker, and creative arts pastor, Manuel's book, *Imagine That: Discovering Your Unique Role as a Christian Artist* (Moody Publishers) is a practical and personal theology of the arts. Check out his thought-provoking blog, "Adventures in Faith and Art" (manuelluz.com), or his four solo albums (iTunes or CDBaby).

