

Vehicles of the Gospel

The Visual Arts in Lutheran Worship

By Jonathan Mayer

Introduction

There can be little doubt that Christian culture of the current age is artistically impoverished compared to the Christian church of ages past. A survey of Lutheran churches built in the post-WWII era will reveal very little in terms of artwork created for worship. What little there is has more than likely outlived its short period of novelty, and now appears as tasteless and outdated as the avocado green Frigidaire you might have owned in the 70's. But for the less adventurous congregations, bare white walls and a utilitarian mindset seem to be the norm.

Many Lutherans do not see the present artistic climate as lacking. Artwork isn't something that most of us were raised to be aware of. We have become so accustomed to barren churches and empty crosses that it does not seem strange to us. Those who have the desire to make art for the church, however, can do little but wonder why a culture that is so visually oriented should find no place for images in its places of worship.

At the time of the Reformation, the artistic climate was much different. The church was bloated with splendid artwork, and sadly, much of it was idolatrous. Eager to purge the church of Rome's influence, mobs of protestant iconoclasts burned paintings, smashed statues, broke windows, and defaced churches across Europe. But we are living in the aftermath of another iconoclasm. The iconoclasm of the 20th century was not violent in nature, and most were unaware of it. But it occurred nonetheless, sometimes utilizing artistic progress, sometimes false teaching. Luther insisted that the visual arts are "good and useful" and should not be discarded.¹ If this is true, there is a vacuum to be filled. What should we fill it with? The question is a worthwhile one, and requires due consideration and study.

The Reformation was an important event that still has implications for our worship today. It is not just an historical footnote; it was a call to return to Christ and the Word of God. In order to know how to properly utilize art in worship, we first need to understand what worship is, from a biblical perspective. We must secondly understand what art is and how God wants us to use it. Lastly, we need to understand the wisdom of the worship principles handed down to us by means of the Reformation and apply those principles to the creation of new ecclesiastical art.

¹ Carl C. Christensen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), 60.

Understanding Worship

If we ask a sampling of Christians today what worship is, we will likely get a wide variety of answers, depending on denominational upbringing. If we intend to create meaningful art for worship, we cannot depend on a survey of off-the-street definitions of worship. We need to examine scripture in order to see what God really says about worship. When we learn more about the purpose and function of worship, we will be better able to make artwork that serves that purpose.

When studying the Bible, we discover that God talks about worship in at least two distinct ways. The first is *corporate worship*—the kind of worship we engage in when we go to church with fellow believers. This is the most common understanding of worship. Corporate worship not only involves adoration and praise, but also a formal expression of that praise by means of rites and ceremonies and involving the whole gathering of believers. We can find a wonderful example in 2 Chronicles, following King Hezekiah’s cleansing of the temple:

Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar. As the offering began, singing to the LORD began also, accompanied by trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. The whole assembly bowed in worship, while the singers sang and the trumpeters played. All this continued until the sacrifice of the burnt offering was completed. When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshipped. King Hezekiah and his officials ordered the Levites to praise the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness and bowed their heads and worshipped.²

The second kind of worship is personal and often informal; we may refer to it either as *individual worship*, or more broadly as *Christian living*. This occurs in the sense that everything we do, we do to God’s glory. St. Paul describes this kind of worship in Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” This second kind of worship is often mixed or confused with the first. As this distinction applies to artists, everything that we make may be done to God’s glory, and thus it becomes an act of spiritual worship. But those personal acts of worship, pleasing to God though they may be, are not necessarily fitting and appropriate for corporate worship.³

Besides there being at least two different kinds of worship, there are also two different aspects of corporate worship that should be recognized. These aspects are commonly referred to as *sacramental* and *sacrificial*. *Sacramental* refers to God’s work on behalf of mankind. The Word and Sacraments, as well as any part of worship that proclaims the gospel, may be referred to as sacramental in a broad sense. The sacrificial aspect of worship, however, refers to mankind’s response to God. This may include our songs

² 2 Chronicles 29: 27-30.

³ Corporate worship must set aside individualism for the sake of the Body of Christ. Paul urges us to avoid acts of worship that do not edify fellow worshippers—for example, speaking in tongues with no one to interpret (1 Corinthians 14:16, 17). Therefore David’s dancing before the Lord (2 Sam 6:14) is certainly not an invitation to include interpretive dance in the corporate worship service.

of praise, offerings, and thanksgiving. The sacramental aspect should receive by far the most emphasis in worship. In fact, it naturally dominates in the worship of all true believers. Even our praise and thanksgiving are sprinkled with the sacramental when we sing about what Christ has done for us on the cross.

This sacramental-sacrificial distinction is essential to Christian worship, as was made apparent during the Reformation. Luther and his fellow reformers vehemently denounced the Canon of the Mass in the Smalkald Articles and other writings, because it had made the Eucharist from a sacrament—in which we receive the forgiveness of sins on behalf of Christ’s blood—into a sacrifice, in which the partaker imagined that he was making propitiation for his own sins. To make matters worse, private Mass could be purchased on behalf of anyone, living or dead, providing yet another way in which a person could “buy” his way into God’s good graces. It was thus not surprising that the reformers attacked this practice with such intensity, calling it the “greatest and most horrible abomination.”⁴ In making the Lord’s Supper (and worship itself) into a work by which salvation might be earned, the Roman Church of Luther’s day was despising the work of Christ and binding consciences with legalism.⁵

Understanding the difference between corporate worship and Christian living, as well as the necessary emphasis of the Christian church on those elements of worship that are sacramental, serves as a necessary foundation for Christians aspiring to include meaningful works of art in worship.

Biblical Paradigms of Worship

It would be a matter of immense value for Christians to be able to observe artwork that was made according to God’s instruction and design in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, all such artifacts were destroyed or lost to history, and we have no examples of Jewish art (ecclesiastical or otherwise) from before the time of the Diaspora of AD 70. But although we cannot study the worship art of the Bible, we can study worship itself in order to apply its principles to our art making today.

The worship of the Old Testament was a sensory experience, involving sight, smell, hearing, and touch. The ritual washing, the smells of burning incense and burning flesh, the sprinkling of blood, the sounds of instruments and of singing, the splendidly clothed priesthood, and the temple itself were just a few of the outward signs of worship. Each sign had significance. While outwardly the worship of the ancient Jews was sacrificial, the sacrifices and ceremonies themselves did not make propitiation to God. Instead, they were symbols intended to make clear several facts: that God is holy, that we are not, that we come before God only on his terms, and that God would provide the sacrificial Lamb. In other words,

⁴ Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 270.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 270, 271.

even Old Testament worship was sacramental in nature. God freely offered the forgiveness of sins by means of an outward sign, in much the same way as he does in the Lord's Supper today. It was never implied that the mere observance of the act (e.g., sacrifice, washing) made the worshipper justified before God.⁶ The Holy Spirit wrote through the repentant King David that "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."⁷ The Lord forgave David's sins of adultery and murder the moment he repented of them—not after he had offered a sin offering.⁸

On Good Friday, God rent the temple curtain from top to bottom—a sign that the sacrifice of Jesus had been acceptable to the Father. The barrier that separated man from God was torn down, and Christ would forever mediate on our behalf. Thus began the era of New Testament worship. With the abolishment of ceremonial law, the forms of worship changed, although the substance remained focused on the works of God. The crucial difference was that the Sacrifice foreshadowed by ceremonial sacrifices had been completed. Now, rather than sing songs of praise for its deliverance from Egypt and Babylon, the Church could direct its praise toward the person and work of Christ.

We know from the Bible that New Testament worship consisted of gathering together,⁹ the public reading of the Word,¹⁰ prayer,¹¹ celebrating the Lord's Supper,¹² and the singing of songs and psalms.¹³ There would likely have also been some form of liturgical structure, as well as an address or sermon. But it is the singing of songs and psalms that especially interests us, because many of those songs are recorded for us in the Old and New Testaments, while the actual rites and trappings of worship are left to historical conjecture. It also interests us because these songs address a major misunderstanding in contemporary worship—namely, that there can be such a thing as "pure praise." When Luther examined the songs of scripture, beginning with the Song of Moses and Miriam and ending with the songs of the redeemed in Revelation, he noted that praise is always attached to the proclamation of God's works. God's actions on behalf of mankind culminated in Jesus' death and resurrection. Thus he held that in the New Testament era, God is rightly praised only when the gospel is preached, and that in preaching the gospel, one is

⁶ Psalm 51:16, Isaiah 1:11-14.

⁷ Psalm 51:17.

⁸ 2 Samuel 12:13

⁹ Hebrews 10:25.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 4:13.

¹¹ Colossians 4:2.

¹² Acts 2:42.

¹³ Colossians 3:16.

therefore also praising God.¹⁴ The Song of Mary has been highly regarded in the Christian Church from its beginning, and it fits this formula of “proclamation and praise” very well.

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.¹⁵

Given this and many other inspired songs of scripture, it is impossible to imagine that there is any form of God-pleasing praise that does not recognize his gracious works—especially the work of redemption. Thus, when we properly praise God, we simultaneously proclaim the gospel, providing further evidence that God intends corporate worship to be saturated with the sacramental for the building up of his Church. Worship is not for God’s benefit, but for ours. This is essential for Lutheran artists to bear in mind as they consider making works of ecclesiastical art.

Understanding Art Through the Reformation

When undertaking to create new and meaningful art in the Lutheran church, it is necessary to study the historical and theological context of the Reformation. Without this context, we risk falling into the same pitfalls that the reformers sought to remove and prevent. It would be of further benefit to learn the whole history of the Christian church in art and theology, but such a survey is not within the scope of this presentation.

Luther’s view of music as next in importance to theology is well known,¹⁶ but his views on the visual arts are not as widely studied. He never wrote on the subject at any great length, and his opinion of

¹⁴ Carl Schalk, “Martin Luther and Music,” *Issues Etc.* (November 10, 2011), <http://issuesetc.org/guest/carl-schalk/> (accessed March 13, 2012).

¹⁵ Luke 1:46-55.

¹⁶ Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 34.

the arts underwent considerable change over the course of his career.¹⁷ But Luther's comments on the fine arts in his mature years, taken in conjunction with the context of his comments on music and worship, helped to construct an environment in which the fine arts were encouraged as useful pedagogical tools and played fitting roles in liturgical worship. In his book, "Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise," Carl Schalk outlines several major premises of Luther's theology concerning music. Insofar as these premises also apply to the visual arts, the following overview of theological principles of art will follow the same basic outline: art as gift of God, art as proclamation and praise, and art as the living tradition of the whole church.

Art as Gift of God. First, Luther maintained that the arts are a gift from God. In Renaissance Europe, there was much discussion over who had first invented music—Pythagoras (according to the Greeks), or Tubal (ostensibly, according to Genesis).¹⁸ For Luther, the point was moot, because music was not the invention of man, but was part of God's creation and his good gift to mankind. Art must fall under the same description; God created not only the properties of light and matter that artists employ, but also the genius and the desire in man to imitate God's act of creation.

The implication of art as gift of God is that man is simply a steward of the arts. It has the capability to preserve good theology and to encourage morality, as Luther also said of music. But the fact that it could be used for high purposes obviously did not rule out its capacity to work harm if it was abused. In fact, abuses of the visual arts, namely, those connected with the idolatry of saint-worship and relics, led Luther to be skeptical and dismissive of art early in his career.¹⁹ It is likely that Luther's early opinions on the subject contributed to the opinions of Ulrich Zwingli and Andreas Karlstadt, who sought to remove or destroy all images under the premise that they were idols. Political climate aside, this bears testimony to the power that images may possess—that they produce at times such strong reactions of either devotion or hatred.

When Luther realized that his failure to commend art as God's gift to the Church had allowed for the opposite view to flourish, he began to teach that art be put to good use. "Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them."²⁰ This point of contrast with the iconoclasts was reflected in Luther's retention of the Ten Commandments as numerated

¹⁷ Christensen, 42.

¹⁸ Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 67.

¹⁹ Christensen, 42. Luther did at times commend the removal or destruction of images, so long as it was done in an orderly way, by proper authorities, and to those works that were "truly idolatrous images and the devil's hospices" (Christensen, 49).

²⁰ "Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal" (1524), LW 53:316, quoted in Schalk, 33, 34.

by St. Augustine, which omitted the prohibition of graven images, and divided the law against covetousness into the ninth and tenth commandments. This was because he understood the prohibition of images in light of the first commandment—which was the primary thought—and which forbade idolatry.²¹ He furthermore did not wish to fuel the fires of false teaching by elevating that secondary thought as its own commandment. In retaining the traditional numbering of the Commandments, he hoped to remove barriers from burdened consciences and allow God’s gift of art to be used in an edifying way.

Art as Proclamation and Praise. If man is simply a steward of the arts, then specifically how should they be employed in God’s service? For Luther and the conservative reformers, it was natural to employ music as a means by which the people of God could join in the proclamation of the gospel and the praise of their Savior. The visual arts, however, do not lend themselves as easily to praise or proclamation, because they lack the explicit clarity of speech.²²

Although speech and song should rightly receive the most emphasis in worship, since it was only by spoken word and song that God chose to reveal his Word to man, art nevertheless has more in common with language than one at first realizes. We readily recognize music as a “bearer” of its text, but Walter Buszin asks, “Must we not admit that the text, too, is only a bearer? A text derives its dynamic from the message it conveys. We marvel that, despite their limitations, God uses human words and language to inform man that He had created the heaven and the earth, that He sent His Son to redeem the world, and that He sends His Holy Spirit to call and sustain us in the saving faith.”²³ Buszin therefore argues that it is not the words themselves that are powerful, but the truths of God that are attached to them. Art, then, is not so distant from music and language as to be incompatible with the proclamation of the gospel. Carl Christensen writes, “Visual images for Luther indeed are useful instruments for conveying the message of the Gospel. They assist in making the Word manifest by providing additional media—with their own particular type of pedagogical effectiveness—for its proclamation.”²⁴

That particular pedagogical effectiveness refers to the way an image may communicate in a moment what could not be explained in a half hour. A powerful image will have a more lasting impression on our minds than a powerful sermon. Luther allowed that images help us to retain those divine stories more easily than by hearing alone.²⁵ And it is perhaps because images are able to call to mind truths that

²¹ Christensen, 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 64.

²³ Walter E. Buszin, “Hymn Tunes in the Service of the Gospel,” in *Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin* ed. Daniel Zager (Forth Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2003) 199, 200.

²⁴ Christensen, 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

are already known to the viewer that they become an effective vehicle of the gospel. Luther pointedly writes,

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, and image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as a reflection of my face naturally appears in 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 before my eyes?²⁶

Jesus spoke in parables (i.e., illustrations, picture stories) that were not immediately understood by the listener. But once the meaning had been explained, the picture became a vehicle by which the heavenly truth was more accessible than without it. Thus, while it is true that images have a limited ability to teach new information, their real value may be in calling to mind—and making clearer—what is already there, by faith. In such a way, the visual arts may certainly proclaim the gospel and praise their Creator.

Luther's view of fine art as a gift of God, and, by way of deduction, a vehicle for proclamation and praise, has implications as to its craftsmanship. If we are truly stewards of this art—not the inventors—then our concern for this gift of God will lead us to show great care in the manner in which it is made. This is all the more true when art is made a vehicle of the precious gospel. Poorly made artwork, according to the Reformation view, would reflect poorly not only on the church that commissions it, but on the gospel we preach and the God we worship.²⁷

Art as Living Tradition. Given the politically charged climate in which the Reformation occurred, it is no small wonder that Lutherans have any artistic heritage to speak of. Karlstadt, Zwingli, Gabriel Zwilling, John Calvin, and other iconoclastic reformers carried a great deal of momentum in Europe. In spite of his strong belief in freedom of choice, Luther was forced to reverse his early position on art as a “trivial” and “external” matter that was of no importance.²⁸ Yet this is the same opinion that is held by many Lutherans today. We hear much talk about “adiaphora” and “Christian freedom” when it comes to matters of worship. Ostensibly it is held that if God has neither commanded nor forbidden it, artwork in the church really does not matter, so long as the doctrine is sound. In his mature years, Luther realized that this view does more harm to the church than good. Because the arts are God's good gift to humanity for the proclamation of the Word, Satan will do his best to suppress and destroy them.²⁹

²⁶ LW 40:99-100; WA, 18:83, quoted in Christensen, 51, 52.

²⁷ Schalk, 52.

²⁸ Christensen, 51. It was also in Luther's teaching and practice that a Christian should at times do the very thing that is prohibited by those who limit Christian freedom with legalism.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

It was not a matter of chance that Luther eventually chose to retain and promote the artistic traditions of the church, rather than to let them be destroyed or fall by the wayside. Inasmuch as he valued Christian freedom, he also valued the traditions of the Christian church. Schalk writes,

To reject the gift of tradition was, for Luther, to go it alone and to be cut off from the mutual edification of the whole company of saints. . . . To accept those gifts of tradition was, for Luther, to be linked with Christians of other times and places and to be reminded in a unique way that the church of his day was indeed part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic company of saints.³⁰

What this means for Christian artists is that they need not—and indeed, should not—discard tradition and rely solely on their own creativity. Luther maintained that insofar as traditions did not harm the consciences of the faithful, they were “useful, proper, and good.”³¹ He also went so far as to imply that God works through the tradition of the Church to benefit us:

We should not discard or alter what cannot be discarded or altered on clear Scriptural authority. God is wonderful in his works. What he does not will, he clearly witnesses to in Scripture. What is not so witnessed to there, we can accept as his work. We are guiltless and he will not mislead us.³²

The new Lutheran church’s regard for tradition was such that it often retained many works of art of a distinctly Roman Catholic flavor. Rather than destroy statues of the saints, they would often simply remove the inscriptions, replacing them with a text that was focused on Christ.

The artistic tradition of the Western Christian church was never meant to be a rigid standard; it was in fact a “living tradition.” With the exception of architecture, there were few conscious considerations of style, since the primary concern was always function.³³ But even those stylistic considerations that affected architecture were shaped at least in part by theology, and in part by the liturgy and other worship needs. The ecclesiastical art of the church did not find its validity in its aesthetic, its style, or its realism. The true art found its validity in the unchanging scriptures on which it was based. When the Lutheran church had rid itself of all art that was clearly contrary to scripture, it was then free to create new and worthy art connected to the tradition of the whole church.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, close friend of Luther, became one of the first artists of the Lutheran church. His most influential work of liturgical art was made for the castle church in Wittenburg. At Luther’s suggestion (and probably with Luther’s collaboration³⁴), Cranach painted a triptych featuring the Last Supper. The painting also portrayed baptism and confession on the wing panels, incorporating portraits of Luther’s fellow reformers Philipp Melancthon and John Bugenhagen. The predella panel at the

³⁰ Schalk, 47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 47, 48.

³² Christensen, 55.

³³ The function of ecclesiastical art of course varies from architecture to painting, sculpture, liturgical vessels, etc., but is primarily sacramental in focus.

³⁴ Christensen, 139.

foot of the triptych showed Luther preaching a sermon and pointing to the crucified Christ. Since Cranach had been painting altarpieces and other religious panels before the Reformation, it required little more than a change of subject matter for the painter to adapt his work to the “new” church body. As was the case in the work of other Lutheran artists (e.g., Dürer, Ostendorfer), it was plain to see that despite a reform of focus, the art itself represented no sudden turn from the tradition of the church. Having been cleansed of everything that smacked of idolatry and works-righteousness, the art was allowed to continue in that living tradition—the building up of the Church in proclamation and praise.

The Modern Iconoclasm

Unfortunately, artwork in Germany seems to have declined soon after the Reformation. It is often generalized that the Reformation itself caused this decline.³⁵ But due in large part to the Thirty Years’ War, it is difficult to ascertain when the decline began or what its causes were. But regardless of the reasons or timing, Luther’s emphasis on the value of church tradition, paired with the view of art as gift of God and as vehicle of proclamation and praise, appears to disarm the accusation that the Reformation itself was a fundamental cause for the decline.

Eventually, we know that other factors caused the art of the church to decline both in quality and in quantity. Rationalism in the 18th century dealt probably the largest blow to Christianity, resulting in an unprecedented distinction between secular and religious society. Pietism infected many Lutheran churches, shifting emphasis from Christ’s obedience to that of the Christian, and forcing an austere aesthetic on its worship spaces. By the 19th century, the Romanticists, weary of an increasingly industrialized culture, contributed to a kind of sentimental, biblical escapism.³⁶ But art drained of its true meaning and purpose could not endure forever. Even though many artists continued working in a classical sense, they shared a waning spiritual conviction. By the end of the 19th century, Impressionism was embraced by some as a welcome change, shifting the focus from the subject to the act of painting. The church at large, despite its weakening artistic heritage, made no concerted effort to remedy the situation.³⁷

The latest and most decisive blow to ecclesiastical art came in the form of Modernism. In the early 20th century, the subject all but disappeared from mainstream painting and sculpture. Even church architecture, which for over a century had been using Gothic stylistic conventions, took a radical turn from traditional forms. It was a social and philosophical inevitability. Clement Greenberg attributed the beginnings of Modernism to Rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant, who insisted that every activity of

³⁵ Ibid, 164.

³⁶ John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63; Norman, 252.

³⁷ Walter Nathan, *Art and the Message of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 115.

society must be self-justifying.³⁸ Modernism insisted that art was its own end, rather than a means to an end. Sacred art, which relies on divine truth for its justification, was dismissed, along with religion, as a relic of the past. Even many Lutherans, excited by the freshness of Modernism, remodeled or rebuilt churches according to the latest trends, and commissioned abstract works of ecclesiastical art. It was not at all uncommon for those so-called sacred works to have been produced by nonbelievers. In fact, there were many secular architects who were enthusiastic for building churches because of the opportunity it presented to express the popular themes of “transcendence” and “spirituality.”³⁹ Much of the “religious community” readily bought into this talk. Had it been aware of the contradiction between the God who became incarnate and a structure intended to increase one’s awareness of a mysterious, transcendent universe-god, then it might have been more resistant to Modernism.⁴⁰

By the middle of the 20th century, the Modernist, subject-less aesthetic had been saturating American culture for several generations. The damage was most wide-spread in Protestant circles. But many Roman Catholics saw Vatican II as their invitation to embrace Modernism, as well. Any artist interested in making ecclesiastical art was being trained in the paradigm of “art for art’s sake.” The fact that Modernism was in every way hostile to the concept of art created for the worship of God seems not to have occurred to many church leaders. In the Lutheran church of today, the Reformation view of art is apparent nowhere. Art as gift of God is replaced by the idea of art as “inspiration.” Art that should be sacramental in focus instead draws attention to itself or the artist. What should rightly proclaim the gospel more closely resembles the egocentric notion of “pure praise.” There is little emphasis on beauty or integrity of craft. Novelty has replaced the living tradition, and churches that were “modern” only decades ago are now eyesores.

Since the philosophy and aesthetic introduced by Modernism have been around for almost a century now, it is not surprising that so many are ignorant of the last iconoclasm. But the fact that pastors and laymen are not aware that the Lutheran tradition in the arts is all but gone only makes the job of reestablishing it more difficult. Even though Modernism has been dead as a mainstream artistic movement for about forty years, the Modernist paradigm will likely continue to exert its influence for decades to come. This is not a problem that will go away on its own. Unless our Lutheran churches realize what it is they have lost, they will never want to get it back.

³⁸ Clement Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 87.

³⁹ Sigurd Bergmann, *Architecture, Aesthetics & Religion* (London: IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 2005), 35.

⁴⁰ But then again, probably not.

What was true during the Reformation is also true today: the question of the visual arts is more a matter of theology than it is of aesthetics. For many Lutherans, it is simply a matter of Christian freedom to adopt a minimalist aesthetic.⁴¹ This is very convenient, of course, because good artwork and good design are costly; they can't be mass-produced. In many cases, the view of art as an adiaphoron goes hand-in-hand with a miserly attitude toward the arts. James Langley writes,

Adding to this [view of art as a trivial affair] is a kind of ingrained cultural utilitarianism that is offended—much like Judas—by what it perceives as the “conspicuous waste” represented by the investment in a higher standard of sacred art for the Church. They believe they are taking the moral high road by saying, “It could have been spent on the needy!” We must never forget that [Christian] art, architecture, and music are all, in their own way, that precious perfume poured out by Mary, sister of Lazarus, upon the head of Jesus.⁴²

Those who insist that investing in the visual arts is “poor stewardship” need to realize—as did Luther—that we are stewards of the arts as well. It is far poorer stewardship to let God's good gifts fall by the wayside. If art was treated with the same level of importance as the proclamation of the gospel, rather than as something superficial and decorative, then churches would more often find the means to commission worthy works of art.

Applying the Reformation to Contemporary Church Art

To many Lutherans, the Reformation is a point of pride, but it is not so much a guiding factor in practical matters. But if we allow the wisdom of Luther and his fellow reformers to influence our approach to the arts, we will find that God will work through that art as he has in the past. The following points constitute a rudimentary guide by which we may apply the Lutheran artistic tradition to our art.

1. Worship is not a sacrificial service to God. We must bear in mind that every element of worship should emphasize the sacramental—God's work for us. The purpose of corporate worship is to edify the body of believers.

2. Art is a gift from God, and we should treat it as such. Art is not decoration; it is not put in churches simply to beautify the space. And it is certainly not for entertainment. The notion that the arts in worship are a matter of little importance endangers the preaching of the gospel.

3. As God's good gift, art has the worthy responsibility of proclamation and praise. There is no room for “pure praise.” Art achieves its highest calling when it becomes a vehicle of the gospel. Wherever possible, it should proclaim God's Word, in simple terms; too much symbolism or sermonizing will

⁴¹ “Everything is permissible—but not everything is beneficial” 1 Corinthians 10:23.

⁴² Benjamin D. Wiker, “The Redemption of Catholic Art,” *Catholic Culture* (November 2005), <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=6853&repos=1&subrepos=0&searchid=443948> (accessed February 18, 2012), under “Salt without savor?”

make the work inaccessible. Furthermore, a vehicle of the Gospel demands a high standard of beauty and craftsmanship. Nothing should be done cheaply, sloppily, or half-heartedly.

4. Art for the Church should recognize and participate in the “living tradition.” We should dispense of all notions of “art for art’s sake,” as well as novelty or newness for its own sake. A living tradition always makes room for new works, but avoids trendiness. Works of art that submit themselves to the Christian tradition do not call attention to themselves—but to the gospel of Christ.

5. Every other consideration of art—be it medium, style, function, or aesthetic—should flow from the above considerations. In Christian freedom we are careful to neither command nor prohibit what is not clearly witnessed to in Scripture, but to educate on the value of the arts, as well as the dangers of their misuse, and to promote what is good and wholesome.

Conclusion

A proper understanding of worship is integral to creating meaningful and praiseworthy art for worship. Our Lutheran heritage gives us a unique understanding of the visual arts as tools for sharing the gospel and worshipping the Creator, from whom we received them. They are good and useful tools for teaching and building up in the Christian faith. Luther placed tremendous emphasis on the value of the Christian tradition, which joins us to the saints of the whole church. The Reformation should not remain a footnote in the history books. If we allow it, it will shape the future of the arts in worship in a God-pleasing way, and will only continue to work good in his Church.

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