

ART AS ORIGINATING IN THE IMAGE OF GOD IN MAN  
AND THE CULTURAL MANDATE

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Art as Originating in the Image of God in Man and the Cultural Mandate

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As the Church in general lacks a clear teaching about art and how it relates to faith, artists and consumers of art are left in a quandary wondering how creative activity fits into God's purpose for mankind. Christian views on art are not only vague, but often conflicting, and so this thesis will seek to reconcile two seemingly opposing theological perspectives—the belief that man's creativity occurs primarily in the context of being created in the image of God, and the view that art has nothing to do with the *imago Dei*, but exists only as a response to God's command to exercise dominion over the earth (the cultural mandate). The argument will be made that both positions are not in conflict, but are actually complementary and that both are necessary components of a balanced Christian aesthetic. In other words, art originates in *both* the image of God in man *and* the cultural mandate. To reach this conclusion the dominion aspect of God's image in man will be explored, and through a study of the Genesis creation narrative parallels will be drawn between how God and man create. The discussion will also include theological insights into the vocational aspects of art, how beauty relates to the image of God and cultural mandate, and the contribution of art produced by non-Christians. A look at the seventeenth century Dutch masters and how their art is associated to the thesis topic will be followed by recommended practical implications for today's Church. These will detail how the cultural mandate reveals the *why* of art, while the

image of God in man demonstrates the *how* of art. Both the *imago Dei* and the cultural mandate are vital doctrines for a complete understanding of art and the Christian faith.

## CONTENTS

### Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. BIBLICAL STUDIES: IMAGE, CREATION AND MANDATE IN GENESIS 1 AND 2 .....	7
Image and Likeness.....	8
The Exclusivity of <i>Bara</i> .....	16
The Artist God .....	18
God's Act of Creation and the Cultural Mandate .....	21
3. THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS OF THE IMAGE AND MANDATE.....	24
Art as it Relates to the Cultural Mandate.....	24
Pro Mandate/ Contra Image .....	27
Pro Image: The Magical Artist .....	36
Creation <i>Ex Nihilo</i> .....	38
Cosmos from Chaos.....	41
Beauty and Art .....	43
The Mystery of Non-Christian Art .....	48
4. CHURCH HISTORY: THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH MASTERS .....	56
A Heightened Sense of Vocation.....	57
The Mundane Exalted .....	61

5. PRACTICAL APPLICATION .....	66
Artists as Craftsmen.....	66
The Freedom and Limitations of the Christian Artist.....	68
Liberation from Utilitarian Art .....	70
A Balanced Aesthetic.....	72
6. CONCLUSION.....	76
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	79

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There is much uncertainty in the Church today about the role of art and how it relates to faith, theology, and tradition. Because the Church is so vague on this subject, Christians in general do not seem to have a clear biblical understanding of how art fits into the greater purpose of human life and God's plan for mankind here on earth. W. David O. Taylor, says that he felt inadequate and confused about his job as an arts pastor because of the lack of clear teaching from the Church about creative activity. He remarks, "Protestantism—in my case evangelical Protestantism—handed me neither a big picture (a theology) nor a sense of how art and the church could hold together (a tradition). . . . Many of us, in fact, have felt the lack of a comprehensive, systematic, integrating, and grounding vision."<sup>1</sup> Dyrness expresses the same concern as he declares that "the involvement of the Christian artists in the church are necessarily fraught with tensions. These artists are not working with a clear theological or artistic consensus, a coherent cultural strategy, or broad-based community support. Therefore, they are necessarily placed in a situation of negotiation and compromise."<sup>2</sup>

It is not a coincidence that this ambiguity corresponds to a time when Christianity has lost its influence in the culture to that of the worldly arts, which have become heralds of secularization. In fact, the power of the arts has increased to the point of becoming a new

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<sup>1</sup> W. David O. Taylor, introduction to *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 21.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 14.



form of religion to many who are without faith and who are lost in the religious vacuum of western society. In today's culture, people are looking to the arts to find meaning and truth instead of religion, and this is a fact that the secular world will readily and unashamedly admit. In a 2009 interview with Roseanne Cash, the daughter of country singer Johnny Cash, when asked if she turned to religion or had a sense of faith during the tough times in her life she responded, "I adhere to the religion of art and music and small children—the pronouncements of small children."<sup>3</sup> In 2011, singer, song writer, and music producer, Joe Henry admitted that what his mother got from the Bible, he got from song. When he was asked to elaborate on that he replied, "You know, a great song to me is life affirming. . . . It makes me feel awake to being alive."<sup>4</sup> And finally, a writer for *The Economist* concluded his article on the art of Andy Warhol with these sad, but perceptive words, "But, though all art is in constant, self-questioning flux, one thing never changes—the longing to define, synthesize and express the human condition. In the absence of religion, it is art's job to do this."<sup>5</sup>

While these stories may be alarming, they make sense when one considers that "art and religion both center on man's deepest needs: for truth and beauty and meaning."<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that the Church should nurture and equip artists of faith to use their craft to counteract secularism because the arts are where the battles are being fought over people's

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<sup>3</sup> Roseanne Cash, interview by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, August 19, 2011 (originally aired October 5, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Joe Henry, interview by Terri Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, November 10, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Bryan Appleyard, "A One-Man Market," *The Economist: Intelligent Life Feature*, 29 October 2011, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy M. Tischler, "The Christian Reader" in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 159.

hearts and minds.<sup>7</sup> Part of the problem, however, is that the Church does not know how to deal with artists because of the general lack of cohesiveness or agreement about the arts amongst Christian scholars and theologians. Without a clear scriptural understanding of artists and creative activity, Christians have been ineffective in providing significant contributions to the arts, leaving them to be dominated by an unbelieving world.

This paper will focus on two theological areas of conflict on the subject of art. The first supports the view that man's creativity occurs in the context of being created in the image of God, and the second views art as merely a response to God's command to exercise dominion over the earth. One side views art as a result of who man is, while the other sees art as something that man does.

Those who see art as originating in the image of God in man find that there are many parallels between the creative activities of God and humans. They believe that the artist echoes God in his ability to create imaginative works that reflect beauty and truth as the Bible reveals an Artist God whom man resembles as he engages in artistic pursuits. Acknowledgement of the vast differences between God and man prevent the claim that man operates as an artist exactly like God does when he creates, but there are similarities in how each creates because of the *imago Dei*.

One person who holds this view is the Catholic fiction writer, Dorothy Sayers, who offers a unique perspective as she jumps into the theological and philosophical fray, not as an academic outsider looking into the world of art, but as an artist herself. As any good theologian does, she bases her doctrine on Scripture, but she also gleans insight from her experience as an artist. In her book, *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers approaches the theology

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<sup>7</sup> H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 32.

of the Christian creeds from the point of view of an artist, and also discusses the parallels between God's act of creation and the artist's process in producing art. On man being created in the image of God, Sayers writes,

How then can [man] be said to resemble God? Is it his immortal soul, his rationality, his self-consciousness, his free will, or what, that gives him a claim to this rather startling distinction? A case may be argued for all these elements in the complex nature of man. But had the author of Genesis anything particular in his mind when he wrote? It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the 'image' of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, 'God created.' The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.<sup>8</sup>

The second school of thought denies the association between human and divine creative activity. These scholars believe that man does not exist as a finite parallel to a perfect and infinite God, and consider man's artistic pursuits as belonging to the category of work and the fulfillment of a vocational calling. Biblically speaking, the crafting of works of art is an act of obedience that occurs as a response to the Genesis 1:26 command to "fill and subdue the earth," commonly referred to as the cultural mandate. This link to the cultural mandate binds and limits art to the earthly material world, depriving it of any sort of transcendent qualities that the pro-image of God group ascribes to creative activity. This leads to the conviction that the artist is no different from other people using their talents to work for the betterment of society. Art does not stand above or beyond any other human activity.

One scholar who defends this doctrine is Calvin Seerveld, a contemporary philosopher who specializes in the field of aesthetics. He has written two books on this subject that are of particular interest. His work, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*,

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<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1942), 17.

consists of four lectures sponsored by the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies and deals with issues such as common grace and non-believing artists, the necessity of Christian artists, and elements necessary for “Christian art.” In his more popular book, *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, he explains his belief that aesthetics are a vital aspect of the Christian life and that the call of the artist is a vocational one. Theologically, Seerveld is of the Reformed tradition and on the subject of art as work he asserts,

Man is not in God’s image, a finite parallel to an infinite Perfection. Only Christ is a spitting image of God. The fact that man is made *in* the image of God means that men and women carry inescapably around with them a restless sense of allegiance to—And this structural, worshipping restlessness remains to plague man until he finally, as Augustine puts it, is rested with commitment in the true Creator. But *imago Dei* and ‘creation’ obfuscate understanding art because it looks too hard, and overlooks the limited serviceable, craftsmanship character of artistic activity. . . . It is so much healthier to realize that art is work, hard, bodily work that can legitimately be a man or woman’s vocation.<sup>9</sup>

So it is apparent that some see art as the result of man being made in the image of God, while others see it as a response to the cultural mandate, and both appear to be in opposition to each other. The question remains, then, which viewpoint is the most biblical. Calvin opens his *Institutes* with the premise that without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God and without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.<sup>10</sup> With Calvin’s assertion in mind, formulating a clear answer to this question will offer insight into the persons of both God and the artist, and will be helpful in defining the role of the artist in the greater body of Christ. After weighing the evidence, it will be demonstrated that art originates in *both* the image of God in man, *and* the cultural mandate. Both sides are

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (2 Volume Set)* 1550 translation ed. ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:35,37.

correct, and a study of biblical texts and corresponding theology will establish that their conclusions are not mutually exclusive.

Due to the integrative nature of this thesis paper, the discussion will be divided into four sections which will focus on the following areas: biblical studies, theology, church history, and practical application. The lines between these are not distinct since there is significant overlap between them all. As the Bible reveals theology in its text, all good theology is based on Scripture. And of course theology has great influence over church history, and affects every aspect of a Christian's life as far as the practical application goes.

With the aid of biblical commentators, theologians, and historians, it will be argued that art is related equally to the image of God in man and the cultural mandate. At a glance, the two may seem to be incompatible, but they are in fact complementary. Scripture affirms both the importance of art as a vocation and the correlation between the human artist and the Supreme Artist who created the universe. Both are necessary components of a balanced theology of art.

## CHAPTER 2

### BIBLICAL STUDIES: IMAGE, CREATION, AND MANDATE

#### IN GENESIS 1 AND 2

The strongest evidence for the claim that both the image of God and the cultural mandate are equally important concepts in defining art is found in the book of Genesis, which is the origin of both doctrines. This analysis will rely heavily on information from commentaries by scholars that include Wenham, Von Rad, and Kidner. The excellent scholarship on the *imago Dei* by Dyrness, Liesch and Finley, and Middleton will be also be utilized in this discussion.

A survey of key concepts found in this first book of the Bible will reveal three vital elements that lead to the belief that art originates in the image of God in man and the cultural mandate. The first is that the text does in fact teach that man exists as the image of God. The second is that there are strong parallels between how God creates and how man creates. And thirdly, what man is commanded to do in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 is so closely related to God's original act of creating the world that it can be seen as a command for man to create in the image of God.

In this chapter more attention will be given to exploring the implications of what it means for man to be made in the image and likeness of God than the cultural mandate because this is the more controversial of the two doctrines. The theology of the cultural mandate will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

### Image and Likeness

Central to this discussion of whether or not the artist acts as an imager of the Divine Creator is a proper interpretation of the text of Genesis 1:26 where man is described as being made in the “image and likeness” of God. Studied in their context, the Hebrew words *selem* (image) and *demut* (likeness) will offer great insight into how this passage is to be viewed. The doctrine of *imago Dei* will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter dealing with theology, but this overview of word usage will provide a biblical foundation on which a solid theological argument can be built.

#### Image: How, not What

Those who disagree with the notion that art results from the image of God in man begin by disagreeing with the interpretation of Genesis 1:26 that says that certain aspects of God are reflected in human beings. To arrive at this conclusion, these scholars take a different grammatical approach in reading this passage. They believe that the phrase “in our image” modifies the verb “let us make” instead of the noun “man.”<sup>1</sup> The word “image” does not refer to the object of creation, namely man, but it does refer to the method of creation. So the passage describes *how* man was made, and not that man ended up with God-like qualities after he was created. According to those who hold to this interpretation, the importance of *selem* in Genesis 1:26 lies in the fact that this “image” is relational. Man has a unique status in creation because he is the sole inhabitant of the earth who is able to have a personal rapport with God, and this relationship is possible because man is made *in* the image of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 31.

Thus, the potential for a God/ man relationship is the defining meaning of this passage.

Therefore, Genesis 1:26 does not describe *selem* or “image” as being a product of creation, but the means of creation.<sup>2</sup>

This explanation is consistent with the use of the word *selem* in the biblical accounts of the creation however, it is not consistent with other passages that use the same word to depict the outcome of creation rather than the method (*cf.* Gen. 5:3; Exod. 25:40).<sup>3</sup> In these instances, *selem* does not describe how something is created or the resulting relationship of a creation, but it portrays the result of an action. This inconsistency reveals problems with squaring this interpretation with other Old Testament usages of the same word, and there is little evidence presented that would justify a different reading of *selem* in the creation narrative. Therefore, it is more plausible that image in Genesis 1 means that God created man to exist in his image, to possess certain qualities that mirror his own. But assuming that the relational interpretation is an accurate one, it begs the question, what is the logical outcome of this type of relationship? What qualities will man possess as a consequence of being created *in* the image of God?<sup>4</sup> Most likely the ability to be in relationship with God would result in man possessing qualities that are similar, if not the same, as the ones claimed by those who interpret the passage as man existing as an image of God.

### The Whole Man

As some view the man’s creation “in the image of God” as relational, the majority of scholars believe that the image denotes a correlation between aspects of man and God. But

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<sup>2</sup> Wenham, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



what characteristics are included in this image is up for debate. Questions on this subject include, “How does God’s image manifest itself in the person of man?” and “Is the image restricted to only the spiritual side of man or does it include the physical as well?” Exploring answers to these questions will be helpful in determining how the image of God manifests itself in man, and therefore, how it ultimately relates to man and his creative activity.

Maybe it is Neoplatonic influences that cause some Christians to see the material world as tainted and somewhat evil, but some scholars believe that any likeness to God must only pertain to the rational, emotional, volitional, or spiritual facets of man. For those of this mindset, the physical characteristics of man will certainly be excluded from such a list. Matthew Henry is one who attests that the God’s image in man is reflected in his soul, his dominion, and righteousness, but not his physical body, since God does not have a body.<sup>5</sup> This exclusion of the physical, however, is inconsistent with other passages that speak of the image of man and God. Specifically, there are three Old Testament references that support the interpretation that the Genesis 1 passage actually indicates that the image extends to the whole person, including the physical. The three passages are: 1) the murder indictment of Genesis 9:6 where *selem* refers to the body, 2) the glory and honor of Psalm 8:5 describes the outward splendor of man according to most exegetes, and 3) Ezekiel 28:12 laments the loss of the physical perfection of man’s original state.<sup>6</sup> Without these other verses, it might seem sensible to limit this image of God in man to abstract qualities. However, as mysterious as it

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary: In One Volume*, ed. Rev. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 4.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Dyrness, “The *Imago Dei* and Christian Aesthetics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 no. 3 (June 1, 1972): 162-163.

may be, when cross-referenced with other passages Genesis 1:26 affirms that the body of a corporeal being (man) is made in the image of a non-corporeal being (God).

The question of “how” the material can image the immaterial is not explicitly answered in the Bible, but Frame offers some insight on this matter as he draws a correlation between man’s body and God’s power. He points out that the anthropomorphisms used to describe God, like God’s “seeing” in Ps. 94:9 and references to God’s “arm” and “hand,” reveal that human eyes reflect the power of God’s sight and human arms and hands reflect God’s power to act.<sup>7</sup> Frame continues by explaining the body-power association accounts for man’s control over his environment. Frame finds this mystery of the physical and the image not irreconcilable, but explainable in larger context of Scripture.

The greater point here, however, is that man is not left to decipher what parts of a human being are made in the image of God and what parts are not. Scripture reveals that God is reflected in the whole person and not just the mind, heart, and/or soul. This makes it possible for the artist to create in the image of God. If the image were compartmentalized then artistic activity could be explained away as part of the human side of man, but it is not. This comprehensive view brings all vocations and callings of man under the umbrella of the image of God because all of what includes being human (except of course man’s sinful nature) bears his image. This is key in relating the image to the cultural mandate. If all of man is a finite representation of God’s image, then man’s efforts in his response to the cultural mandate are part of God’s image as well. How the two are specifically linked will be discussed later in this chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2008), 624.

## God's Vice Regent

Related to the physical aspect of *selem* is the Ancient Near East use of the word to describe images or idols of gods and kings. Von Rad calls attention to the fact that in 1 Samuel 6:5; Numbers 33:52; 2 Kings 11:18; and Ezekiel 23:14 *selem* denotes “an actual plastic work, a duplicate, sometimes an idol,”<sup>8</sup> which leads to two things to note about the images described in these passages. The first is that the images are actual tangible items. They were formed using earthly matter by artisans. The second point of interest is that these images functioned as substitutes for the original king or god that they individually represented. Both of these facets of *selem* in these verses offer greater insight into the use of the same word in Genesis 1:26.

The representative aspect of the word, *selem*, implies a sense of dominion. In the Ancient Near East, it was believed that the spirit of a god dwelled in an actual statue as an idol or image, and that the image could function as a substitute for the god's authority wherever it was placed.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, kings were also considered representatives of the gods and ruled on their behalf. Because this surrogate dominion of a particular god could be bestowed upon a king, kings were often described as images of god.<sup>10</sup> Wenham believes that this Ancient Near East pagan use of the phrase “image of god” carries over to the image reference in Genesis 1.<sup>11</sup> Like ancient images, idols, and kings were believed to have

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<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 56.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Hart, “Genesis 1:1-2:3 As a Prologue to the Book of Genesis,” *TynBul* 46, no.2 (1995): 318, quoted in Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 218.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Wenham, 31.

dominion as representations of a deity, so man is an earthly reflection of his Maker as he also shares in the dominion over God's kingdom according to Genesis 1:28; 2:19; 9:2. Von Rad concurs and believes that "just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem."<sup>12</sup> Thus, being made in the image of God includes man inheriting God's kingly duties.

This theory is reinforced by Scripture references where man is described in terms with royal overtones. For instance, this kingly resemblance of all of mankind is found in Psalm 8, where man is said to be crowned with glory and honor and the ruler over the works of God's hands (v. 3,4). Even the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, the command to rule and subdue creation, describes a duty similar to that of kings, and it is not a coincidence that this follows on the heels of the image reference of Genesis 1:26.<sup>13</sup> So there is strong scriptural evidence that mankind is comprised of royal representatives of the Divine King, presiding as his images and possessing dominion over his earthly kingdom.

However, this belief in man existing as God's vice regent has its critics. There are scholars who find the idea that man is God's kingly representative on earth an inaccurate one for two reasons.<sup>14</sup> First, this notion of a king as a divine substitute works on an individual level, but not en masse. How can the inhabitants of an entire kingdom act as images of the king? It is simply meaningless for the entirety of mankind to represent God. The second reason is that man as God's vice regent is incompatible with the author of Genesis' stark distinction between God and man. In Genesis there is a strong emphasis on the otherness of

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<sup>12</sup> Von Rad, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Wenham, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 31.

God, and viewing man as having a family resemblance to him is incongruent with God's transcendence. It is for these reasons some believe that man as a kingly image of God is an erroneous concept.

Wenham responds to these statements with the following counterarguments, which he gleans from a broader view of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> He points out that in the Bible it is not uncommon for a collective group to represent one entity. For instance, sacrificial animals represent the nation of Israel in the temple rites. Here a collective group (the animals) represents a singular unit (the nation of Israel). So "the many representing the one" is not a foreign concept in Scripture. Wenham also calls attention to the fact that the Old Testament does not just emphasize the immeasurable gulf between man and God, but also shows how the gap is bridged between the two. To explain this he highlights how man as God's representative to creation is similar to the high priest, who represents God to Israel. God is represented as both transcendent and immanent as his holiness does not cause him remain far away from the nation of Israel. In spite of his otherness, he operates as a close, personal God through the high priests of Israel. Therefore, the dominion aspect of the *imago Dei* appears to be not only consistent with the Ancient Near East usage of the word, *selem*, but can be supported by Scripture as well. It would not be unreasonable then to view the collective body of humanity as agents of God that act as stewards by helping to complete the work that he began by filling and subduing the earth.

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<sup>15</sup> Wenham, 31.

## The Modifier

If the connotations of the word “image” in Genesis 1:26 make man seem excessively God-like, its force is somewhat mitigated by its pairing with the Hebrew word for “likeness”, *demut*. Dyrness explains that the most common Old Testament usage of *demut* is “a verbal abstraction connoting something abstract as in ‘appearance’, ‘similarity’, or ‘analogy.’”<sup>16</sup> *Demut* is used with this meaning in Ezekiel 1:5,10,26,28, and only in 2 Kings 16:10 does it refer to an exact resemblance.<sup>17</sup> “Likeness” generally indicates a similarity that is more conceptual and less precise as the resemblance it signifies is analogous and parallel. This is in contrast to “image” which is more concrete. In a sense, the *demut* of Genesis 1:26 softens the impact of *selem*, and as Waltke explains, the word choice of “likeness” is a safeguard to prevent “image” from being equated to deity.<sup>18</sup> Thus, *demut* not only helps to define *selem*, it limits it as well.<sup>19</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

As a final word on the subject, Frame brings up an excellent point that should be taken into consideration when weighing the technical, complicated, and sometimes conflicting interpretations of *demut* and *selem* in Genesis 1:26. He states the very simple fact that “the writer of Genesis did not consider the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ (1:26) to be problematic; he made no attempt to explain them. Evidently he was using a concept familiar

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<sup>16</sup> Dyrness, 162,

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 219.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

to his readers.”<sup>20</sup> This is why it is crucial to cross reference these words with their function in other Old Testament passages and research their Ancient Near East usages. Because this concept can be perplexing to present day readers, the passage should be interpreted from viewpoint of the original audience. This is why a sensible definition of the *imago Dei* that is consistent with the original historical context should include the whole person as a representative or viceroy of God sharing in his kingly reign on earth.

### The Exclusivity of *Bara*

Probably the strongest biblical evidence to support those who believe in a complete separation between how God and man creates comes from the use of the Hebrew verb *bara*. The word, *bara*, means “to create,” and in the Bible, God is its exclusive subject.<sup>21</sup> In fact, in the forty eight instances of this Hebrew word in the Old Testament all refer to activity by God and never that of humans.<sup>22</sup> Thus, God’s work of creation is set apart from that of man. It is wholly other and unique to only God evidenced by the fact that God even has his own word to describe his creative activity. The word *bara* is not even used in Exodus 25:9 and 1 Chronicles 28:11-19—passages that describe the construction of the tabernacle and temple respectively, both considered the highest elevated artistic works that were inspired by God and performed by man.<sup>23</sup> So the fact that this verb is exclusive to God the creator gives some reason to believe that man’s creative activity is far removed.

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<sup>20</sup> Frame, 623.

<sup>21</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words with Topical Index*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), s.v. “to create,” 51.

<sup>22</sup> Barry W. Liesch and Thomas J. Finley, “The Biblical Concept of Creativity: Scope, Definition, Criteria,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, no. 3 (1984), 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

As far as the actual meaning of *bara* goes, there are some conflicting opinions. Vine cites that it means creation out of nothing,<sup>24</sup> and Kidner says that its meaning varies according to its context. Sometimes it means “bringing something into existence” (Is.48:3,7) and other times it refers to “the patient work of bringing something to perfection” (Gen. 2:1-4; cf. Is. 65:18).<sup>25</sup> Liesch and Finley disagree with the *ex nihilo* definition citing the use of *bara* to describe the formation of the nation of Israel (Is. 43:1), which does not demonstrate creation from nothing.<sup>26</sup> What Liesch and Finley stress as fundamental to *bara* activity is the idea of “newness”—not something brought from nothing, but something that is fresh and original.<sup>27</sup>

Whether one prefers one definition of *bara* over another, this word is seen by some as describing something that only God is capable of accomplishing and there are two things to mention in response. The first is that man being made in the image of God does not mean that he is an exact replica. That there is a word that solely describes God’s act of creation does not negate the possibility of an analogous relationship between God and man’s creative activity. The second is that there are ways in which man’s creation echoes *bara* creation, albeit in a limited and fallen way. Liesch and Finley, who caution against comparing man and God’s act of creation because of this verb, view the “newness” aspect of *bara* as unprecedented, humanly unforeseeable, valuable, transformational, and lasting.<sup>28</sup> Liesch and Finley intend for this illustration to show the great chasm between God and man in their

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<sup>24</sup> Vine, s.v. “to create,” 51.

<sup>25</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1967), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Liesch and Finley, 196.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 192-193.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



creative activity, but human works of art can have qualities that correspond to their list. Art can be unique, surprising, contain value, able to evoke sincere emotions, and have ongoing effects on cultures and civilizations respectively. These do not exist in the pure forms that they do in the Master Creator's work, but they are present as shadows of the Divine.

So the Hebrew word *bara* does set God's creative acts apart from man's, but not to the point where the two are so different as to be unrelated. God's standards will always be unreachable for man, but man will reflect his Creator as he is made in his image. This extends to God's literal act of creating. Even though the Bible uses a word for "create" that only pertains to God, man also has the capability to create but on a different level. That is the heart of what "image" and "likeness" mean. Artists are not exactly like God, but how they produce art has strong similarities to how God created the universe.

### The Artist God

Because there is little in the way of direct references to art in the Bible, much of what is understood about the artistic side of God comes from inferences from the biblical text. It is for this lack of specificity that one could argue that man is projecting the role of artist onto God in order to show that the artist is somewhat like him. In fact, on this very subject Seerveld passionately states, "There are no biblical grounds for the usual talk about artistic 'creation'. Comparisons between God as capital A Creator Artist and man as small, image-of-God creator artist are only speculative and misleading."<sup>29</sup> However, an argument can be made that the connection between God and man creator is actually biblical as the author of Genesis employs two words in the creation narrative that, in their original Hebrew meanings,

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 26.

describe God as an artist or craftsman. The two words are *yasar*, which means “to form”, and *melaka*, which is translated as “work.”

*Yasar* is used sixty times in the Old Testament and means “to form, mold, fashion”, and is a technical word that refers to a potter at work.<sup>30</sup> Relating to the realm of art, it can also imply “craftsmanship or handiwork” in a variety of disciplines including molding, carving, or casting (Isa. 44:9-10; 12). *Yasar*’s other uses include forming plans (Ps. 94:20) and forming the nation of Israel (Isa. 44:2, 24; 49:5).<sup>31</sup> But the use of the verb *yasar* to describe how God created the first man and the animals from the dust of the ground in Genesis 2:7, 8, 19 most likely corresponds to one of the artisan-related definitions and is meant to parallel human artistic activity.

Aside from the presence of this arty verb, note the strong similarities between God and the human artist. As God manipulates physical matter (“dust of the earth” [Gen. 2:7] and “the ground” [2:19]) to create man and the animals, the artist uses earthly substances such as clay, metal, and wood to form their imaginative creations. Both use substances of the earth to mold, shape, and form something of value. Couple this analogous act with the use of a Hebrew word used to describe human creative activity and one can begin to see that this action of God is very similar to that of an artist. In regards to Genesis 2:7, Kidner observes, “*Formed* expresses the relation of craftsman to material, with implication of both skill (eg. Ps. 94:9; ‘He that formed the eye . . .’; cf. Ps 139:14-16) and a sovereignty which man forgets

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<sup>30</sup> Vine, s.v. “to form,” 86.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

at his peril (Is. 29:16; Je. 18:4).”<sup>32</sup> So here it is noted that God relates to his creation in a similar way that an artist does with his own medium of choice.

The other Hebrew word that describes God’s creative act with artistic undertones is translated into English as “work.” There are two Old Testament Hebrew words for work: *aboda*, which refers to raw and unskilled labor, and *melaka*, which means “skilled labor performed by a craftsman or artisan.”<sup>33</sup> The latter is used three times in Genesis 2:2,3 to describe God’s complete act of creating the universe. The word choice here is interesting because at this point in the narrative the reader would not need to be informed that the formation of the universe required skill, expertise, or creative genius. Was the author simply choosing a term that stated the obvious, or was he alluding to the notion that God’s work of creation was akin to that of a human artisan fashioning of a work of art? Either way, this noun paints a picture of a world that has come into being as a result of the handiwork of one who is a master at his craft.

The presence of the words *yasar* and *melaka* as terms describing both human artistic activity and God’s act of creation in the Old Testament provides ample reason to believe that there is some sort of connection between God and the artist. This point is not an obvious one when reading the English translations of these words, but when their Hebrew meanings are understood in context, the picture becomes clearer. On the heels of Genesis 1:26 describing man as made in the image of God, the Genesis 2 passages utilizing both *yasar* and *melaka* may very well be educating the reader about one way in which this image manifests itself in the lives of men.

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<sup>32</sup> Kidner, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 142.

### God's Act of Creation and the Cultural Mandate

The striking similarities between God's act of creation and the cultural mandate form a reconciling bridge between those who believe that art originates solely from the image of God in man and those who strictly see art as an act of obedience to the cultural mandate. The following discussion will offer reasons to believe that the cultural mandate is actually an example of man imaging God, and that the two are inextricably linked.

The second verse of the creation narrative (Gen. 1:2) describes the earth as *tohu* (formless) and *bohu* (empty), and sets the stage for the beginning of God's act of creation. The Hebrew words *tohu* and *bohu* literally mean "waste" and "void."<sup>34</sup> *Tohu* has two main Old Testament uses—"nothingness" (Isa. 29:21) and as it is used here "chaos, disorder" sometimes used to describe the vast desert where men get lost and die (Deut. 32:10; Job 6:18).<sup>35</sup> Many questions arise when trying to interpret this passage, including the origin of the chaos, but it is clear that this chaos was of God's making and the text indicates that creation at this point in the story had far to go before reaching completion.<sup>36</sup>

The six day creation account describes how God deals with this formlessness and emptiness of the universe. Middleton divides the six days in half which he calls two "panels."<sup>37</sup> The first three days of creation are characterized by division or separation and comprise the first panel. This is when God separates darkness from light, water in the sky

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<sup>34</sup> Wenham, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kidner, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Richard J. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 75.

from water below, and the land from the seas. It is on these days that God causes that which is formless to have structure. So the first panel involves taking care of the *tohu* aspect of the earth.

The second panel is the last three days of creation, and these are days of God filling the earth with mobile beings. God creates the sun, moon, and stars for the sky, fills the oceans and sky with creatures, makes land animals, and completes his work by making man. With the completion of the second panel, the earth is no longer *bohu* or empty, but is now filled with a variety of things that move. Therefore, it can be said that God's act of creating the heavens and the earth is twofold: creating structure to that which was formless, and filling that which was empty.

A remarkable resemblance to God's two panels of creation is found in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 where man is given the instruction to "fill the earth and subdue it." This directive, which gives man permission to create culture in order to make the earth inhabitable, mirrors God's very own method of creation.<sup>38</sup> God's act of separating and creating structure in the first three days of creation corresponds to man's charge to subdue, while God's creation of the moving beings during the second three days of creation is similar to man's instruction to "fill the earth." However, one will notice that the order in the mandate is reversed from the creation narrative, and this is for a very good reason.<sup>39</sup> God's subduing of creation resulted in a habitable environment for the moving beings, but this pattern is inverted for man, because the job of subduing the earth (i.e. creating culture) requires the work of a healthy number of people. Therefore, man must fill the earth by

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<sup>38</sup> Middleton, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

reproducing so that there will be a sufficient number of people to tame, control, and domesticate creation, which in turn makes the earth livable with a pleasurable quality of life.

This leads to a powerful argument that can be made for the idea that man as made in the image of God is strongly connected to the cultural mandate because the mandate itself exists as a parallel to God's act of creating the world. And it is no coincidence that the mandate passage comes immediately after the image reference. Part of being made in the image of God is to participate in the completion of the creation that God began. This includes man's cultural pursuits, which are analogous to God in his formation of the cosmos. The cultural mandate is structured in a way that it commands man to act in the image and likeness of God as the mandate's wording so closely parallels how God created the universe. To miss this connection between the image and the mandate is to have an incomplete picture of Genesis 1. The relationship between art and the cultural mandate will be discussed later in the next chapter, but the implication is clear that if artistic activity is an aspect of the mandate, then it is also an aspect of being created in the image of God because of the strong association between the two.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS OF THE IMAGE AND MANDATE

The previous chapter established a scriptural basis upon which the following theological arguments will be based. While still giving attention to other points of view this discussion of theology will operate under the assumption that it has been established that the most accurate interpretation of Genesis 1:26 is that man is created in the image of God and that there are close ties between this image and the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28. Both of these concepts are crucial to understanding how art relates to both the image of God in man and the cultural mandate, and the connection between the two is most convincingly established as the previously discussed specifics of the cultural mandate are shown to echo the specifics of God's act of creating the universe. This chapter will seek to unpack the theological implications of this relationship between the image and mandate and what it means to man as a creator and consumer of art.

#### Art as it Relates to the Cultural Mandate

The cultural mandate found in Genesis 1:28 is a charge to man to “fill and subdue the earth.” This command plainly asks man to procreate and take care of creation, but in the context of the rest of Scripture it reveals a more complex picture. The purpose of the mandate is not merely to give man something to do while he lives his life on earth, but it

offers a clue to who man is as an imager of God.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen in the naming of the animals of Genesis 2:19,20, which serves as an example of the importance of man's creativity and dominion in man's response to the mandate. Genesis 4 expands the idea of creativity and dominion, and broadens the scope of the mandate beyond that of agriculture and animal husbandry to also include city building (4:17), music (4:21), and metallurgy (4:22).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the cultural mandate establishes man's role on earth to have authority over all areas of life including the arts and sciences.

That the mandate is directed toward all of humanity means that people are not meant to accomplish this task individually, but are to help each other in making the earth a habitable place. This idea is reinforced in Genesis 2:18-15, which describes the creation of the first woman. On this passage Brueggemann remarks,

In this scene we may note first that God engages in a sharp secularization of the human creature. God does not intend to be the man's helper. (Elsewhere, eg. Ps. 121:1; Isa 41:10, God is helper. But not in this quite secularized presentation.) The 'help' the man needs and must have will be found among the 'earthlings.' That the helper must be creature not creator shows to what extent creation is left to its own resources and expected to honor its vocation, explore its freedom, and respect the prohibition [of not eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil].<sup>3</sup>

By using the term "secular" Brueggemann highlights the fact that the human need for support comes not only from the spiritual assistance of God, but from man's earthly peers as well. That a man cannot function on earth without help from other humans calls attention to the fact that there are many facets to creating culture. Therefore, the mandate affirms man's

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Dyrness, "The *Imago Dei* and Christian Aesthetics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 no. 3 (June 1, 1972): 165.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 89.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 47.



dependence on other humans in carrying out this command, and the need for a variety of vocations for its implementation.

Obedience to the call to fill and subdue the earth can be answered in any number of ways, and most scholars agree that art is one way that man can appropriately respond to it. Waltke affirms that “the cultural mandate gives dignity and meaning to the arts and sciences,”<sup>4</sup> while Wolterstorff believes that engaging in artistic pursuits means continuing God’s work by bringing forth order for human benefit and God’s honor, and in achieving this the artist is sharing “in man’s vocation to master and subdue the earth.”<sup>5</sup> So even though there is general agreement that subduing the earth involves artistic activity, it will be worthwhile to take a look at how art specifically ties into the mandate.

As was discussed earlier, the cultural mandate is interconnected with the *imago Dei*, which among other things demonstrates that man is God’s kingly representative here on earth and shares in his dominion. Man’s role as God’s vice regent is associated with the cultural mandate because ruling and subduing creation echoes the work of a king in his dealing with his subjects and kingdom. As God exercises ultimate authority as King of all creation, man too is given a measure of authority with which he is to govern the material world. This dominion aspect of the image of God means that man is “destined to be always creating, discovering, and controlling what he finds at hand.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 70.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 76,77.

<sup>6</sup> Dyrness, 169.

There are many ways that this authority can manifest itself, and one way is by producing art because the work of the artist is to take command over nature. This happens whenever man chisels a fine sculpture out of a rough block of marble, creates forms and patterns of human bodies to produce a ballet, or manipulates sound in such a way that results in a beautiful symphony. In all of these instances man demonstrates his authority over the material world, and this is a byproduct of the royal nature bestowed on man by the Maker. Man as the royal image of God reveals dominion; dominion which is reflected in the cultural mandate means exercising control over nature; and the result of that control often takes the form of works of art.

What is important about the link between art and the mandate is that it establishes the fact that human creative activity is an act of obedience in response to a command of God and not just a superfluous pursuit that stands apart from man's purpose on earth. Without finding its origin in this biblical command, art can be reduced to a mere luxury, hobby, or unnecessary element of life. Identifying how art comes from the image of God in man gives a clue to why man has the desire to create and the cultural mandate brings to light art's legitimacy, worth, and necessity in the world.

#### Pro Mandate/ Contra Image

As was stated in the previous chapter, those who believe that man does not resemble God as his image have what they believe are biblical reasons to back up their claim. Their interpretation of the word "image" in Genesis 1:26 as primarily describing the potential for a God-man relationship provides ample reason for them to reject the notion that man is in any way like God. Seerveld sums up this perspective as he writes, "Man is not God's image, a

finite parallel to an infinite Perfection. . . The fact that man is made *in* the image of God means that men and women carry inescapably around with them a restless sense of allegiance to- And this structural, worshipping restlessness remains to plague man until he finally, as Augustine puts it, is rested with commitment in the true Creator.”<sup>7</sup> It is this reading of Genesis 1:26 that is the springboard for the argument that the artist does not act in the image of God.

This viewpoint comes from a theology that tends to emphasize God’s transcendence as his holiness causes him to be vastly different and “wholly other” than man. To these scholars, the differences between God’s act of creation and man’s earthly attempts to form art are too great to be parallel actions. The freedom, power, and majesty with which and through which God creates cannot be compared to the great limitations of the earthly man. Thus, the artist simply works within the framework of an earthly vocation producing art that is grounded to this world and stripped of any transcendent value or qualities. Wolterstorff observes, “Man’s *embeddedness* in the physical creation, and his creaturely *vocation* and creaturely end within that creation, are where we must begin if we are to describe how the Christian sees the arts, provided, in turn, that the arts are seen as instruments and objects of action.”<sup>8</sup> The prominence of God’s transcendence in this theology is countered with an accent on man’s earthliness. When speaking of art, it is man’s physical limitations that are an insurmountable barrier to his being able to create in the image of God.

However, for those of this mindset, the rejection of the image of God is followed by the particularly valuable reminder that artistic activity is an integral part of the cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Wolterstorff, 68, 69.

mandate. When the earthbound man subdues and orders creation and the outcome is a work of art, then man is simply acting in accordance to God's command in Genesis 1:28. This emphasis on the cultural mandate exposes a common theme with those that are pro-mandate and anti-image, which can be summarized by the following: *Art is something that man does and does not stem from what man is*. The focus on the "doing" aspect of art is why these scholars place a heavy emphasis on art as a vocation among other vocations. Seerveld comments, "Art is one way for men and women to respond to the Lord's command to cultivate the earth, to praise his Name. Art is neither more or less than that."<sup>9</sup> To Seerveld art boils down to being a response to a command.

#### Art as Work

One of the complaints that Seerveld has against those who are pro *imago Dei* is that they fail to acknowledge the work aspect of art. The special "God-like" status of the artist elevates him to a position that neglects the fact that art is physical work performed by a fallen person. To be clear, he does not wish to invalidate the job of the artist or question its legitimacy, but, to reiterate his sentiment from this paper's introduction, he feels that "*imago Dei* and 'creation' obfuscate understanding art because it looks too hard, and overlooks the limited, serviceable, craftsmanship character of artistic activity."<sup>10</sup> For this reason he believes that it is "so much healthier to realize that art is work, hard, bodily work that can legitimately be a man or woman's vocation."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Seerveld, *Rainbow*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 27.

Seerveld presents his argument with the assumption that the artist acting in the image of God is incompatible with the belief that art is the product of toil and exertion, but is this really an accurate premise? Viewing art as work is certainly a reality check that may prevent the artist from claiming a special divine status, but it does not necessarily diminish the similarities between how man and God creates. In fact, there are references to God's act of creation as work, which resemble the artist in his work. Examples of God's "work" in the Genesis creation story might even be said to strengthen the analogy between God and man's act of creation rather than weaken it, and so reinforce the belief in the *imago Dei* of the artist.

First of all, there are two words in the first two chapters of Genesis where God's actions mirror that of a human worker. The first Hebrew word, *melaka*, found in Genesis 2:2,3 was discussed in the previous chapter. This is the word that is translated in English as "work" and refers to the expert work of an artisan or craftsman. That this word is even translated as "work" demonstrates that creating the universe required some measure of effort by God, not that it was drudgery or toil, but effort nonetheless.

The second word is *banah*, which means "to build, establish, construct, rebuild."<sup>12</sup> This is the same term used to describe Enoch's building and establishing a city (Gen. 4:17), Noah's construction of the ark (Gen. 8:20), and the manufacturing of a ship in Ezekiel 27:5. The first biblical occurrence of *banah* though is in Genesis 2:22 where it is used to depict the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. This anthropomorphic action verb portrays this particular undertaking of God as something like the work of a human builder. Here *banah* cannot be interpreted in a figurative sense because this act required the use of physical material (i.e. Adam's rib). The forming of Adam and the animals from the dust of the ground related to

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<sup>12</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words with Topical Index*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), s.v. "to build," 25.

the work of an artist, but the creation of Eve has more of a construction worker feel to it (it seems like it should be the other way around!). The choice of the word *banah* does not reveal a delicate act or something effortless, but alludes to a creative feat that is akin to work.

The final and maybe the most compelling evidence that God's creation has ties to human work is his resting on the seventh day as recorded in Genesis 2:2,3. It is true that this resting was not a time of inactivity for God, but as Waltke observes, it established that the act of creation was complete and marked the "triumph over chaos" and the inauguration of life.<sup>13</sup> Kidner likewise remarks that God's Sabbath was a sign of achievement.<sup>14</sup> This Sabbath carries over to man, who is commanded to have his own weekly Sabbath, and though the purpose of this day is different from God's, it is rooted in his creation rest (Exod. 20:11). There is a tendency for modern day Christians to make worship and church attendance the focus of the Sunday Sabbath, but as Exodus 20:9,10 reveals, the Sabbath was originally intended to be a day of rest from the previous six days of work.<sup>15</sup> So if man's rest on the seventh day is a reflection of God's creation rest, then it stands to reason that there is a correlation between man's six days of work and God's six days of creation.

To say that the artist does not create in the image of God because art is nothing more than "work" takes a narrow view of what was involved in God's construction of the heavens and earth. The creation account divulges a work element that is present in the crafting of the universe, and this motif comes into focus with the use of two labor-related Hebrew words and the presence of God's Sabbath rest. Furthermore, God's creative work mirrors that of

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<sup>13</sup> Waltke and Yu, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-varsity Press, 1967), 53.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggeman, 32.

man as God even uses physical matter like dust and bone to form his masterpieces. So the fact that art is work does not necessarily mean that it cannot be derived from the image of God. The two are not mutually exclusive as they exist harmoniously together in Scripture.

### The Dangers of Hubris

Much of the rhetoric from those who oppose the idea of an *imago Dei* artist, focuses on one of the potential abuses of the artist/ image idea—that of artistic hubris. Some believe that the idea of creative activity being rooted in God’s image can lead to an overinflated view of the artist. They fear that without distancing themselves from pro-image theology, the artist will be elevated to a false status that is more Godlike than he really is. Therefore, finding any similarities between God the Artist and man the artist is the result of the longstanding tendency of man desiring to be like God.

Wolterstorff identifies two pride-centered dangers that he believes are inherent in a pro-image theology for the artist. First, he finds that this theology tempts the artist to view his art as an expression of his own self.<sup>16</sup> As all of earthly creation reflects the glory of God, the human artist produces works of art with the goal of revealing his own glory. This prideful motivation will cause art to cease to be a representation of a higher reality, and consequently become a monument to the self. However, Wolterstorff is presenting an argument against this position based on a potential abuse of it. Because it can lead to an unhealthy perception of art and the artist, does not make the theology of *imago Dei* untrue. He appears to be presenting an irrelevant conclusion by suggesting that this concept is not

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<sup>16</sup> Wolterstorff, 53.

true because it may lead to pride. As the age-old saying goes: Abuse does not rule out proper use.

Secondly, he feels that this theology encourages the artist toward the unhealthy desire to be like God and create something new—“not an imitation of nature, nor the bearer of a message, but a new reality.”<sup>17</sup> God is able to create that which is new because He creates in total freedom. Man, however, is bound by the earthly limits of aesthetic norms, artistic traditions, physical materials, and public acceptance. In his belief that he can be liberated from these restrictions, the artist fights for freedom by pursuing novelty in his art.<sup>18</sup> According to Wolterstorff, man feels entitled to share in God’s ability to enjoy total freedom in his creative endeavors, and this sense of entitlement is grounded in sinful pride.

However, “new” for the artist does not have to translate into novelty or boundless freedom or pride. The concept of humans creating something new is not foreign to Scripture as there are at least six references encouraging man to compose and sing new songs (Ps. 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10).<sup>19</sup> Here the Hebrew word for “new”, *hadash*, indicates something that has not previously existed.<sup>20</sup> This is not referring to a copy or representation, but something unique, creative, and imaginative. The songwriter is given the freedom to use his or her imagination to create something new with the assumption that this creation will take place within the confines of revealed truth and all of the laws governing the art of music. After all, God is a god of truth and order. More importantly though, God is openly granting the artist the freedom to create a song that previously did not exist. So the

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<sup>17</sup> Wolterstorff, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Barry W. Liesch and Thomas J. Finley, “The Biblical Concept of Creativity: Scope, Definition, Criteria,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 12, no. 3 (1984), 195.

<sup>20</sup> Vine, s.v. “new; new moon,” 160.



desire of the artist to create something new does not necessarily stem from a dysfunctional desire to create in untrammelled freedom like God, nor is it an unbiblical concept.

Sayers considers this newness aspect of art an important part of creativity. Only through creative acts does a person accomplish extraordinary acts (with humility) that can make an impact in the world.<sup>21</sup> The areas of life that can be influenced by human activity remain stagnant without the newness that creativity brings. This creativity finds its most obvious manifestation in art, but extends to other facets of life too, as Sayers reveals through a quote from A.D. Lindsay. Lindsay remarks, “The difference between ordinary people and saints is not that saints fulfill the plain duties which ordinary men neglect. The things saints do have not usually occurred to ordinary people at all. . . ‘Gracious’ conduct is somehow like the work of an artist. It needs imagination and spontaneity. It is not a choice between presented alternatives, but the creation of something new.”<sup>22</sup> The saints that are spoken of here are most likely not consciously acting in a way that is motivated by a prideful need to do something novel, but offer a beautiful illustration of the good that can come from using their imaginations in ways that greatly benefit mankind. And the main point here, of course, is that there is an element of newness in human creativity that is unrelated to pride.

It is important to note, however, that the fears of pride resulting from an *imago Dei* theology are not unfounded. As pride has infiltrated every aspect of this fallen world, many artists are tempted to believe that they are able to create with all the liberties and power of God, and strive to become like God themselves. One example occurs in a letter written by Paul Gauguin in 1888 where he offers some counsel to a fellow artist. He writes, “Some

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<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1942), 155

<sup>22</sup> A. D. Lindsay, *The Two Moralities*, quoted in Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1942), 155.

advice: do not paint too much after nature. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature. Creating like unto our Divine Maker is the only way of rising toward God!”<sup>23</sup>

Without a doubt Gauguin, like many other artists, have distorted the principle of the artist as the image of God to mean that the act of creating art makes them more like God than others. Scripture is clear that all men are created in the image and likeness of God, and any attempt to achieve greater prominence is sin. Artists, though they may create as imagers of God, are no more special because of it.

This pride stems from an unbiblical view of what it really means to be created in the image of God. God reveals to humans that they are made in His image and likeness to let them know who they are, and not what they should strive to be. The apostle Paul addresses this very issue in Philippians 2:1-11 as he looks to the ultimate imager of God, Jesus Christ. On this passage Brueggemann remarks, “Apparently, the key mark of Jesus in the image/form of God is that he did not grasp after equality with God but became obedient. God is the one who does not grasp. And human persons in his image are those who do not grasp.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, the grasping of power is not only sinful, but is contrary to the act of creation as Genesis 2-3 shows that such prideful aspirations lead to death.<sup>25</sup> This idea of grasping is in contrast to God’s very giving act when he created the universe. In creating the world God was not focused on himself, but he centered his energies and interests on the creation.<sup>26</sup> So the *imago Dei* artist is not one who is tempted by pride and seeks to honor

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<sup>23</sup> Wolterstorff, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

himself in through his art, but one who, like God, selflessly pours himself into his creation for the good of others. If the Church were clear on this teaching, then there would be less concern about artists having Gauguin-like arrogance when “creating like unto our Divine Maker.”

### Pro Image: The Magical Artist

In contrast to those who adamantly oppose the idea of an *imago Dei* artist, are those like Sayers, who place a high value on the doctrine of art originating in the image of God in man. These exegetes accurately interpret the Genesis creation passages to mean that man is created in God’s image and believe that his artistic pursuits mirror the Creator God. Sayers calls attention to the fact that when it is written that man is created in the image of God, the only thing we know about God up until that point in the Bible is that he creates.<sup>27</sup> This “family resemblance” explains the origin of man’s constant desire to make things. Humans have an innate yearning to craft, to construct, and to compose and this is because they are made in the image of God, the creator of all that is seen and unseen. As God creates, so does man. It is for this reason that Sayers rightly points out that the artist as God’s image is a key element of a sound Christian aesthetic.

Though she is correct in her assessment of the image in Scripture, Sayers has drawn criticism from many of the image naysayers like Seerveld, and her strong, and possibly inordinate, emphasis on the artist as acting in the image of God may be the reason. Unlike Seerveld, who sees the artist as a fallen, earthbound creature performing work that is consistent with his vocation, Sayers presents the artist as a more magical figure that exists in

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<sup>27</sup> Sayers, 17.

the image of God differently from the rest of humanity. Her assessment of the artist places him on a different level, having powers that the non-artist does not possess. She declares, “Yet the common man, obsessed by the practice of a mathematical and scientific period, is nevertheless obscurely aware that that enigmatic figure, the creative artist, possesses some power of interpretation which he has not, some access to the hidden things behind that baffling curtain of phenomena which he cannot penetrate.”<sup>28</sup> The artist described here has prophet-like insight enabling him to communicate otherwise mysterious truths through his art. In a different occurrence, Sayers asserts that her experience as an artist is not relatable to the uncreative and analytical types.<sup>29</sup> Underscoring the specialness of the artist, she claims that the process of human creator cannot possibly be understood by those who do are not creative.

This higher view of the artist is not biblical, and Rookmaaker blames this mindset on the influence of romanticism. He observes that romanticism “regarded art as a kind of religion—deep, yet remote from reality—and the artist as a high and sublime creative being, a high priest of culture.”<sup>30</sup> Does this not sound like the viewpoint of Dorothy Sayers? Sayers should be commended on her contributions to how Christians understand art and the artist, but on this particular subject she presents an incomplete picture. Her problem here is not in her affirmation of the image of God in the artist, but in her failure to acknowledge that art is a part of the cultural mandate which is common to all of mankind. Artists do operate differently from people in other occupations, but they are not the only creative types. The

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<sup>28</sup> Sayers, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>30</sup> H. R. Rookmaaker, *The Creative Gift: Essays on Art and the Christian Life* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1981), 57.

cultural mandate is a call for creativity not only for the artist, but for everyone. Creativity is essential to the crafting of art, but it is also necessary for problem solving, social relationships, theology, writing, manufacturing, and a host of other vocations and human activities.<sup>31</sup> The cultural mandate grounds art in the realm of the physical, and presents it as a vocation among other vocations. An aesthetic that couples the image of God and the cultural mandate prevents art from becoming something that is seen as existing on a higher level than other human pursuits.

### Creation *Ex Nihilo*

Waltke comments, “. . . since we are only God’s likeness and not identical to him, we need to validate our analogies between ourselves and God by considering his reflection in Scripture to see to what extent the images comport with one another.”<sup>32</sup> This insightful comment encapsulates the responsibility of the theologian as he constructs his views on the *imago Dei*. Those who study this doctrine must answer the questions: In what manner does man create like unto God? What ways are they similar and how are they different?

One way that the pro-image Sayers believes the human artist creates like God has to do with creation *ex nihilo*. The theological doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is basic to orthodox Christianity, and is the belief that God created the world “out of nothing”. This doctrine stems from Genesis 1:1, and is verified in the New Testament as well (*cf.* Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3). When speaking of man creating in the image of God, Sayers believes that artists

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<sup>31</sup> Rookmaaker, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Waltke and Yu, 216.

participate in an earthly version this creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>33</sup> Of course she is not unaware of the differences between God and humans, but she thinks there are ways in which man mirrors God in his ability to create things out of nothing.

Though Sayers concedes that man creates art from the fixed realm of the material world, she cites two components of human creation *ex nihilo*. The first involves the human imagination, which is not bound by the limits of the physical universe. Sayers sees the imagination as a vast source of ideas and concepts that reach beyond the boundaries of what we can perceive with our senses. She argues that the components “of the world of imagination increase by a continuous and irreversible process, without any destruction or rearrangement of what went before.”<sup>34</sup> So what appears from nothing is not the physical work of art, but the idea that instigates and drives the creation of it, which is born of the human imagination. Secondly, Sayers claims a human version of creating *ex nihilo* when she observes that art is always something created out of nothing because “a whole artistic work is immeasurably more than the sum of its parts.”<sup>35</sup> While nothing tangible is added to the material universe when art is formed, the intangible qualities of value and worth are.

One of Sayers great strengths is that she has the ability to think outside of the traditional theological box yet remain true to Scripture (ie. her work on art and the Trinity), but in this case, her unique viewpoint strays too far from the original doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to be feasible. Yes, she is correct in verifying both the vastness of the imagination and the value of the artistic whole, but neither materializes from nothing. She asserts that what is birthed from the human imagination increases without “rearrangement of what went before,”

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<sup>33</sup> Sayers, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 22.

but that fact is debatable. Even though they appear new, all products of the imagination originate in the mind from what has been experienced through the senses, felt through the emotions, or learned through the intellect. Man has no capacity to imagine anything that is unrelated to any of these in one form or another. It appears as if Sayers gives the power of the imagination too much credit. What comes out of the imagination does not emerge from cerebral nothingness, but from a stockpile of experience that is stored in the human mind. Unlike God, man cannot rise above this fact.

Sayers' second point about art being "more than the sum of its parts" deviates from the concept of *ex nihilo* as well. As this subject was discussed in the above section on artistic hubris, value is indeed created when a work of art is formed, but it does not come forth from nothing. In art, value has a very tangible origin and that is in the work itself. Art increases because the skilled artisan manipulates the material world. The value created is a byproduct of the completed work of art.

So while Sayers brings up some very good points about creative activity, how she relates the artist to creation *ex nihilo* is a theory that falls short. As there are many parallels between how God creates and how man creates, "creation from nothing" should not be considered one of them. In this instance, the disparity between the two is too great. In regards to this particular difference in how God and man create Hughes writes that "as a creative being man is endowed with the competence, not to bring something into being where before there was nothing, but creatively to bring into ever new relationships and combinations the inexhaustible aesthetic potential latent in the forms and colors and harmonies of creation."<sup>36</sup> Hughes accurately recognizes that human genius and innovation

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 63.

do not bring forth what has not already existed, but simply help to bring out the artistic *potential* that is yet to be developed in creation. Thus, creation *ex nihilo* is one aspect of the creative process that is not evident in the production of art by fallen man, and can only apply to God.

### Cosmos from Chaos

Leonard Bernstein once said that to him, “music is cosmos in chaos,” and the children’s fiction writer, Madeline L’Engle, agrees and extends this concept to define all good art.<sup>37</sup> She says that she finds this definition of art easy for her to relate to as she points out that all quality art contains a certain level of stability, harmony, and orderliness. Conversely, she considers bad art as simply replicating existing chaos.

The connection between L’Engle’s artist creating cosmos from chaos and the biblical view of art begins in Genesis 1:2, a passage that was discussed in the previous chapter. This is the verse where the pre-creation world is described as “formless and void.” The word *bohu* that is translated “formless” in Genesis 1:2 is the same word used in Job 26:7 to mean “emptiness” and in Is. 34:11 to mean “chaos.”<sup>38</sup> It is noteworthy that all three words, “formless”, “emptiness”, and “chaos,” can be used to describe a work of art before it exists. A lump of clay is without form before the potter fashions it into a vessel, a canvas is empty and void of color before the painter paints, and the painter’s palette is a chaotic mass of color before the paint is brushed onto the canvas to create a picture. Art always exists in some form of formlessness before transforming into “cosmos,” and the capability of the artist to

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<sup>37</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>38</sup> Kidner, 44.



arrange unorganized matter into something orderly, beautiful, and valuable offers a compelling parallel to God's forming all of creation from the "formless void." Here one finds the Creator and the creator involved in similar acts— one is infinite and perfect while the other is finite and imperfect, but they are similar acts nonetheless.

The idea of "cosmos in chaos" does not only apply to the rearrangement of physical matter in the creation of art, but to matters of the heart as well. Matthew Henry calls attention to the fact that the words *tohu* and *bohu* are translated as "confusion" and "emptiness" in the King James Version of Isaiah 34:11 as he comments on the Genesis 1:2 passage. He remarks, "To those who have their hearts in heaven this lower world, in comparison with that upper, still appears to be nothing but confusion and emptiness."<sup>39</sup> However, it is not only those "who have their hearts in heaven" that experience the world in this way. Feelings of confusion and emptiness are universal among humans and drive many people to find refuge in art because it has the power to counteract chaos with truth and beauty.

This particular transformative aspect of cosmos from chaos in art is not a physical one, but one that transcends the earthly to communicate the eternal truth that the fallen earth will one day be redeemed. Art has the ability to impart a sense of order, and reveal to its beholder the fact that the craziness of this world is only temporary. Bavinck identifies beauty in art as a key element in conveying this idea that one day all of creation will be restored to its original splendor. He asserts, "Beauty is the harmony that still shines through chaos in the world; by God's grace, beauty is observed, felt, translated by artists; it is prophecy and guarantee that this world is not destined for ruin but for glory—a glory for which there is a

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary: In One Volume*, ed. Rev. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 2.

longing deep in every human heart.”<sup>40</sup> Bavinck’s idea here squares with Rom. 8:18-25, which describes a creation that is waiting to be freed from its existence of decay, and the 8:22 reference to “the whole creation” includes man, who along with the rest of the world, is “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” as he yearns for cosmos to reign supreme over the world’s present chaos.

What Bavinck recognizes as the longing that “this world is not destined for ruin but for glory” may be a clue into understanding all aspects of the element of order in art. Could this longing be part of the motivation for the artist to rearrange physical matter in order to create works of art? Does the finished work of art serve as a corporeal representation of what people really hope for in a glorified and perfect universe? Is the hope of a more harmonious world part of the power, draw, and influence of art? The answer may very well be “yes” to all of these questions. Existing as cosmos from chaos, art offers the human creator the opportunity to participate (in a finite way) in redeeming the fallen world from its burden of disorder as God will one day infinitely accomplish. Art’s cosmos from chaos also is true to the cultural mandate offering a respite of peace and harmony for those seeking refuge from the general turmoil of life.

### Beauty and Art

Loveliness, splendor, and whatever is pleasing to the senses have always been important elements of art, and the significance of these qualities is no surprise when one discovers the origins of beauty in the Bible and how it affects man’s life on earth. Beauty can readily be observed in nature and its presence is similarly ubiquitous in human art. That

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<sup>40</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 259.

it is equally evident in both God and man's creation is not a coincidence. The aesthetic value of art finds its roots in both the image of God and the cultural mandate.

### Beauty and the Creation Narrative

Understanding the significance of beauty in art begins with a study of the presence of beauty in the creation narrative. The first biblical reference to beauty comes in the first chapter of Genesis when God judges his work “good” (Gen. 1:10,12,18, 21, 25) and “very good” (1:31). Bruggemann informs that “the ‘good’ here does not refer primarily to a moral quality, but to an aesthetic quality. It might better be translated ‘lovely, pleasing, beautiful’ (cf. Eccles. 3:11).”<sup>41</sup> Liesch and Finley add that this Hebrew word for “good”, *tob*, in Genesis 1 refers to the practical as well as beautiful side of creation as they write, “The point here is that God in his model of creativity has embedded both aesthetic and functional ‘goodness’ in the micro-macro structure of the universe.”<sup>42</sup> So from the beginning of time beauty was a central component of the universe.

The second mention of beauty in Scripture is found in Genesis 2:9 where it is written that “the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.” God could have created food-producing trees that were strictly utilitarian, but instead he chose to add an aesthetic element so that they would be visually pleasurable as well as functional. The trees in this passage were apparently meant to be life sustaining, which brings up an interesting point—the criterion for the perfect living

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<sup>41</sup> Bruggemann, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Liesch and Finley, 194.

conditions for man includes both the utilitarian and the aesthetic.<sup>43</sup> In other words, man is meant to live in a world that is both useful and lovely.

Surveying the role of beauty in God's formation of the universe helps to explain the emphasis of beauty in human art. The *imago Dei* artist places a high value on beauty, and like God, creates with both form and function in mind. Consistent with both the image of God and the cultural mandate, human creative activity not only mirrors that of God's creation in its attention to aesthetics, but the artist also stays true to God's command to subdue the earth by maintaining equilibrium between both the beautiful and the utilitarian. It is the artist who adds balance to human culture by infusing the useful and the practical in life with loveliness. Thus, art is central in helping man's creation to parallel God's, and without the beauty provided by art, man's response to the cultural mandate would be incomplete.

There is also an unequivocal connection between beauty and the idea that the Creator God and the artist both exemplify cosmos out of chaos. Beauty finds its roots in order, and as it was demonstrated in previous sections of this paper, man and God's creative work involves forming order from what would otherwise be unorganized. It can be argued that the aesthetic merit that God proclaimed at the end of each of the first three days of creation expressed the fact that the chaotic was now tamed in such a way that it no longer existed as chaos, but was transformed into something ordered, and therefore something beautiful. The same happens to art when beauty emerges from what was previously unformed. "Beauty brings order out of anarchy, harmony out of cacophony."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Leland Ryken, "In the Beginning, God Created," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 57.

<sup>44</sup> Roland M. Frye, "Literature and the Greatness of Man," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 136.

## A Necessary Aspect of Human Life

That God intended beauty to be not just an indulgence that man can do without, but something essential to human flourishing can be seen in the architecture of the modern era, which began around the turn of the twentieth century and lasted until the 1970's. The theory behind modern architecture was that form follows function and "attention to function would produce a pleasing form."<sup>45</sup> During this time function was valued far above beauty and this approach eventually provided an environment that was less than ideal for man's well-being. While admitting that some of the sleek simple skyscrapers of the modern era possessed some measure of beauty, Vieth says of modern architecture, "The monotonous drabness of the glass and steel towers, void of bright colors or other decorative touches, the conformity of block after block of identical little boxes, the exaltation of function and technology over the human, soon grew stifling."<sup>46</sup>

The Pruitt-Igoe housing development of St. Louis, Missouri was a paragon of modern architecture. Its architecture and design were prize-winning as they both exemplified the modern era by focusing on technology, functional aesthetics, and utilitarian design.<sup>47</sup> This housing complex had every practical feature that a person needed to live, but it lacked an environment that contained beauty. Without this key aesthetic component, the project was described as sterile, impersonal, inhuman, and depressing.<sup>48</sup> Construction of the complex of

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<sup>45</sup> Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 113.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

thirty-three buildings was complete in 1956, and by 1972 its demolition had begun. This housing project that was functionally efficient but unlivable was a failure because the importance of beauty was underestimated. Frye keenly observes, “We go far astray if we regard beauty as a mere ornament or decoration, as a filigree attached to the surface of life. . . . Beauty is not excrescent to the general well-being of man, but essential to it.”<sup>49</sup>

So what is it about beauty that makes it necessary for mankind to thrive? Beauty is difficult to define because it is not discerned through the senses or reason alone, and it is for this reason that some scholars discern a spiritual element belonging to it.<sup>50</sup> This element of spirituality may offer a clue into why beauty is a necessity for man as it seems to have the ability to pierce the human heart and point its beholder to God. Kuyper makes the point that beauty is not derived from fantasy or subjective perception, but “has an objective existence, being itself the expression of a Divine perfection.”<sup>51</sup> In the Bible, an experience of God through beauty is found in Psalm 48 as the psalmist’s visually exquisite surroundings move him to praise the almighty God, and in Psalm 19 the writer cherishes nature because it leads him to experience the beauty of God’s artistry.<sup>52</sup> It stands to reason then that if beauty is such a powerful expression of the Divine, then it must be fundamental to human flourishing. Man cannot live life to the fullest without God, and beauty feeds man’s soul as an earthly reminder of him.

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<sup>49</sup> Frye, 136.

<sup>50</sup> Bavink, 258.

<sup>51</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 236, 237.

<sup>52</sup> Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: H. Shaw Publishers, 1989), 74.

That beauty is such an indispensable aspect of human life leads to a direct tie to the cultural mandate. A large part of man's calling in the mandate is to aid in making the earth a habitable place. If the world is not livable without beauty, then creating beauty is important for man. Of course, the natural world is full of glory and splendor, but human culture must add to this in order to provide man with an environment where he can live and thrive. Subduing the earth requires more than just manipulating physical matter for utilitarian purposes. The serviceable yet dismal Pruitt-Ingoe Housing Project demonstrates that culture without beauty is an anemic answer to the cultural mandate.

### The Mystery of Non-Christian Art

When one examines the history of art in all of its forms, it will become apparent that there is a preponderance of artists who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ creating wonderful works of art. A case could even be made that there are more non-Christians than Christians who are known in the art world for their great work. It even seems a little strange that those who know the joy of the Lord and enjoy the fullness of the Holy Spirit are often artistically outshined by those who do not. This leads to the very important question: How does the artistic genius of the unregenerate square with the image of God and the cultural mandate?

### Image and Mandate Extended to the Ungodly

First it should be noted that image of God in man continues after the fall, and is not lost as the result of sin (see Gen. 9:6). Kidner sees the *imago Dei* as "structural," which

means that all humans exist in the image of God as part of who they are.<sup>53</sup> Thus, God's image in man is universal. However, Kidner does discern a distinction between the regenerate and unregenerate in how each reflects God, and this difference is a spiritual one.<sup>54</sup> The regenerate are unique in that they are the only ones who are able to bear a spiritual likeness to God, and this occurs as a result of having a relationship with him. Unbelievers do not share in this spiritual likeness, but aside from this, the image of God in man is true for all. This universality of the image extends to the non-Christian artist, who is also capable of creating art in the image of God. Christians are not the only ones who benefit from this privilege.

As the image of God is affirmed in those who do not proclaim Christ, so the cultural mandate applies to them as well. Many Bible commentators recognize a connection between the cultural achievements of seed of Cain in Genesis 4:20-22 and the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28. Waltke identifies this passage as significant because it broadens the mandate from animal husbandry (v.20) to include the arts (v.21) and sciences (v.22), and the fact that these verses describe the activities of a wicked family does not give Waltke reason to doubt that these activities are valid responses to the mandate.<sup>55</sup> What is also noteworthy about this passage is that it demonstrates that not only are non-Christians responsible for carrying out the cultural mandate, but their actions reveal an obedience to the command even though they know nothing about it. This is not only true of Lamech's family of Genesis 4, but non-Christian compliance to the mandate is observable throughout the history of human culture.

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<sup>53</sup> Kidner, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Waltke and Yu, 272.



## Pagan Contributions to Culture

Knowing that the Bible acknowledges the involvement of the reprobate in the cultural mandate and affirms them as imagers of God still does not inform Christians how they are to respond to art created by non-Christians. Are not these works of art tainted because like Matt. 7:18 says, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit”? Seerveld is one who might answer that question in the affirmative. He is not a fan of the artistic endeavors of the non-Christian, and is concerned with how this art affects the culture of today—particularly how it influences the Christians who are steeped in this very secular culture. His problem with the art of the ungodly motivates him to urge Christian involvement in culture to counteract the damage done by the non-Christians. In his own colorful way, Seerveld writes that “the areas untouched by a biblically redeeming consciousness and formation really go to hell. And then the Christian community is prey to the unbelieving, God-damning artistic culture that results.”<sup>56</sup> On another occasion he declares, “That ‘the earth is the Lord’s and everything filling it is His’ (Psalm 24:1) is a recognition missing in unchristian art, an insight twisted in post-Christian secular art, and a commitment that cannot be satisfactorily appended, circumscribed or applied like a varnish to an object conceived without it, because the Lord is a jealous God.”<sup>57</sup> Seerveld passionately defends his position by appealing to the doctrine that all who are not for God are against him, and the fact that an artist does not know the Lord means that his work is contaminated because it comes from a place that exalts pagan or secular beliefs and demeans the convictions of the true faith.

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<sup>56</sup> Seerveld, *Rainbows*, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Toronto: Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1968), 26.

As a true Reformed theologian, Seerveld recognizes an element of common grace in non-Christian art, but he does not feel that it gives value to the work. Nothing can compare with something created by one who operates by the light of the true gospel.<sup>58</sup> Calvin, however, under the umbrella of common grace, gives more credit to the contributions of the ungodly. In his *Institutes* he asserts that the Holy Spirit bestows gifts that work for the good of all mankind on whomever he pleases and that “if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishments for our sloths.”<sup>59</sup> Siding with Calvin is Kuyper who expresses a similar sentiment. He writes, “Calvinism has taught us that all liberal arts are gifts which God imparts promiscuously to believers and to unbelievers, yea, that, as history shows, these gifts have flourished in even a larger measure outside the holy circle.”<sup>60</sup> In contrast to Seerveld, Calvin and Kuyper recognize the dominance of the ungodly in the art world without lament, and this comes from a different way of viewing the gifts that God has endowed the unbelieving artist. It seems that some Calvinists can appreciate non-Christian involvement in culture, while others like Seerveld feel that Christians can and should do better.

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<sup>58</sup> Seerveld, *Christian Critique*, 24-26.

<sup>59</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (2 Volume Set)* 1550 translation ed. ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:275.

<sup>60</sup> Kuyper, 243.

## Examples from Scripture

Looking at how pagan art and culture is dealt with in Scripture, one will find that there are several examples in the Bible where the artistic contributions of non-believers are praised and their virtues extolled. Of course pagan religious practices are always condemned, but not their art, craftsmanship, and talents that are employed toward the good of society. In fact, the ungodly are often portrayed as having abilities that are superior to God's people, and even prove to be a benefit to them.

The first mention of artists in the Bible appears in the previously discussed Genesis 4:19-24, where Jubal is given the title of “father of all who play the harp and flute” (v.21) and Tubal-Cain “forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron” (v.22). Appearing just a few verses after the story of Cain's murder of Abel, these pioneers in their respective fields were of Cain's lineage and were members of a family that was characterized by polygamy (4:19) and violence (4:23,24). About these descendants of Cain, Kidner observes, “A biased account would ascribe nothing good to Cain. . . . The phrase *he was the father of such* acknowledges the debt and prepares us to accept for ourselves a similar indebtedness to secular enterprise; for the Bible nowhere teaches that the godly should have all the gifts.”<sup>61</sup> Here Kidner brings up a good point—Christians are not to limit the celebration of artistic talents to those of their own kind. God's grace extends to the unbelievers to the degree that the believing community is sometimes indebted to them for cultural advancements.

A second example of the giftedness of the ungodly comes from 1 Kings 5, which details Solomon's preparation for building the temple. In this chapter, Solomon solicits the help of Hiram, the heathen king of Tyre, for the cutting of the cedar trees and preparing the

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<sup>61</sup> Kidner, 78.

timber for the building of the temple. In 5:8 Solomon admits that the skills of the Sidonians exceed those of the Israelites in “felling timber,” and so he requests their assistance and offers to compensate them for their services. Kuyper interprets the biblical mention of the skills of the pagan Sidonians to include those of architecture, and points out, “The building of the Temple required the coming of Hiram from a heathen country to Jerusalem; and Solomon, in whom, after all, was found the Wisdom of God, not only knows that Israel stands behind in architecture and needs help from without, but by his action he publicly shows that he, as the king of the Jews, is in no way ashamed of Hiram’s coming, which he realizes as a natural ordinance of God.”<sup>62</sup> That Solomon was comfortable with heathens being a part of the construction of the most holy building that ever existed up until that time demonstrates that Christians can and should utilize the talents of non-Christians when they prove to be the best ones for the job. For the Christian, excellence in cultural endeavors should not be compromised because of a fear of contamination from those outside the faith.

A final illustration from Scripture that affirms the unbeliever’s role in culture building has to do with pagan cities. In the Bible the cities of Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, and Sidon are praised for their beauty, though they end up being destroyed for their wickedness.<sup>63</sup> For example, in the book of Ezekiel the prophet is particularly saddened by the loss of Tyre, a pagan city known for its wealth, skill, abundant goods, and even wisdom, though it was destroyed because its pride and corruption had become detestable to God (Ezek. 27 and 28). And Tyre is only one heathen city in the Bible among many that is lauded for its cultural triumphs. About these centers of civilization Rookmaaker explains, “We are certainly not

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<sup>62</sup> Kuyper, 244.

<sup>63</sup> Rookmaaker, 19.

encouraged to look upon these achievements with contempt. In fact, we are told to lament because they are gone, destroyed.”<sup>64</sup> These cities were centers of idolatry and immorality, but that did not negate their aesthetic value. God in his graciousness endowed these heathens with the expertise to build cities that were so beautiful and successful in culture building that it was considered tragic when they were demolished. Once again, the Bible affirms the talents of the unbeliever.

At this point, it is worth reiterating that Scripture never condones or supports the religious practices or worldviews of the pagans. What is acknowledged as good is their technical skill as artists and craftsmen. Those discussed in the above illustrations were given extraordinary talents. These talents were to be appreciated and sometimes even utilized by God’s people with the understanding that their abilities, which were considered good, remained distinct from their spiritual life, which was loathsome to God. The Bible is clear that in spite of religious status, there can be value in the cultural contributions of those who do not profess faith in the Christian God.

### A Final Word

Because some non-Christian art finds its roots in the *imago Dei* and the cultural mandate does not mean that all art from unbelievers is beneficial. Seeveld’s reservations about secular art are not completely groundless. Art is a powerful communicator and “the effect of any proposition, whether true or false, can be heightened if it is expressed in poetry or in artistic prose rather than in bald, formulaic statements.”<sup>65</sup> Herein lies the potential

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<sup>64</sup> Rookmaaker, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, “Some Perspectives on Art,” in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 86.

danger of art created by non-Christians. When art is used to promote counterfeit truth, then its likeness to how God creates and its role in the cultural mandate are diminished. This type of art is far from virtuous, and does not represent the sort of pagan contribution to human culture that is referred to in this section. However, art that is derived from a false worldview can still possess artistic excellence from a technical point of view.

In conclusion, the image of God and cultural mandate can give merit and worth to Christian and non-Christian art alike. Consciously or unconsciously, both artists have the ability create in obedience to the cultural mandate, and God graciously allows each the privilege to create art in his image. As theologians battle over whether heathen art is pernicious or benign, Scripture speaks of talented pagans who were pioneers in the arts, used their skills to construct Solomon's temple, and were capable of building the most beautiful cities of their time. All of these are true examples of man using his abilities to order and subdue the earth, and all of these illustrate the creation of things that are beautiful, valuable, and new. This does not mean that everything that is called art is a reflection of God and the cultural mandate, but the point here is that like the Christian, the unbeliever is capable of reflecting both of these in his art through God's generous grace.

## CHAPTER 4

### CHURCH HISTORY: THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH MASTERS

During the Protestant Reformation, the Netherlands proved to be fertile ground for Protestantism, and by the 1600's Calvinism had firmly taken its root in that country.<sup>1</sup> In the Netherlands the move to Reformed theology not only affected religious life, but proved to be highly influential in the realm of art as well. The Calvinist faith had a transforming effect on the Dutch culture of the day and sparked a fundamental change in the societal role of the seventeenth century Dutch painters.

This change was not the result of a calculated effort or an organized agenda by the faithful people of the time, but demonstrates the power that a religious movement can have in affecting a culture. Rookmaaker observes that seventeenth century Dutch art serves as an example of how Christianity can act as salt in a society and how a culture can change due to what he calls “secondary fruits” of the Spirit. He writes,

Individuals became Christians by accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The fact that He comes to indwell them by His Spirit means that they will be bearing the ‘fruit’ of the Spirit in their lives. This, working in and through the world, leads to the ‘secondary’ fruits in culture, the consensus of Christian, biblical attitudes—to work, to money, to the whole of reality—which deeply influences the whole nation. And it is these which are reflected in the nation’s art.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1985), 101.

<sup>2</sup> H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 21,22.

Kuyper also attributes Calvinism as an important contributor to the development of the works of the Dutch masters as he remarks that the influences of Calvinism “do not operate personally, but put their impress on surroundings and society, upon the world of perceptions, of representations and of thought; and as a result of these various impressions an art-school makes its appearance.”<sup>3</sup>

The change in worldview triggered by the reformation affected the art of the Netherlands in two significant ways. The first involves the function of the artist in Dutch society and the second is a shift in the subject matter of the Dutch painters. The following discussion will explain how these changes demonstrate a historical example of art as originating from both the cultural mandate and the image of God in man.

### A Heightened Sense of Vocation

Before the reformation, artists relied on patrons to fund their work. They were commissioned to produce art by wealthy sources like the Roman Catholic Church, royal members of the ruling class, and society’s most affluent families.<sup>4</sup> But things were different in the Netherlands of the 1600’s. After the Reformation, Dutch churches had very few paintings,<sup>5</sup> and politically the Netherlands fought and gained independence from Spain in 1579 (although the war persisted until 1609) so tax money was no longer flowing to the monarchs and privileged princes and regents.<sup>6</sup> Because of these factors, Holland saw the end

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 250.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon Cheney, *A World History of Art* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 686.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Johnson, *Art: A New History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 365.

<sup>6</sup> Cheney, 687.



of art patronage where the artist was guaranteed payment before creating a work of art, and a new era dawned where the artist was forced to create art before attempting to find someone to buy it.

This change involved both the artist and the buyer. The Dutch artist of the 1600's "had either to go to the market place and to public fairs, there to peddle his wares, or to rely on middlemen, picture dealers who relieved him of this burden but who wanted to buy as cheaply as possible in order to be able to sell at a profit."<sup>7</sup> The artist was no longer affiliated with the elite, but participated in the marketplace like the grocer, the tailor, and the maker of household wares. Likewise, the market was open to a new economic class of buyers, who were not a part of the highest echelons of society.

Kuypers feels that this age ushered in a certain freedom in art that was not previously available to the artist due to the controlling nature of the Church (and others would argue, the aristocracy). Writing more specifically about music after the reformation he asserts, "And as in every department of life, Protestantism in general, but Calvinism more consistently bridled the tutelage of the Church, so also was music emancipated by it, and the way opened to its so splendid modern development."<sup>8</sup> What is said here about music applies to painting as well. Part of the growth of art initiated by Calvinism involved prying art from the hands of the elite (and the Church) and including the involvement of the common people. This, in turn, lessened the exclusivity of the position of the artist, which made creating art more of a job among other jobs.

This historical change in how the artist operated in society seems to line up with Seeveld and Wolterstorff's view of art as "work, hard, bodily work that can legitimately be a

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<sup>7</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1956), 311,312.

<sup>8</sup> Kuyper, 254.

man or woman's vocation,"<sup>9</sup> and it is worth noting that both ascribe to the same Reformed theology of seventeenth century Holland. Work was exactly what art was in the Netherlands at this time, and the market-driven business of creating and selling art leveled the playing field, and opened up the possibility of painting as a vocation for all who had the skill, discipline, and the drive to pursue this career. The new marketplace orientation of the artist meant that his work was more akin to the work of the common man. The artist ceased to exist exclusively in the category of the magical creator, but was now also a part of the earthier realm of the cultural mandate. This is not to say that artists prior to this movement were not engaged in work when creating art, but the Dutch artists were seen in a different light—as skilled workers and not superhuman purveyors of beauty and truth. While the work itself did not change for the painters, the marketplace put the artists alongside others like farmers and tradesmen whose roles in filling and subduing the earth were more obvious, and therefore, the artist's function in society became more clearly part of the cultural mandate.

The cultural mandate also factors in when considering the buyers of these paintings. Whereas in the past, owners of works of art were members of an elite aristocracy, the Netherlands of the seventeenth century saw an expanded middle class who had the expendable income to beautify their homes with paintings.<sup>10</sup> As was discussed in the previous chapter, beauty is an essential factor in "filling and subduing the earth" and this aspect of the cultural mandate was now seen as something that was an important contributor to the quality of life not only for the wealthy, but for the middle class as well. While the enhancement of art in one's home was still a luxury it became more available to the people,

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Downsview, Ontario: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, 365.

and the response to God's command to create culture saw a farther reach in Dutch society of the time.

However, not all historians are enthusiastic about the effects of Protestantism on the Dutch art of the 1600's. Art historian Cheney laments this move of art away from the privileged few and into the hands of the general public. Taking a "higher" view of art, he feels that art should be elevated above the common as it is more dignified and belongs in a different class. He especially finds the market-driven production of art regrettable as he bewails the fact that art was made "a gambling commodity and an instrument of materialistic gain" instead of "a companion to man in his nobler haunts and his least commercial moments."<sup>11</sup> Cheney insightfully observes that opening up the whole realm of art to all who are interested in having a say does have its drawbacks. Capitalism has certainly spawned the creation of some bad art with shoddy workmanship and poor subject matter, but the results have not been all bad. As was mentioned before, it was this free market aspect of art that extended the ability to add beauty to the personal surroundings of common citizens, and therefore in regards to art, the response to the cultural mandate was taken to a new level.

So seventeenth century Dutch painting saw a new answer to the cultural mandate in both the vocational aspect of art and its availability to a wider audience. The command to fill and subdue the earth was not meant to be carried out and enjoyed by an elite few, but it applies to all men, and in the Netherlands of the 1600's the job of the artist as well as the art itself were made accessible to a whole new segment of society. The artist's profession lost some of its mystique and was brought to a humbler standing among other more common occupations, while the people of Holland were able to enjoy a higher quality of living by

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<sup>11</sup> Cheney, 714.

adorning their homes with beautiful paintings. The Dutch were trailblazers in the realm of art's answer to the cultural mandate in this respect.

### The Mundane Exalted

Humanism, a man-centered philosophy/ worldview, was birthed in the Renaissance and its application to Christianity found its origins in the theology of “the prince of the Humanists,” Erasmus, who “believed that people were essentially neutral moral agents, filled as much with a potential for good as for evil, disposed as much to serve their neighbors as to harm them, and as likely to love God as to curse him—all in accordance with a sovereign free choice.”<sup>12</sup> Free will was a large part of his theology as he believed that because man was created in the image of God, he was a thinking being with a will that was capable for choosing both the moral good and bad.<sup>13</sup> This outlook fostered a belief in the great potential of man, whose insight and power could have a transforming effect on the world.<sup>14</sup> The overwhelming optimism of Humanism gave birth to art that represented “a more lofty, ideal world, in a setting fit for great human deeds, heroic acts, deep thoughts, surpassing the mean, everyday world.”<sup>15</sup> The art was characterized by idyllic scenes that portrayed a world teeming with beauty, while downplaying life's pain, suffering, and other hardships. This was the life that the human was capable of achieving through his power of free will.

The belief system of the Humanists differed greatly from that of the Calvinists, who subscribed to the doctrine of election over free will, and total depravity over man's neutral

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 290.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 296.

<sup>14</sup> Rookmaaker, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

moral nature. These theological differences manifested themselves in the subject matter chosen by the seventeenth century Dutch artists, who broke free from Renaissance Humanism and found value in the commonplace. Dutch art did not follow the Humanist model of depicting the gracious and splendid world that was possible if man made the right choices. Protestant theology, and more specifically Calvinism, changed the worldview of the Dutch artist, who painted a more realistic world with all of its beauty and its flaws. The paintings exposed the true experience of man, which is mixed with both happiness and sorrow, joy and pain as attention was paid to the natural over the supernatural. It can be said that Protestantism “broke the path for the representation of the ‘contemptible’ in art, always, of course, under the condition that in the lowly a spiritual content must appear. But it is also a part of the nature of Protestantism to enjoy the simply genuine, that which is at home in a small room, that which is natural for man.”<sup>16</sup> This type of art existed in sharp contrast to the idyllic world represented by the Humanists.

Kuyper credits this change of artistic focus toward the everyday to Calvin’s newly unearthed doctrine of election. He comments,

If a common man, to whom the world pays no special attention, is valued and even chosen by God as one of His elect, this must lead the artist also to find a motive for his artistic studies in what is common and of everyday occurrence. . . . When he saw how God had chosen the porter and the wage-earner for Himself, he found interest not only in the head, the figure and the entire personality of the man of the people, but began to reproduce the human expression of every rank and station.<sup>17</sup>

Here Kuyper is pointing out that “before this period, no account was taken of the people; *they* only were considered worthy of notice who were superior to the common man, *vis.*, the high

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, trans. Karl and Barbara Hertz and John H. Lichtblau (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1959), 150,151.

<sup>17</sup> Kuyper, 251, 252.

world of the church and of the priests, of knights and princes.”<sup>18</sup> The dignity that belonged to the common man was illustrated by the time and effort the Dutch masters put into their paintings of the prosaic, and also by offering their finished works for purchase by the general public.

Rookmaaker recognizes this shift in the subject matter of art as a result of Protestant tendency to see the world from a biblical point of view that represents a reality that is closer to the truth than the slices of heaven offered in Humanistic art. In his analysis of Van Goyen’s *Landscape of 1646*, which he considers a fine example of Reformation-influenced art, he writes, “. . . this painting does not copy nature as a camera would, but depicts a human experience, a human understanding, an insight and emotion into what the truth about reality is . . . clouds, bad weather coming, the sea, water, boats, work and rest.”<sup>19</sup> The Dutch painted the world as it really is—beautiful yet tainted, joyous yet sorrowful, glorious yet fallen, and Rookmaaker believes this was a direct result of how the Protestants beheld life through the lens of Scripture.

Cheney jettisons the theological implications of this newfound subject matter of Dutch art and sees economics as the catalyst for this change of focus. In his discussion of the transition of art from “pleasure pictures for the rich” and “show pieces for the religious shrines” to paintings for the everyday household he disdainfully points out, “It is only when the story of Holland is reached that the fisherman and the humble housewife, the windmill and the cow—yes, the turnip and the beer mug—seriously sit for their portraits. . . . The painting reminds man of his own houses and fields instead of heaven and the legendary saints, flatters the doctor and the captain of the guard and the bulb-grower instead of king and

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<sup>18</sup> Kuyper, 250, 251.

<sup>19</sup> Rookmaaker, 21.

duchess.”<sup>20</sup> According to Cheney, this transition to the depiction of the mundane was driven by market demand of the common citizen who wanted “himself immortalized or his surroundings.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, these artists were simply painting what they had to paint in order to make a living.

All in all it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly caused the shift in the subject matter of the painters of seventeenth century Holland, although a vast majority of scholars agree that the shift in the Dutch worldview caused by the Reformation had a great impact on the art of this era. Most likely Kuyper, Rookmaaker, and Cheney are all correct to a certain extent. Calvin’s doctrine of election did elevate the common man over the über-saints of Catholicism, the Protestant view of the fallen world affected Dutch paintings, and surely market demand had an effect on what was produced as well, and all of this leads up to the main point of this section. In short, the end result of this ground-breaking Dutch Protestant art was an aesthetic that more closely reflected the reality of God’s creation than the art that preceded it, and therefore, revealed a new way for the artist to create as God creates. Does not God create the dignified as well as the ignoble? Does not Scripture demonstrate time and time again that God often creates the weak to overpower the strong and the poor to receive blessings that exceed those of the rich?

Of course the main body of artists who worked in the centuries before this time exemplified the *imago Dei* by creating exceptional works of art of great beauty, but the Dutch brought a different approach to creating in God’s image. By not just cherry picking the lovely and pleasant from the world to paint, they embodied the essence of God’s creation in their work by including brokenness as well. After all, beauty abounds in the fallen world.

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<sup>20</sup> Cheney, 686.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Rembrandt is one whose art embodies this idea of beauty from the scorned. Art history scholar, Gombrich, declares,

People who are used to the beautiful figures of Italian art are sometimes shocked when they first see Rembrandt's pictures because he seems to care nothing for beauty, and not even to shrink from outright ugliness. . . . Like Caravaggio, he valued truth and sincerity above harmony and beauty. Christ had preached to the poor, the hungry and the sad, and poverty, hunger and tears are not beautiful. Of course much depends on what we agree to call beauty. A child often finds the kind, wrinkled face of his grandmother more beautiful than the regular features of a film star, and why should he not?<sup>22</sup>

Creating in the image of God cannot exclude the weatherworn face of a random old man or a landscape that is less that paradisiacal. This was something that was largely missing in pre-Reformation art and its appearance in seventeenth century Dutch painting has had a lasting effect on the art world ever since. *Imago Dei* art must be more than presenting the glorified world that is to come. Creating works of harmony and beauty echo God's creative activity, but so does the representation of truth and sincerity. The world and everything in it comes from God, and this validates the image of God in the artist who, like the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century, chooses to depict the least of these in his art.

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<sup>22</sup> Gombrich, 318.



## CHAPTER 5

### PRACTICAL APPLICATION

That art originates in the image of God and the cultural mandate is a fine theological premise, but if it cannot be practically applied to the work of an artist it is a futile doctrine. As was stated in the introduction to this paper, the Church is in a bit of a conundrum about how to deal with art and the artist. Clarifying how art, God's image, and the cultural mandate fit together is a step toward reconciling the somewhat strained relationship between art and Christianity. In 1970 Rookmaaker claimed, "Indeed, nowhere is culture more 'unsalted' than precisely in the field of the arts—and that in a time when the arts (in the widest sense) are gaining a stronger influence than ever through the mass communications."<sup>1</sup> Over forty years later Rookmaaker's statement rings true today. This final chapter will take a look at practical measures that the Church can take toward encouraging artists to effectively engage the culture and become the salt of the world that they are commanded to be.

#### Artists as Craftsmen

An important step toward Christian artists becoming respected contributors to culture lies in the cultural mandate and the vocational aspect of art that is implied in this command. It was discussed earlier that art is a proper response to the cultural mandate, which means that the work of the artist is both worthwhile and necessary. This makes the work aspect of art a vitally important one. As long as art is perceived by the Church as a nice hobby or

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<sup>1</sup> H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 222.

interesting pastime, mediocrity in so-called Christian art will prevail. That art is grounded in the cultural mandate as a valid career automatically puts an emphasis on education because in order to be competitive in the marketplace, the Christian artist must be seriously schooled in his discipline just like any other successful professional trains for his or her career.

Training in art is the key to excellence, and excellence is what is going to impact the culture. The Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor acknowledges that in order to create quality art the Christian must look beyond the Church for its measure of excellence.

Referring to the fiction writer she declares, "Our final standards for [the novelist] will have to be the demands of art, which are a good deal more exacting than the demands of the Church."<sup>2</sup> Her statement reveals her personal belief that Christians in general have low expectations when it comes to art, and that artists will do well to look beyond the Church and strive to achieve the level of technical skill that the art world in general deems excellent.

Rookmaaker confirms this as he writes, "If we are going to create a work of art we must follow the norms for art, its structure. . . . If an artist is not sensitive to this he will simply not be a good artist."<sup>3</sup> It is important for the Christian artist to know that when it comes to the practical elements of art (the actual physical work as opposed to its content and message), he must know and strive for the standards of excellence of whatever field of art he is pursuing. The Church's standards in art are often sub-par and when that is so it is the responsibility of the artist to achieve higher quality in his work.

This commitment of the artist to working on his craft is part of the charge found in 1 Cor. 10:31 which urges the believer to do everything for the glory of God. To the artist, this

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<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961, 183, 184.

<sup>3</sup> Rookmaaker, 234, 236.

means that mediocrity hardly brings God glory, even though second-rate art can sometimes be edifying. But, when this sort of edification emerges from mediocrity it is God's doing and not man's and should not be used as an excuse to justify sub-par art. On how inferior Christian art can sometimes be enlightening O'Connor asserts, "We have plenty of examples in this world of poor things being used for good purposes. God can make any indifferent thing, as well as evil itself, an instrument for good; but I submit that to do this is the business of God and not of any human beings."<sup>4</sup> Part of the job of the human artist is to hone his craft to the best of his ability, and to create works of art that reflect this effort.

#### The Freedom and Limitations of the Christian Artist

The vocational element of the cultural mandate also clarifies the role of the Christian artist. The artist has a unique role in filling and subduing the earth, and this role is distinct in its function in the body of Christ. The Church should encourage the artist in his or her vocation and make known the freedoms and limitations that come with this calling.

Though a person may be a Christian artist, his job is first and foremost to create art and is therefore free to focus on creating excellent works and not be burdened with accomplishing tasks that belong to people of other callings. Art can definitely be used to evangelize and communicate profound truths of the faith, but the artists should know that they are free to above all focus on their art as art. Rookmaaker recognizes this and contends, "The artist, with his special gifts, has a specific task, a very special and wonderful calling. It is not to play the prophet, nor to be a teacher, nor to be a preacher, nor to evangelize. It is to make life better, more worthwhile, to create the sound, the shape, the tale, the decoration, the

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<sup>4</sup> O'Connor, 174.

environment that is meaningful and lovely and a joy to mankind.”<sup>5</sup> Here Rookmaaker very beautifully sums up this vocational calling of the artist, while at the same time eliminating the obligation that the believing artist may feel to restrict his work to that which overtly carries a Christian message. In other words, “art must never be used to show the validity of Christianity. Rather the validity of art should be shown through Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> When the Church embraces the implications of the cultural mandate and its relationship to art it not only affirms it as a useful and meaningful component of human society, but it simply gives Christian artists the freedom to concentrate their attention on their creative work.

However, the same factors which contribute to the artist’s freedom are constraints for him as well. He is limited by the parameters of his art and need not overstep his boundaries by taking on more than he is called to do. It takes time and commitment to become skilled at an art form and the artist should pour his energies into his craft. As a Christian, being called as an artist is sufficient for a person’s vocation. As a successful artist of faith, O’Connor maintains, “The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists. He must first be aware of his limitations as an artist—for art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.”<sup>7</sup> As a writer, O’Connor is consistent with her views on this subject. Her collection of essays, *Mystery and Manners*, reveals the musings of a writer very much concerned with marrying her art and her faith. She is a master storyteller, who remains within the confines of fiction writing when she is crafting a story, but her novels are infused with Christian overtones, which are a result of her worldview and not a conscious attempt to evangelize. In her essays, she speaks much

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<sup>5</sup> Rookmaaker, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>7</sup> O’Connor, 171.

of Christian truth and worldview, but she never condones creating with the primary purpose of preaching, teaching, or evangelizing. On the contrary, she urges aspiring Christian artists to focus on their art without forcing a Christian agenda because their faith will work its way into the material naturally.<sup>8</sup> Quality of art will suffer if artists divert their focus away from the actual art, and try to accomplish too many tasks within their work.

### Liberation from Utilitarian Art

The belief that the artist acts in the image of God brings dignity to the vocation, and gives the artist an insight into his creative activity. Creating as God creates involves beauty, order, and attention to the seemingly insignificant, and there are a few practical things that the Church and the artist can learn from the relationship of art to the image of God in man.

First, considering the universe which God created it becomes apparent that not everything that God makes is “useful” in a utilitarian sense, and therefore the artist is free to do the same. A sunset has no use or value per se, but its loveliness enhances human life greatly. There are many plants and animals that are intricately and beautifully designed yet their absence on this planet would only be a shame because of the loss of their beauty and not their usefulness. Christian artists and patrons would do well to take note of this aspect of God’s creation and know that art can be valid even if it does not possess utilitarian value.

Some scholars have noted that Christians in particular are in the habit of overlooking the physical excellence of a piece of art and assessing its value by the practicality of the work. Does the artwork convey an edifying Christian idea? Does it teach or help to clarify some deep Christian truth? Can it be *used* for something that benefits Christianity? Those of this mindset see art as something that has to be justified. There must be a good, practical

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<sup>8</sup> O’Connor, 158.

reason for a particular work of art to be considered valid. However, Rookmaaker says that art does not have to be justified, and that “it would be false to say that art is only good if it promotes Christianity. Art and singing can be used to promote worship. . . and art may be used in evangelism. But art does not need to be justified because it can be used in this way.”<sup>9</sup> Art can just be something beautiful to look at or something that evokes an emotion. To be legitimate, art does not necessarily have to carry a Christian message.

Wolterstorff compares the tendency to assess art in light of its usefulness to the ancient heretical view of Jesus Christ called docetism, which was the belief that Jesus did not live on earth in a flesh and blood body, but just seemed like he had a physical bodily form. This false doctrine was rooted in the belief that the physical world is bad and the spiritual world is good, and this is in essence the same premise that many Christians operate by in their experience with art. Wolterstorff explains, “The practice, in one’s contemplation of a work of art, of looking only for the message and of fixing only on the world projected, of taking no delight in the artifact which bears the message and presents the world, might be called a ‘docetic’ approach to the arts. . . .”<sup>10</sup> Along these same lines O’Connor brings up a great point when she reminds her readers that excellent art points its audience to God just by the fact that it is excellent. She argues, “[St. Thomas Aquinas] says that a work of art is a good in itself, and this is a truth that the modern world has largely forgotten. . . . Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself

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<sup>9</sup> Rookmaaker, 230.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 83.

glorifies God because it reflects God.”<sup>11</sup> Christian artists and patrons could both benefit from being educated on this matter.

Not everything that God creates finds its worth in its usefulness, and because art originates in the image of God in man, creative acts can profit society because they are delightful and add joy to human life. Looking to how God creates gives clarity to the job of the artist and also how the Church is to appreciate art. The image/art connection as it relates to God’s creation of the lovely and beautiful allows the artist to work to his full potential, and helps the Church to understand and value exceptional works of art. In short, “art has meaning as art because God thought it was good to give art and beauty to humanity.”<sup>12</sup> Christians are capable of have a greater impact on the culture as creators and as consumers of art when they understand this vital aspect of creative activity.

### A Balanced Aesthetic

In the 1940’s Dorothy Sayers observed the plight of the Christian artist in the Church. In her opinion creative types were left to wonder what their role was in the bigger picture of Christianity and how their calling could be reconciled with their faith. She asserted, “The disastrous and widening cleavage between the Church and the Arts on the one hand and between the State and the Arts on the other leaves the common man with the impression that the artist is something of little account, either in this world or the next; and this has had a bad effect on the artist, since it has left him in a curious spiritual isolation.”<sup>13</sup> Since Sayers’ day, things have improved for artists of faith. There are now Christian organizations like

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<sup>11</sup> O’Connor, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Rookmaaker, 230.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: The Religious Book Club, 1942), 173.

International Arts Movement, The Christian Performing Artists' Fellowship, and Artists in Christian Testimony which provide community and support for artists in their faith and calling. But as a whole the Church still seems to struggle with exactly how to encourage and train up the type of artists who can make an impact on contemporary culture.

Seerveld notes that Christians are very active in other areas of culture, but seem to neglect the importance of the arts. He sees Christian literature and art, not as a luxury that the Church can opt to participate in or not, but a necessary part of the body of Christ. He states, "With all our getting of Christian culture—politics, economics, the sciences—with all our getting we must get the arts too lest when our Lord return for an accounting we shall have to dig up our one artistic and literary talent out of its burial ground and face His wrath."<sup>14</sup> It is true that that the Church has trouble with what to do with this curious gift of art, and it is also the responsibility of the Church to find a way to use this gift to bring glory to God.

Community, support, and encouragement of believing artists are only part of the solution for Christians to have an impactful presence in the world of art. For true change to occur, believers need to have a solid biblical understanding about their own creativity and how art relates to the world around them. Insight into the theology of the *imago Dei* and the cultural mandate places solid tools in the hands of the Church so that she can support artists in their calling and educate the flock in matters regarding art and culture. A balanced aesthetic requires both of these doctrines working together.

Emphasizing art as originating in the image of God while neglecting the cultural mandate leaves out the work and vocational aspect of creating art, and can also foster the

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<sup>14</sup> Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Toronto: Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1968), 30.



belief that art has no value in society. The cultural mandate is important for the Church to consider so that she may recognize that art is a worthwhile and necessary contribution to human culture, and also so she can grant both the artist and patron the freedom to create and enjoy art as a very important act of obedience to this command. Without art, man's response to the mandate would be anemic and incomplete.

On the other hand, affirming art's role in the cultural mandate and denying its relationship with the image of God in man leaves the artist with a deficient picture of who he is and how he is to manage his creative abilities. The cultural mandate teaches of the need for art and worthiness of art as a career, but the *imago Dei* demonstrates the *how* of art. Viewing God as the supreme Artist and his creation as the ultimate work of art, gives man information about what it takes to create great art and how he is to discern between the excellent and the poor. As man creates in the image of God art is free to be beautiful, orderly, and not necessarily useful. Man can strive to create something new, he can elevate the mundane and the grand in his work, and he can add something of value to the world. This is all a part of creating in the image of God.

The fact that both the image of God and cultural mandate are necessary components of a balanced theology of art is true, but each does not stand apart from the other. In reality, the image and mandate are intertwined. The command to fill and subdue the earth is a command to mirror God's work in creating the universe. Beauty makes the earth a more livable place because God created the world to be beautiful. The artist manipulates the material world in the image of a God who formed man and the animals out of the earth. There are many parallels between God's acts of creation and man's artistic endeavors in response to the cultural mandate because the mandate requires man to create culture in image

of his Maker. The artist who is true to his calling is acting according to both the image and mandate. One cannot exist without the other.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

To recognize that art originates in both the image of God in man and the cultural mandate not only presents an accurate biblical aesthetic, but it also helps to clarify theology as it pertains to art where significant conflict exists. To reconcile the two, it is first necessary to see that Scripture teaches that God's image is reflected in the whole person of man, not as an exact replica, but having a likeness that includes similar or parallel traits of God that are a part of who man is and what he does. The image is not restricted to the spiritual, intellectual, or emotional parts of man, but is comprehensive and encompasses the whole person.

Once the reality of the *imago Dei* is established, then a picture of God the artist can emerge from the Genesis creation narrative. The Hebrew verb *yasar* describes God's act of creating man and the animals in Genesis 2:7,9,19 the same way that a human potter forms and molds his pottery, and the word *melaka* used to depict the finished creation of God in Genesis 2:2,3, is the same word used to describe the work of a craftsman or artisan. Each word sheds light on the artistic side of God and offers a correlation to the activities of man. It is through these anthropomorphic terms that connections can be made between God the artist and the artist man.

However, understanding art as finding its origin in the image of God is only half of the equation. For the argument that art involves both the image of God and cultural mandate to hold, there must be an association between the two. The first mention of man being

created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28) are in close proximity as they are separated by only one verse, but there is more than just physical closeness that joins these important biblical ideas. When the meanings of these verses are explored, it is found that there is also significant overlap between the two. The intersection between the image and mandate is demonstrated in the dominion aspect of the image as it is interpreted according to its Ancient Near East context, and the dominion that is given to all humans in the cultural mandate. There are also strong parallels between man's charge to fill and subdue the earth and God's filling and subduing the earth when he created the universe at the beginning of time. Then there is the element of work that is inherent in the cultural mandate and is also seen in God's act of creating the universe. It is for these reasons that it can be said that Scripture presents God's image as being strongly reflected in the cultural mandate, and that the two are interrelated.

The *imago Dei* and cultural mandate are intertwined with art as well. This is evident by the fact that man desires to create art not just because this activity mirrors that of God, but also because it is a direct response to the cultural mandate. Art is reflected in both equally. As God brought forth the earth from chaos, man too images his Maker by bringing order to physical matter so that he can create splendid works of art. But this ordering of chaos does not belong to the *imago Dei* alone, since it also occurs in obedience to God's Genesis 1:28 command to subdue the earth. Furthermore, including beauty in art because of its necessary aesthetic value not only mirrors God in his creation of the world, but also makes the earth a habitable place as the cultural mandate calls man to do. All in all, examples of how the image, mandate, and art are linked are not few.

Ultimately, affirming art's relationship to the image of God in man and the cultural mandate results in a theology of freedom. When this is viewed from the proper perspective the Christian is free to see art as a part of who man is *and* as an appropriate response to God's charge to fill and subdue the earth. The Christian is free to enjoy art and appreciate it for its contribution for the betterment of society. The Christian is free to create and value art not because it is useful and has a utilitarian purpose, but simply for its beauty. The Christian is free to pursue art as a valid career and the Church is free to affirm art as a dignified and worthwhile calling. And, finally, the Christian is free to enjoy the merits of pagan art as they sift the wheat from chaff of secular culture. To sum it up, being theologically minded about art in regards to the *imago Dei* and cultural mandate offers freedom and presents the Church with a clear path toward biblical engagement with culture through creative activity.

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