

*Moments & Metaphors in the Life of Christ
Lessons in Art-making and Worship-giving*

A Paper Presented by

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I begin, as I think we all do, by saying thank you to those who have planned and organized this conference. It is a privilege to gather together, hear from the keynote speakers and share ideas with fellow Christians artists and teachers about the construction and consumption of art in this age and time. In these brief moments, I hope to quickly examine how the creative nature and activity of God--His "outpouring" of Himself--is the very basis for our own existence, and how we, made in His image find ourselves "outpouring" ourselves--either to Him, or to other gods (including ourselves). Furthermore, in our "outpouring" of self we all--carpenters, programmers, teachers and file clerks--act. And in our action--our outpouring--we worship.

One of the ways we act is in the making and experiencing of art. Art making is an act of outpouring. This act may be extremely personal and private; our outpouring acts of art-making may focus upon explicitly religious, sacred themes or our work may have a general/universal theme (or in deference to the abstractionists, the act may seemingly have no form or purpose at all). To shed light and hopefully insight on the cascading nature of God's outpouring, to our outpouring, to our acts of worship, and finally to our acts of art making, I intend to direct our attention to the life of Christ. I hope to identify a few select moments and metaphors from events in His earthly life that may serve as guideposts for those of us who direct our outpouring to Him in creative ways.

First, allow me to provide a brief context, a list of presuppositions and personal background that shapes my thoughts and comments. I have assumed that I am writing and speaking primarily to a group of Christians who are engaged in or reflect upon the creation and

consumption of art--often art for which we would assign religious or sacred purposes and/or subject matter. Therefore, I direct the majority of my comments to the proper motives and practices surrounding such making and reflecting. Second, I make my comments from a theological perspective shaped by my Wesleyan heritage. I highlight this fact because for Wesley, God was and is at work in grace-filled ways, actively seeking us, yet requiring a willful response. His grace is present in all facets of life and may be encountered "in creation [His prevenient grace], in Gods' forgiveness [His justifying grace], and in our transformation or re-creation [His sanctifying grace]."ⁱ I highlight this distinction here, because I propose that God may utilize our craft to shed His grace in ways both subtle and obvious.

Additionally, I come to this topic as a musician; by training, a choral conductor; by practice, a professor and church musician. Consequently, words, and the Word, has always been a part of my art making. There are those who would separate art's style and craft from its theme and subject matter, for me, melody and lyric have been inseparable. Despite those who would attempt to separate craft from subject matter, it is never as easy as it might seem to separate aesthetic, from non-aesthetic considerations. I operate from the presupposition that the arts in general and music in particular have an extra-musical function. Iris Murdoch, in her insightful work, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, observes, "much of what Plato says about art is concerned with the results of its consumption expressed in terms which are obviously moral or political, rather than aesthetic."ⁱⁱ

Attach this point to the observation of Jacque Barzun and others that "art has power", and we realize we are dealing with an important and potent topic. Barzun notes in *The Use and Abuse of Art*, "if art has importance, it is because it can shape the minds and emotions of men. It can enlarge or trivialize the imagination. If it can do so much, it affects the social fabric as well as individual lives for good and evil."ⁱⁱⁱ

As a Christian I hurry to point out that one must never confuse the power of art with the power of God. As Harold Best reminds us "there is a difference in being moved by music and being morally directed or changed by it."^{iv} For spiritual purposes God is at work, not the artist, we who make art must not seek to manipulate and preach for effect, "only God can mastermind and synthesize this remarkable union of temporal work and spiritual offering, and it is His responsibility alone to unite the work--its processes, techniques, content, vocational and spiritual

meanings--with his sworn purposes of leading us into deeper holiness and allowing our works to comprise a life of witness."^v

With this in mind, we must hear Barzun's caution. If we are saying that *art is power*, "it influences the mind, the nerves, the feelings, the soul. It carries messages of hope, hostility, derision and moral rebuke. It can fight material and spiritual evils, and transmit the ideals of a community now living, long past, or soon to be born. In a word, art is deemed universally important because it helps men to live and to remember. . . . But in saying these are truths we are saying also that *art is dangerous*."^{vi} [italics mine]

This is an important observation for the Christian, for our engagement in the arts, both personally and culturally, is ripe with temptations for artistic idolatry. The power of art may tempt us to think we are doing the work of God, rather than focusing our intent on our worship-filled acts of creation. We must continually acknowledge that we traffic in powerful mediums where an object may be mistaken for something greater than what it is, and its limited "power" confused with the activity and power of God.

One last delimitation, I make little attempt to address issues of quality in this presentation, something that is too often a temptation when looking at tradition and innovation as two distinct poles. Instead, my remarks emerge from the worship-centered origin of art-making—matters of sincerity, motive and intent. I prefer that we remember the gift of the widow's mite, and realize it is God alone who knows our intent and weighs our motives, far separate from the skill of our craft or our earthly cleverness.

Outpouring—God's Nature I am indebted to Harold Best, in his book *Unceasing Worship*, for exploring the term "outpourer" to describe God. He writes, "God is the eternal Outpourer. Within and toward His triune Self, He outpours Himself in endless love and unapproachable holiness."^{vii} In His creative acts, He outpours Himself. In the Incarnation of Christ, Jesus becomes the Word outpoured, dwelling among us. And now, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been, and continues to be, outpoured.

I look for lessons and insights in to the nature of God, His creative activity, with an eye toward application for our own being and doing. Specifically, I wish to highlight several episodes in the life of Jesus that shed light upon His outpouring, the outpouring of those around Him and from those moments and metaphors extrapolate several conclusions for and about artist, audience and object. I find a certain irony in the fact that we look to the Creator for lessons on

worship and creation by watching Christ embody the very earthly frame He spoke into being. Perhaps the first lesson is, God shows up among us outpouring Himself in strange, unpredictable, truly heavenly ways to announce and establish a Kingdom of His design and for His intent. How else can one explain kingly birth in a manger or celestial choirs, surely a heavenly extravagance, announcing this birth to an earthly caste of people not worthy of royal attention?

Outpouring—Our Nature This posture of outpouring, this essence of God, is embedded in the *imago dei* that resides in us. By design we live our lives as outpourers too, engaged in continuous worship--Best writes, "the concept of continuous outpouring is the rubric of our worship. As God eternally outpours within His triune self, and as we are created in His image, it follows that we too are continuous outpourers."^{viii} This is the nature of humankind, regardless of whom or what we choose to worship, Best's definitional statement of human worship reads, "worship is the continuous outpouring of all that I am, all that I do and all that I can ever become in light of a chosen or choosing god."^{ix} This concept applies to all men and women, redeemed or fallen. We all outpour by the virtue of the *imago dei* which comprises our essence. And in our outpouring, we are and act and become.

Outpouring—Personal Acts of Worship This point may best be underscored by looking at a scene in the life of Jesus. Smell the aroma, listen to the scoffing bystanders, and recall the look of utter devotion in the face of the woman who anointed the head of Jesus with costly perfume.^x Do not the actions of this woman serve as an example of personal outpouring to God? In her outpouring—she took action.

Outpouring—Personal Act of Art-Making Why go to these links to make this point? Because *art making is an act of outpouring*. The activity of art-making may be, should be, conducted as an act of worship. We do well to mirror the motive of this woman, whose act of outpouring was her natural service of worship. This act parallels the activity of the Christian who is an artist, who through heartfelt outpouring creates costly works, acts publicly in ways that others may scoff at—so vocal in their disapproval that they miss the sweet aroma of genuine acts of worship that speak both to God and to those looking on.

For all who outpour and act, our work may create a sweet aroma, an extravagant, costly act, impractical to the world but emblematic of our great love for God, our response to God's great love for us. The one forgiven of much, acts symbolically to give witness to the forgiver.

Not only do the acts of outpouring have extremely personal, worship-centered application, our artistic acts of creation may also connect with the community of faith or the general public. Our artistic outpouring may be used by God to bring others to Jesus.

Outpouring—Personal Act of Art-Making Received by the Community of Faith Let us look at works in which the subject matter is explicitly or implicitly sacred in nature and their place in the scheme of outpouring. Another episode in Christ's life. A crippled man, a circle of friends, rumors of a healer, a crowded room, no access, yet the friend of the crippled man work diligently, rope is found, roof tiles are removed, people stare up as the dust falls, a friend is lowered down upon his stretcher to the feet of Jesus.

Like this band of friends, we may be used by God to provide access to Him through our work, like this company of stretcher bearers, our work may carry the needy to the feet of Jesus. Artists should take hope and counsel from this story, access to God requires diligence, persistence and tenacity to look for and portray solutions outside the easy or obvious. Artists who are Christian must never be ashamed of the fact that their art may be used by God and the church for utilitarian purposes. Christian artists, like these stretcher bearers, serve Him and His body. Hear the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Works and Worlds of Art*, he writes, "it is in the context of [Christian] community that the Christian artist is ... called to do his work. He is called as artist to share in this people's task of being witness to God's work of renewal, its task of serving all men everywhere by working to bring about righteousness and peace, its task of giving evidence in its own existence of what the renewed life is like, its task of inviting all men everywhere to join the ranks of the people of renewal. Sharing in the task of this community is now the particular form which the artist's responsibility to God takes."^{xi} This is noble—stretcher bearing work.

Christ's Outpouring—Parables of the Kingdom I have referenced both the woman who anointed Christ with costly perfume and the friends who lowered their comrade to Christ, these are but a glimmer of the art-as-outpouring-act insights that awaits us if we look to Jesus' own use of art to tell His Father's story. Consider with me for a moment the fact that Jesus uses an art form created by His creatures to communicate with His children. The parable--this simple, accessible, tightly coiled art form--so well-crafted by Christ smuggles ideas of *His Kingdom* into the minds of people living in *this kingdom*. Jesus understood the power of story; Calvin Miller writes, "why do the narratives of Scripture so enthrall us? I believe it is because the biblical

stories are so germane to the life narratives we ourselves are writing. 'Once upon a time...Jesus' is a story that presupposes 'Once upon a time...ourselves'."^{xii}

Jesus understood the seed-like affect of art. Christ knew that in the structure and form of the parable He could craft a "virtual world", and in those worlds, the human spirit could investigate the incarnational ideas embedded in His parables. Jesus used the parables to craft a mosaic of the Kingdom of God. Recall with me the accumulated affect of these stories in bringing in to focus for the hearer a world unknown to Pharisee and commoner alike. The parables of The Mustard Seed, The Tares, The Leaven, The Pearl of Great Price, The Laborers in the Vineyard, The Ten Virgins, The Parable of the Master, His Servants and the Talents, The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Prodigal Son. In the artistically crafted virtual world of these parables Jesus communicated the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.

He knew full well that due to the paradoxical, mysterious nature of His kingdom, He could more easily connect and communicate via storied art form, than the most complex systematic theology of His day. Certainly, not everyone understood the essence of the parables' virtual world, in fact it is in the telling of The Parable of the Sower that His disciples questioned Him as to why He spoke in parables and what that specific parable meant (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8).

We Christian artists who engage in the making of art for Christ's community would do well to remember that we too have the opportunity to depict the kingdom of God in ways both explicit and implicit, paradoxical and profound. This is of particular import as we approach the role that we have in creating and using the arts for corporate worship. In our living and in our corporate worship we are, as Brueggemann states, "embracing an alternative future". Through story and song and paint and dance we proclaim and depict the New Covenant. Worship is a constitutive act, worship creates a world.^{xiii} Therefore we must be diligent to answer Marva Dawn's question "what kind of persons are the elements of our worship forming?"^{xiv} As we create our individual works and as we are engaged in planning and crafting our corporate worship we are engaged in the incarnational act of *creatio continuo*, being used by God to fulfill the *imago dei* within us, outpouring ourselves in such a way with acts that capture the heart of His Kingdom. This is the sacred work of art.

Outpouring—Personal Act of Art-Making Received by the Public But what of those who do not seek to explicitly represent their faith in sacred and religious subject matter, those artists

who paint and write and compose and sculpt in the manner that Tolstoy calls "universal art"? Certainly, the artist making non-religious art should approach her art-making with the same stewardship and intentional zeal as the "religious artist", for in her art-making she too is pouring ointment. Does the outpouring of their work have a role? Can we extrapolate implications for this art making from Christ's life? I offer three scenes. First, from Matthew 12, Christ and His disciples threshing grain in their hands are caught "breaking" the Sabbath. When questioned by the Pharisees about complying with the Law and ordinances of the temple Jesus replies, "one greater than the temple is here." Second, Zaccheus, curious, outcast, looking from a distance to see what all the commotion is about, never intending to hear the words "I'm coming to your house today". Third, the veil of the temple at the time of Christ's crucifixion, as He breathes His last, the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom, exposing the Holy of Holies, access to God is now symbolically and radically changed.

There is heavenly irony when the Word Incarnate is perceived to be breaking the Sabbath He established. God is at work outside the conventions of the Old Covenant—something greater than the temple is here—the Messiah has arrived. This New Covenant, this Kingdom, this Messiah, has and will continue to touch and proclaim and invade our lives in unexpected ways. I submit that artists who are Christian who traffic in universal art--both representational and abstract--may find that their works, their outpouring, may be used by God in ways beyond the church's expectations for religious art. This general artistic outpouring can and will be used by God as a "means of grace". God works outside the temple, outside the customs of His sometimes stultified people. He is not unaware of those who seek Him, before they are conscious of their search for Him, He is offering drippings of His prevenient grace. Consider Zaccheus, looking at Christ from a distance, half from curiosity, half from an unidentified hunger. God may use a work of art to become His witness, His "means of grace". When the modern-day art consumer catches a glimpse of Kingdom behavior, just like Zaccheus, must respond. Will he leave the quest for the 'interesting', 'shocking' and 'sensational, and change the nature of his outpouring, his response.

Lastly, have you ever wondered what happened to the veil of the temple torn in two on Good Friday? No doubt there was a fever of activity to repair and restore it as quickly as possible—"Hurry, cover up the opening before someone gets hurt". We would do well to remember that for all intents and purposes the veil is still torn. We now find ourselves in a New

Covenant world where we may be used by God to clear away the cloth; remove barriers and trappings, touch a those hungry for meaning, so often frightened of the temple and all that was once hidden behind the veil.

The artistic community in general, who depict scenes of life—the marketplace, nature’s wonders, both common place and spectacular—may be used by God to shine light on all aspects of this earthly existence. The good and the bad, the holy and the profane, evil men and their acts. Artistically, art works can identify a "brood of vipers" or depict the embrace of sinners and tax gatherers; these works have a place in the New Covenant work going on outside the temple. As Madeline L'Engle notes, "some of the angry etchings of Hogarth, depicting the sordidness and squalor and immorality caused by the social inequities of his day are profoundly incarnational, for they are filled with anguished pity for the thief and the prostitute and the scum of the earth, and this compassion is Christ's."^{xv}

The very veil of the temple has been torn, signifying the end of the old covenant and the unexpected, unorthodox, often unplanned presence of the new kingdom is manifesting itself in places and ways previously unimagined. May He use us to pull back the veil, to reveal qualities of the Kingdom, constructed in scenes and sonnets, lyrics and melody, pigment and clay.

God makes all things sacred—works of art included—sacraments uses this-worldly and material means to communicate transcendent reality. These are the finite things "utilized by God to communicate grace and register that grace in our consciousness."^{xvi} Furthermore, "the works of art God chooses as means of grace may be created by believer and non-believer alike. They may be simple or complex, crafted well or constructed poorly. The important thing is God is present, perhaps conveying grace to the artist in the process of creating, perhaps touching a lone listener, or perhaps reaching an entire community through a common act. Whatever created object is used, at that time, for His purpose, it becomes sacramental, a means of grace."^{xvii}

Through the lives and activity of artists, believer and non-believer, God may choose to speak, shed grace, compel audience or arts. May we continue to outpour ourselves to Him, pouring alabaster, finding rope to lower a friend, directing our attention to someone hiding up in a tree, moving aside the cloth and clutter of an old system. May God enable us to see and be in new as we diligently seek Him. May we capture and create what we see in ways pleasing to Him. May our artistic outpourings be laid as offerings of worship to give Him glory, edify His body, and when He chooses, to become "means of grace" in the hands of the one who made us.

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- ⁱ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 26.
- ⁱⁱ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 12.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 17.
- ^{iv} Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 56.
- ^v Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 117.
- ^{vi} Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 21.
- ^{vii} Best, *Unceasing*, p. 211.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ^x I am indebted to Harold Best for expanding the art-making application of this scene in the life of Christ, see, Best, *Unceasing Worship*, pp. 215-222.
- ^{xi} Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 198.
- ^{xii} Calvin Miller, *Spirit, Word, and Story: A Philosophy of Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1989), p. 144.
- ^{xiii} Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 5.
- ^{xiv} Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 305.
- ^{xv} Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1980), p. 122.
- ^{xvi} Runyon, p. 159.
- ^{xvii} David Alexander "Toward a Wesleyan Aesthetic" (Point Loma, San Diego: Centennial Conference, 2002), p. 9.