

A Thousand Tongues are not Enough

1. Introduction.

**It used to be that the church at large divided the artistic world into two camps: sacred/secular; approved/disapproved for use in corporate worship.

There was a further division: moral/immoral, by whatever set of names. This came through a combination of two issues: Associational values, intrinsic values.

Further divisions based on qualitative approval: Only the best for the worship of God. Mediocrity was a double insult: To God and to the artists themselves. In a way, this was parallel to the change from art to ART.

Parenthetically, the traditional/contemporary division is not new; in a way today's issues are increasingly moot. The so-called contemporary has settled into its own conservative habits with its built in protection devices, and the traditional is still alive and evolving—much more than folks like us would like to think.

** But most importantly, these inter-related matrices have been largely dissolved.

Just about anything goes in just about all venues. The following broad causes come to mind; they appear in no order and without any attempt at synthesis:

1. The 60s and the radical popularizing of Western culture.
2. Vatican II, also in the 60s (one of the few thought-through) convocations.
3. The Jesus movement of the 70s.
4. A significantly de-institutionalized church.
5. A gradual breakdown of social proprieties: modesty, dress, language, protocols, the normalization of free sexuality, in short, moral relativism.
6. Under the flag of redefined Christian freedom, issues of temperance, abstinence and discernment have become confused, coupled to the rather sudden, largely unexplained revision of practical worldliness in conservative evangelicalism: Sabbath practices, musical types, dance and dancing, cinema, alcohol. Contemporary Christians jubilate over all they can do in contrast to the earlier generation (until about the 60s) known by what they couldn't do.
7. The birth of contextualization in world missions—the model of the indigenous church, joining a culture for what it is— the rise of missiological ethnomusicology with its host of self-enclosed legitimacies.
8. Westernized globalism in general.

9. All of this partially or fully protected under the rubric of postmodernism and the radical questioning of all absolutes.

10. Tucked safely away in the whole is the churchly world of artistic free-for-all, particularly in music, most, if not all of which is borrowed from popular culture and is used to offer easy access to the increasing number of culture-specific churches. This free-ranging borrowing has inevitabilities:

Borrowing most always means staying behind, which is its own kind of conservatism. And the more we borrow the more we relinquish the possibility of being Christian *and* original. For good or for bad, this means the Church cannot lay claim to be artistically in the lead, but simply culturally parallel. Is this good or is it bad? It's bad if we worship originality so much that we can no longer communicate on common ground; it's bad if we so equate our borrowed art with godliness that we marry church and culture at the wrong level. But it's good if we adopt a completely new model for the world-wide role of the church in artistic action. I'd like to suggest a two-part model that begins to lay out a theology for artistic activity in its world-wide practices and second, in its implications for the Church universal. The first is theo-centric; the second is ecclesio-centric.

This will be tightly knit, but I don't hire out to serve up dream-whip

II. God's Creation and Human Creativity.

A series of inter-linked assertions, each of which can be separately worked through.

*The Triune God, I AM THAT I AM THAT I ACT THAT I ACT, is uniquely the Uncreated One: nothing prior to, parallel with, or exteriorly supportive of this all-in-all mystery.

* God's attributes are eternally inherent, co-equal, inseparable yet individual, and harmoniously at work at once and forever.

*Among these is God's creatorhood. God simply *is that He is that He is*. He is triunely uncreated.

* Father, Son, and Spirit chose, as One, to create the heavens and the earth, *ex nihilo*: from *no-thing* into a staggering array of inter-connected, inter-dependent, individually variegated *some-things* for which there were no prior models.

*Everything created completely satisfies the Creator; He calls it good. Each particle, each thing has intrinsic worth, is infinitely loved, and is eminently useful, both inter-dependently and individually. Furthermore, the entire creation both purposely "works/functions" and has worth. This principle, found deep within God's counsel, necessarily guides all of our work.

* This vast truth can be broken down in two parts. The first articulates a unique relational hierarchy of which God alone is Author and Finisher: *Creator, creation, creature, creativity*. The second part forces a clear, inviolable distinction between the absolute and the relative in both God's person and work, therefore ours.

1. As to the relational hierarchy: creator, creation, creature, creativity

a. The Creator is *not* His creation (otherwise we would be pantheists) and the creation is not the Creator (otherwise we would be idolaters). Everything God made is contingent, inter- and intra-dependent, material, and temporal.

b. We call this creation/cosmos, “creature” in the most general sense, but, more particularly sense there is creaturely *life* with which the creation swarms.

c. Within the world of living creatures, a magnificent and singular uniqueness stands out: *human personhood*. It participates fully in the bounty and materials of creation, yet it is given sovereignty over it and stewardly responsibility for it. Created in the image of the Creator (*imago Dei*), humankind is finitely but variably capable of uniting with and imaging forth the person, ways, and works of the Triune God. While God alone is Creat-or, humankind is creat-ive, finitely but extensively endowed with the ability to think up and make (imagine and craft) some-thing(s) from some-thing(s) else. “Artistic” creativity is but one aspect of this enormous gift.

d. The doctrine of *imago Dei* is irreversibly theocentric. This doctrine stands above and informs all anthropological and cultural categories and worldviews and not the reverse: (diversity, poly-/multi-cultural[ism]), even ethnic[ity]). Otherwise, we would end up with anthropocentric or socio-centric pseudo-theology. In other words, no anthropological work is complete unless it issues out of a theocentric foundation. The following shows how this principle can be worked out.

e. *Imago Dei* guarantees the glory of *anybodyness*. Every human being, *imago Dei*, is simply and fully *anybody*.

f. *Anybodyness* is where the primal glory of *imago Dei* universally shows itself. No one is more “image of God” than another. *Anybodyness* guarantees universal equality, personal worth, and steady dignity. Hence, prejudice, superiority/inferiority, domination, castes, and classes are more than a direct affront to the moral laws of God. They attack His very nature.

g. Furthermore, within the richness of *anybodyness*, multiplied capabilities reside. They are inter-related and variegated. Among these (and before we use words like “art” “artistic giftedness”, etc.) we must say this: to one degree or another *anybody* sings, *anybody* dances, *anybody* draws, *anybody* carves, *anybody* sculpts. The sheer importance of this cannot be over-stated.

h. But multiplied *anybodyness* by itself would simply mean a world of clones, duplicated images of God: anybody is the exact equal of anybody. Therefore, in God’s creational wisdom, each *anybody* is immediately *somebody*, uniquely individuated, with a distinct personal “fingerprint.” Furthermore, within each *somebody*, certain capabilities show more than others: this *somebody* has more skill(s) in certain areas than another and no two *somebodies* are gifted exactly alike. This principle extends into all individual particulars of work and leisure and guarantee a world in which the various needs of humanity are served by those who are variously gifted.

i. Culture, simply stated, is a dynamic interplay of what a community of *somebodies* thinks up, makes, and believes in. And here again, theocentrism informs cultural anthropology.

2. Regarding the clear distinction between the world of absolutes and the world of relativities, the following are crucial.

a. As to the absolute, God alone is such, as are all His attributes. All in all and once for all, the triune God is Truth. God is Word. God's Word speaks Truth. Truth is the full articulation of the righteousness of God and it is final. There are no absolutes apart from God. The Gospel of the Son of God is not relative to other gospels. The church is not relative other religious bodies.

b. As to the relative, it is not a sign of evil, but properly understood, it is a gift from God, therefore fully valid and fully to be celebrated. Relativity pertains to God's physical handiwork in which there is no fixity, no center, no supremacy. All is freely relative to all else. It is in this sense that the creation cannot speak Truth; it is morally neutral. It cannot redeem, nor articulate any path to redemption. While the creation cannot *declare* Truth, it declares the glory of God and points to the Truth, while continuing in fully ordained relativity.

c. Humankind, being both creature and image of God, participates in, and must distinguish between, absolute and relative. (That it fails to do so is not God's fault but ours in our fallenness.)

d. As with Creator, so with human creature. If God's material handiwork is freely relative to itself, so is humankind's. There is no final center, no final absolute in the arts. An Arabian dance or a South Bronx rap is no more, no less "final" than a Taj Mahal or Bach's St. Matthew Passion, nor is there an aesthetic finality in any one cultural sector. While Truth is absolutely final, beauty is continuously debatable. There is no absolute aesthetic to which the world of artistic action submits. Someone in Philadelphia or the Solomon Islands may prefer one drawing over another, and this is as it should be, but this is interiorly relative, even if it is relatively fixed. If we were to use the word "aesthetics" in a global, un-labeled way, we can say that *anybody* is endowed with an innate sense by which qualitative choices are made. Hence it is shortsighted, even prejudicial, to say that while culture *x* is capable of action *y* and culture *q* is not, *y* holds an edge over *q*. It is eminently desirable, however, to celebrate what *each* individual or culture is capable of in making what it makes and valuing what it values. This invites both positive comparison and cross-cultural exchange, even synthesis. To state this more fully: No one, no language, no style, etc., is capable of everything, every meaning, every insight, every nuance. Hence no human action should be discouraged from inter- and intra-personal/cultural exchanging, borrowing.

A thousand tongues is not enough.

e. The collective term "the arts" is misleading. It is unfortunate that certain inherently contrasting forms and distinctive languages of human expression have been lumped together into "the arts" for at least two reasons that, in the broadest sense, allow us to distinguish between artistic eisegesis and exegesis.

1. In the purely linguistic sense (as contrasted with language-istic sense), all art forms, large and small, are in some way syntactical. (This from Chomsky: "People are born bringing the sentence with them; we just give them words.") This sentence- sense is creationally primal, irrespective of any specific language used in any given discursive medium. Thus, painting or music or dance cannot "mean" each

other. This is probably the most unfortunate and misleading issue in lumping the arts together, as if they guaranteed discursive synonymy.

2. However the arts still “mean”, first by interiorly meaning themselves. Yet, there are two extremes within which the arts have meaning outside themselves. On one extreme, object-specific art and most particularly, art containing words, including music with words, cannot help but strongly allude to, or directly transmit Truth and Truth-related meaning, and it may or may not reflect the actual worldview of the author/composer. (As with God’s material handiwork, the art points to [“declares”] the artist, but the artist must speak for her/himself.) On the other extreme, music *qua* music is incapable of any Truth message whatsoever, even though the composer might want it to.

Texted art directly *informs* a context; hence preaching is the unique, informing Truth-sayer). Non-texted art, and most especially music, does not morally inform a context as much as *absorb* it, *gather* it up into some sort of experiential reality. It easily *associates with* a context, and can come to mean that context; hence becoming “sacred” or “secular”, *which easily changes if a context changes*. There may be experiential and emotional power in the arts, but not morally causal power. A fully Christian perspective is both trans- or meta-cultural by insisting that there is no such thing as Christian art or pagan art or morally causal art even though there are Christian or pagan contexts in which it can be made.

Why? By creational principle, anything made, from a painting to a political system is both relative to and less than its makers, who by virtue of *imago Dei* should be, *a priori*, sovereign over it. *In one of many respects, therefore, human handiwork, the (textless) arts among them, can never be used to “cause” behavior, be blamed or credited for it, to induce worship (idolatry) or bring God nearer (creaturely work over Creator) This is true because it is first of all true with God’s creation.*

*Finally, there are two, all-important “Howevers” that take in the wonders of fall and redemption.

1. All of the opening concepts in all of their *primal* glory, have only suggested a reality that both surrounds and infuses everything in the creation. The whole of our primal glory was horribly distorted—glory gone, death in pursuit—when Adam and Eve exchanged gods and fell, turning from Creator to creature and invited the pantheon. Their in-created worship continued but became inverted. Absolute and relative were enclosed and confused in the darkness of fallenness. The things in God’s and our handiwork which were (and are still) in themselves neutral—no god— became charged with false power and imbued with god-ness. The *imago Dei*, while not erased, was obscenely set against itself; self took the throne and enslaved itself, and in a confusion of artifact, ego, power, and darkness, our every path since then has been marked by delusion and error.

2. However, only in and through God-in-Christ-through-the-Spirit can the inversion be righted, our sojourn cleansed, our pantheon slowly dissolved, our priorities set aright and our worship redeemed and the primal glories invited back. Creator and creature assume their rightful places. The absolute and the relative are re-established and separated. There is no god but God; there is no such thing as an idol. Content and context are gradually separated and understood. The arts, in all of their god-given freedom and relativity, *all of them in their pan-creative glory, are no longer proxies for God*

and His presence; nor are they the lords of the liturgy They are made and chosen, borrowed and used only in the freedom that local conscience and spiritual discernment permit. They are, in all walks of life, purely and simply offerings—variegated acts of continuing worship, made fit for a holy God by faith, hope, and love alone.. Quality, however perceived, is no longer worshiped for its own sake, but sought as an aspect of everybodyness-toward-Christ, joining with the glossolalic “ALLELUIAS” of all redeemed human action.

III. The Church as the Strategic Center for World-wide Artistic Action.

This section will be shorter (thank you, clock)), but no less crucial. It's a model that I've only just begun working on, etc.

The church is a history-wide and world-wide body of the redeemed. It is also each person who is, remarkably, the church. (Bruner and the first church: those named at the cross.)

As the world-wide church it becomes the single most important entity in civilization: Jesus, Christ, the Son of God is risen from the dead, and the new creation, the last days are begun, pure and simple. Every knee shall bow to its Lord, period.

This is a subject which has yet to be fully treated and never really will until faith becomes sight and we will know even as we are known.

But we're talking about the arts, so a certain limit is going to be placed.

The usual conjunction of the church and the arts lies in the use of the arts within the church.

This is its own history, incredibly varied, full of issues and wonders and continues to this day.

But its importance has overshadowed a deeper reality: one which has received virtually treatment.

Yet, if fully explicated, fully understood and fully practiced, the arts—all of them everywhere—would be summoned to theological scrutiny, just as everything else in our world.

Undertaking this excuses no one, yet places a new and exciting responsibility on every practicing artist in Christ's community. Church art becomes just one of the types of artistic action.

Here's a start.

1. Irrespective of broad ecclesiastical categories: Protestant, Roman, Eastern; irrespective of theological denominational and sectarian breakdowns; irrespective of size, stylistic variegation; irrespective of the training and quality found in any local assembly, the church should lay claim to a unifying theology of artistic creativity and action that takes in every aspect, and is to be honored and celebrated everywhere, both inside and outside the church.

In other words, the theological WHY of artistic action subordinates the creative WHATS. A small storefront, financially impoverished and amateur-ly staffed church can stand tall, hand-in-hand with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in upper Manhattan, and break artistic bread in complete harmony.

(A parallel to this is the outcome of a faith-alone document hammered out by Lutherans and Catholics in 1990—an admirable, satisfying testament to the underlying, once-for-all doctrine of salvation by faith.)

2. There are only three ways a Christian can do the arts and only three ways the church can encounter them. Three prepositions are crucial in this: for, from, toward. Put in context: A. Art for the church; B. Art from the church; C. Art toward the church.

A. Art for the church. Its creation and use for internal use. It serves the liturgy, which in turn serves the Word and its proclamation.

Art that functions, is subordinate to; art that serves; art that communicates; art that is familiar (even in its variations); humble, non-pretentious, does not call attention to itself.

In other words, art that respects and serves its immediate context; art that is locally authentic—with its own honest fingerprint. Nothing there that comes of envy, false witness or fraudulent advertising.

B. Art from the Church. Not a rebroadcast of art for the church, but the insertion of the Christian artist into an alien world, in which artistic idolatry (Art for Art's sake), snobbery, and the like mask the beauty and winsomeness of the very art that idolaters can make. In the world, the Christian artist does not necessarily make Christian art, but makes art Christianly, besting the best if vision and gifting so demand, in all styles and all media.

Artist in residence in a place not his/her true home.

And with other artists—all sanctified under God—tucked away in any number of artistic work places from the sanctity of public school teaching to the highest vistas in commercial art, representing Jesus Christ personally and artistically.

Artists whose work is not meant to function in the liturgy but to prophecy on its own outside of the church but with heavy Christian implications.

C. Art Toward the Church. Here's where all artistic creativity from every social, political, ethnic, religious quarter faces the church to be sorted out, celebrated, paraphrased, imitated, rejected, theologically defended and critiqued. Here's where the church is tested about the relation of content to context, the absolute and the relative, idolatry being faced and cleansed of itself. Here's where the church can be dislodged from its too-close embrace of the churchly and launched out into new paths. For let's remember that the interior church can never keep up with the exterior church and the rest of the world when it comes to the perpetual explosion of the world-wide imagination.

In other words and in conclusion: A THOUSAND TONGUES WILL NEVER SUFFICE. LET US WORSHIP.