

CREATIVE ARTS

Genesis 1:26-31

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Introduction

Some of you are aware of the long-standing argument between my wife and I on which is better, *The Great Showman* or *La La Land*. And I'll grant you that *The Greatest Showman* had catchy music; moreover, it had a happy ending which is, really, all my bride really wants. But I get flabbergasted by comparisons. *The Greatest Showman* is not even a Double-A team compared to *La La Land*!

You see I realize we're in the Midwest and guys are supposed to be in their boots killing things, but I'm secure enough in my masculinity to admit I uncontrollably wept the first time I saw the scene we just watched. It's utterly perfect. You see, the movie is, for one, a beautiful tribute and homage to the musicals of old, not to mention Hollywood of old. Second, it's about an aspiring Jazz pianist who dreams of owning a jazz bar and a young actress who dreams of being successful and famous. They fall in love while pursuing their dreams but ultimately go their separate ways during their personal pursuits. This closing scene, thus, occurs after years have passed and, what do you know, each of them has achieved all they wanted. And yet, during this song we watch an alternative reality, of what might have happened had they prioritized each other over career. The whole timeline of the movie is replayed in these nine minutes where we see what could've been. And what we see is that, ultimately, they would have been happier together than achieving their "dreams." Their little smiles at the end indicate that they'll be ok, but we, the audience, are left knowing that building a family together would've brought more joy and fulfillment than fame and success.

I wept watching this. Like, Teresa was like, 'What is wrong with this dude I married?!'. But to me it's not just the bittersweet ending; I mean, it's easy to play off emotions and get a reaction. The beauty, and what just overwhelmed me, was how a secular film took you on this

journey of self-introspection to lead you to the conclusion that family is more fulfilling than career and success. And the film does it in a subtle way; it's not obvious or in your face. The story, the music, the cinematography, everything moves you to where you *feel* this conclusion.

It's truly meta-physical. And that's what art does, or at least good art. It moves you beyond the ordinary, using physical forms like music, acting, visual art, dancing, to stir within your soul, to speak to some truth beyond what just a blatant statement of words, like I'm doing here, could do. That's the power of art; it's because we're designed and wired in this way. I've said this before but think about how God could have created this world without taste or smell; the world black and white and gray; no music, no sensation of sound. But He did create all those things and these things speak to our souls; they stir us and move us. That's what art does because that's how God has designed art.

Thus, it naturally follows that art is meant for the worship and glory of God. Art, in its excellence, done with the right focus and purpose, magnifies our Creator. Of course, art can do the opposite. We see in our culture how art can be abused and perverted; even within Christianity we've seen just bad forms of art. But, just because it can be abused or done poorly doesn't mean we should abandon the arts. Rather, as we've talked about over the last four weeks, God can be worshiped and glorified and made known through art. So, what we want to do this morning is briefly flesh out a theology of art and the mission of God and then offer some practical things we can start to do as a church to live out this reality.

1. Image-bearers as Created and Creating

As we read a moment ago, we see the act of creating as tied to the mission of God all the way at the beginning of the Bible. That human beings are creators of things begins with their creation itself. Being made in the image and likeness of God includes all the ways we reflect

Him to the world around us. In other words, **Our creative ability is rooted in God's creative ability.**

But the task of creating goes beyond just our constitution; it's actually a command God gives to us. When God says, **"Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it," (Genesis 1:28)** this means more than just reproduction. As the rest of the passage indicates they are to exercise dominion over the earth by establishing a society that worships and obey God.

Theologians call this entire passage "The Cultural Mandate," as Adam and Eve are tasked with creating culture. Right, God's mission is to fill the earth with His glory and part of the way that is done is as His image-bearers create.

Art, therefore, isn't just some elective or hobby or inconsequential activity, but is intrinsic to who we are as those made in the image of God and it is intrinsic to our worship and obedience of Him. And that art doesn't have to have explicit Christian images or words to God-honoring. All truth is God's truth and all beauty is a reflection of His beauty. Again, take for example the ending of *La La Land*, which we just showed. There is nothing overtly "Christian" about the art. The music has no lyrics; I didn't see any depictions of biblical stories, and so you might say, 'Patrick, that's secular, therefore, and moreover, an abomination that you would play it during corporate worship.' But as I argued a moment ago, the message of this scene is how the pursuit of 'career' and 'dream' is actually lesser than the pursuit of building a healthy marriage and family. That's a pretty biblical theme! Moreover, the subtleties of the story telling, the beauty of the music and the cinematography and choreography, the art forms themselves only enhance that message. Regardless of the intentions of the director, songwriters, or even actors, the product itself is something I believe honors God.

Now again, we might differ on styles of music we like or forms of art. Moreover, we have to acknowledge that art can be used in a way that's displeasing to God. Just consider the difference in the art designed and produced for the Tabernacle in the book of Exodus and how that art honored God whereas the artform of the golden calf dishonored Him. Consider how many Renaissance paintings depict nudity but not in a gratuitous or sexual way, but in a way that celebrates the beauty of the human body. I believe these classic pieces of art can glorify God. But then consider how much of our television and movie choices today feature pornographic nudity. Here we'd say this obviously dishonors God and is sinful.

My point is that because of Genesis 3 we now have the ability as human creatures to create bad art or art that doesn't bring God glory, and so we have to use wisdom and discernment. Moreover, we also need to show grace to one another and acknowledge that we'll have disagreements and that's ok. You may dislike the artform we employ musically on Sunday mornings; others of you may prefer it. You may feel the stage is 'too dark' or the lighting up here is distracting; others may see these five pillars and the visual of them helps reinforce and remind you of this series and the vision and mission of the church.

But then again, our disagreements or personal tastes may spill outside the church. You may hate jazz and so you didn't find that opening clip compelling. Or you may think art must be explicitly, in-your-face, Christian or else it doesn't honor God. I can think about as a kid the trouble that my sister and I got in for secretly listening to Aerosmith and R.E.M. God forbid the time I played Coolio in my room. My dad about kicked down the door when he heard Gangsta's Paradise. Right, we weren't allowed to listen to 'secular' music, whereas what I'm arguing this morning is that there really is no such thing as sacred vs. secular so long as the art meets certain biblical standards.

Now, of course, in retrospect there were definitely some Aerosmith songs that dealt with themes that dishonored God and we shouldn't listen to those. There are T.V. shows and movies that contain language and violence and sex that dishonor God and we shouldn't consume those things. But, I think **So long as the content or the form of the art doesn't violate commandments and principles we find in Scripture, it can be God-honoring if we are intentional about it in either our consumption or production.** One last example and then we'll move on.

Harry Potter.

I'll be frank. *La La Land* was not my first choice this morning; Harry Potter was. And listen I'm about to get into some major spoilers and so before I do, if you're not wanting me to ruin the books and the movies, then adults and kids alike, when I'm about to reveal something I'll tell you to cover your ears for just a few seconds, because I know some of you are reading through the books right now or watching the movies, whatever. But I really wanted to show you a scene from the last Harry Potter movie when (spoiler alert; cover your ears) when Voldemort kills Harry. The reason I wanted to was because, in my opinion, it's probably the best depiction of the atonement of Jesus Christ that I've found in art.

You see, the scene begins with Harry alone in the forest contemplating death and fearing it. I mean it's Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He then goes (spoiler alert; cover your ears) he goes to offer himself to Voldemort, and he does so for two reasons. First, Harry offers himself as a sacrifice in the place of his friends, **"No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends," (John 15:13).** Right, this act is an act of substitution; he dies in their place. But then, second, Harry offers himself because we've just found out that Voldemort's life is tied to Harry's. In other words, (spoiler alert; cover your ears) Harry's death is what breaks the power of evil. Again, that's just simple biblical atonement theology. J.K. Rowling has even publicly stated

that she drew from the Gospel in crafting how her story would end. Again, it's beautiful art, beautifully done and captured and performed, but its content is biblical, and frankly, in my opinion, does a much better job of helping you to understand the cross than *The Passion of the Christ* ever did. Gibson's movie is just about the gore and the brutality of Jesus' death. It misses the biblical meaning of the cross altogether. In other words, yes what you are hearing me say is that Harry Potter understands Jesus better than *The Passion of the Christ*.

Of course, I didn't show you the clip this morning, and I didn't for a couple of reasons. One, I didn't want to spoil for those hoping to read the books and watch the movies themselves, even though I probably have this morning. Second, it is a heavy scene; it's intense and can be scary for our kids. And so, even though the message is right on, when considering art we have to also, obviously, consider the maturity of the one consuming it. Third, though, there's the obvious reason. When Harry Potter first came out the church was quite divided over it. Some thought it was of the devil; others had no problem with it. And I know those opinions still exist. Some may be offended this morning just by the last seven minutes that I would give credence to the story. But again, this is where I come back to the importance of using wisdom and discernment in evaluating art, and the grace in understanding we're all going to have different feelings and that's ok.

The big point I'm trying to make is that a song doesn't have to have explicit Christian lyrics, or a painting doesn't have to be depicting a scene from the Bible to still honor God and cooperate in His mission. Whatever form of creativity that you are passionate about, whether it be painting or music or dance or sewing or woodworking or writing, whatever you create can honor God and can be understood within His mission.

2. The Role of Art in the Life of FBC

And so, let me just flesh out a few practicalities. And I'll try to keep these general because these conversations of how to use your creativity for the glory of God really is very personal and particular to you. First, I want to address how the arts can be further incorporated into the corporate family of FBC.

Visual Arts

Let's consider visual arts. In his phenomenal trilogy book series, *Cultural Liturgies*, Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith explains how our desires and vision of "the good life" are formed through bodily senses. In other words, the things we see orient and form our desires and, thereby, our actions. What this means for our corporate life together is that we should be intentional at thinking, therefore, about everything you see and we should be intentional at doing our best to ensure all the visual forms of our church's corporate life and gathering are directing our hearts toward the intended end of the glory and worship of God.

Consider our lobby. When you walk in hopefully you are first noticing a giant hanging sign that says 'Welcome' and there a large circular desk with, hopefully, happy smiling people. Those visual forms are subconsciously telling every person who walks in something. Then you notice seating areas and bar tables scattered around. Their presence is telling you that you are meant to gather with others; to talk and connect rather than just run in and run out of the sanctuary. In the center of the lobby hangs a map, but not a literal one, but something painted in a visually pleasing way. You soon notice its of our community and there are gold dots all over it. Again, all these art forms are meant to shape the way you conceive of our very gathering itself. You make your way to the sanctuary and photographs of the community itself. This is our home and this is where we live our lives and interact with others. Their presence reminds you that we

do not retreat away from the culture when we worship but are rather to take our worship into the culture.

You come in the sanctuary and hopefully the lighting gives you a sense of solemnness. The stage design meant to highlight and illustrate in some way the series and message we're engaged in. The words on screens, the background graphics, meant to not only show you what you should sing or read or think, but hopefully in a beautiful and aesthetic way. We want the graphics not to distract but complement. At the center of the stage every week, the cup and the bread front and center. Unlike the covered trays we used to use, that you can now see the cup and the bread reminds you of the body and blood of Christ. As we discuss each week, the bread broken and the cup drank are physical reminders of the very real body and blood of Jesus offered 2000 years ago for you and physical reminders, moreover, of the new and perfect body that awaits you at Jesus' return.

Right, just think about all the things your eyes tell you when you're in this place. What we'd love is even more of this. For those of you who are visually artistic, whether in painting or architecture or design, to join with our creative arts team and continue to explore how can our eyes help reinforce and accomplish the mission of the church.

Music Arts

Of course, one of the most obvious incorporations of the arts into our corporate life is with music. The Bible commands us to sing, to make joyful noises. But we're also reminded that David danced before the Lord. Music gives us the opportunity to express our emotions, our thoughts, and our faith. That's why our liturgy is organized as it; we sing the Gospel every week reflecting on **God as holy and creator, the fall and sinful rebellion against Him, the work of Jesus to save and redeem us, and then His commission of us to go and proclaim the Gospel.** Right, the

style of music, their particular words, and their order in the service are all ways we proclaim the glory of God.

And so, to our musicians we invite you to use your natural gifts and talents in corporate worship. We invite our dancers to consider with us what that may look like. And more than that we don't want you to just feel like you have no say or input in what we do, but to those who are interested and passionate to join with our creative arts team and continue to explore with us how can music help reinforce and accomplish the mission of the church.

Technical Production Arts

Closely related to both visual and music forms is then our technical production. Right, there are men and women up in that booth overseeing the sound, the screens, the cameras and livestream, and the lighting. The same is true in our children's and student ministries. Our kids and young people sing and so there is artistic and technical opportunities there as well. I mean I know it's easy to sometime look at these things as just the task to be performed, making sure there's no feedback, or you can hear the lead singer, or the words appear at the right time, but this really has more to do with our hearts than anything else. God maybe hasn't given you a great voice but you're good with technical things. How might you join with the creative arts team to support the mission of the church?

Individual Artists

I think, though, perhaps our biggest opportunity to do something beyond what we've already been doing, beyond what arts in the church has looked like typically, concerns you artists individually with what you do with your art and how you think about it outside the corporate life of FBC. I hope I've already shown you this morning that your art is important to God, it is useful to Him and His mission, and He is pleased when you create anything for His sake. But how can

you share your art with others? Whether you're a kid, a student, in art school, aspiring to be professional artist, or it's just a fun hobby, what are ways to share your art.

Well first and foremost, I believe we have a responsibility to nurture you as an artist who is also a Christian. This is part of our disciple-making calling. And that certainly includes our pastors and elders who want to help you grow in your faith as well as our gospel community leaders. But I also think there is supreme value in artists investing in and nurturing one another. In the lobby today, if you have an interest in sharing your art with others, with perhaps even meeting and networking with other artists to discuss these things, I'd encourage you to sign up. We want to foster those desires and provide a forum for you and your art. This include an art expo here at the building or open mic night in the coffee shop or warehouse, but could also include partnering with a local business to host an open mic night and art expo. This network would also seek to stay informed about local events happening. What want to produce God-honoring art, but we also want to be patrons of the arts, meaning supporting local events and artists.

In other words, wherever you may be on the talent or age spectrum, if the arts are something that you are passionate about the first step we want to take today is to connect you to other believers who feel the same way.

Conclusion

The arts remind us that your Creator has finely crafted every part of you, body and soul. He has gifted you with talents and passions and He is glorified when you use those things in a way that honors and points to Him. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all,

does not cry: ‘Mine!’” (Abraham Kuyper)¹ It all belongs to King Jesus and so we are to give it back to Him.

That’s part of the miracle of the cross and resurrection. When Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice for you to defeat evil and death, He wasn’t just dying for your soul, but He died for your mind and your body as well; for your hands with which you craft things; for your voice with which you sing; for your eyes and your ears. The sin and idolatry of the human heart which leads to art that dishonors God has been defeated; you are free from it in Christ Jesus. Thus, now Paul commends us to, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2). Artist, be transformed and renewed in your mind and in your heart to the likeness of Christ!

¹ Abraham Kuyper, “Inaugural Address at the Free University,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

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