

Andrew Fellows Christianity & the Arts 20150715c

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[0 : 00] Good to be here. I'm a member of the IPC Church in West List, so we feel a deep connection to you guys. And of course lots of Lubri Lakes. Lubri in England started here, and Ely, as many of you know.

So it's a delight to be with you tonight. So I was asked to address the subject of Christianity and the arts. It's a huge subject. We'll see how far we get. When I see you starting to fall asleep, we'll just cut it off and open it up for questions.

So I want to address a series of questions here in this talk. Perhaps the most basic question I want to address is, where does art, or where should art, fit into the life of a Christian?

Important thing to reflect on. And then, if we have time, I want to move on a little bit further and ask, what is art? A very dangerous question. You can get lots of answers to that one.

And then, if we have time, the third question I'd like to address is, what is Christian art? Is there a place for Christian art? So those are a series of questions that I put out there.

[1 : 09] None of these questions are straightforward. And I would say there's quite a bit of confusion amongst Christians about the answers to those questions. Let me start my introduction with a bit of a negative thought.

I think one of the great tragedies of modern evangelicalism has been its uneasy relationship to the arts. And I think there's been some moderate improvements in the last 40 years, largely through the work of Hans Ruckmacher, the Dutch art historian who did great work in this country back in the late 60s, early 70s.

And then Francis Schaeffer, who started Labrie. I think these guys did good work, biblical work, in terms of reestablishing a basis for why we as Christians should engage the arts.

But I would say the relationship is still not stabilized. I still doubt, as I travel around, that there's not actually much real space within the church and amongst Christians for art.

As something which is totally legitimate. Some churches have it as a bolt-on, but I don't think they have a coherent reason why Christians should actually engage art full-heartedly.

[2 : 19] So, what I want to do is to begin with a theology of the arts, a brief theology of the arts. Argue from the Bible why Christians should embrace art fully.

So, that's where I want to start. And I want to make this observation. I believe art has an unstable place amongst modern evangelicals because of a weak emphasis on the doctrine of creation.

I think often our doctrine of salvation, we call this in theological terms soteriology, often our doctrine of salvation eclipses our doctrine of creation.

And as the gospel is central, we emphasize the gospel's central importance, but never to the negation of creation.

And I would say this, when creation is secure in our theology, there will always be a stable place for the arts. When creation theology is affirmed, art needs no justification.

[3 : 23] You guys have read, some of you have read Rookwalker's book, Art Needs No Justification. Great title for a book. And basically, one of the theses is, if your creation thought theology is secure, you don't have to justify art.

It's just obvious. Of course we affirm the arts. So I'm saying if creation is in place, our view of the arts and our embrace of the arts will be secure.

Now a strong theology of creation secures art in two ways. The first way is this. At the very core of creation, you have a creative act.

So obvious, isn't it? This is Sunday school. Creation is about a creative act. Creation is about the creativity of our God. And the first and primary disclosure of God to human persons, in this revelation, is in himself being the creator.

That's the primary disclosure of God. He's not firstly the savior. He's firstly the creator. Now this immediately brings us into the sphere of art theory.

[4 : 33] Because at the core of all art, you have a creator. We tend to call that creative person the artist. And you have a creation, which is the artwork.

That's exactly what's going on in Genesis 1 and 2. Now I think we need to be careful to make a clear distinction between God's creativity and ours. God is able to actually create out of nothing. The technical term for this is *ex nihilo*. So our Lord didn't need pre-existing materials in order to create. When we create, we need pre-existing materials.

We need notes if we're composing music. Our Lord was able to create out of nothing. We can't do that. However, we are still creators.

We still have the ability to create. And that is what we see in the Genesis is narrative. Now what is basic to all art is actually in the opening chapters of the Bible.

[5 : 32] First of all, you have intentionality. That means that the Trinitarian community got together and they said, Let us create. They formed an intention within the divine mind to put forward the creative act.

So it started as a form of self-consciousness in the mind of God, which is very different from evolutionary theory. There's no intentionality in evolution. It just happens somehow.

But our Bible says that God creates an intention in his mind and then he acts on that. And the acting of it is the creation act itself. So he imposes intention on the world.

He orders the materials and creation comes forth. So this is part of the narrative of Genesis 1. Our Lord put the stuff of the material world into a pattern that reflects design and order.

It's interesting. Genesis 1 verse 2 says that the world, God first created the heavens and the earth. And then it says in Genesis 1 verse 2 that the earth was void without form and empty.

[6 : 37] It's describing chaos. Formless and empty. Darkness was over the shadow of the deep. And the creation narrative goes on to reflect how our creator first gave creation a form.

So he made earth and sky. He made land and sea. In the place of chaos, he creates form out of these things. Then he goes on to fill it in.

Because it's empty. So he fills it with plants and trees and birds. Animals and aquatic life. I like to think of it. I know lots of artists.

And you look at their studios. They're usually a wreck. They're so chaotic, aren't they? So you go into the studio and materials are scattered everywhere. There's an easel in the corner and there's brushes scattered around and paint and palette.

And the empty canvas. And in order to create, you have to put some order and form to what's going on in that room. So you have to order the canvas. You put it on the easel.

[7 : 35] And you bring your palette to your side. And you get your paintbrush out. You put the paint on the palette. That's giving some form to the chaos. And then out of that, you fill your canvas.

Well, that's a little bit what the Lord did at the very beginning. Made the form out of the chaos. And then he filled it in. Then, that's the creative act. And all of this reflects the freedom of God.

He wasn't constrained by laws beyond him or some mind beyond him. It was a free act on his part. Now, I would say all creative acts, every time we create art, reflects human freedom.

It reflects that we're not just caught in the stream of nature's laws. We can act upon nature to create. There's real freedom there. And what we also see in the creation act is that there's an aesthetic quality to it.

Three times in the Genesis narrative, we're told that what the Lord did was pleasing to the eye. And that's an aesthetic category.

[8 : 41] Something which is pleasing to the eye appeals to beauty. So there's aesthetic judgments that go into the creation act.

And actually, when the creator finishes his work at the end of the day, he looks at it and he pronounces it good. And that's not a moral judgment, primarily.

To say it's good means that it's complete. It's perfect. And that includes the aesthetic side. It's very beautiful. Beautiful. And beauty is a core component of art theory.

So you have all the components, all the elements in the fabric of art there in the original creation.

And that's why I say if your theology has a strong creational dimension, you're already functioning in the field of art theory.

There's tons of genuine art theory going on in the opening chapters of the Bible. And that's why Christians with a strong creational theology will have a natural delight in art.

[9 : 43] It's not hard to get there. That's my point. So, at the core of the creation act, we have creativity and the components that make up what goes into art.

The second thing in terms of a theology of art is this, as we go back to creation. At the very core of the creation mandate is a focus on culture making.

It's a very key part of the Genesis narrative. Adam and Eve are given a creation mandate. And the creation mandate, you guys will have heard many times, it goes like this.

God created the man and the woman in his own image. And then God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it or have dominion over it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the ground. Then God said, I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it.

[10 : 41] They will be yours for food. And then he went on into all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground.

Everything that has the breath of life in it, I give every green plant for food. And it was so. So this is known as the creation mandate. This is the Lord giving to Adam and Eve and to all of us as their descendants, dominion over creation.

So he's saying, here's my creation temple and I'm putting you in my temple as my representatives to rule over the creation. Now what I want you to see is that the creation mandate is the same thing as a cultural mandate.

And you'll see where I'm going in a moment. What the Lord gave to Adam and Eve here was a cultural mandate. Let me read from one of my favorite theologians, Herman Babink, early 20th century.

Babink says this, if we comprehend the force of this subduing under the term culture, now generally used for it, we can say that culture in the broadest sense is the purpose for which God created man after his own image.

[11 : 52] Purpose of our creation in his image is to create culture. So little are cultists and culture, religion and civilization, Christianity and humanity in conflict with each other, that it would be truer to say God's image has been granted to man so that he might in his dominion over the whole earth bring culture into manifestation.

That's what the cultural, the creation mandate is about. It's a mandate to create culture. So to be a human creature is to be a culture maker.

And when we make culture, we image God. It's a wonderful thing. To be able to make culture is actually to assert that we're not just nature.

We're not just material objects carried along by the forces of nature. We are subjects who can act upon nature with our minds, with our intentions and with our wills.

And every time we do that, we act upon nature as the lords of it. We make culture. Every time we do that, culture emerges.

[13 : 00] And every time we do that, every time we make culture, we leave the stamp of personhood on the world. I like to, this is my definition of culture, is the way we inscribe our personhood on creation.

The way we leave it there. Our signature. And every time we make culture, we reflect the dignity and significance of our human creaturehood as the image of God.

Now in terms of culture's origin, it first occurred when humans tilled the soil. The first kind of culture was agriculture or horticulture, which my cousin is involved in.

And that's the first culture. That's primary culture. And that's one of the reasons I like loving. I love gardening. My cousin would say I'm not very good at it. But it's a wonderful reflection of culture.

When we garden, we act upon the natural world and we shape it according to our deliberate action. So we create borders and boundaries. And this is how it's meant to work.

[14 : 07] It doesn't work in mine. You create a border, a boundary, and you say the grass can come to there, and there the grass and the weeds stop, and then we have something different. We have our flowers or our vegetables. That's actually horticulture or agriculture.

So it doesn't just happen. We have to impose our mind and intentions on the natural world to create this. That's the first culture. And it's interesting.

In Genesis 2.8, we see that the Lord God himself planted a garden in the east in Eden. So the Lord himself is a gardener. He makes culture.

Then we're told in verse 15, The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and to take care of it. So the Creator is calling Adam to carry on the cultural side of the creation mandate. It's an over-to-you moment. I've done my bit of culture-making in this garden. Now I want you to be the primary culture-maker. And you need to go and be like me and reflect what I am in terms of creating culture in the world.

[15:18] So you see, the Genesis text makes a direct connection between God as a culture-maker and humans as culture-makers. Now we leave our culture mark in many, many different ways.

I've just driven through Southall. Wow! There's a very different culture mark right there in terms of dress and food. And you go around the world and you see the diversity of fashion and culinary arts.

These are all culture marks. You see it in various styles of architecture. I would say culture goes right down to the way you brush your teeth in the morning. You pop open the lid.

My wife keeps telling me I leave it open. My culture mark should be to close it after I finish it. How do you put the toothpaste on your brush? Do you squiggle it this way? Is it a line? Is it diagonal? And then, how do you brush your teeth?

What's your culture mark there? Right down to the most trivial things we leave a culture mark. But here's my point. The point I'm coming to is this. The most exquisite culture mark we leave is in the form of art.

[16:28] And it's interesting. In the past, art was called high culture. Not because it was snobby and elitist. But there's actually an interesting argument by theorists that say it was called high culture because it was seen by Christians as the highest form of culture making.

Because it's here that the image of God on the cultural stage of life and reality emerges at its highest level. It takes an aesthetic function into the realm of beauty.

So when we create art and when we appreciate art, we're engaging in culture at the highest level. And for that reason, Christians should be the first to affirm culture in the form of art.

To make it. To make culture in the form of art. And to delight in the artistic output of others. And I say, and I say it gently, the fact that many Christians live in a slight repudiation of art and culture is not honoring to the Lord.

Because of this creation theology that we're developing here that comes out of the Bible. He gave us this capacity to make it and to enjoy it. And every time we do this, we reflect it.

[17:43] So there we have a brief theology of the arts going right back to creation. Creation itself is a creative act with lots of art theory in it. In terms of how we understand art.

And then we look, go on, we look at the creation mandate. It is primarily a cultural mandate. And one of the aspects of culture making, leaving our mark, is in the form of art. And my point is, if our creation theology is solid and firm, we'll naturally delight in art where we engage it.

Well, let me move on quickly now to my second main point. I want to move, this is dangerous territory, towards a description of art. I want to ask, what is art?

Now, at Labrie where I work, we do a lot of our teaching very informally around meal tables. And we don't come with a prepared lecture. We just serve the meal.

And we say, we've been doing this for 60 years now in Labrie. We say, do you have a question? Does anybody have a question? Well, I've been at Labrie now over 20 years. And I've heard the question many times, what is art?

[18:51] Then I can tell you, it's a subject which divides opinion. And you can raise the temperature of a conversation quite quickly by just posing that question. Is a squiggle on a piece of paper by a toddler art?

Is making a sandcastle on the beach a work of art? I hope I don't offend anybody.

But I honestly heard a serious conversation once. Whether the passing of wind in a certain way was an art form. It was a serious conversation.

Now, I'm not sure I want to consign art to a one-line definition. So what I'd like to do is reflect on art in terms of its basic functions.

How art functions. And I want to reflect on the norms that are meant to govern the functions of art. All of God's creation is governed by norms.

[19 : 53] Another way to put it is governed by laws. Not just moral laws, but everything. There's laws in nature which govern how nature functions. And I believe there's also norms or laws that govern how art is meant to function.

And the thing about norms is that we can break them. So not all art reflects these norms. Don't misunderstand me. But I believe these are some of the core norms along which, or in obedience to which, art is meant to function.

Art transgresses that, and the artist does. But these are the primary norms as I understand them. Three of them. The first is this. Art functions as gift.

One of the functions of art is its pure gift. And this is true at every point at which the art functions. So you think of the artist.

You listen to some Mozart, or you see a Rembrandt painting. And you look at this, or you see one of your children who are very good at this, skilled at this.

[20 : 57] And we look at the artist and we say, aren't they gifted? It's the most natural language to use with certain artists, isn't it? They're so gifted. Interesting that we just naturally use that kind of language.

It's a recognition that the genius in the artist is not self-generated. It comes from somewhere else. And actually, traditionally, in all religions, it was thought that artists had their gifts conferred by the gods.

And that's why artists were said to be gifted. The gods had gifted them. Now, we as Christians would say, actually, there's truth in that. Everything in creation is a gift.

We have gifts, all of us. And if we have artistic gifts, they come from the Lord. So the Bible says, don't boast in your gifts. It's been given to you. So, the artist functions in terms of their gift.

I would say at a very functional level, the same thing. You can see the same thing. I sometimes listen to Front Row Radio 4 if I'm traveling. And they interview the artist. And you often see that these men and women were very privileged in terms of their education, their background.

[22 : 06] Their home, often one of their parents, was quite artistic. And the house is full of painting or full of music. So it didn't come from nowhere. They're dependent on gifts outside of them for their artistic gift.

So there you see art as a gift in terms of the artist himself or herself. But then let's think about the piece of artwork and how the gift works here. There it is. The sculpture, the composition, the musical composition.

And you ask the question, what is it worth? Now that's how we tend to approach art today, isn't it? We tend to see everything under the shadow of the market. And the shadow of the market means everything can be reduced to monetary value.

So how much is a piece of art worth? There's a recent sale of a Picasso painting a few weeks ago that broke all records, didn't it? How much was it? 18 million or something like that? It was ridiculous for a painting.

A bit of paint on it. But it just broke all records. But what made the value of that Picasso whatever it was? Millions and millions. Well, I'll tell you, art doesn't easily submit to market principles.

[23 : 20] You look at a piece of art. The monetary value of a piece of art. Is it made up by the number of hours that went into it? Well, unless you're a celebrity artist, someone like Andy Warhol, who just had to sign a piece of junk, basically, and it became worth millions.

For the rest of us, if we engage in art, we never get a return for the hours we put in it. I'm helping a friend with the writing of a novel. He just has me read it and I look at it. And this guy's already put hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours into it.

I hope it gets published. If it does, will he get a market return in terms of the reward for it? Probably not. He'll sell a few thousand if he's doing well. He'll never get a market return in terms of what he invested into it.

And that's why, by the way, artists have always needed patrons. The Catholic Church had a patronage system. They recognized great artists and they supported them. I think evangelicals should be doing the same.

Looking for good artists amongst them and engaging in some type of patronage. So my point is this. When you look at monetary value, the measures are so arbitrary.

[24 : 28] What's the monetary value of one of Bach's cello suites? Well, there isn't any. Except for the music producer. There's no monetary value for Bach. You can't pay him anymore.

He's dead. So he's not going to get the value of it. So what happens here? Bach receives the gift of music. And he, out of his gift, composes the cello suites.

And then he puts his cello suites into the circle of gifts. He passes it on. Now, did Bach himself receive a market return for his cello suites? No.

If you look at the history. And it's interesting. He died long ago. But the artwork itself keeps going. And it keeps getting passed on. So someone passed it on to me.

My father. Had a love of the Bach cello suites. And I spent a few pounds for a CD years ago. I still have it. And I play it. Is that the worth? The seven pounds I paid for it back then?

[25 : 23] I mean, that's not how it works when it comes to art. And I hope I pass it on to my kids. Still not sure about that. But I pass it on to lots of Libri students. So you keep passing the gift along.

And what this reflects is that art as a gift is never consumed. Within the market, commodities are always consumed, used up, and then disposed of.

So in a market exchange, you pay, you take the commodity, you consume it. That's what it means to be a consumer. And then you discard it. You can't do that with great art.

You can't consume a piece of art. Because it functions as a gift. Now, in the modern context, a lot of modern art has been reduced to a commodity. It's lost its gift function.

And this is my problem with popular culture. In popular culture, art is basically reduced to a commodity that you buy. The latest pop star you listen to. And even as you bought the CD, they're almost out of date, aren't they?

[26 : 30] And the new things come along. And here you can get me started on X Factor, which makes me grind my teeth. But that is very much a commercial arrangement.

It's art completely in the shadow of the market. Sting of the police has done lots of interesting things in music. He had a very good article showing how X Factor, with its commodity values, had sent back music three decades.

Utter disaster. So it's the breaking of a norm. Because art functions as a gift. Let me go on to my second point here, in terms of what art is. Now I'm going to shock you. Second function of art is this. Art functions as useless. Oscar Wilde famously said that all art is absolutely useless. It's a bit of a shocking statement, isn't it?

What did he mean by that? Well, it's actually a profound affirmation of one of art's norms. Let's say your Uncle Morris is a bit of an amateur landscape painter.

[27 : 38] You've just turned 40, and he presents you with one of his landscape paintings. Now it's absolutely useless. Why? Well, not necessarily because it's rubbish.

But because it serves no bodily need. That's the idea behind the idea of useless here. It doesn't serve a bodily need. All of our consumption has the self and its bodily needs basically in view.

We consume for me. So we take it into ourselves to satisfy some need. In terms of the appetite's food, you consume food to satisfy your food hunger.

People do this with sex, too. That's how they abuse sex. Sex becomes a commodity. You buy it. In order to take it to yourself, use it up, and then move on.

Now, art doesn't serve any practical purpose. And it exists for an end beyond yourself. It's actually an other-centered reality.

[28 : 42] It's designed to take you beyond yourself. It exists for its own sake. And this argument has been formulated by Christian art historians as art for art's sake.

That's what it's for. It's just for its own sake. Not for you. It's for its own sake. To take you beyond yourself. And to engage art like this leads to a kind of adoration.

Not an idolatrous one. But it's an adoration. You contemplate the beauty of the painting or the music you're listening to. And that is completely beyond the material needs of yourself.

And that's why we call it useless. It doesn't satisfy any personal, material need. You're taking beyond yourself and you say, Wow! That's amazing. That actually is how worship, the worship of our Lord, is meant to function.

Worship should be like that too. We're so captivated by the worth and wonder of who the Lord is that we enter a place of self-forgetfulness. The needs of ourself are forgotten in the moment of seeing His worth and His glory.

[29 : 48] Now that is something consumers cannot do. Because consumption is all about the needs of the self. So the uselessness of art reflects a subject-object relation that's completely other-centered.

For those of you who know a little bit of art theory in terms of philosophy, the philosophers call what I'm talking about disinterestedness. And it's a very important part of how art functions.

So art functions as gift. It functions as useless. After we qualify what we mean by that. Thirdly, art functions as unveiling. I believe great art is always an inference of the supernatural realm.

That is that there's a realm of reality beyond the material worlds that's very obvious to us. The seen worlds. And these signals of transcendence are all around us.

And art is a way of reflecting that there's more to reality than meets the eye. And on the strength of our capacity, as those, we ourselves, are more than matter.

[30 : 56] We are bodies and spirit. And we recognize there's more to reality than we can see. And art is a way of unveiling or uncovering those hidden meanings.

Science isn't about those kind of meanings. Science looks at the meanings of the nuts and bolts of how things work. And that's good. Art goes beyond that and says there's hidden meanings that we have to bring out of hiding.

We need to unveil them. And that's a big part of what art is about. And actually this challenges the materialistic worldview, which is the consensus in our day.

And I need to tell you there's a total contradiction going on in our culture. You meet a lot of people who in their left brains are hardcore atheists. Rationally, matter is all that exists.

But with their right brains, with their imagination, they love watching TV drama, which is all about fantasy and the supernatural. They read vampire novels. One of the most popular form of novel today is the vampire.

[32 : 00] Sadly, it's not even vampire. It's vampire porn. That's mainstream now. Humans having sex with vampires. Now that's not very atheistic in terms of its assumptions. Total contradiction going on.

But the idea that art is trying to get behind things to unveil hidden meanings. Okay, we're covering a lot of ground quickly. We've done a bit of a theology of the arts.

We've asked, what is art? We've looked at its functions, gift, its uselessness, disinterestedness, and then the fact that it's unveiling. Let me briefly, as we finish, work towards an understanding of Christian art.

Now this might be the most controversial of anything I've said this evening. We're taking up the question of what makes art Christian. Now Christian art is a category fraught with difficulties.

And sadly, in the modern period, art that is Christian has tended to be complete rubbish. And sadly, when we want to find Christians who have been great in terms of their creative output, we often have to go way back or to other traditions besides our evangelical traditions.

[33 : 14] We're known for our bad music. I've collected some. But it would just make us all cynical. And it would be bad for Paul if I did that.

If we just played all this bad Christian music, it would be terrible for us. We're known for bad music, bad novels, and today, bad films. The faith film industry in America is huge.

And it's appalling what they're putting out. So what makes art Christian? Well, there's three false definitions of what makes art Christian. The first is the assumption that if a Christian does it, therefore it's Christian art.

Wrong. It's quite possible for a Christian to make art that's anything but Christian. So it takes more than the label of being a Christian on an artist to make it truly Christian.

And that's my point. The second false way of defining Christian art is a focus to the theme and content which is explicitly Christian.

[34 : 13] So people say if the theme and content of your art is explicitly Christian, then it must be Christian art. And for many, the pressure is to fit the themes of art into the Great Commission.

So the purpose of Christian art is evangelism. Now, I'm passionate about evangelism. There's nothing I love more than sharing the gospel with someone. But it's not the purpose of art to share the gospel.

In fact, it's very clear for me that the sharing of the gospel is proclamation. It's word-based. One time, years ago, a Labrie student dragged me off to a concert.

And it was a Christian heavy metal band. And it was a bit of an experience, I can tell you. And I didn't understand a word of what was going on. I don't think anyone did. And at the end, with no words at all, they just invited people to come to Christ.

And masses went forward. And I thought, what are they responding to? Because they haven't heard anything coherent. They haven't heard a proclamation here. So I don't believe the purpose of art is evangelism.

[35 : 16] And if Christians say, art with evangelism is what makes a Christian, I say, no. It's actually, I think, a butchering of what art is. Some take it a little bit further and broaden out and say it has to be explicitly religious categories.

So Christian art is painting Bible scenes. Or it has to have some angels in it. Or at least it has to have a mom and dad and three very happy-looking children. Preferably reading the Bible together. And it must not have swearing in it. So it often functions as very moralistic categories. And then we say it's Christian art. No good either, I don't think. It's not sufficient. And then the third false definition is this.

That one makes art Christian is the market that it's targeting. Now this is really a North American thing. There are lots of Christians in North America. Born again Christians. And I tell you what, it's a massive market that I think has been well exploited by marketeers in terms of Christian art. I found it quite depressing that the Tim LaHaye Left Behind novels actually outsold J.K. Rowling, the Harry Potter books in the early stage.

[36 : 27] More of those being sold than Harry Potter. It's a massive market. Now I'd say the market, that also is not an adequate definition of Christian art. So these are unhelpful reductions in terms of what Christian art is.

So what is it? Well I would say this. Art that is Christian stands in the categories of the biblical worldview.

That's what makes art Christian. It stands clearly within the categories of the Christian worldview. The Bible, the revelation of God, reveals all kinds of categories, the technical term is categoria, in terms of how reality is structured.

So we as believers have been given these categories by revelation of the Creator. So we have the true categories in terms of how reality is structured and governed.

Let me give you just a few of them. This is Sunday school stuff. We talked a little bit about a lot of them already tonight. Creator, creation. It's so basic, but I tell you what, that is fundamental.

[37 : 37] That category is everything. That's the primary category in which all of reality is based. Qi category. Then we have another one. We have the category of human as object, body, and human as subject, spirit.

Very important category. The Bible then gives us the category of the human as, this isn't a biblical phrase, but it's what the Bible teaches, a glorious ruin. Humans are the image of God.

We have all of us, non-Christians, who have dignity and glory because we bear the image of God, but we're also, all of us, ruined by the fall. Key biblical category.

We've got categories of time and eternity, completely lost in the modern world, sadly, even by Christians. We've got categories of life and death. The category of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of darkness.

We've got the categories, not popular today, of heaven and hell. You lose that one, you lose a lot. Heaven and hell. You've got the categories we've talked about already tonight of the seen realm and the unseen realm.

[38 : 48] You've got the categories of nature and culture. You've got categories of form and freedom, wholeness and suffering. I could go on and on and on.

These are the categories of a biblical world view. I haven't even mentioned the most important category in the Bible. The important two categories is the Trinity and Incarnation.

Jesus is fully God and fully man. These are the categories of a biblical world view. Now my point is that art that is Christian functions within these categories.

So when art reflects humans as glorious ruins, it's Christian art. And the way it's going to do this is by not diminishing either our dignity as image bearers nor diminish our depravity.

It's actually going to hold both of them out there. And here I'm going to introduce something which you might find quite controversial. There's lots of films who are produced and directed by non-Christians that actually reflect the biblical categories.

[39 : 59] So this idea of glorious ruin is something I'm looking for when I'm watching a film. Many films today trash human beings. It's interesting because we need, we must never lose the doctrine of sin.

But actually, you go to Hollywood and you get a pretty dark view of what humans are in Hollywood, don't you? They're, we're so bad. That's that, that. And actually, it's so pessimistic.

I'm looking in films for the glory and the dignity that, that is part of our humanity too. You watch a film that has that principle in it, it's a Christian film.

It might not be written by a Christian, but it's working coherently within the categories. I like to think of art, all art, functioning as what I call a kind of cosmic theater.

And I like this idea of cosmic theater because it says it's a big story and theater means it has a narrative to it. Now, the narrative of the Bible, the big story of the Bible is creation, fall, redemption.

[41 : 03] And you can take that narrative and actually measure everything against that narrative.

And it's interesting that many, many films, in fact, some would say all films in the West function in the Christian narrative, the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption.

Every detective thriller you watch is a creation, fall, redemption narrative. Because you start off with normality, this is the order of the world in its right place, and then the crime occurs, and everything falls into disorder and absolute chaos, and detective man or woman comes along and they redeem the situation and put it right again.

That's creation, fall, redemption. There's a film theory guru called Christopher Deese. He wrote a book called Faith in Film and he said all film in the Western world is a creation, fall, redemption structure.

It's quite interesting. So in that sense there's something Christian about almost all films because it has that structure. Now there's lots of it that we would say no to, but in terms of its narrative structure in that sense it's Christian.

Calvin Siebold is a Dutch-Canadian who's thought a lot about Christian art theory and he defined Christian art as what the devil cannot stand in.

[42 : 21] And I quite like that. If your biblical categories are being reflected in art, the devil can't stand there. The devil is the master of deception. But if we reflect the biblical categories, he can't find a place to work in that.

And I think that's a good way to reflect it. So, there we are. We could say a lot more. I think we have to be careful how we think about Christian art, but for me Christian art is art that reflects and stands in the biblical categories and the devil can't stand there.

Good. Sorry, I hope I haven't gone too long. Can we, I'd love just to open it up for questions. Yeah. You can disagree with me. I bet we get a lot of that at Labrie.

If you want clarification, something that wasn't clear in terms of my presentation, you can ask that. What did you mean by the devil can't stand the last comment?

Well, the devil's the father of lies and the devil's all about creating false categories. So, the devil, who knows a lot about hell, today wants to deny the reality of hell and get people to deny the reality of hell.

[43 : 35] So, he functions in lies. If we create art that actually is in biblical categories, he can't stand there because it's truth. There's no place for him to get into that because he's the master of lies.

If there's a lie in a piece of art, he can do lots with that. So, in a sense, we're making a strong affirmation of truth and if our artwork is filled with the truth of the biblical categories, it's a problem for the devil.

So, I mean, it's quite a, he's, Calden Seaboard is an art theory guy so he's going to be using quite a poetic metaphor but I quite like it. It works for me.

So, similar question to you then. I like the metaphor. It sounds great but when you talk about detective movies and so much, you know, western fiction has a kind of creation for redemption categories but then, a movie like Titanic where redemption is, you know, falling in love with the guy and gives up his life for you, you know, everlasting happiness of life in America as a new person. Yeah. Clearly, there are a lot of lies about redemption in that. Sure, yeah. There are lies about what we need to be removed from so, in that sense, it seems to play into the old hands that we're just going to Yeah.

[44 : 46] But, in a sense, the Christian worldview is very robust and there's a number of categories that function and as we immerse ourselves in scripture, these categories take hold of us more and more.

But my point is you could have some of the categories functioning and then others would not be functioning. I would say art that really is Christian, the categories are all on fire.

So, when I look at what non-Christians produce, I can see some categories that actually are Christian there. So, in that sense, it's Christian art to the level to which it goes. yeah. But, I would say those of us who are committed Bible-believing Christians and we have artistic gifts, we really want to create art, the devil can't stand it.

And, we have to be careful. There's a famous artist in America and I hope I don't upset any of you, I'm good at upsetting people, but when you name names, he's called Thomas Kincaid. Have you heard of Thomas Kincaid?

And, he's the painter of light, he's a Texan, he's a commercial genius, he's become a multi, multi-millionaire just by the genius of how he markets his paintings.

[45 : 54] very well technically executed, but it's a world where the fall doesn't exist. And, I think they're incredibly saccharine. In fact, I don't like them at all.

And, I would say the devil could really stand in a Thomas Kincaid painting because he's reflecting reality with perfection. Everything is glistening and there's no tension of living in a fallen condition which we all have to face.

we don't know what heaven's going to be like. We can reflect heaven as a hope but in terms of where we stand now, we reflect the tension we're in creation for redemption. So, Thomas Kincaid, a Christian man, but I don't think his artwork is Christian at all.

Anything but Christian. Great. The relations also saw great revival of art.

Yes. Much of it, as you say, under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformation produces something else. Yes. Particularly because of its emphasis on the implications of the Second Commandment.

[47 : 07] Yes. So, do you think in a sense you could say that the Reformation was out in art or sorted things out? Sort of things out. So, in the North, I mean, the Holland, you think of the Dutch Masters, those guys were profoundly influenced by reformational thought.

So, they weren't anti-art at all. Quite the opposite. I think they sorted out the corruptions in terms of a biblical worldview that were in the Catholic Church. I'd rather go to the Rike Museum over Florence any day of the week because I actually find I've been there once, twice now, took my wife once and she wanted to see David.

I felt a bit threatened by that. But, I find the Southern Renaissance fluffy. It's not robust.

I mean, there's genius in it, but when you go to the North, the Northern Renaissance, where the Reformation really took hold, I think, yes, that's Christian art in terms of the categories. So, I think they redeemed it and produced, the output was unbelievable.

So, they weren't against it at all. I think they redeemed it. And, just, I think, I have to say, occasionally, the Catholic side has produced something like the Adoration of the Mystic Land, which has a profound biblical message.

[48 : 34] And today, in classical music, James Macmillan, Scottish composer, he's unbelievable. I have no doubt he has real faith. And I think he's reflecting biblical categories in a profound way.

We're the evangelicals, they should be doing that too. In the world of classical music, I do a music listening session at Labrie quite often, look at the top ten composers in the world today, and eight of the ten are working profoundly within a Christian worldview, but they're either Catholic or Orthodox. There's not one single Protestant evangelical I can go to. But also on that musical one, you see the strong choral tradition in the English church, which was then pretty well, well, it would have been lost if the Puritans had their way.

Yeah, I think we've been too hard on the Puritans. They were very hard in drama, but a lot of them were actually were very enthusiastic about encouraging and regenerating music within the church. I see some evidence. I'll put you onto a book after where this argument is made. I'd like to know how the evangelical church would commission artists and maintain the usual church disciplines without dividing their commissioning of the artists.

[50 : 06] That's one. Two, visual arts church. It's very important in our test of worship of God. It seems to be just this completely New Testament.

Is that appropriate? We should seem to bring the visual arts back into our worship? It's very by two questions.

So if we were going to bring a system of patronage, it's a very good question, into the evangelical church and support, a group of churches support an artist, really encourage them to, with their gift to get on, your point was how would they fit coherently within the church?

I could just see very quickly an artist creating a piece of work that a church, one of its holy churches decided wasn't quite difficult.

I see the problems. And I'm just asking for a framework. I think what is needed is a lot of conversation between the more left brained type people, the more analytic people, and the more artistic people.

[51 : 24] Because I work at Labrie, I hear these conversations almost every day. And they talk past each other, and they're not communicating, because the stream of rationality, the analytic stream, and the stream of imagination function quite differently.

So there's often a lot of confusion. So the analytic, theological mind says, that's heretical, and they give their reasons, and then the artists from their imagination, they're loving the Bible, this is not heretical, this is what I'm doing.

I find that conversation is very, very helpful and fruitful. I tend to be stronger on the analytic side, but being at Labrie and meeting hundreds of really good artists over the years has actually been very, very good for me.

It's broadened me out and helped me to see the world in a slightly different way. So I would say we just need to be patient and to have lots of conversation, allow the artists to explain. A lot of artists, I'd be honest, aren't terribly good at explaining their artwork, and they can get quite frustrated, and so I constantly say to them be more patient and feel people's questions.

What was your second question? Visual arts. Visual arts and worship. I don't think we can draw an argument directly from the pages of the New Testament, because the New Testament says actually very little about the detail of what went on in worship in terms of how did they sit, did they stand, and in terms of all our worship has a ritual that governs it.

[52 : 55] We go through certain liturgy, all of us, in terms of whether we have a hymn sandwich or however we do it, we have a certain liturgy that governs our worship. We don't know how it worked in the New Testament, so I wouldn't use the New Testament itself as it changed what was going on in the Old Testament.

I would say this, that the early church fathers and then the Protestant reformers recognized the danger of the visual in worship, and they recognized that Christianity is logo-centric, it's word-centered first, and that the icon or the sculpture can easily become idolatrous.

And it's interesting, Islamic thought is the same, that representations are dangerous, especially in worship. So I would say in terms of patronage, we don't have to bring the artwork into the center of our worship.

I don't think it needs to be incorporated there. I think our worship, I'm more for a logo-based thing there, but that's not the whole of church life. there's other parts of church life where I think we can bring out the visual in terms of our paintings.

It's a big question, but that would be my brief answer to that. I just asked about the transit nature of art. Sometimes a performance is beautiful art, beautiful music, beautiful girls, beautiful piece of food on a plate.

[54 : 28] Sometimes that's consumed. it's not passed on. Yep. Yeah. I think the memory can be passed on. I mean, it's a good question.

Is culinary art, is it really an art? Is food an art? This is where we get into some struggles in terms of our definitions. things. Sorry to interrupt.

It's really funny, isn't it, when you have an artistic looking piece of food, you don't want to consume it. Yeah. You want to look at it. That's right. And not consume it.

Yeah. Because it's got that kind of non-consumative thing you were talking about. Yeah, yeah, that's right. People say, I don't want to wreck this. That's right. And the first one, it does. I feel really guilty.

You just want someone to do it first. They're hungry. Yeah. Yeah. The performance art is in terms of, it's quite a post-modern idea in art, performance art.

[55 : 27] And the whole idea is that it was a one-off that could never ever be repeated. I'm not saying it's not art. I have a little bit of a problem with that.

Performance is core to music, but you then repeat it. I love jazz, and what I like about jazz is you repeat it, but it's not going to be exactly the same. Because improvisation is at the core of jazz. But actually, there's still a structure and a form, and it's going to come back in some way. Yeah. The post-modern theory behind performance art, I think, is quite bleak.

So, yeah, it is art, but I'm not sure about it. Would you have a definition of long-crested art? What the devil can stand in, very easily. Yeah, well, as I say, I think you could have a Christian doing something which is very non-Christian in terms of how it functions.

[56 : 32] I would say this, we need to be careful with our children in terms of what they're exposed to on the moral side, but Christians have tended to judge art primarily, some exclusively, through what I call the moral lens.

if there's a swear word in it, it's not Christian. And that's a bit of a shame, I think. It's one of the ways that you analyze, because we haven't talked about how you read a piece of work.

One of the ways you read it is what is its moral universe. And what does it say about, well, if someone swears, what is that reflecting?

Is it saying that swearing is good? Is it saying it's bad? Is it neutral? Is it gratuitous? Is it non-gratuitous? But there's many other filters through which we need to read a piece of art. And my experience, and I come from the same background as you did, that if there's any kind of swearing in a piece of art or in a novel, that's it.

[57 : 32] You just cast it off because it's not Christian. And I think we have to get past that. There was a great moment in our house when my father was railing against Harry Potter. And my father went out of the room and my mother removed the dust jacket from the book when she was reading Harry Potter.

Smiling at me. I was being really great. I love listening to you. You make me think. And that is a good, good thing. Would you, oh, we should say this.

This Jaron Barth's book, David Holder, Echoes of Eden, which is, I skinned up over the last couple of days. Very, very good. I've only got three or four copies, but read that. I think it's written in that kind of Jaron.

Would you pray for us? I'd love to. Father, we thank you for all the wonderful gifts of your creation. Thank you for the beauty of the natural world, which we enjoy in these summer months.

It's such a delight to be in this country, the color that surrounds us. And we thank you also for the gift of art that we've reflected on briefly tonight. And we thank you for how it enriches our life, it nourishes our inner being.

[58 : 46] we haven't addressed it much. Father, we do live in a world where there is a terrible corruption in terms of artistic output. Much of it is so toxic. But we thank you that in amidst the toxicity and rubbish that there is still so much, which gives pleasure.

And we thank you that in the pleasure of art, we share in your pleasure. We thank you that the devil did not invent pleasure, but that you did. And we pray that you would help us to be discerning as we engage art and to be joyful.

joyful as we find that which is good and true and beautiful. So we pray that you would bless this church, for any in this church who have a special interest in the arts.

I pray that you would encourage them where they often feel discouraged. And I pray that you would give us hope as we face a world which is in such decay.

And we thank you that in your son, Jesus Christ, creation will one day be fully restored. Culture will manifest. Beauty in all the ways that you originally intended.

[59 : 49] And we look forward to that recovery when it comes fully. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.