

Distinguished Faculty Address
School of the Arts
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“Leveraging the Arts for the Mission of God”
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Dean Hopkins, fellow faculty, staff, and students, thank you for being here and for this opportunity to deliver this distinguished faculty address today. I truly consider this opportunity an honor, and it is also an honor to be part of the Samford family with you. I also want to extend a welcome to the freshmen. You are in a wonderful place at an *unusually* wonderful time.

In this brief lecture today, my topic is “Leveraging Arts for the Mission of God.” When I refer to arts or art, I am referring to a general expression of creative skill and/or imagination. This is found in each of our departments: Art and Design; Theatre and Dance; Music; and Ministry. So, no one receives a pass today.

Art has the ability to move us toward truth (or away from truth). It has the ability to bring comfort in chaos and hope when all seems hopeless. It brings encouragement to the downcast and expands vision when we are nearsighted.

Artists bring ideas and emotions to life. We are affected by art and artists every day, whether this is related to our Spotify playlist, the construction and interior design of our dorms, the photograph on the wall at the doctor’s office, the monologue and dance steps we still remember when we watched our first musical, or the liturgy we experienced this past Sunday with our churches. Art abounds. It is part of the created order, for the ability to create comes from the Divine Creator.

Unfortunately, the Church’s relationship with the arts has a bittersweet history, one in which She has only leveraged a small percentage of the people of God for His mission in the world. This must change.

In this lecture, I hope to accomplish two things:

- 1) I want to summarize, very briefly, how the Church has often thought of art;**
- 2) I want to challenge you to consider three things that Christ-followers can do to best position themselves to leverage their art for God’s mission in the world.**

Arts and Church History

For the sake of time, I must beg your pardon (especially the historians among us) and ask that you allow me to make some quick general statements regarding the Church and Her artists. Perhaps in a future setting, Lord willing, we can develop these matters.

While there are exceptions, the Church has generally placed artistic expressions (and artists) into four categories:

- 1) **Category 1: Godly Art – Attitude: Let’s Use It:** Art is for Christians and expressed in Christian venues. Such art does bear witness to Christ, but must be encountered within Christian settings (e.g., sanctuary).
- 2) **Category 2: Ungodly Art – Attitude: Let’s Avoid It:** Simply because these artistic expressions fail to have overtly Christian concepts they are considered too worldly and discouraged. **Note:** This is NOT the perspective that says “avoid temptation and sin,” but rather avoid this art because it simply fails to be useful in the worshipping community.
- 3) **Category 3: Sacred/Secular (divided) Art – Attitude: Let’s Keep the Sacred and Secular Separated:** The Christian life is dichotomized: faith is private and separated from your vocation (public artistic expressions). Sacred Art is to be enjoyed in private Christian context (worship gathering, television, radio, podcast); and 2) Secular Art is also to be enjoyed, but in the marketplace, and permissible for Christians if it does not tempt them to sin.
- 4) **Category 4: Who-Cares-about-Art? - Attitude: Let’s not be concerned about Art:** Apathy defines this view. This is a take-it-or-leave it attitude when it comes to art. Art is not really a big deal in the Church and Christian faith.

Throughout history, including our present, these four approaches and attitudes have existed in various degrees among various groups. I share this list to say to future church leaders, particularly those in the Christian Ministry department, that we must be a catalyst for change in our churches when it comes to the value of the arts and their place in God’s mission.

While things are improving, artists who are Christians, often have been marginalized by the Church. And young artists who desire to be disciplined and taught to think biblically about their vocations have failed to experience this desired guidance. And whenever the Church fails to disciple Her artists, the culture most definitely will.

When I sensed the Lord was leading me into pastoral ministry, I approached my pastor for guidance. He encouraged me, prayed for me, gave me an opportunity to preach, and that was it. Unfortunately, my story is not exceptional. However, years later, I started to wonder, if this is how the Church shepherds her future leaders into church vocations, how much less does She shepherd her artists into the marketplace!

Leveraging the Arts for the Mission of God

As Christ-followers, we position ourselves to leverage the arts for God's mission in God's world when do at least three things:

- 1) We understand our relationship to the *imago Dei* and the *missio Dei*.
- 2) We incorporate a biblical worldview into our art.
- 3) We place our art, as an act of worship, into the hands of God for His use.

First, as Christ-followers, we position ourselves to leverage the arts for God's mission in God's world when:

We Understand Our Relationship to the *Imago Dei* and the *Missio Dei*

These terms have been translated as *image of God* and *mission of God*, respectively. Most of us are familiar with people being created in the *imago Dei* from Genesis 1:27:

**“So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).**

However, we often overlook the *missio Dei* (i.e., mission of God) which is found in the following verse:

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28).

In Genesis 1 we are given a picture of a God who imagines and then creates and then sculps creation to His desire.

This artistic ability of imagination, creation, and sculpting is then given to Adam and Eve from the very beginning. With God as the ultimate ruler, Adam and Eve were to rule over the earth as God's vice-regents (Gen 1:26-28). And as Creator, He expected them to create.

The command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” over it (Gen 1:28) was a call to create and produce culture. The ability to work the garden of Eden (Gen 1:15) and name the animals (Gen 2:19-20) was about the development of culture and order to what God had set in place. They were joining God in His mission which is to fill the world with His image bearers who would bring glory to Him.

It is important to note that when sin enters the world in Genesis 3, the *imago Dei* and the *missio Dei* are affected but not destroyed. For example:

Imago Dei: People continue to remain created in the image of God, but are now separated from the Creator and death comes into the world (Gen 3:19). Their social relationships (Gen 3:16) and work (Gen 3:17-18) are affected by the Fall. However, women and men still have the ability to imagine, create, design, and sculpt within the created order.

Missio Dei: The mission of God is still to see the earth filled with His image bearers (a command given to Noah in Genesis 9:1, and mentioned in Isa 45:18), but now these image bearers must turn from the sin that separates them from God with the expectation that somehow and someday the offspring of the woman will destroy the Tempter (Gen 3:15).

So, from the beginning of the Scriptures, we encounter an artistic God, whose mission is that His earth is to be filled with His image bearers that glorify Him by creating culture that is reflective of His people.

As Christ-followers, we position ourselves to leverage the arts for God's mission in God's world when:

We Incorporate a Biblical Worldview into Our Art

What does it mean for a Christian to make art? Or, another way to think about this matter: What is the difference between the art of someone who is a Christian and someone who is not? I want you to consider these questions in your journey.

I would submit to you that the element that makes art Christian is *not* that the art overtly deals with religious subject matter. It may, but that is not the element. Rather, it is the expression of a biblical worldview that is critical.

The Lordship of Christ is over all of a person, including his or her art.

In his book, *Art and the Bible*, philosopher Francis Schaffer wrote,

[T]he art of an artist who never paints the head of Christ, never once paints an open tomb, may be magnificent Christian art. For some artists there is a place for religious themes, but an artist does not need to be conscience stricken if he [or she] does not paint in this area. Some Christian artists will never use religious themes. This is a freedom the artist

has in Christ under the leadership of the Holy Spirit (*Art and the Bible*, ebook, location 584).

In his book, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*, Tim Keller's comments are helpful as we consider these thoughts:

So when we say that Christians work from a gospel worldview, it does not mean that they are constantly speaking about Christian teaching in their work. Some people think of the gospel as something we are principally to 'look at' in our work. This would mean that Christian musicians should play Christian music, Christian writers should write stories about conversion, and Christian businessmen and -women should work for companies that make Christian-themed products and services for Christian customers. Yes, some Christians in those fields would sometimes do well to do those things, but it is a mistake to think that the Christian worldview is operating only when we are doing such overtly Christian activities. Instead, think of the gospel as a set of glasses through which you 'look' at everything else in the world. Christian artists, when they do this faithfully, will not be completely beholden either to profit or to naked self-expression; and they will tell the widest variety of stories." (Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 181).

As Christ-followers, we position ourselves to leverage the arts for God's mission in God's word when:

We Place Our Art, as an Act of Worship, into the Hands of God for His Use

Roberta R. King in her book *Global Arts and Christian Witness*, writes, "[T]he arts possess profound abilities to symbolically capture values, reveal worldview themes, shape identity, and communicate with impact in culturally appropriate ways" (15).

As artists you have a powerful ability to move people. How will you use this ability? How will you leverage art in a world that suffers both physically and spiritually?

Jesus once told his disciples that "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). He was not stating that they would be unable to make great accomplishments or achieve great feats. Rather, he was stating that apart from Him, their greatest achievements and creations are nothing in the Kingdom of God.

We must keep in mind that while artists have great power, the ability to transform the human heart is not found within ourselves. This means that in and of themselves, our notes played, steps taken, collages arranged, buildings built, and yes, even sermons preached, cannot transform the human heart before a holy God. Only the Holy Spirit and the gospel are capable of producing such change.

As artists we have been given an incredible capability, often beyond the norm, to connect with people on a rational, emotional, and physical level. May we steward this well for God's mission in the world wherever He takes us with our art. For the Apostle John described a vision he saw of the throne room of God:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev 7:9-10).

A time is coming when gathered around the throne of God will be an ethnically, linguistically, and nationally diverse multitude (Rev 7:9). Would it not be wonderful, on that day, knowing that we and our art were used by God to populate that gathering?

Concluding Thoughts

Students:

- 1) Proverbs says, "Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life" (Prov 4:23); your heart affects your art. Take responsibility for your emotions, thoughts, actions, and words to express yourself. As followers of Jesus, do your expressions reveal the perspective of the Kingdom of Christ? Francis Schaffer once wrote, "Even for the great artist, the most crucial work of art is his [or her] life" (*Art and the Bible*, ebook, location 288). Roberta R. King in her book *Global Arts and Christian Witness*, writes "Artists who can shape and form others through their art need shaping and forming themselves" (154). Walk intimately with the Divine Artist, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path. . . and art (Prov 3:5).
- 2) You will need to figure out the best mediums for which to communicate your art in the world. How will you learn from the past and express yourself to a modern audience? You must know yourself, abilities, history, your medium, and God's Word and God's world. Great artists should be great theologians and disciple makers.
- 3) Do not confuse a single work of art with your collection of art over time. No single work of art can express the totality of your worldview, just as no sermon can reveal everything a minister believes. Allow your body of work, over time, to say everything you need to say to the world. This is true in the art of sermon development. In my preaching classes, I learned that it is a poor sermon if I try to put everything into it that that reveals everything I know about a biblical worldview.

Colleagues:

- 1) Teach your students the biblical worldview and how that should shape their artistic expressions.
- 2) Samford is not a Church. However, because of possible student backgrounds, including Church contexts that may have marginalized them as artists, we need to understand how to shepherd our students well into global marketplace for God's glory.
- 3) Our students need to be in an environment whereby their artistic expressions are influenced the modeling high quality skills, practical knowledge, encouragement, and prayer. Are we working to create and maintain such an atmosphere?

The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization produced a paper titled "Redeeming the Arts," (Lausanne Occasional Paper #46). Its conclusion challenged readers to have a vision of the possible when it comes to the use of the arts in God's mission in the world.

I conclude with a portion from that paper:

- 1) **Envision a future** in which the church worldwide will integrate into its theological foundations a response to God's gifts of beauty and creativity that will value and empower Christian engagement in and enjoyment of the arts.
- 2) **Envision a future** in which the community of faith is at the forefront of artistic innovation that will be celebrated in the corporate life of the church and its individual members, in the local cultural marketplace, and in the global entertainment industry.
- 3) **Envision a future** in which all children are able to explore, discover, and develop their creative abilities, and where those with special gifts are given the encouragement and opportunity to study and develop their God-given creativity to its fullest potential.
- 4) **Envision a future** in which students in seminaries and missionary training schools are required to study and experience the arts for their own development, understanding, and preparation for pastoral and mission leadership and service.
- 5) **Envision a future** in which business and arts leaders work together in partnership to ensure that kingdom resources are gifted or invested into strategic arts initiatives.

- 6) **Envision a future** in which art patronage is once again seen as a responsibility of the church, enabling great works of art to be produced that will affirm our story, celebrate our common humanity, challenge our thinking, enrich our world, and bring glory to God.
- 7) **Envision a future** in which the arts are a partner in local and global community development projects that bring healing and hope to the poor and needy, the abused and marginalized, and children at risk.
- 8) **Envision a future** in which the church in all people groups will reinforce the biblical narrative, pass it on to the next generation, and celebrate the goodness of God within their own cultural framework and with their own indigenous instruments and art forms.
- 9) **Envision a future** in which mission organizations will value the partnership of artists and the arts in fulfilling the Great Commission, as consultants in indigenous hymnody and contextualization, and in the task of church planting and cultural restoration.
- 10) **Envision a future** in which information will be available to promote the active global networking of Christians in the arts in order to encourage, discuss, strategize, identify and share resources, and facilitate diverse creative partnerships.
- 11) **Envision a future** in which artists will desire to be excellent in their craft, spiritually mature in their walk, humble in their attitude, servant-hearted in motivation, moral in lifestyle, and uncompromising in their obedience to Christ.
- 12) **Envision a future** in which Christians in every diverse cultural context of our world are continually involved in a lifestyle of intentional, premeditated acts of creativity and beauty, pointing to the day in which the Original Artist will “make all things new.”

Could Samford University’s School of the Arts be part of such a future? Could we be known not just for great professors and a great placement rate after graduation, but for faculty, staff, and graduates who know that Christ does not expect them to dichotomize their faith and art—but use the two in the marketplace (as well as the Church) for His glory among the nations?