

## **Art May Serve as a Means of Grace**

[S.T. 223; May, 2000]

*by Nathan Wagenknecht*

“Wouldn’t this money be better spent on missions?” That is the argument some well meaning Christians raise when others suggest buying high quality artwork--be it a painting, sculpture, symbol, or any other form--to adorn their church. What that statement shows, however, is a lack of understanding of the complete mission of the church, or at least a misunderstanding of what role art may play in that mission. Yes, indeed, Christ has commissioned his church to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). We are to do mission work among those who do not yet know that Jesus is their Savior, but also included in making disciples is “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” which means we are to train and edify those who are already believers. The church therefore has a twofold purpose--both to do mission work among unbelievers and to educate and edify believers.

Our Lord tells us how we are to carry out both of those purposes when he says, “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15). God gives us only one tool for converting the unbeliever and strengthening the believer; that tool is the gospel, the good news about Jesus. We call this tool the means of grace. The question before us then is: What role does art have in the means of grace?

### ***WHAT IS THE MEANS OF GRACE?***

By nature, man is totally corrupt (Is 64:6), spiritually dead (Eph 2:1,5), opposed to God (Rom 8:7), and bound for hell (Rom 6:23). Because natural man is ignorant of salvation and

wants nothing to do with it, God must act first (Rom 9:16). God makes that “first move” by revealing to man in the gospel the fact that he has reconciled man to himself through Christ (2 Cor 5:18). He has given man this message of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19) through the preaching of his word (1 Cor 1:21; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47) and in the sacraments of baptism (Ac 2:38; 1 Cor 6:11) and the Lord’s Supper (Mt 26:26-28; 1 Cor 10:16-17).

We use the term *the means of grace* for the gospel in word and sacrament because God uses his word and the sacraments to offer his grace to man, thereby effecting faith (Ro 10:17; Jn 20:31) and strengthening that faith (2 Tm 3:16-17). While the sacraments have been instituted by Christ and may not change form--Baptism must be an application of water and the word, the Lord’s Supper must be an eating of bread, drinking of the fruit of the vine, and the word--the “word” is not restricted to only the visible word written with letters nor to only the audible word expressed with sounds, but it includes any mode of conveying a thought. If the word were limited to the written letters, how could a blind person come to faith? If it were limited to the audible sounds, how could a deaf person believe? Again, if the word were limited only to visible letters and/or audible sounds, we would have to maintain the original written and spoken languages, and no translation would be the word of God because we are forbidden from changing God’s word (Dt 4:2; Re 22:18-19). Rather, the “word” is the *message* of the gospel as it is expressed in any form.

Pieper explains that “the gospel is such a means of grace in every form in which it reaches men, whether it be preached, or printed, or expressed as a formal absolution, or pictured in

symbols or types, or pondered in the heart, and so forth.”<sup>1</sup>[1] The gospel may reach man by being preached: “Jesus said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved’” (Mk 16:15-16); and “repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Lk 24:47). The gospel may be in the printed word: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus in the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31); and “we write [what we have seen and heard] to make our joy complete” (1 Jn 1:3-4). The gospel may be a formal absolution: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven” (Jn 20:23). The gospel may be pictured in symbols or types: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14-15). The gospel may even strengthen one’s faith by being pondered in the heart: “I have hidden your word in my heart” (Ps 119:11); and “ ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart’, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming” (Ro 10:8).

Admittedly, the majority of Bible passages refer to the spoken word because that is the most common form of communication (all cultures communicate orally, not all cultures are literate), but we are reminded that the word is not limited to the spoken word. The gospel may take many different forms; what determines if something is the gospel or not is that the **message** is conveyed.

### ***ART MAY SERVE AS A MEANS OF GRACE***

As one reads the Scriptures, he cannot help but notice that the Holy Spirit often paints a picture in our minds with the use of figurative language. Consider our Lord’s use of parables to

---

<sup>1</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Volume III* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 106.

express spiritual truths by means of earthly, physical objects. Or consider how “in order to give us some conception of the glory of our inheritance, the Bible pictures it to us in terms of this life; e.g., as a wedding (Mt 25:10; Rev 19:9), as a feast (Mt 8:11; Lk 13:29), as a sitting upon thrones (Lk 22:30).”<sup>2</sup>[2] Luther points out the natural result:

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?<sup>3</sup>[3]

Art, correctly used, simply takes the image that the mind naturally forms from the descriptive language of Scripture and places it in an external medium seen with the eyes.

This art has a good use. “External images, parables, and signs are good and useful: they illustrate a thing so that it can be grasped and retained.”<sup>4</sup>[4] For this reason art, pictures and images were used during times of illiteracy as an aid in teaching Bible history, as Paustian explains:

When it comes right down to it, the “Golden Age” of symbolism was the Middle Ages. There are many reasons why this was a good time for the growth and greatest use of symbolism, most obvious is the illiteracy of the peasants. Churches in those times were covered from top to bottom with symbols, because the ministers would tell the people Bible stories and point out the symbols which referred to the stories. The peasants are said to have understood quite well what the symbols stood for, and so they became extremely meaningful to them.<sup>5</sup>[5]

---

<sup>2</sup>Pieper, 552.

<sup>3</sup>Helmut Lehmann, gen. ed., *Luther's Works: Volume 40* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 99f.

<sup>4</sup>A quote attributed to Luther. Carl Christensen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), 60.

<sup>5</sup>Mark Paustian, “Christian Symbolism--The Signature of History on St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Watertown, Wisconsin” (an essay located at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, Mequon, WI), 5f.

Along these same lines, many people may reach the point of preferring art over books. “Ordinary people are caught more easily by analogies and illustrations than by difficult and subtle discussions; they would rather look at a well-drawn picture than a well-written book.”<sup>6</sup>[6]

Art is further useful and beneficial as it brings to one’s mind an entire Bible story or biblical truth. Chemnitz quotes the church father Germanus as saying, “The things anyone has previously read or heard, if he again sees them represented in a picture, it recalls to his memory what he has previously heard and read.”<sup>7</sup>[7]

Art, then, serves as a means of grace when it is used to express the gospel message. It serves as a means of grace for believers only, however, because only believers know the gospel meaning of the image or symbol depicted. One must be taught the message of the gospel--perhaps in conjunction with pictures and images, but the message must be *explained*--then art may be used to remind him of what he has learned and thereby strengthen his faith by the gospel. Allow me to use the example of the Chi-rho symbol. The meaning of an “x” with a “p” in the middle of it is unknown until it is taught that “x” and “p” are the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek; then the Chi-rho symbol takes on meaning and reminds the believer about Christ.

We also point out here that if the art is not related to the gospel message, neither is it a means of grace. For this reason our confessions state: “The chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ.”<sup>8</sup>[8] Allow me to use a picture of the

---

<sup>6</sup>Luther, quoted in Christensen, 60.

<sup>7</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part IV* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 110.

<sup>8</sup>*Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: 1917), Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV--Of the Mass, paragraph 3, 65. The quote is a slightly different translation used in Christensen, 59, who uses Tappert (cf. endnote in Christensen).

crucifixion as an example. We will place a picture of the crucifixion in our church because it is connected to the gospel; we will not, however, place Andy Warhol's "Soup can" in the church because it does not convey the gospel message.

### ***ONE EXTREME: IDOLATRY***

While we recognize the value of art for the believer, and even recognize that it may serve as a means of grace when it brings the gospel message to mind, we maintain that art is not to be worshiped. Some churches, however, overestimate art and images to the point where they worship the image itself. The Roman Catholic Church is one such church. Their official doctrine as decreed at the Council of Trent states:

[The holy synod enjoins] that images of Christ, of the Virgin Bearer of God, and of other saints are to be had and retained particularly in the churches, and that due honor and veneration be shown them; not as though it were believed that any divinity or power resided in them, on account of which they are to be worshiped, or that anything should be requested of them, or that trust should be placed in images, as was formerly done by the heathen,...but because the honor which is shown them is bestowed on the prototypes they represent, so that through the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover our head and bow down, we may adore Christ, and venerate the saints whose similitude the images bear.<sup>9</sup>[9]

Since the idolatrous Roman Catholic veneration of Mary and the saints is a topic in and of itself, we will limit ourselves to the worship of the *images* of Christ and the saints. The Roman Catholic Church maintains that they do not worship the image itself, but rather the "prototype" which an image represents. Chemnitz quotes some of their arguments: "It is written: 'Thy face, Lord, do I seek' (Ps. 27:8), likewise: 'The rich of the people will pray or supplicate your countenance' (Ps. 45:12). But images are the face or countenance of God. Therefore images are

---

<sup>9</sup>Chemnitz, 53.

to be adored with prayers and supplications.”<sup>10</sup>[10] And again: “In the Old Testament the fathers worshiped the ark and the cherubim, who had the form of a man. Therefore we also will adore God Himself in the same manner, before images.”<sup>11</sup>[11]

Thomas Aquinas also tries to defend worship of the images by saying that they are not worshipping the image itself: “An image, apart from its representational function, has no claim to veneration,” and “Religion does not offer worship to images considered as mere things in themselves, but as images drawing us to God incarnate. Motion to an image does not stop there at the image, but goes on to the thing it represents.”<sup>12</sup>[12] A Roman Catholic book of confession states, “We must honor the images not for themselves, but as reminders of what they represent...otherwise it would be idolatry.”<sup>13</sup>[13]

The Lord, however, does not allow us to worship him *through* images. Laban had household gods which Rachel stole for Jacob’s household, but Scripture calls them “foreign gods” (Gen 35:2). Micah made for himself an idol and claimed to worship and invoke the LORD through that idol. The Danites eventually took the idol for themselves and also claimed to worship the LORD, even inquiring to know the future through it (Jg 17 and 18). Yet Samuel refers to all such things as divination and, therefore, rebellion (I Sam 15:23). This was idolatry because they did not have a command nor a promise of God to worship him in that way before statues. Neither do we have a command nor a promise that we should worship God through images.

Furthermore upon closer inspection, we see that, while their doctrine claims not to

---

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.* 120.

<sup>11</sup>*ibid.* 121

<sup>12</sup>Christensen, 21.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.*

worship the images, in practice they truly do worship the image itself. Chemnitz supplies a host of historical examples in which the images themselves are adored and credited with power.

Consider the plethora of miracles and healings attributed to the images and statues of the saints:

“If I were at home, I could take away all your pains with a waxen image of my saints,” and “When I was sick, I ordered them to bring an image of Christ to me...I laid it on the place that hurt, and the sickness was driven out,” among other claims of miracles.<sup>14</sup>[14] “When I have an image of Christ, it seems to me that through it I have and adore Christ himself.”<sup>15</sup>[15] Also, “If anyone looking upon and adoring the image of Christ says...‘This is Christ,’ he does not sin.”<sup>16</sup>[16]

Prayers used for consecrating images also show a direct worship of the image itself. One prayer asks that wood be empowered to grant healing: “Let this wood of the cross be sanctified, that those who pray and bow down before it may for God’s sake find before this cross healing of body and mind.”<sup>17</sup>[17] Another prayer asks that a statue of Mary be given saving power: “Sanctify, O God, this form of the blessed Virgin, that it may bring saving help to Your faithful.”<sup>18</sup>[18]

Although the Roman Catholic Church preaches about doing away with superstitions, they themselves promote superstitions by worshiping and ascribing divine power to images and statues. Scripture clearly prohibits and condemns this [Ex 20:4-5; Lv 26:1; Dt 5:8-9].

### ***THE OPPOSTIE EXTREME: LEGALISTIC PROHIBITION OF ART***

---

<sup>14</sup>Chemnitz, 117ff.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.* 118.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.* 118.

<sup>17</sup>Chemnitz, 140.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*

As people realized the idolatry of the Roman Catholic Church during the time of the Reformation and tried to oppose it, some men went too far to the opposite extreme. One such man was Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. In 1522 he published a pamphlet under the title “On the abolishing of the images, and that there should be no beggars among Christians” in which he called for the total abolition of statues and figurative paintings in the churches.<sup>19</sup>[19] He would use John 6:63, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing,” to teach that since God is a spirit and should be worshiped spiritually, visible and external acts of worship are essentially useless,<sup>20</sup>[20] the material being unable to convey spiritual value.<sup>21</sup>[21] He would further defend the absolute abolition of all images with Deuteronomy 7:5, “Break down their altars.”

Another man who called for the abolition of images was Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland. The extent to which these men prohibited images is shown in an event in Zurich, 1524. They had pressured the city council to order the removal of all images, and once the removal was approved, “at the end of two weeks every church had been cleared of statues, paintings, murals, altar decorations, votive lamps and carved choir stalls. The walls of each church were also whitewashed.”<sup>22</sup>[22]

Their motive for removing the images may have been good--to stop the image worship of the Roman Catholic Church--yet they went too far when they absolutely prohibited all art and images. They became guilty of legalism by prohibiting something God has not prohibited.

What God does prohibit in the law is the *adoration* or *worship* of images as the Roman

---

<sup>19</sup>Christensen, 24.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* 26.

<sup>21</sup>Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 60.

<sup>22</sup>Eire, 83.

Church does. Scripture itself shows that the making and use of images, if they are not set up for adoration and worship, is not simply forbidden. Consider how Jacob set up a stone as a memorial (that is, a reminder of what had happened) and even poured oil on it, yet he was not rebuked for it (Gn 28:18-22). Consider the account in Joshua 22 where the two and a half tribes on the west of the Jordan built an altar, and the children of Israel approved it and praised the LORD, but only *after* they were assured that the altar was not built for worship. Again, consider how the LORD commanded Moses to make a bronze snake as a sign to the people (Nu 21:8; Jn 3:14,15), and the children of Israel preserved it for more than 700 years *until* some began to burn incense to it and worship it. At that time, King Hezekiah broke the serpent in pieces (2 Kg 18:4).

Images themselves, therefore, are not prohibited; rather the adoration of images is prohibited. Chemnitz explains it well:

Because God Himself showed such images in visions, even as it is not a sin to express such stories of visions in words, so also it will not be a sin to represent such stories of Scripture historically, for historical use, in pictures, if only this remains fixed, that the essence of the Godhead neither should nor can be expressed by any figure or image.<sup>23</sup>[23]

### ***PRACTICAL APPLICATION***

Art does have a proper role in the church. To the extent that it brings the gospel message to mind when one sees a picture or symbol that communicates the gospel, it is a means of grace. God himself speaks to us in picturesque language, and art may be used to convey the same message before our eyes. Since God has created man with various senses, it is beneficial and edifying to make use of all of them--as God himself does by including earthly elements in the sacraments.

An additional benefit of high quality artwork is in the realm of “pre-evangelism.” While we recognize that art in and of itself does not bring anyone to faith, it may play a preliminary role. Chemnitz quotes Germanus: “When the ignorant see such things placed before their eyes through pictures, they take occasion from it to inquire and investigate the histories.”<sup>24</sup>[24] In this way, art may open the door and provide an opportunity to share the gospel by explaining what the picture, image, or symbol means.

As the Christian struggles with the question, “Wouldn’t this money be better spent on missions?” he is to use his Christian judgment to decide how to make use of the gifts God has given. At the same time, he should not overlook the benefit of quality artwork in the church. Art does serve the mission of the church because it edifies believers by communicating the gospel.

---

<sup>23</sup>Chemnitz, 80.

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.* 110.