



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
WORSHIP STUDIES

*Entering His*  
*Courts With Praise (1) -*  
A Study Of The Role Of  
Music And The Arts  
In Worship

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As some of you know, the elders of our congregation have mandated me into a program of studies, which is serving as a period of sabbatical renewal. It's with the *Institute For Worship Studies*. The degree program is structured with four units of course study, followed by a time of dissertation preparation. Each of the four course units has, as part of the requirements, a mandate to teach a course in the local congregation.

The whole point of the degree is not only to train and equip church pastoral staff, but to bring the entire congregation along in that training. The *Institute* wants to see us travel this road together. Hence the course.

That's also why, by the way, I'm sending along copies of the papers and reflective articles that I write to council members and worship leaders here at Calvin. If others of you want to be on that mailing list, and kept in the loop, drop me an email.

Last February we explored a unit entitled *Learning To Worship With All Your Heart*. We focused particularly on the Old Testament, and how the God-mandated worship practices and traditions there formed what developed into New Testament worship. From there we considered how that evolved into what we do today.

We also thought a little about some areas where, perhaps, we could grow in our experiences and practices of worship. What are some of the biblical guides and fences to our liturgical practices? We talked about something known as the *Regulative Principle* – when it comes to worship practices as a gathered people of God:

If the Scripture mandates it, we'll go there.

If the Scripture forbids it, or doesn't say anything about it, better to stay away from it.

We'll want to keep that principle in mind as we move into exploring the second area of worship study together. It'll be a four week unit which will probe some practical "how to's" of worship. We're calling this unit -

*Enter His Courts With Praise -*

*A Study Of The Role Of Music And The Arts In Worship*

This week is introductory to the whole idea of art and worship.

Next week I'll be away - have to preach in Brockville as part of our congregation's commitment to Classis Eastern Canada.

In two weeks we'll deal with the role of music in worship - the power and the task of music in worship; what does it do and how can it do it.

In three weeks talking about forms of music in worship - what types of music does the scripture speak about; how do they relate to forms of music we experience today.

The last unit will explore the use of various art forms and symbols in worship - what are some of the symbols and rituals used in Christian worship; what are our experiences in Reformed worship; what options may be open for us to explore here at Calvin?

That, then, is where we've come from and where we're headed.

Today, then: Art and worship -  
that's our beginning point.

Do the two even belong in the same conversation?

Someone asked me at one point - "*Pastor, is this necessary? Can't we do without it?*"

And ultimately the answer, when pushed to the wall is - "*Well, no - it is not absolutely necessary.*"

It is not a life-and-death matter; worship can occur without having any artistic element to it.

That's because art in general is what scholars will call a "*second order*" element of life. First order elements are those that deal with the essentials of survival - without them you die. Second order begins to explore how to make that survival more meaning-filled; it expands the borders of our experience in life.

Recently I took in a display of Inuit textile art at the Museum of Civilization. Textile art is a recent addition to northern society, along with carving and painting. In fact, the language of the northern first nations people has no word for "art."

The curator of the exhibit said, "*this is because we've been too busy surviving. Our whole culture is focused on survival skills; when they are done well we live. If not, we die.*"

And so, they have a way to express appreciation for something well crafted and good looking. But the exploration of beauty, craft and art for its own sake, as a separate dimension of social life - until very recently it simply wasn't an option.

Northern culture was, because of the harshness of the climate, focused on first order living.

There are first-order concerns in our culture, too.

Can you think what some of them might be?

[receive input from congregation]

When first order concerns are met,

when you're not worried about having enough to eat, being able to stay warm, having fundamental health care, having a place to call home and a group that will accept you - family

when those immediacies are met we can take life to the next level.

We move on to the second order of living.

In the second order, that which is on the first order a very spartan life, is explored, broadened, enriched, stimulated and beautified.

It's moving beyond "starvation rations."

It's the next level beyond living in a hut or tent.

You can get by without it. But.....

how much you'd be missing!

What a meager existence it would be!

Apply that now to worship.

First order concerns would say that one can worship God alone in a jail cell, and be touched by the Spirit.

A gathered group can worship in a blacked-out basement, away from the eyes of persecuting authorities, and do so to the glory of God.

A family gathered around a hospital bed of a dying loved one can celebrate Holy Communion and be spiritually encouraged.

A group of refugees can meet together in borrowed space, using cast-off hymn books and a tattered bible; sharing learned knowledge and singing songs - and Christ would smile.

That is worship on the first order.

Let **no one** ever deny or minimize such worship.

**BUT**

**EQUALLY SO**

If God provides the ways and means,

as much as we should offer praise to the Lord when worship can occur in such first order ways so much so should we seek to explore and cultivate deeper opportunities and levels of worship.

To paraphrase the vision given to Peter on a roof top in Acts 10 -  
What God provides, and declares good, let not anyone reject.  
Take up and eat!

Worship on the second order; taken to the next level -  
A consideration of such worship isn't limited to, but certainly includes exploration of the arts; worship  
with concern and sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of life;  
that cares about beauty.

In the context of worship, I'd ask you to open your bibles to Psalm 27. Check v.4: *I have asked the Lord for one thing; one thing only do I want:*  
*to live in the Lord's house all my life,*  
*to marvel there at his goodness*  
*and to ask for his guidance.* (TEV)

This is actually a terribly poor translation.  
*Marvel at his goodness* -  
The Hebrew word has nothing to do with goodness.

the KJV says: *to behold the beauty of the Lord*  
the NIV says: *to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.*  
That's far closer to the Hebrew.

God is beautiful.  
He, as Creator, is the originator of all that is good and right and beautiful on earth. Beauty on earth,  
then, is a reflection of His holy beauty.

Our Confessions teach that. Belgic Confession, article 2, says that we come to know God by two ways.  
The greatest way is through His holy and divine Word. It is the ultimate guide for our salvation and for  
living a life to His glory.  
Supporting the divine revelation in the Scriptures is another means for knowing God. Understand that  
the Confession is talking not just in terms of knowing **about** God. It refers to actually coming to **know** God, as  
we come to **know** another person when we grow in relationship with them - personally, rather than in a distant,  
second-hand sort of way.

*We know God..... by the creation, preservation and government of the universe, since that universe is before our  
eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible  
things of God.....*

(Belgic Confession article 2)

Creation points to the Creator.  
The beauty of Creation points to the perfectly beautiful Creator.

Psalm 19 teaches the same thing:  
*"How clearly the sky reveals God's glory..... no speech or words are used, no sound is heard; yet their  
voices goes out to all the world and is heard to the ends of the earth."* (v.1,3,4 TEV)

And the psalm which I read every year with my family when we go camping - Psalm 104. It also describes how  
the beauty of creation shows the greatness and wonder of God.

Beauty -  
God not only has it, and not only places it in creation. He desires it for humanity. Isaiah 61:3  
prophecies about restoration to a broken, grieving people, promising that God will....

*provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of **beauty** instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

God desires our lives be lifted to the second order.

Externally, and internally.

1 Peter 3:4 reminds us that beauty goes much further than externals; it's not just skin deep.

*"...your beauty should consist of your true inner self, the ageless beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of the greatest value in God's sight."*

Beauty -

Beginning with God.

Granted as a gift to creation and to created humanity.

In creation becoming one of the ways we can know God.

The whole area of exploring the world of beauty is part of what we know as the sphere of life called "*the arts*."

God created the world. He created it good, says Genesis 1:31. And He created it with a vast potential to be explored and developed. Humanity became his stewards, charged with that development task:

*"fill the earth and subdue it..."* (Gen 1:28)

It is the great cultural mandate.

Psalm 8 echoes that mandate.

*"You have made humanity ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet..."* (v.6)

That means more than just learning how to mine ore and produce various alloys; more than just learning how to do agriculture in appropriate ways or develop genetic science in an ethically responsible manner.

It includes the world of the arts.

Art is part of good stewardship of the Creation.

It contributes, as Nick Wolterstorff says, to the shalom which God desires his Creation and His created beings to experience.

[*"Evangelicalism And The Arts"*]

Two of the ways it does that are:

1. By displaying, showing, allowing the experience of beauty;
  - the beauty of a creation well made.
  - the beauty of poetic words well formed
  - the grace of a dance well executed
  - the wonder of a painting or a sculpture
  - the passion of a drama
  - the lines of architecture

Reveling in, enjoying, wondering at.... beauty.

That's part of peace, part of whole living, part of shalom -

part of what God looked at and saw to be very good.

And life without the beauty of art, said Abraham Kuyper in his fifth Stone Lecture, is an atrophied existence.

(*"Lectures On Calvinism - Calvinism And Art"* p.143)

2. A second contribution of art to shalom-filled life is its special ability to point beyond itself - to allude to something else, deeper, greater, beyond. It is the witnessing, proclaiming, kerygmatic element of art.

Art has an ability to point to truths, to realities, to possibilities that mere words, perhaps, could not do justice to.

And **that**, more than anything else, is where art and worship connect.

Belgic Confession teaches the scriptural truth that creation points to the Creator.

I'd suggest you not limit this to the world of nature.

Include, in that teaching, all which God has created. Including the world of art. I want to suggest that based on the teaching of Psalm 27.

Psalm 27 tells us that the Psalmist sees the great beauty of God in the context of worshiping at the temple.

*I want to dwell in the house of the Lord... to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple.*

What would the psalmist mean by "*gaze upon the beauty of the Lord*"?

There's an element of looking involved, a looking that draws his whole being into the presence of God.

What would he be looking at?

Those of you who took in the last course on worship, remember?

Do you know where you find most of the Old Testament's references to artists?

It's in the context of building and decorating the worship spaces of Israel - first the tabernacle, and later the temple.

Let's read together from Exodus 31:1-11.

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, 2 "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, 3 and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts-- 4 to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, 5 to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. 6 Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: 7 the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent-- 8 the table and its articles, the pure gold lampstand and all its accessories, the altar of incense, 9 the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, the basin with its stand-- 10 and also the woven garments, both the sacred garments for Aaron the priest and the garments for his sons when they serve as priests, 11 and the anointing oil and fragrant incense for the Holy Place. They are to make them just as I commanded you.

God was not satisfied with a first-order level of worship from His people.

He gifted them, and called them to second-order worship; worship with beauty, worship in an artistic setting.

The worship space, the rituals, even the clothing worn by the priests all had artistic functions:

- they showed beauty
- they pointed to the God of Beauty

Look at Exodus 28, where it speaks of the clothing Aaron and his sons would wear in their role as priests. They could have functioned as priests in their "civies", so to speak. But hear what God commands:

*V.40 - "Make shirts, sashes, and caps for Aaron's sons, to provide them with dignity and beauty."*

Years, later, when Solomon built the temple - same thing. Artists were called to work. Hiram, the bronze worker, makes two huge columns, each 8 metres tall and over 5 meters in circumference. They were topped with intricately cast and carved capitals. They were placed in front of the temple - experts say that they had no structural importance. They were symbolic. You can see that because 1 Kings 7:21 says that these columns were given names:

Boaz for the one, and Jachin for the other.

Boaz means "*in God is strength*"

Jachin means "*God establishes*"

That's what the writer of Psalm 27 would be greeted by when he came to worship. Overwhelming, artistically done, and divinely mandated architecture, rituals and implements that pointed the worshiper to God.

Psalm 50:2 says - "*God shines from Zion, the city perfect in its beauty.*" (TEV)

There is a reveling in God's beauty.

And an unleashing of a collective, worshipful "wow" at the majesty, beauty and creativity of God.

The priest could simply have lectured the people about the greatness of God, about the future that God had in store for His redeemed people.

But he doesn't - because God commanded that there be more to the worship experience of Israel than just that.

Yes, there is talk.

But there is also much more.

That's because the work of God and the person of God is, to use the language of 1 Cor 2:9, beyond what the eye can see and the ear can hear and the mind can conceive.

We can only begin to grasp it.

And the allusory function of art is called into action;

it's ability to exercise the human imagination to begin to plumb truths that in fullness lay, in our existence East of Eden, beyond our sin-tainted grasp.

I don't mean imagination as in dreaming made-up fairy tales or wispy myths.

I mean that deep part inside our souls that can reach beyond the sin-stained world in which we live and move;

the truth for which we reach and long when we pray,

*"Maranatha - come quickly, Lord Jesus."*

Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian pastor and author of *The Message*, writes:

"For Christians, whose largest investment is in the invisible, the imagination is indispensable, for it is only by means of the imagination that we can see reality whole, in context."

[E.Peterson *Subversive Spirituality* p.132]

The Old Testament describes God mandating His people to worship in an imagination-stimulated setting; an artistic setting of symbol through architecture, furniture, clothing, decoration and ritual.

None of these God-mandated worship art forms are not the end product.

They are but servants.

They are messengers, pointing to the Lord Himself.

As C.S. Lewis puts it:

"they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited." [C.S. Lewis "The Weight Of Glory" p.5]

This is the realm where art and worship intersect.

A realm that we do well to explore.

John Calvin talks about people gifted in various creative ways, including the artists of Exodus, Bezalel and company, and the talents they have been granted by the Spirit of God. He challenges us:

*"Let us avail ourselves of that skill, lest, by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth."*

(Inst II.2.16)

People of Calvin - indeed, let us do that.

**AND**

As we explore and grow liturgically in this way, let's be diligent to keep it all in context.

The divine artistic mandate to create worship space and ritual that is full of symbol and stimulates the worshiper's heart and imagination towards heaven -

- that mandate comes a few chapters after Exodus 20 and the 10 commandments, which include the prohibition against idolatry.

Don't make graven images....

Please understand. This commandment:

- Doesn't mean "don't decorate."
- Doesn't prohibit symbol or beauty.

Exodus 28-31, the design of the beautiful worship space in the Tabernacle, come **after** Exodus 20 - both from the mouth of God.

The second commandment means,

"Don't confuse beauty with the Author of all Beauty."

"Don't confuse the symbol with the one to whom the symbol points."

If you read Exodus 32, **one** mere chapter after the description of the Tabernacle's design, you can see how quickly and easily the people did exactly that - created a golden calf and worshiped it.

It's a short step from artistic obedience to heretical idolatry!

And the taking of that step, and then some, led our forefathers to pen the words of the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 96, which warn against the use of images in church.

The Medieval period saw the veneration of images;

spiritual value and power placed in the symbol itself.

**"NO!"** say the Reformers.

And because of the sensitivities and dynamic of the day, they swung the pendulum towards worship in very stark settings.

They brought worship almost to a first-order level.

Which is our heritage.

Plain worship, word-driven, in rather stark surroundings.

This is the aftermath of the Reformation, rather than the command of scripture. The Bible, you see, never counters or nullifies Exodus 28-31. It never issues a divine edict calling for art to be removed from worship.

The challenge for us, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is to explore what this all means for us today. Given our heritage and our history, given our rather plain tradition on the one hand, and the challenge of the Bible with its depiction of the role of the artist in worship - where are we,

in obedience to the Lord

to go from here?