

# IMAGO WORKSHOP

## Creatives and their Creator

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### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you've cringed at a church bulletin that utilized every single font known to man - or maybe a flyer with cutting edge WordArt circa 1995... Or, maybe you've seen amazing and compelling graphics, sounds, and presence from movements and churches that were theologically dubious and wondered, where are the 'solid' Christian creatives? Does solid theology stifle creativity? How do I glorify God as a creative person? These are some of the questions we will look at answering in this workshop.

### The Goal of this workshop

This workshop aims at equipping Christian creatives theologically to think through how their faith informs their creative talents and professional fields. It would be impossible in this time to explore all of the implications of Christianity on creativity, but we hope to leave fruitful food for thought, and allow God, by His Spirit to use this in the hearts and minds of creatives to figure out how they can glorify Him with their gifts.

The title of this workshop is taken from the Latin phrase from Genesis 1, *imago Dei*, meaning 'image of God'.

**Our primary focus for this workshop will come from the topic of the imago Dei in scripture and building a Gospel-centered theology of God-glorifying creativity.**

### How did we get here?

We love origin stories because we were made to love them. We love them because they cast light on our own search for meaning and purpose, which usually involves an extensive excavation of the past. We love them because we are temporal beings. Looking back comes natural to us...

Knowing where we come from helps make sense of the life-giving questions about who we are and where we are going... philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard said that "life can only be understood backwards, even while it must be lived forwards."  
(Images & Idols, 23)

Historically, the church used to be a center of learning and training in art. Theology used to be a driving factor behind much of the great art that happened in the church. However, in recent

times, the evangelical church, in particular, has not been exceptionally strong in leading the way for creatives to integrate their faith and creativity.

Theology was the driving factor behind Gothic architecture, for example, with its strong parallel lines leading the viewer's eyes upward. Gothic churches were meant to make the viewer feel their smallness and thus communicate our place in a sacred space, as small creatures coming to an immense God. The theological message they were meant to communicate was undeniable.

The Protestant Reformation brought an explosion of the Gospel in a time where it had been darkened through Roman Catholicism. The Reformation even impacted the art of the day and many Reformers had developed a good theology of the right place of the arts, aesthetics and creativity. However, as Reformation theology spread and eventually led into evangelicalism and the Great Awakening of the 18th & 19th century, a strong theological basis for the arts and creativity was lost to pragmatism as tent revivals and the influence of rationalism sought to reach the most people at the most efficient way. Beauty and the arts were often seen as 'superfluous' and unnecessary expense. This evangelical pragmatism even lingers today.

Also associated with the ethos of the Great Awakening was a desire to separate from 'dead orthodoxy', which led other evangelicals to over-emphasize experience and emotionalism over doctrine and theology. **Some evangelicals then, who became detached from their Reformed roots, ended up becoming like beings with heads detached from their hearts. Yet, as Francis Schaeffer has noted, when God saves someone, He doesn't just save their soul - but also their mind and affections - He saves the whole person.**

Many artists in evangelical churches today find themselves either feeling like there's not much of a place for them at church or any significant connection of their faith to their creative passions, or they find themselves in a church that over-emphasizes experience and hype and uses the arts and creativity as man-made ways of attracting and entertaining people with a spectacle devoid of deep biblical-theological grounding.

So, what is a theology of creativity and why is it important?

## **What is a "Theology of Creativity"?**

**A theology of creativity is simply a holistic look at scripture's teachings on creativity, art, beauty and aesthetics in order to understand how it all fits into God's big picture. It is how we reconcile the disconnect between our hearts and our heads.**

If we don't teach artists how to think theologically about their creativity, then they just end up copying what they see others do. They don't have a theology driving the why behind their art, so they just do what others do and become mundane, boring and uninspiring. But when we teach and help creatives think theologically about God and His beauty - then you bring transcendence. It opens up their palate to give them colours they've never imagined before to create with. So,

we must spend more time being inspired by who God is, His work and His imprint on the world we live in.

Sadly, many evangelical churches that often emphasize the arts can also be deficient theologically in the life of the mind. Also, Catholic churches have a lot of art, but do not have the Gospel - and so the art can become idolatrous iconography. This can be true also of evangelical churches, in a different way, who idolize the arts - where exuberant worship, lights shows, comedy-drama skits and jokes become a replacement for the meat of the truth of God's Word as the thing that keeps the pews filled. It almost seems like there is an impasse between theological depth and artistic passion and creativity. This should not be so.

This workshop is intentionally deeply theological because I want creatives to see that:  
**Creativity and theology are not at odds with each other - but vitally interconnected.**

"...the same Bible that may have stirred our hearts to repent and believe the gospel also guides the stirring of our hearts in aesthetic pursuits. It means that the proper approach to aesthetics is itself God-centered." (David Covington, A Redemptive Theology of Art, 24)

**So, here's the big question: How does the Gospel shape our creativity?**

## **Gospel-Shaped Creativity**

The Gospel is God's big story of redemption through all of history.

We believe the Gospel shapes everything in the Christian's life. It's not just the entry point to the Christian life, it is *every point* of the Christian life. As such, I believe the Gospel also shapes our creativity, because the Gospel changes not just a part of our life, but the whole person - our whole life - including our creativity!

We'll be using our familiar Gospel formulation as an outline for this workshop:

### **GOD | MAN & SIN | CHRIST | RESPONSE**

We'll be looking at:

**God** as Creator | **Man & Sin** marred creativity | **Christ** redeemed creativity | **Our Response**

By first understanding our origins, with God as Creator, what went wrong with sin's entrance to the world, and what God has done in Christ to solve that problem - only then can we respond appropriately. ***I will be pointing out this response throughout the 3 sections of this workshop.***

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# GOD: The Creator (Genesis 1 & 2)

Literally, the first thing the Bible reveals to us about God is that He is the Creator - the Creative par-excellence! But how does Genesis 1 help us understand creativity?

## 1. Creation & Beauty

If we hope to understand creativity, we must look at its origins. It doesn't get more original than the Originator Himself! We'll take a fresh look at Genesis 1 to see what the text shows us about the Original Creative. God's world demonstrates His creativity while God's Word interprets it for us - so now, we turn to His word.

### A. God is the Original Creative

Many Christians today, when they hear of Genesis 1, they think "Oh yea, that's the Biblical passage about Creation - God creates the universe out of nothing." And they would be correct - in part. Genesis 1 is about creation 'ex-nihilo' (out of nothing), but to boil it down to only that would be to miss the forest by straining at a leaf.

Look closely at Genesis 1 and you will see that the words "God created" don't really occur as much as you may think. In fact, they occur only in 3 verses in the whole chapter:

- **Verse 1** - as an overall summary statement: "in the beginning, God created... everything"
- **Verse 21** - with the first mention of the creation of all animal life.
- **Verse 27** - with God's special creation - mankind in His image - which we will get back to.

For the majority of Genesis 1, we don't really read much of God 'creating' - at least not in the sense that we can tend to assume. The text is describing God's 'creating' - but it maybe looks different to what we assume. Let's look closely at the text - what is God described as doing then?

Firstly, we might be surprised to see that in verse 2, there is already this 'formless earth'. What follows for the majority of verses 3-19, on Days 1 to 3, is a lot of God 'separating' various aspects of the environment: the skies, waters, light and dark... it's almost like God is putting the 'formless, chaotic earth' into order. The raw materials are already there, they're just without structure and purpose. God orders them by separating them into their proper places, and then He names them.

In verses 20 to the end of the chapter, we see God starting to fill the now organized and prepared environments from Days 1 to 3 with the things that inhabit them. He creates the Sun, moon and stars which inhabit the heavens, he creates birds and sea creatures to inhabit the seas and skies, then he creates the land animals and man to inhabit the land. He also gives

each of these creatures a command or purpose to fulfill within their spaces. Also, something interesting we see on Days 4 to 6 in contrast to 1 to 3 is that God no longer names things after he has created them - because that responsibility will be given to Adam later.

So, what do we learn about God as Creative?

We learn that His creativity is about bringing order, structure, and purpose to the disordered, formless raw materials. There is a natural logic to His creation - He makes the environments and prepares them for the creatures He will later make and put in them.

**God's creativity brings His order, beauty and purpose.**

**RESPONSE: Our creativity should bring God's order, beauty and purpose.**

## **B. God is the Primary Viewer - Defining Beauty**

One of the repeated phrases throughout the creation narrative is: "God saw that it was good."

Notice, this is not just a pragmatic declaration, as in - everything functioned as it ought - but also an aesthetic pronouncement. How do I know this? Because when Genesis 2 retells the story, in verse 9 it clarifies that the plants God made to spring up were "pleasant to the sight and good for food."

In Genesis 1, six times we see the phrase "God saw that it was good" and the seventh time, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." By the seven-fold repetition of the phrase, it re-emphasizes the completeness of everything He made and 'sees' - then the call to "behold" grabs the reader's attention to say, "HEY YOU! Look closely at this here!" And what is God's verdict of all that He sees? It is not just good, but VERY GOOD! God is well-pleased with all His works of creation.

### **I. Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder**

Notice that God is the primary viewer. He is the one who sees and then declares it as good. **God defines what is good.** This is important to remember in building our theological understanding of beauty and aesthetics. **God is always the primary viewer.** And thus, even when we ask the question, "What is good art or creativity?" it is an essentially theological question.

Creation's goodness is derived from the good God who created it, and because He alone can fully perceive all of it - all the billions of stars and galaxies far too vast for humans to comprehend fully - He alone fully appreciates it. Creation's beauty, truth and power, consists first in the eye of God as the first and eternal Beholder.

**The saying is true, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder... however, we must understand, that Beholder is God.**

## **II. Shared “Beholding”**

Note also, in Genesis 1, that God does not say “behold” to any other creature before Man - the previous six times God saw His creation and said it was good, there is no ‘behold’ beckoning some other ‘beholder’ to look. The first two uses of the word ‘behold’ in scripture immediately follow God’s creation of people and are addressed to them. As image-bearers of God, they are commanded to image Him in their ‘beholding’ - their ‘seeing’ of the goodness of creation. They are invited to share God’s beholding and appreciation of the beauty of His creation - and so are we.

### **The Tabernacle - God’s appreciation of art, beauty & creativity**

Many other Biblical examples could be given of God’s concern for beauty, but here is one from Exodus that can quickly illustrate that God is not uninterested in beauty and creativity.

- In Exodus 25:18, God commands that two cherubim are to be made of gold for the Art of the Covenant. Cherubim are angelic hosts - and what is commanded is some sort of representational art - which it seems that the artist was given creative liberty (within certain bounds to create).
- In Exodus 28 and 29, where we find instructions surrounding the tabernacle - the primary place where God’s OT people were to meet with God’s presence - we see that the priestly garments were designed and worn “for glory and for beauty” (Ex. 28:2) and the burnt offering was a “pleasing aroma.” (Ex. 29:18)
- The garments were to have blue and purple pomegranates - nowhere in nature do we find blue and purple pomegranates. It seems like the art that God commands is not necessarily always ‘photographic’ representations of reality but involve some creative imaginations too!
- Furthermore, God said that He had filled Bezalel with the Spirit which enabled him to devise artistic designs in precious materials and crafts for the Tabernacle (see Exodus 36:1-4). See that? Spirit-filled creativity to the glory of God!
- “God restricts the use of the special anointing oil and the incense to his audience alone (Ex.30:32, 37). God reserved to himself the pleasure of these special symbols; he forbade his people to use them for private, personal pleasure, though other formulations of oil and of incense were expected and not forbidden. By this restriction, God reminded the Israelites that he alone is the first viewer, the one whose pleasure has primacy.” (A Redemptive Theology of Art, 94)

But note again - who is the primary beholder of these beautiful things? God was the primary audience of the priest’s garments, the burnt offering, the oil and incense, and the crafted designs of the Tabernacle. God’s people were invited in to share in this beautiful vision of the sacred space. All of these details of the creativity that went into the Tabernacle are given not for utilitarian purposes or pragmatism - what pragmatic purpose was there to blue pomegranates!?

- but rather shows God wanted beauty in the place that represented His presence, and where His people gathered to worship.

The very fact that in the Bible we have creativity on display in the text itself - we have poems and songs - and we believe that the text is God-breathed, inspired by God himself, shows that God is concerned and pleased with the use of creativity and wants us to see and appreciate it with Him.

“All the arts come from God and are to be respected as divine inventions.” - John Calvin

**We are invited into sharing in God’s seeing and appreciation of beauty and goodness.**

**RESPONSE: We are to always remember that God is the Primary Viewer whose opinion matters, and we are invited to share in His vision of creativity and beauty.**

## **2. Understanding Beauty - God’s Triadic Glory**

God as the original Creative, defines creativity - and so does His triune nature.

Several theologians have observed that what is often called ‘the beauty of God’ - His glory - it has a triadic/trifold pattern to it. This topic is far greater to explore in depth than the time we have here (perhaps in a future workshop we’ll dive deeper), but we’ll seek at least a basic understanding. Why? Because as we begin to understand a biblical theology of creativity and the arts - we must know what is beauty and aesthetics - since one of the primary goals of creativity and the arts is beauty.

One of the clearest texts for us to get an understanding of God’s glory is Exodus 33. In Exodus 33:18, Moses asked God, “Show me your glory.” God’s response to Moses is in three coordinated ways: by showing, telling and doing. Let’s look at the text:

“I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you (**showing**) I, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence (**telling**). I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion (**doing**).”  
(Exodus 33:19)

Moses asks to see God’s glory, and God responds by showing, telling and doing. In Genesis 1, we see this same pattern in the creation narrative - God shows, tells and does. It is why creation itself shows God’s glory - Psa. 19:1 - “The heavens declare the glory of the Lord.”

### **God’s Triadic Glory and Creatives**

OK, so let’s bring this home to us as creatives. How does seeing that God’s glory is displayed through His telling, showing and doing relate to us? Well, if as we saw previously that God is the

ultimate referent for all beauty - He is the source and also the primary Beholder, then for our creativity to truly be beautiful, it must be modeled after God - the Originator of Beauty.

These 3 categories of telling, showing and doing can be correlated with these 3 aspects of beauty: truth, aesthetics, and power/practice. These are also sometimes known as content, form and purpose. All 3 of these must be present for something to be truly beautiful and good:

- Firstly, there must be some aspect of **truth** to it - that is, it must tell a true story, and be in agreement with God's truth as the True reference point.
- Secondly, it must be **aesthetically** pleasing - that is, its forms must be (to borrow from Genesis 2) "pleasing to the eyes" - representative of pleasant sensory reception.
- Thirdly, it must serve some **function** - it must do something, achieve some goal, have power, or purpose that corresponds with God's purposes.

Telling | Showing | Doing

Truth | Aesthetics | Power

Content | Form | Purpose

These 3 things are meant to work together to arouse a response in our affections and emotions. When God saw that what He created was 'very good' - this is not some merely dispassionate statement of fact - but also a passionate exclamation of His pleasure and satisfaction in the work of His hands. We too are meant to have such emotional and pleasurable responses to true beauty.

**Divine creativity does more than demonstrate God's glory, it demands a response.**

**This Triadic Glory of God speaks to us as whole persons: our mind, affections and will.**

This then gives us a good basis for evaluating beauty or creativity. We can ask questions based on these 3 categories. Is it true? Is it aesthetically pleasing? Does it accomplish some good purpose? Is the content honest? Is the form appropriate to the message? Is it powerful or compelling?

Do you see how these categories now give us a good diagnostic for distinguishing between good and bad art or creativity?

**RESPONSE: We must use God's standards for beauty of content, form and purpose - truth, aesthetics and power - telling, showing and doing. We must realize that God's glory demands a response.**

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# MAN & SIN: Marred Creativity (Genesis 3)

So, how does this relate to us today in a post-Fall world? We've seen how beauty worked in God's perfect creation... but we no longer live in that pre-Fall world where sin had not yet stained all of His good creation. If we are to understand our purpose in creativity - we must understand ourselves: both as created in God's image, and also how sin has corrupted that image.

## 1. MAN - Imago Dei

To understand how sin has corrupted the image of God, we must first get some understanding of what it means to image God. The image of God on humanity encompasses way more than just creativity, but for this workshop, we'll look specifically at its implications on us as creatives.

Firstly, when the Genesis 1 narrative talks about the creation of Man - it takes a distinctive shift from the rest of the narrative pattern. In every other instance, we saw that God spoke and it happens. With the creation of Man, it is the first time we see God first take counsel with Himself - "Let us make man in our image..." before continuing. As if to say, this one is really special, let's take a huddle before proceeding. Then God doesn't just speak Man into existence - He forms and fashions a man out of the ground - out of the clay like a master Potter. So, we see that Man is the special creation of God - made with intricate care - to image Him. How?

God delights in the beauty of creation, and we, as His image-bearers, should as well. Abraham Kuyper said that we, like God, have the possibility, both to create something and to delight in it. Christianity is a whole person kind of holistic reality. It involves the head and the heart. It involves accuracy and beauty. We were meant to behold and delight in beauty as image-bearers of God - it is a part of how we image or reflect God.

*"Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself." (John Calvin)*

God holds the key to your self-understanding as a creative because He created you in His image. **We are all reflections of God's glory. We cannot help but image God.**

**We cannot escape the reality of God because every face in every crowd staring back at you confronts you with His likeness.**

## The Creation Mandate: Imaging God in Creativity and Culture

Being God's image-bearers also means that we image God in our creativity. As we saw in Genesis 1, God creates by bringing form to chaos, structure to disorder, and purpose and fruitfulness to what was useless and purposeless. We too do the same instinctively.

Why do people later in life who worked jobs they hated end up doing some form of art/creativity in their retirement years? How many retirees pick up painting, or pottery, or knitting, or craft projects? Or how many times have you come to a table that is messy and of your own accord, without anyone telling you - put it in order, straightening your table settings? Why do we desire and put effort into making things orderly, giving structure and purpose to the things and spaces in our lives? It is because we are created in the *imago Dei* - the image of God. We cannot help but image Him and our creativity is intricately and inseparably connected to God.

**This imaging of God - to fill the earth and subdue it, to cultivate the Garden, to exercise dominion and make the earth fruitful is the basis for the creation of culture itself. This is why creatives tend to be the ones leading the culture. Hence why it is incredibly important for Christian creatives to have a robust theological understanding of creativity.**

We often talk about how we reflect/image the character of God... but we don't often talk about how we reflect some of the talents of God we see in creation. **Your creative talents are meant to reflect the glory of God because they ultimately derive from and reflect His talents.**

“every act of creativity, in its essence, is an act of worship, a doxological expression of your true humanity and purpose.” (Thomas Terry & Ryan Lister, *Images & Idols*, 15)

**Your creativity - rightly aimed - is worship to God.**

**RESPONSE: The use of your creative talents images God and reflects His glory because they come from Him. Rightly aimed, it is worship to God.**

## **2. SIN - The Corruption of Our Creativity**

Sin's effects on us as creatives is often a topic that is not talked about much. Yet it is one of vital importance for creatives to understand living in a post-Fall world after Genesis 3.

### **Genesis 3 - Our Corrupted Vision**

We can sometimes assume that we see things well and forget sin's effects on our own vision. The image of God on us was to behold the goodness of His creation in agreement with God's beholding. However, sin has corrupted our vision.

In Genesis 3, at the Fall - sin's entrance into the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience, a big shift happened. Adam and Eve no longer joined with God in His beholding, instead, they became autonomous viewers - without reference to God's vision of things. They started viewing things their own way, not God's way.

After the Serpent tempts Eve with the lie that God was holding out on her, note what verse 6 says:

“So when the woman **saw that the tree was good for food**, and that it was a **delight to the eyes**, and that the tree was to be **desired to make one wise**, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”  
(Genesis 3:6)

Notice the trifold corruption of the triad we have seen previously:

- **Truth, telling and content are corrupted:** God’s word is distrusted.
- **Showing, aesthetics and form are corrupted:** God’s declaration of good/beautiful is supplanted by Eve’s own opinion.
- **Doing, Power and Purpose are corrupted:** Eve now wants to determine her own purpose and to have power by gaining the ‘wisdom to determine good and evil.’

**Sin’s corruption has marred our minds (truth), our affections (aesthetics) and our actions (doing).**

Ever since then, we have distrusted God’s word, supplanted His definitions of beauty with our own, and tried to determine our own purposes. Why do we do this though? It is because, at our core - our desires - we have been corrupted by sin’s stain.

James K.A. Smith has argued in his book ‘Desiring the Kingdom’ that we are primarily desiring beings. That is, we are driven, not first by our intellect, but rather instinctually by our desires at a pre-cognitive level. **Our desires are our heart’s eyes - our beholding - our need for something to captivate our gaze. Our hearts lead.** Why do you do anything? It is because, at the root, your desires dictate your behaviour. **This is why sin is not a problem of a lack of knowledge.** Does telling you that lying or lust is wrong solve the problem? No. We always follow our deepest desires - and since the Fall, those desires are corrupted. The image is broken. Our vision - our beholding - is fixed on the wrong objects.

We no longer see as God sees. We no longer desire to create with God’s trifold standard of beauty. We no longer look to God first. **This is the essence of idolatry - looking to something other than God to give us truth, beauty and purpose.**

**In the first garden, we find Adam, in defiance to God under a tree, throws humanity into the curse of sin and death.**

## **Romans 1 - Our Trifold Exchange**

Remember that Divine beauty not only displays God’s glory but also demands a response. Paul in Romans 1, describes the effects of sin on humanity in having corrupted this proper response. **This response which God’s glory demands is the whole basis why Paul says that people in their sin are without an excuse - because God’s glory in creation has been made plain to them and they should respond with worship to Him, but they don’t (see Rom. 1:19-20).**

Instead, there are 3 exchanges which happen that correspond to the 3 aspects of God's Triadic glory earlier:

- **Verse 25** - exchange the truth for a lie (telling | truth | content)
- **Verse 23** - exchange God's glory for images (showing | aesthetics | form)
- **Verse 26** - exchange natural sexual relations for unnatural (doing | power | purpose)

>Insert Sho-Baraka's monologue clip

## Creative Idolatry

Our creativity was always meant to be oriented God-ward. In our sin, we exchange this for futility. Here is an example of what that exchange can look like for creatives:

### A. Becoming enslaved to creativity's production

The contemporary creative culture's catchphrase "Never stop creating" offers creatives little space to contemplate where creativity originates. Instead, it burdens them with the unrealistic expectation of being so busy with creativity's production that they forget or ignore its original purpose. It's our mission drift: creatives are too concerned with filling their portfolios and shelves so that they never ask why - how do we explain, beyond subjective or pragmatic platitudes, why our portfolio exists in the first place? Many creatives - especially in social media fields, find themselves enslaved to the pressure to always be creating something new. The likes, retweets, re-shares and viral marketing become our merciless taskmasters and the shackles our egos are chained to because we've found our identity and worth in the approval our creativity brings us from others.

### B. Creativity becoming a creative's functional saviour

The Enlightenment overemphasized rationalism over beauty and aesthetics. The Romantic Movement elevated beauty and aesthetics in response over truth in order to rescue humanity from the dehumanization of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The Industrial Revolution emphasized power and productivity at the cost of beauty and truth shouting "form follows function!" Each of these claimed to be the functional saviour of humanity, and yet none delivered the goods - what we really needed - and in the end, we lost more of our humanity.

If we do not start with God and a God-centered definition of beauty and creativity, then every cultural moment in history has tended towards imbalance. Emphasizing one aspect of the Glory Triad over another. Without God as the proper target of our creative compass - we elevate aesthetics, or productivity, or rationalism as our 'functional saviours' - the things which will really set things right. This is what happens when image bearers become image makers with creation's images. Creativity ends up fueling idolatry as we come up with replacement gods made in our shattered image.

“There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from him.” (C.S. LEWIS)

**Your creativity - wrongly aimed - will lead you into idolatry.**

### **C. Creatives becoming Autonomous Artists**

While artists and creatives are susceptible to the full spectrum of sins, it would be my estimation that the sin of pride lurks at our door most frequently. **Our sinfulness makes us mix up representing God (imaging God) with replacing God with our artistic endeavors.** This is what the 2nd Commandment against idolatry forbids - replacing God with something of our own creation.

**Our secular culture, as it abandoned any reference to God needed something to aim its creativity - and so, the artist themselves or the art itself became that reference point.** This was heavily reflected in the development of postmodern art. “Art for Art’s sake” became the championed slogan of newly ‘liberated’ creatives who no longer felt bound to a Creator but became self-made creators.

“Almost overnight, creatives became the world's "genius... with very special gifts (who could give mankind something of almost religious importance in the work of art." That is why creatives and artists today don't simply reflect or serve the culture they determine it... “Art for Art's Sake” turned creativity into its own cult and the creative into the culture's high priest and demigod. In making new idols for the world, creatives have been made new idols by the world... Self-determination is always the seedbed of idolatry...” (Images & Idols, 72)

Want proof of this? Just look at celebrity culture - our culture’s ‘idols’ are the creatives themselves.

**The truth about “Art for Art’s sake” though is that it is never just for ‘art’s sake’ but there is always some worldview behind it. If it is not the Christian one, then some other philosophy will motivate and drive your art.**

**RESPONSE: Your art and creative calling will not save you. We must recognize and take seriously sin’s effects on our vision and creativity.**

Vincent Van Gogh felt called to pursue painting to communicate deeper spiritual truths. However, he made his art and other things the center-point of his life’s meaning. Throughout his life he was a troubled soul. In his quest to create his own meaning and purpose through his art, he grew despondent and eventually took his own life when he failed to realize the lofty goal of salvation through his art.

Even for Christian artist, the temptation is real - God's beauty turns into a stepping-stone on their climb to fame.

However, neither you, nor your followers and likes, nor your admirers can hold up the weight of your soul's needs for acceptance, redemption, and satisfaction. They will all, in the end, break your soul. Your 'followers' will eventually become your merciless task-masters, ever-demanding more production and ever-giving scathing criticism. You will reduce everyone to a like or retweet and dehumanize them.

You will trade artistic purity for its fringe benefits. You will end up not knowing **why** you create. At best, your creativity will become self-serving - idolatrous and prideful - but you will feel more empty and alone. This is because when we lose God as our reference point, we stop creating for Him, and even stop creating for ourselves even! We create to keep up appearances, appease critics, to put on a facade, and keep the money and fame machine rolling.

**As idolaters, we are doing one of two things: we either make a god with our imaginations or make ourselves gods with our imaginations. Both of these will break our souls.**

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## CHRIST: Redeemed Creativity (John 1)

What then is the hope for creatives? It is the same object of hope for everyone - Jesus Christ - the Son of God. He alone can bear the weight of being our soul's Saviour. You cannot save yourself. You cannot rescue yourself from your creativity's idolatrous enslavement. Nothing else can. Let's look at why Jesus Christ is the only proper Saviour for us as creatives.

### 1. The True Image

We turn to John 1 and read words which should sound familiar to us. "In the beginning..." harkens us back to Genesis 1 where we saw God - the Original Creative. Yet here in John 1, we find 'the Word'. And this Word was with God, and also was God (1:1)! Not only that, everything was made through the Word (1:3)... whoever this Word is - John is clear - is equal with the same God of Genesis 1 we saw creating.

If we jump down to verse 14 we see that this Word, who is the Creator God became flesh - became human - and dwelt among us! Jesus - the Author himself - writes Himself into His story! And "we have seen his glory..." there's that word glory we looked at prior - but what type of glory? The same "glory as of the only Son from the Father"!

**Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's Triadic Glory.**

"The incarnation is like the opening of an art gallery, filled not just with the artist's work but, more importantly, with the Artist Himself." (Images & Idols, 101)

If God's glory was too abstract for us to comprehend, in Christ we see God's condescension to our level so we can comprehend it. But what does it look like?

In theology we have a fancy word for explaining or making clear a text of scripture - it's called exegesis. It basically means to extract the meaning that is there in a text and make it plain and understandable to all. Verse 18 literally says, "No one has ever seen God - the only God - the One who is at the Father's side (Jesus) has exegeted him." Jesus exegetes the Father to us.

So, what does Jesus reveal to us about God? What about God does he exegete to us as creatives?

Well, in the Gospel accounts, we find Jesus speaking - but he doesn't sound like any of the preachers of his day. He doesn't sound like a seminary professor or scholar. He talks very differently to the Pharisees - the religious leaders of the day. He tells stories. He uses imaginative language of similes, metaphors, analogies and parables that build mental pictures in the minds of his listeners about the Kingdom of Heaven that stir their hearts. In order to make the Father known, to exegete Him to us, Jesus paints with powerful word images and pictures that arouse the imagination.

**Christ looks, speaks and acts very much like a creative! Which makes sense, since he is the Creator in the flesh!**

So, in light of what we've learned about God's Triadic glory already, how does Jesus exegete this to us? Jesus Christ is:

## **A. The WORD of God - Truth/Content/Telling**

We see this plainly stated in John 1 - Jesus is the Word in flesh. John 14:16 - Jesus says he is the truth. Hebrews 1:2 says that God has spoken to us by His Son. And throughout His ministry in the four Gospels, He declares the word of God - the truth about God and His Kingdom - to us.

**Jesus tells us the truth about God.**

## **B. The IMAGE of God - Aesthetic/Form/Showing**

He is also the perfect representation - an exact likeness - of God. Colossians 1:15 calls him the 'image of the invisible God' in whom 'the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (v.19). Hebrews 1:3, Jesus is called 'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature.'

"He is the one true and perfect metaphor, an analogy so true to the original that the analogy itself shares the character, the divinity of the original, the Father." (A Redemptive Theology of Art, 140)

**Jesus, God in human form, shows us the beauty of God.**

## C. The POWER of God - Power/Purpose/Doing

John 1:3 also tells us that nothing was made that was made without him. Hebrews 1:3 says that he 'upholds the universe by the word of his power.' And Colossians 1:16 says that 'by him all things were created.' Jesus himself says in Matthew 28:18 that, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And Paul in 1 Cor. 1:24 says that to those who are called, "Christ is the power of God."

**Jesus is the power of God, fulfilling His purpose.**

So, we are to look to Jesus Christ for our redemption as persons and creatives. He alone is the exact image of God's Triadic glory which we so desperately need.

**RESPONSE: Look to Christ! He corrects our vision as being the perfect image of God. He corrects our sinful trifold exchange and frees us from our creative idolatry.**

## 2. True Salvation for Creatives

How does Christ save us from these sinful effects of the Fall?

### A. The Second Adam Succeeds where the First Failed

Adam was our federal head - the representative for all of humanity so that when Adam fell, we all fell in him. Jesus Christ is the Second Adam - the federal head or representative of all who put their faith in him. Jesus conquers sin's grasp on us by being the Second Adam who doesn't succumb to temptation so that all who are in him, are united to his conquering of sin and death.

In Matthew 4 and Luke 4 we find the account of Satan's temptation of Jesus before he formally starts his earthly ministry. In it, we find 3 temptations as Satan tries to lure Jesus's aim away from the reference point of God's Triadic glory:

- Firstly, Satan tries to tempt Jesus to turn stones into bread - corresponding to "good for food" with which he tempted Eve in Genesis 3:6. Defying the **truth** that 'man lives by God's word.'
- Secondly, he entices Jesus with the nations' glory - corresponding with Satan's temptation of Eve with the fruit that was 'pleasing to the eye' - the **aesthetic** aspect.
- Lastly, Satan offers Jesus autonomous **power** - corresponding to Eve's temptation seeing the fruit for gaining wisdom to define good and evil for herself.

Jesus, the Second Adam standing in place for us, succeeds where Adam and Eve failed - keeping His eyes fixed on God's Triadic glory of truth, beauty, and power. His continued obedience to God in order to accomplish our redemption eventually leads him to the Cross.

**In the second garden, Gethsemane, we find Christ, the Second Adam, who in obedience to God goes upon a Tree (Cross) to free humanity from the curse of sin and death.**

## **B. The Gospel as Creative Redemption**

John 3:14 - 15 - Jesus makes the connection of what he would do on the Cross to accomplish our redemption with the story of Moses and the rebellious Israelites being bitten by serpents in the wilderness. The Israelites had rebelled again against God, and as judgment on their sin - poisonous serpents were sent to bite them. In their anguish and repentance, they cried out to Moses for some salvation. And how does that salvation come? **God gives Moses and arts and crafts project!** Moses' art brings Israel face to face with the image of their sin.

**He tells him to fashion a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that by looking to this visual symbol of the judgement of their sins lifted up, they would be saved.** *God saves His people through His judgement.* **Christ on the Cross brings us face to face with the judgment of our sin also.** Christ on the Cross bears the judgment of God for us - the Judge becomes the judged, the sinless becomes our sin - Christ takes our poison by drinking it to the dregs. And we are saved by looking to him. This is why John 3:16 starts by stating why Christ would go to the Cross - to demonstrate the love of God to the world by giving His precious Son so that the ones who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life.

**The Gospel is God's story of redemption, so beautiful and unexpected that it captivates our heart's gaze and desire to see glory. What else can truly stir our souls to right response?** Throughout the Bible it uses many creative metaphors and stories to illustrate the Gospel, not just in a plain list of facts to believe, but rather as a thing of unbelievable beauty by which we are transformed. The Gospel is about God redeeming us. We're helpless and in need - this is true for you as a creative also. You can't redeem your creativity any more than you could earn your salvation.

"This means that the point of glorifying God through your creativity isn't that you make great art for Him. Rather, it's that *He uses the gifts He has given you to make you into one of His masterpieces.* In the end, you are His artwork that brings Him glory. Your imagination and creativity are a part of this harmony that is your life of praise. They are just a few of the colors God uses to paint your canvas. It's just a few pieces of clay the Potter uses to make you a vessel of His glory. We can rejoice in this: *God is the artist who is making us worthy to stand in the gallery of His new creation, to point to Him as our Creator and Redeemer with our life, worship, and, yes, still our creativity.*" (Images & Idols, 139)

## **C. The Gospel as our Future Creative Restoration**

The Gospel also gives creatives hope for the future. Note that in the world to come, there is creativity perfected. Hebrews 11:10 says that the New Jerusalem - God's city center of the New Creation - has God himself as its 'designer and builder'.

C.S. Lewis in his famous essay - The Weight of Glory - said that all of humanity has the memory of paradise lost - Eden - etched on their souls. And when we see beauty, it stirs the memory of our lost past. They are good images of what we really desire. But if we mistake them for the thing itself, they become idols. Instead, we must see 'through' them to what they point to. They are meant to point us to the true Object of satisfaction - and forward to our hope of the restoration of Eden - paradise regained, and even better!

"This is why the new creation is so important. God's future promises teach us that the hope of the world is not our art. It is God dwelling with humanity in the new heaven and new earth, where tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain shall be no more (Rev. 21:1-4)... it means your creativity doesn't have to hold up the world. God already does... There is great peace knowing that your next creative piece does not determine the trajectory of the world. It never could, and you wouldn't want it to. Which, in God's grace, gives us not just contentment but also the space we need for our creativity to flourish." (Images & Idols, 133-134)

**So, create like you're in the new creation. Use your creativity to help the light of the better world that we hope for break into the darkness of today's world.** This is why your creativity matters and how it can last forever. Creatives have the ability to give wings to the imagination of the life we all hope for and desire. If your heart is aimed at God's glory - it can direct your creativity to reflect His glory in a myriad of ways without turning it into an idol that becomes your salvation but rather a tool that points to your salvation.

### How does theology help creatives?

Connecting your faith to your creativity requires theology.

Jonathan Edwards, in regards to right religious affections, once said that true religious affections are not all heat without light. Meaning that they aren't just all passion (heat) without some true illumination of the mind to fuel it.

In order to provide fuel for the passions of our creativity to burn brightly, we must feast on the knowledge of God's Word. To not be all heat without light, we must study - not to increase the size of our heads, but rather the size of our hearts also!

This is why Christian worship in the corporate gathering has always had the impetus to put words to melody - our truths are so beautiful, mere propositional statements would not do justice - they must be sung! The best hymns have all been birthed out of deep and rich theological truth.

## 3. Art for God's Sake (1 Peter 4:10)

Ok, so simply all of this for me. How would we summarize what we've learnt? How does all this theology connect?

1 Peter 4:10 says,

“As each has **received** a gift, use it to **serve** one another, as good **stewards** of God's varied **grace...**”

Note, your creativity ultimately is not *your creativity*. It is God's. You received the gift and are to steward it. Secondly, you are to use it to serve others. This is God's grace to you - varied grace. Meaning He gives unique gifts to be stewarded for the good of others and the glory of God. Peter finishes his thought with “in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (v.11) That's the end game.

**Create for the love of God and the love of your neighbour.**

Christian art and creativity should be the opposite of the autonomous slogan 'Art for Art's sake'... it is rather, “Art for God's sake.”

**Consider: Who is the primary audience of our creativity? For whom do you create?**

This is why we exist - to glorify God.

## **Creative Honesty and Big Picture**

Christian artists and creatives should keep the big picture in mind. To tell the truth in your art is to be honest about the major and minor themes. The major themes of redemption and hope can only make sense against the minor themes of the reality of evil and suffering in a broken world. Thus, Christian art should not be boiled down to pithy cliches of quaint idealized fictions. We all know why we cringe at cheezy Christian movies - because they're not honest with reality as it is but try to just get to some sort of idealized Gospel message where everyone gets saved and they all lived happily ever after.

“A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God.” (FRANCIS SCHAEFFER)

Too often, Evangelicals can make the mistake of thinking that a work of art only has value if it is reduced to some sort of vehicle of evangelism or a tract. But this is to view art as solely a message for the intellect and ignores people as whole beings of mind, affections and will. Good art glorifies God, even if it is not directly religious in content because it seeks to image God in the 3 aspects His Triadic glory.

“Another way to put it is to say that some projects will be like a tree. We love a tree's shade, its limbs that our kids climb, and its autumn-painted leaves. Yet how many of us ever give its root system a second thought? But regardless of our consideration, the tree's roots actually make all the things we love about the tree possible. At times, our creativity will be like this. We will make things marked by beauty, ingenuity, and promise,

which will not directly evidence God's purposes but are only available because of Him."  
(Images & Idols, 62)

Colossians 2:6-7 says, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

That's where your creative roots must be grounded and dig deep. It says, as we received Christ, so walk in him. The Gospel - how we received Christ (as poor, helpless and needy of Him to do for us what we couldn't do) is how we also walk in him. It's not just the entry point, it's every point of our Christian walk. And as we are increasingly rooted and grounded in Him, in seeing him more clearly, in studying and knowing His word, we see more of His glory - and you will abound in worship - not just through your creativity, but your whole life.

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