

The Gift of Artistry: God's Clothing for Human Life

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God made clothes for Adam and Eve after they sinned. God's act of clothing them was one of grace, first to protect them from the thorns and bruises that would plague creation. That the Lord sewed Adam and Eve durable clothes from animal skins rather than makeshift loincloths of leaves is significant as well. God wanted men and women to be dressed well. To be dressed up with the glory of God's wool and leather, as well as God's flax and cotton, is a human use of plants and animals that God approves.

Later in history, whenever Aaron went through ritual washing to become "nakedly pure" as high priest, he was decked in splendid vestments and anointed with perfume that surrounded him with sweets-smelling air. The Scriptures lead us to believe that the Holy One of Israel was glad at such festive activity (Ex. 28-29; 39:27-31; Ps. 133).

Christ reaffirms the propriety of clothes along with food and drink, but he tells us not to glory in clothes the way Solomon came to do (cf. Matt. 6:19-34). Conspicuous consumption in food, vanity in dress, and a materialist pursuit of ever-higher standards of living are perversions of the well-being God provides in the smell of fresh bread, the taste of good wine, and the joy afforded by colorful clothing.

God through Paul also emphasizes the truth that denial of what is good in God's world is wrong: thankful acceptance of God's gifts like food and drink and clothes and shelter and safety is the way of faithful Christian obedience (I Tim. 4:1-10).

Artistry is one of the ways God clothes human lives.

Once upon a time God raised up the choreographer Miriam and the song-writer Moses to dance about the victory of the Lord against the evil-minded Egyptians (Ex. 15:1-21). Simply to issue a bare-faced communiqué to the wire services—"Egyptian army drowned"—would have been inadequate. The Lord wanted God's people to move their bodies rhythmically with an exuberant happiness.

At another time God asked for carpenters and goldsmiths, sculptors and silversmiths, artisans in fabrics and wall-hangings, to construct and decorate the ark and tabernacle

where the Lord would be specially worshiped (Ex. 25-26, 31:1-11). The Lord wanted more than a wooden box and a tent covering, even in the desert, because God likes what is lovely, and he knows that worship will be enhanced when it is attended by the well-crafted work of believing men and women.

God chose King David to organize guilds of songwriters psalmists), composers and musicians, to clothe the ritual sacrifices with praise (I Chron. 16:37-43). God wants more than talk and thought when people respond to the guidance his leaders bring in a worshipping assembly. If you don't sing or make a joyful noise performed skillfully in church (cf. Psalms 30 and 33), you shortchange the Lord and inhibit your celebration of God's gracious mercy.

Holy Scripture itself is not just a fact-filled almanac of salvation or how-to-do-it book of propositions on sanctification. Scripture is a true story book that imaginatively and graphically tells God's truth, from Genesis 1 to Revelations 21.

Christ told dramatic parables while on earth, to make his points, just as God put a rainbow in the sky to remind us of God's promise. God naturally plays with colors and does more than post rules and give directions in simple sentences because he is a majestic, inventive, surprising God, and has gifted those imaging God to go and do likewise in their daily lives.

Why in God's world, then, should Christians ever fudge on being faithfully busy with the arts? If God is for it, who can be against it? God's people should hate sin and shun the devil but we must never reject the gifts and talents God has provided us; and that includes body movements, drawing faces, singing, acting funny, painting, and making merry with instruments.

What has gone wrong with evangelical Christianity, so naked or ragged when it comes to the clothing of art for home, schooling, church and other sectors of life?

(1) Followers of Christ sometimes divide their lives into spiritual and secular compartments. Then we wrongly think of faith as a matter of soul and the body as being less important (although you can't do without it in this life). Since art is visible, sensuous and physical, art is by definition not so spiritual, godly, or holy as prayer, for example.

But Scripture says our very sensation is to be filled with love (Phil. 1:9-11), and our whole corporeality is to be Spirit-filled (Rom. 12:1-2), and that the faith-commitment to the reconciling lordship of Jesus Christ is to fill every zone of our ordinary activities (II Cor. 5:17-19), including artistry.

(2) Followers of Christ have sometimes confused "church" with "Christian." Thus we wrongly think the institutional church to be the epitome of a Christian's life, and don't realize that such things as schooling, making civil laws, practicing a profession and guiding family life should all be Christ-centered but not thereby churchly activities.

The congregated church, such as we see on Sundays, is a special centre for deepening our faith. But we are called to be a communion of saints during the week as well, to be an association of laboring saints, a community of educating saints, those committed together to enact justice and liberty with redemptive horizons, even as we have to act individually in the secularized society of practical atheists around us.

Art also needn't be churchly art. It may be that at times, but artistry is as legitimate a holy, skilled calling as is nursing or preparing sermons. Our task is to know the spirit within the art, to be as wary as a snake and as innocent as a dove (cf. Matt. 10:16).

(3) Followers of Christ have sometimes been faulted by Pharisees who have a guilty conscience and pretend to give preference to the disciples who abstain from eating and drinking, making merry and being comely dressed. Christ says that both the ascetic and his own disciples (who do eat and drink in thanksgiving) can bring God's truth to bear upon the lives of those who are lost (cf. Luke 7:31-35).

But it's wrong to rule out art as a luxury, or to pit world famine against the good deed of clothing the lonely and bored and desperate with the artistic perfume of sung joy, theatrical insight, cinematic comfort and poetic praise. (Cf Christ's rebuke of Judas and killjoy disciples in Mark 14:1-11.)

It's true that Lamech's song was a lewd boast (Gen. 4:23-24), and that the first skyscraping architecture was explicitly godless (Gen. 11:1-9), and that the dance around the golden calf had an evil spirit, so different from David's processional dance before God's ark (Ex. 32, II Sam. 6) - which Michal despised, to her own punishment.

But that does not mean singing and architecture and dancing are off limits for God's people. The truth is that whenever faithful believers in our Lord absent themselves from artistry and leadership in the arts, art goes to hell.

The Lord will reprove Christ's body in the judgement day if there are no gritty redemptive programs on TV instead of soft-soaping inanity and sensationalism. It grieves the Holy Spirit that there are so few relevant hopegiving artistic sights in our homes and neighborhoods, or murals and sculptures in the cities, such a dearth of songs that assuage our pressured life with vibrant insight, both inside the church walls and on the pop-song sound waves. Have we not been burying our artistic talents in the ground and offering God pat excuses (cf. Matt. 25:14-30)?

Evangelical Christianity has the good to be a reforming force in history, but we have lamentably restricted our vision of what the Lord is to the confines of churchly activities, and we've harnessed cultural acts to be mostly instruments for proselytizing evangelism. We have often "spiritualized" art into tracts or left it at the roadside. It will take generations of concerted, communal Christian artistic activity to set the trouble right, God willing, because a few hundred years ago we largely abdicated our responsibility in cultivating this are of God's garden.

The Lord may mercifully surprise us, however, if we as a faith community become obedient in the arts, because the Lord likes to hear a sound of troubled joy in faith welling up in tunes and cinema and novels, not the din or sentimental drivel of those who don't know the real misery of sin's killing the world that Christ died to save (John 3:16-18).

Each one of us can begin: write a poem for a loved one's birthday; commission a linoleum print for your child's graduation; hire a songwriter for your next anniversary; put a flower in your hair or in a pocket. Respond to God's good gift of artistry as clothing rather than walk through life artistically naked. Share with your neighbor the joy of what it mean to be graciously clothed with art.