

# Sharing God's Big Story: *How the Arts Give Meaning*

by  
Phil Burgess & Mike Metzger

## What is the Big Story?

Four types of conversations dominate our lives. For example, think about family conversations as the context. You either talk about

- how you *ought to be* as a family,
- how things *are going now* (or *what is*),
- how your family *can be* better as a family (reforms, changes that are needed), or
- what your family *might become one day* (i.e., your hopes and aspirations).

Whether we are discussing our families, business, sports, church – whatever the topic or issue – we convey our thoughts through one or more of these four conversations. And there's a reason why.

**For over two thousand years, the Christian gospel was understood as a story. The Christian Story consisted of four interlocking conversations:**

- Creation,
- Fall,
- Redemption, and
- Restoration.

The Christian conversation encompasses how life *ought to be* (**Creation**), how life actually *is* (**The Fall**), how life *can be* made better (**Redemption**) and what it *will be* one day (i.e., the final **Restoration**).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the Christian worldview expressed as the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration see Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, and Wolters' "On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy," in Paul Marshall, Sander Griggioen, and Richard J. Mouw (eds.), *Stained Glass: World Views and Social Science*, (Lanham: Maryland: University Press of America, 1989). For an comprehensive account of the origins and development of worldview thinking, see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). For a compelling critique of compartmentalization and other pathologies of contemporary worldview thinking, see Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004). For a brief, readable and stimulating discussion of criteria for assessing different worldviews, see Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

Christians know this Big Story as a four-chapter narrative that explains *everything* – including our work, our families, government, education, marriage, sexuality... everything!

This understanding of the Big Story was enshrined in such early documents as the Nicene Creed (325 AD), the Athanasian Creed (4th century),<sup>2</sup> and the Apostle's Creed (8<sup>th</sup> century revision of the Old Roman Creed of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century). And, because everyone is made in the image of God, this accounts for why everyone – regardless of creed or faith – settles on four types of conversations throughout their life. The gospel describes how *everyone* lives *everyday* – right down to the things we talk about.

### **How do we come to understand the Big Story?**

There are many ways of knowing this Big Story. Our primary source is the Scriptures. Yet the ancient church – where Bibles were scarce and literacy was limited – also appreciated other ways for people to learn about and comprehend biblical truth – ways that included the arts.

Indeed, from the beginning, the arts were widely viewed as enhancing the ability of people to know and understand the gospel.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the third century, Christians in Rome pooled their resources to purchase a plot of land on the Via Appia Antica – the Appian Way – outside the city. There they constructed an underground burial chamber and commissioned artists to decorate the walls and ceilings with frescoes.<sup>4</sup> According to church historian Robert Wilken, its construction represented the first “organized effort (diggers, designers, plasterers, painters) on the part of the Christian community in Rome to create a distinctively Christian space.”<sup>5</sup>

The significance of Christians creating a “distinctively Christian space” is that “Christian faith – no matter how enthusiastically proclaimed by evangelists, how ably expounded by theologians and philosophers”<sup>6</sup> – cannot be sustained for long without the support of a nurturing Christian *culture*. In other words, the arts are part of the “total harvest of thinking and feeling”<sup>7</sup> that helps people grasp the meaning of the good news. The arts build “the pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities encoded in rituals, law,

---

<sup>2</sup> The *Catholic Encyclopedia* dates the creed at 361 AD, while acknowledging the date is in dispute. Some claim it could not have been consummated earlier than the fifth century.

<sup>3</sup> The arts were particularly important before the 15<sup>th</sup> century printing press made bibles widely available and Latin was the lingua franca of the Church in a time that preceded 19<sup>th</sup> century public address systems.

<sup>4</sup> “Church as Culture,” by Robert Louis Wilken. Wilken is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia. The original version of this article was delivered as the Palmer Lecture at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Four Quartets,” by T.S. Eliot

language, practices, and stories that can order, inspire, and guide the behavior, thoughts, and affections of a Christian people.”<sup>8</sup>

Architecture and icons, painting and pantomime, theater and music, dance and drama – all of these illustrated, communicated or otherwise helped people imagine and appreciate the truth of the gospel, especially during the first 1,500 years of the faith, prior to the invention of the printing press, when Bibles were beyond the reach of the ordinary Believer.

Even Constantine’s setting aside Sunday as a special day to worship and rest (321 AD) helped cement the Christian faith as something that truly made a difference in how people lived and worked. When Third Century readers picked up the *Book of Genesis* and read about God’s six-day work week, they also *saw* it outside on the street and experienced it in their everyday life. There was a visible connection between “ought” of Scripture and the “is” of the culture.

### **How people *really* live.**

“Nothing is more needful today than the revival of Christian culture, because in recent generations this culture has become dangerously thin.”<sup>9</sup> “Thinness” refers to our reliance on an approach to evangelism that does not incorporate the arts and imagination, an approach that yields a slender faith. Survey after survey indicates that many people believe in the gospel as a way to get to heaven. Yet it is our music, theater, books, and movies that shape how people – especially our young people – really live, think and imagine. And those two sources – the gospel and the arts – are often at odds.

The gospel *is* truth. People come to genuine faith through evangelism and hearing this truth. But it is the arts that prepare people to *receive* the truth and to give *meaning* to the messages of the gospel.. Why? It is because the arts are three-dimensional. They are

- *sneaky*,<sup>10</sup>
- *upstream*, and
- make the elements of truth *coherent*.

### **Batteries and Baywatch.**

During her tenure as ambassador to Morocco, Margaret Tutwiler<sup>11</sup> learned that the average day for a Moroccan man went like this: he worked hard all day, came home in the evening, unplugged the car battery, hauled it into his home and turned on *Baywatch*,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Sneaky” can have positive connotations, such as Jesus’ use of parables to “sneak” truth by people skeptical of religious truth.

<sup>11</sup> Tutwiler, a senior official in both the Reagan and Bush administrations, was confirmed as US Ambassador to the Kingdom of Morocco on July 11, 2001.

the most widely watched TV show in the country.<sup>12</sup> Most Moroccans assume *Baywatch* is a Discovery Channel-type of show documenting real life in America. So why don't we correct this impression and ship more Discovery Channel documentaries to Arab countries? It's because *Baywatch* sells.

### **We hate you – but send us *Baywatch*!**

In 2003, Margaret and Melvin DeFleur<sup>13</sup> published *The Next Generation's Image of Americans*, a report on Arab youth attitudes toward US. Not surprisingly, these two authors found that an overwhelming majority of Arab teens had negative feelings about Americans. Very negative feelings. They believed Americans to be violent, prone to criminal activity, materialistic and sexually immoral.<sup>14</sup> But before this survey was conducted, most Americans assumed Arab hostility was the result of U.S. foreign policy. Perhaps not. Instead, the source of hostility appears to be American media and the arts. When the Screenwriters Guild reviewed the report, they suggested the DeFleurs change its title to "We Hate You, But Please Send Us Baywatch!"

### **Art shapes attitudes.**

"You can't turn on your television set on any night or go to a movie without seeing unmarried people cavorting in bed," according to the DeFleurs, "or you can see folks with no clothes on, and so on, particularly women."<sup>15</sup> Their study found the arts, particularly the powerful influence of American movies and television programs that are seen by millions of foreign teenagers, are primary sources that shape Arab hostility toward the US. "When it came to 'overall attitudes' toward Americans, Saudi Arabian teens ranked #1, with the most negative feelings about Americans. Saudi teens were followed by those in Bahrain, South Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, China, Spain, Taiwan, Pakistan and Nigeria."<sup>16</sup>

As a diplomat, Tutwiler discovered that America's aims and objectives in Muslim lands are severely crimped when foreign policy derives from the West Wing of the White House while the arts are a product of the private sector – Hollywood, Broadway, Madison Avenue advertising houses, Nashville, MoTown and other centers of cultural creativity in the US. This reduces the role of the arts to "what sells" – leading Bill Ivey,<sup>17</sup> former chair

---

<sup>12</sup> Remarks from Bill Ivey's "The Corrosive Incoherence of the U.S. Arts System," given at the "Fate of The Arts" conference hosted by The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, April 2, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Both are professors at Boston University's College of Communications.

<sup>14</sup> The DeFleurs surveyed 1,400 teens in 12 countries around the world about their attitudes towards Americans and American culture.

<sup>15</sup> "The Next Generation's Images of Americans," by Margaret and Melvin DeFleur.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Ivey is currently Director of the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt. He is also a four-time Grammy Award nominee (Best Album Notes category), and holds honorary doctorates from the University of Michigan, Michigan Technological University, Wayne State University, and Indiana University.

of the National Endowment for the Arts, to declare that the current US arts system is “incoherent.”

### **Why should we care?**

The way some Christians think about the arts is equally incoherent. In most Arab lands, Western arts have generated a hostility toward Western ideas – including the gospel. The same is true in Europe and the United States. When believers treat the arts as something secondary – or “nice”<sup>18</sup> for cultured people with time and money on their hands – we are, in fact, making it more difficult to present a plausible, coherent, and compelling gospel.

This is *not* to say that no one will come to faith without the arts. Just as the DeFleurs agree that not everyone who watches American TV is going to become a terrorist. “But if you are a militant terrorist group and you have to recruit people to join your movement, this ‘culture of hate’ that is being created, provides a foundation for that.”<sup>19</sup> Nor are we saying that *fewer people will come to faith if the arts are neglected*. The point is not *quantity*, but *quality*. It is not *conversion*, but *coherence*.

In an age of spirituality, conversion is relatively easy. The 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge is *coherence*.

“To have a conversion experience is nothing much,” says Peter Berger. “The real thing is to be able to keep taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility.”<sup>20</sup> For many who hear and receive the gospel, it is “a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane.”<sup>21</sup> Why? Among the important reasons is the fact that the arts are viewed as relatively unimportant to our mission.

By contrast, we believe the arts are vital and three-dimensional. The arts are *sneaky*, *upstream*, and make truth *coherent*.

### **The arts are sneaky.**

“Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise, its five year mission to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life, and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before...”

---

<sup>18</sup> “Nice” comes from the Latin meaning “silly” or “stupid.”

<sup>19</sup> Press release, “Journal from Afghanistan Trip – Day Seven,” August 28, 2002. U.S. Rep. Mark Green. Posted on his Web site at <http://www.house.gov/markgreen>.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p.158.

<sup>21</sup> *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, p.1

With this introduction, the original *Star Trek* series<sup>22</sup> – and all subsequent episodes – was launched. Captain James T. Kirk and his crew were commissioned “to boldly go where no man has gone before.”

The first characteristic of the arts is its stealth. It can take the gospel under the radar – where it has not gone before. The arts bring truth to people who might be resistant to the gospel by taking them to imaginary lands where truth can sneak in – again, under the radar that otherwise “protects” them from “subversive” or “silly” ideas.

People are usually on guard against religious people seeking to evangelize. Yet, the arts, according to C.S. Lewis, can “steal past” the age-old prejudices against religion that undermine the ability of our neighbors to be open to hearing the truth of Scripture. By presenting gospel truths “in an imaginative world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations,” people apart from faith can see these truths “for the first time...in their potency,” wrote Lewis. The arts help evangelists “steal past those watchful dragons.”<sup>23</sup> For example, many people who appreciate theater have come to faith in Christ through watching a performance of *Les Misérables*. The gospel “sneaked up” on them through Victor Hugo’s masterpiece.

Even the Scriptures often resort to artistic expression and stealth language when presenting delicate matters. If you read the Song of Solomon, it describes sex with great artistic license and symbolism. In this way, Emily Dickinson said the Bible dealt with delicate matters in a “slanted way” – an artistic way. Simply proclaiming the truth can be blinding, as Dickinson expressed in her poem #1129.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -  
Success in circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth’s superb surprise.

As lightning to the child eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind.<sup>24</sup>

Clive Staples Lewis (1899-1963) believed that good art can sneak Christian theology into pagan settings that are normally resistant to the truth of the gospel. He sought to do exactly this in many of his books, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*. According to C.S. Lewis historian Colin Duriez, Lewis, “self-consciously sneaks in Christian insights.”

---

<sup>22</sup> The series premiered on NBC on Thursday, September 8, 1966 in the 8:30-9:30 PM timeslot with the episode “The Man Trap.”

<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, p.37.

<sup>24</sup> From “The Riddles of Emily Dickinson.” *Obbligati* (Atheneum, 1986).

One of his books, *Till We Have Faces*, retells the classical story of Cupid and Psyche. It was a myth which to him had great meaning and power. He retold it in the form of a modern novel. It's set in pre-Christian times, and he explores the insight that it is possible to have within the pagan imagination that prefigure Christian truth.<sup>25</sup>

Some of Lewis's books are explicit regarding the gospel.<sup>26</sup> Yet, in all of his writing, he sought "to create a climate in the reader, an imaginative and intellectual climate that would make the reader more able to receive the gospel when they heard it," according to Duriez. "He was preparing the ground for the gospel because he felt that the gospel itself was pointing to the deepest reality about nature."

There's an old saying that you attract more bees with honey than vinegar. Telling someone they are fat, ugly, or have bad breath might be the truth – but it's not very gracious.<sup>27</sup> The gospel is both and news and good news. The arts can subversively steal past people on guard against bad news. A great example is the recently released film *Hotel Rwanda*. This is the true-life story of hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina (played by Don Cheadle) who housed over a thousand African and Western refugees during their struggle between Hutu militia and Tutsi rebels in Rwanda (800,000 Tutsis and dissident Hutus were slaughtered over 100 days in 1994).

By retelling this inspirational and redemptive story of one man's efforts to save *people* (both Hutus and Tutsis), *Hotel Rwanda* subversively steals past our natural defenses and challenges those in the West to consider their own complicity in the genocide. Educators have long understood this phenomenon, where the arts foster "incidental learning."<sup>28</sup> For example, most kids go to movies or rent videos to be entertained. The directors and producers who make the films may not intend to teach moral lessons any more than Arab youths intend to come out after watching *Baywatch* thinking that Americans are ungodly people. But, while being entertained, moral lessons are exactly what they learn. For good or evil, the arts are sneaky.

---

<sup>25</sup> "C.S. Lewis, the Sneaky Pagan," interview of Colin Duriez by Rob Moll, *Christianity Today*, 06/28/2004. Duriez is the author of *A Field Guide to Narnia*, and book that explores how Lewis wove pre-Christian ideas into a story for a post-Christian culture.

<sup>26</sup> *Mere Christianity* is one example.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, it can be a disaster (and very funny) as Jim Carrey portrayed in *Liar, Liar* – a hilarious, 1997 PG-13 account of what happens to a man who tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth for 24 hours.

<sup>28</sup> A. Rogers, "Learning: Can We Change the Discourse?" *Adults Learning* 8, no. 5 (January 1997): 116-117. McGuffey's famous readers, widely-used in 19<sup>th</sup> century US schools to teach reading, used stories that contained important morality tales – and another opportunity for incidental learning. For an example, see Phil Burgess, "Schools fall short on values, virtues," *Rocky Mountain News*, March 10, 1998.

### **The arts are upstream.**

C. S. Lewis was known as “The Apostle to the Skeptics.”<sup>29</sup> Lewis’ legacy was as a writer of apologetics through the medium of fantasy literature. He was an artist with pencil and paper. At the foundation of Lewis’ understanding of fantasy literature and art was his belief that *reason* and *imagination* have distinct roles: reason has to do with theoretical truths; imagination has to do with the very conditions of truth. Reason had to do with *finding and proclaiming truth* – as in the gospel. Imagination had to do with *preparing the mind to receive truth* as meaningful. This was the place of the arts.

**Thus, as Lewis saw it, imagination informs reason** – because *imagination* shapes the *meaning* we assign to facts and logic.

If Lewis is right, the arts are upstream. Artists get there first. Put another way, the arts, which provide meaning, can trump facts and logic. Facts, in other words, do *not* speak for themselves. They are filtered through experience, including the imagination.

Lewis was not saying that the arts are sovereign – contrary to the view of most romantics. Imagination did not supersede reason as the organ of truth; rather it *preceded* reason as a condition for truth:

It must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.<sup>30</sup>

**What do we mean when we say the arts are upstream?**<sup>31</sup> Forty years ago, if anyone were asked to describe a homosexual man, you would have heard most likely adjectives like *disgusting*, *effeminate*, or *distasteful*. That’s what most people imagined about the fact of homosexuality. And their imaginations were reinforced by media and the arts. And four decades ago, if you went to church and heard a sermon describing homosexuality as a sin, that description would “fit” with your imagination. In each case, the fact of sexual orientation is given meaning by your imagination – and the truth from the pulpit is easy to accept because it is consistent with what you imagine a homosexual to be.

Now fast-forward to the twenty-first century. If anyone were asked to describe a homosexual man *today*, likely descriptors would be *humorous*, *caring*, or *sharp*. Now go back to that church and listen to *the same message as forty years before*. Because biblical truth doesn’t change, homosexuality is still a sin. For most listeners, the idea that sharp,

---

<sup>29</sup> Chad Walsh, *C.S. Lewis, Apostle to the Skeptics*. 1974.

<sup>30</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, p. 265.

<sup>31</sup> On this point, see Bill Wichterman, “The Culture: Upstream from Politics,” in Don Eberly (ed.), *Building a Healthy Culture: Strategies for an American Renaissance*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).



caring, and humorous people are an abomination to God is tough to swallow. The biblical truth is much more difficult to swallow because the arts beat the pastor to the punch.

Put another way, there is now dissonance or a discrepancy between imagination (formed by the arts via TV and movies) and the truth from Scripture (proclaimed from the pulpit). Psychologists tell us that when dissonance occurs, we try to eliminate it – by rejecting (or accommodating) one of messages that is causing the tension between what we “know” and what we see or are being told.<sup>32</sup>

The ancient Judeo-Christian tradition held that God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) *imagined* the creation before they began their work. They spoke of it while conceiving it: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule...’” (Genesis 1:26-28). Because human beings are made in his image, they have the capacity for imagination. As Louise Cowan has said, “If we’re made in the image of God, it’s not so much in our analytical reason, as it is in our imagination.”<sup>33</sup> The core of our being is our *imagination*.

Lewis historian Colin Duriez reports that C.S. Lewis believed “the imaginative man in him was more basic than any other aspect.”<sup>34</sup> Imagination, then, precedes reason. And the arts are the primary vehicle for shaping the imagination. Samuel Johnson, for example, described poetry as “the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason.”<sup>35</sup>

Because the arts are upstream, they both *reflect* and *advance* a society’s hopes and dreams, its attitudes and patterns of thought, and its understanding of what human life is and ought to be. This view is reflected by some groups of politically-placed people in Washington, D.C., who are also thoughtful, serious, and culturally-engaged Christians, people who understand the need to get upstream of politics. Unfortunately, many groups of Christian elected leaders come together on a regular basis simply to share their own privatized faith, focusing on their own personal salvation while declaring both politics and reform of the culture to be out of bounds.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> This psychological phenomenon is called “cognitive dissonance” and refers to the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between what you already know or believe to be true and new information or interpretation – and typically gets resolved by rejecting or accommodating the “new ideas” or information. The classic text is Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* Evanston, Ill.; Row Peterson, 1957.

<sup>33</sup> Caroline J. Simon, “On love, destiny, and imagination,” *Mars Hill Audio*, Volume 30 Jan./Feb. 1998.

<sup>34</sup> “C.S. Lewis, The Sneaky Pagan,” interview of Colin Duriez by Rob Moll, *Christianity Today*, June 28, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> John Milton, *Lives of the Poets*.

<sup>36</sup> A good example of the privatized approach is a group variously known as “The Fellowship” or “the Family,” a secretive group that includes members of Congress that discourages its members from discussing controversial public policy issues. On this point see Jeffrey Sharlet, “Jesus Plus Nothing,” *Harpers*, March 2003. Sharlet says, “The Family is, in its own words, an ‘invisible’ association [that operates] under many guises...The Family’s only publicized gathering is the National Prayer Breakfast...a

However, if Believers are to influence the culture, they have to understand *what* shapes culture – and *how* it is shaped. Too many believers think that politics shapes society – but, it may be more nuanced than that. Respected Harvard scholar and late US Senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, once observed, “The **central conservative truth** is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the *success* of a society. The **central liberal truth** is that politics can *change* a culture and save it from itself.”<sup>37</sup>

In Washington, D.C. and in our state capitals, leaders make laws, enforce laws, or interpret laws. But **it is the culture, more than leaders, that shapes the hearts and minds of people** who, in turn, lay the foundations for the laws of the land with which most comply voluntarily. But, if politics is *normally* downstream from the arts, politics, as Moynihan reminds us, can still change the culture – or try to.

A good and recent example is the last year’s decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court approving same-sex marriage. Though polls show that same-sex marriage is opposed by a large majority of the people, leaders can, by providing official sanction, lay the groundwork for changing the culture. That’s exactly what the Supreme Court did in its landmark case, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, which removed official approval for “separate but equal” schools, laying the foundation for a cultural change that rejected segregation. On the other hand, the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, which extended the rights of slave owners, is an example of a failed attempt of the Supreme Court to change the culture – though it took a civil war to prove the point

Though the “big bang” of politics (in this case, the heavy hand of the Massachusetts Supreme Court) might change the culture, **it is the arts that shape the soul of the society** – day after day and generation after generation. Those who are giving of themselves as artists, musicians, novelists, filmmakers, poets, actors, dancers, and painters are upstream.

If you want to understand Greek culture in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., then the surest window in is to study its sculpture, as it is there that hopes and dreams are most plainly seen. And if you want to understand 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Italy, then study its paintings, observe its buildings, and read its poetry, as it is there that its attitudes and thought-patterns are manifest. And if you want to understand the profusion, tempo, and incoherence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then pay attention to the filmmakers and musicians, as it is in their movies and songs that we imagine what human life is and ought to be. **The arts get there first** – just as Edvard Munch’s immortal painting, *The Scream*, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

---

tool...to recruit the powerful into smaller, more frequent prayer meetings, where they can ‘meet Jesus man to man.’”

<sup>37</sup> Which is exactly the rationale of the US intervention in Iraq and the Middle East. On the need for changing the culture, to “save it from itself,” see, for example, Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? : The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, New York: Perennial, 2003.

symbolizes the inner turmoil of man in a post-modern world that lacks roots, standards, or purpose...a world of incoherence.<sup>38</sup>

### **The arts as revisionism**

In his classic, *1984*, George Orwell wrote, “Who controls the past controls the future: Who controls the present controls the past.” How we tell the story of our past certainly shapes our future. Sometimes, leaders, elected or otherwise, have it in their mind to rewrite history.<sup>39</sup> We can see that now with the effort of the ACLU to eliminate the symbols of our religious heritage from the public square. As Peter Schramm says, “One doesn’t need to be particularly disposed to religion to understand the prominent role that the Ten Commandments played in this country’s founding and in the formation of our laws...Twelve of the 13 original colonies simply codified the Ten Commandments as law. The only way for the ACLU to prevail is...for someone to rewrite history, erasing public recognition of the influence of religion on the Founders.”<sup>40</sup>

### **The arts make truth coherent.**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian faith was eclipsed by competing ideas that ultimately failed to deliver.<sup>41</sup> As a result, the poet William Butler Yeats saw the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an age of incoherence, expressed well in his stunning poem “The Second Coming”.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all convictions, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

---

<sup>38</sup> Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the gifted Norwegian painter and printmaker who was his country's greatest artist also played a vital role in the development of German expressionism. His work typically uses an incident or a landscape to depict a state of mind, portraying themes such as misery, sickness, and death just as *The Scream* is typical in its anguished expression of isolation and fear.

<sup>39</sup> Or, as Winston Churchill famously said, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

<sup>40</sup> Peter W. Schramm, “Decalogue Part of Nation’s Founding,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, March 2, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Weak substitutes for traditional constraints on personal and institutional behavior – including Darwin’s naturalism, Nietzsche’s atheism, and Marx’s socialism, and Oliver Wendell Holmes’s utilitarianism – all contributed to almost 170 million people murdered by governments between 1900 and 1987 – far more than the 34 million killed in conventional wars during the same period. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao account for over 100 million of those murdered. Pol Pot – in just 4 years – killed about a third of Cambodia’s population. Under Saddam Hussein, at least 290,000 Iraqis disappeared. See Bruce Falconer, “Murder by the State,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2003, which uses data compiled by University of Hawaii professor R.J. Rummel, today’s leading student of war and civil strife who has counted the number of people killed in the twentieth century by “democide,” a term he coined to describe government’s intentional killing of its own people because of *ideas*.

Yeats wrote “The Second Coming” in 1922, while Europe and much of the rest of the world was trying to recover from World War I – naively described as “The War to End All Wars”. Yeats saw the improbability of this view. The world was spiraling downward into incoherence – “The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Within two decades, World War II unleashed the horror all over again. As an artist, Yeats got there first.

The incoherence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be seen through the lens of teen sexual behavior – even church-going teens. Most teenage Christians acknowledge they understand Scripture’s position on pre-marital sex. But scores of surveys indicate they can’t imagine *why* these truths are either *realistic* or *coherent*.<sup>42</sup> Given the massive deluge of free-wheeling sex they see everywhere; it just *doesn’t make sense* to abstain. It’s not a coherent idea. And if it’s not coherent, it’s not compelling.

Abstinence is not compelling to many teens today because their imagination has been warped by the contrarian messages contained or portrayed in many films, fashion magazines, television programs, and street buzz. And it is not just teens who are affected. “I have a suspicion that one factor is the starved imagination of congregations,” writes Warren Wiersbe. “These people have studied the Bible and listened to sermons, *but the truths of Scripture have never penetrated their imaginations*.”<sup>43</sup>

Theologian Sallie McFague suggests a reciprocal relationship between art and proclaiming concepts in order to derive meaning: “Images ‘feed’ concepts; concepts ‘discipline’ images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile.”<sup>44</sup>

Kids may say they agree with what the Bible teaches; but if it doesn’t sync with the arts, it doesn’t make much sense. The pictures make the propositions coherent.<sup>45</sup> When the

---

<sup>42</sup> *True Love Waits*, a program sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention, is a widely-recognized initiative to reduce premarital sexual activity among our youth. Since 1993, about 2.4 million young people have signed a pledge to wait until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. For seven years, researchers from Columbia University and Yale University studied 12,000 teenagers who took the pledge. In March 2004, they reported on their findings. 88 percent of those who pledged reported having sexual intercourse before marriage; just 12 percent kept their promise. The researchers also found that the rates for having sexually transmitted diseases “were almost identical for the teenagers who took pledges and those who did not.” Lawrence K. Altman, “Study Finds That Teenage Virginity Pledges Are Rarely Kept,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2004. See also the many survey-based commentaries by the Barna Group on this and related issues.

<sup>43</sup> Warren Wiersbe. *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*. p.61

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p.41.

<sup>45</sup> The term “picture” is used here as a metaphor for all the arts – print, music, film, television, etc.

pictures and the propositions are discrepant, something's got to give. Too often it is the propositions that yield to the power of the picture.

"All our truth, or all but a few fragments," according to C.S. Lewis, "is won by metaphor."<sup>46</sup> Thus, part of the reason for the gospel's incoherence in the modern world is due to the arts being relegated to a secondary status. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien<sup>47</sup> held that "great stories take us out of the prison of our own selves and our presuppositions about reality."<sup>48</sup> The arts free us to understand how truth is coherent.

Tolkien, for example, took the seven virtues of the ancient church and spun them into a fantasy trilogy we know as *The Lord of the Rings*. His aim was to widen the imagination of readers and widen the circle of those who would not normally pick up a religious book. Tolkien knew that, ultimately, the only world where these virtues hung together was in the ancient Judeo-Christian tradition. Lewis' and Tolkien's works made Christian truth coherent.

In 1987, *U2* became more public about their Christian faith; especially in "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Bono's lyrics are not a denial of faith; they are the cry of a Christian lamenting the incoherence of faith in the modern world.

I have climbed highest mountain  
I have run through the fields  
Only to be with you  
Only to be with you  
I have run  
I have crawled  
I have scaled these city walls  
These city walls  
Only to be with you

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I believe in the kingdom come  
Then all the colors will bleed into one  
Bleed into one  
Well yes I'm still running  
You broke the bonds and you  
Loosed the chains  
Carried the cross  
Of my shame

---

<sup>46</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes," in Max Black (ed.), *The Importance of Language*, (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 50.

<sup>47</sup> Tolkien led Lewis to faith and both were part of a literary circle dubbed "The Inklings."

<sup>48</sup> "C.S. Lewis, The Sneaky Pagan," interview of Colin Duriez by Rob Moll, *Christianity Today*, June 28, 2004.

Of my shame  
You know I believed it

But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...<sup>49</sup>

In many places around the world – including the United States – the gospel is not faring as well as it should, and people still haven't found what they are looking for. For Christians, the message of “God loves you” means something attractive and appealing. But only when it fits our imagination. If our friends imagine a different world, “God loves you” can sound like fingernailss on a chalk board or evoke the RCA-dog look. Only the arts have the power to make truth coherent. To ignore the arts is to invite the incoherence our faith is meant to overcome.

### **“Art. Ask for more.”**

The Ad Council runs a provocative commercial showing a father and mother trying to get a conversation going over dinner with his 10 or 12-year-old son. “So, son, what did you do in school today?” With a dry, monotone voice, the son dutifully responds with something like this, “Well, first I went to spelling. And then that was over. And then study hall... and then that was over. Then it was lunchtime, and I went to lunch [Mom and dad are starting to look forlornly at one another]... and then.... [long pause] ... I ate it... and then I went to recess... and then I came home. And now I'm here.”

Eventually, the father says, “Sounds like yesterday.” The voiceover: “Art. Ask for more.”

### **Art, evangelism, and reaching the world.**

Brigham Young, the Mormon leader who led his flock to Utah after being run out of the Midwest, saw the arts as a bridge to the “gentiles” (the non-Believers). When he sent families out to “colonize” Utah he instructed them, first, to build a Temple that would be used only by Mormons for worship and, second, to build a center for the performing arts, that could be used by the entire community – as a bridge to the community and an opportunity to evangelize.

Though many would question Young's *theology*, there is increasing evidence that his *strategy* of using the arts – where the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is only the most visible example – as a bridge to the larger community is a sound and effective approach.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, sociologist Robert Wuthnow, director of the Center for Religion at Princeton University, points to surveys indicating “people with greater exposure to the arts were more interested in spiritual growth, devoted more to it and more regularly engaged”<sup>51</sup> in

---

<sup>49</sup> The Joshua Tree 1987.

<sup>50</sup> On this point, see Philip M. Burgess: *Utah and America's New Economy: Expanding the Winners' Circle*, (Salt Lake City: Summit Publishing, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> “Feeling God's Spirit Through the Arts,” *Washington Post*, February 5, 2005, B9.

practicing their faith. Wuthnow's conclusion is that the healthiest Believers view the arts as "allies, not adversaries."<sup>52</sup>

But what do we mean by "healthy" Believers who appreciate the arts? We believe our culture produces four kinds of people: Drifters, Surfers, Seekers, and Shield-bearers.<sup>53</sup> Only one type of person – whether they are a Believer or not – usually embraces the arts as vital. Here is a description of these four types of people – and why they view the arts in different ways.

***Drifters – those who see little or no value in the arts.***

*Drifters* see little or no value in the arts. They could not care less if the arts are essential to shaping the imagination and culture. That's because *Drifters* are people who go with the flow; they absorb the conventional wisdom and reflect the dominant values and features of the culture – but they are primarily survivors, not achievers. The typical characteristic of the Drifter is boredom or indifference. They view "fulfilling the Great Commission" as meaning direct proclamation of the gospel with little care for the complementary nature of the arts.

***Surfers – those who "use" the arts.***

*Surfers* only see the arts as honey for attracting flies. They incorporate drama, music, dance, etc. for its *instrumental* value – not for any *intrinsic* worth. In other words, this is not art for art's sake – it is art that we use for other purposes. *Surfers*, like *Drifters*, are people who go with the flow, but they try to catch the "big wave" as they amplify the dominant values and features of the culture. Most *Surfers* are found in the fast lane and include the "Uber Moms"<sup>54</sup> and workaholic dads seeking the prestige, power, popularity, pleasure and possessions that are the world's measure of success. The typical characteristic of the Surfer is exhaustion (as tactics of "success" and "keeping up with the Joneses" are life's focal points).

*Surfers*, unfortunately, are quite popular in much of evangelicalism, especially in the music and media industry. Matt Odmark (a musician with *Jars of Clay*) once wrote a song prompted by the group's collective response to the tragic death of a friend.<sup>55</sup> The problem was that "Christian" radio stations would not play the "The Valley Song," telling the group that it was not "happy" enough for their formats. They wanted music that was "upbeat" and "lifted people." Matt was left asking what it is that the Church communicates to the world – beyond what it communicates to itself – about the meaning of life, if we can only be "happyhappyhappyallthetime?"

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> These archetypes were identified and developed by TCI senior fellow Phil Burgess and are detailed in his "Seeking Anchors in a Sea of Change" (September 26, 2004) and other TCI working papers.

<sup>54</sup> David Brooks' description of suburban mothers in his book *On Paradise Drive*.

<sup>55</sup> TCI fellow Steve Garber contributed this story.

***Standard-seekers – those who appreciate the arts.***

*Standard-seekers* appreciate the role of art in shaping the imagination, and understand the link between meaning, coherence, and truth. They are people who resist or are troubled by the dominant currents and tides of the culture, bringing order to their lives and their relationship to the changing environment by marching to another drummer. Standard-seekers anchor their being and who they are by embracing transcendent truths. Like the sailor who throws out a sea anchor during a storm, they are able to sail into the wind and slice through the waves rather than be carried by them. The sea anchor helps by permitting sailors to have some control over the speed and direction of their lives. Many Standard-seekers embrace transcendent truths to anchor their lives in times of rapid change. The typical characteristic of the Standard-seeker is rectitude (i.e., virtue, integrity, uprightness, justice).

***Shield-bearers – those who disregard the arts.***

*Shield-bearers* generally disregard the arts. They are people who bring order to their lives by withdrawing from and walling off the most intrusive parts of the culture. Many shield-bearers cocoon<sup>56</sup> to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of wind, weather, and wave; or they escape to religious fundamentalism and take refuge in religious bomb shelters. Among Christian shield-bearers, for example, practices include sending kids exclusively to religious schools, buying books only at religious bookstores, only patronizing vendors in the “Good Shepherd” book of Yellow Pages, hanging only with friends who are Believers, living in Christian ghettos, and avoiding, as much as possible, contact with the culture. The typical characteristic of the Shield-bearer is smugness (vanity, conceit, bigotry). They prefer direct evangelism, focus almost exclusively on the “the Book,” and see little value in the arts.

**Conclusion.**

The task of Christian evangelism is to “weld together imagination and experience.”<sup>57</sup> The arts are worth our support as participants and patrons because they are sneaky, upstream, and make truth coherent. Lasting changes in human personality must involve the imagination, and a resilient culture is required as protection against the “big bang” of misguided political intervention.

If the goal of Christian missions is merely conversion and church growth, then the arts are ancillary. But if the goal is discipleship and conformity to the will of God and “Thy Kingdom come, they will be done on the earth,” then the arts are essential to redemption and restoration. This is why Lendor Calder urges us to remember C.S. Lewis’ understanding of imagination and the arts:

Spiritual awakening will not occur when Christian doctrines are better defended; rather, it will occur when holy imaginations make

---

<sup>56</sup> *Cocooning* is a term invented by marketing oracle Faith Popcorn and is discussed in *The Popcorn Report, Clicking* and other publications of Popcorn’s New York-based BrainReserve market research firm.

<sup>57</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, p.81



the Christian story more likely to be appreciated. The experience of C. S. Lewis is a case in point.

That brings us back to the Big Story and the way we imagine Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration. To those who know and can imagine the Big Story, life is coherent, and “the scream” is replaced with the image of men and women, working together, engaged in the world, to make it a better place – connecting the “ought” to the “can be.”

## Bibliography

Berger, Peter. 1988. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City: First Anchor.

Brueggeman, Walter. 1989. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.

Burgess, Phil, "Schools fall short on values, virtues," Commentary in the *Rocky Mountain News*, March 10, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Utah and America's New Economy: Expanding the Winners' Circle*, (Salt Lake City: Summit Publishing, 2002).

Burson, Scott and Walls, Jerry. 1998. *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.

Cowan, Louise. 1998. How Classics Address Our Imaginations." *Mars Hill Audio Journal*. Vol. 34. (cassette).

Cowan, Louise and Guinness, Os. 1998. *Invitation to the Classics*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

DeFleur, Margaret H. and Melvin L. 2003. "The Next Generation's Image of Americans." See their full report at <http://www.bu.edu/news/releases/2002/defleur/report.pdf>

Duriez, Colin. 2004. "C.S. Lewis, the Sneaky Pagan," *Christianity Today*, posted 06/28/2004.

Eliot, T. S. 1962. *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1954*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World.

Eliot, T. S. 1965. *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Festinger, Leon, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* Evanston, Ill.; Row Peterson, 1957.

Kilby, Clyde. 1998. "On C. S. Lewis and the role of reason and imagination." *Interview on Mars Hill Audio*. Vol. 30. (cassette)

Lewis, C. S. 1943. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1944. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1946. *The Great Divorce*. New York: Macmillan.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1961. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York: Simon and Schuster (Scribner paperback).

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Simon and Schuster (Scribner paperback).

\_\_\_\_\_. 1962. "Bluspels and Flalansferes," *The Importance of Language*. Max Black (ed.). Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Mills, David, ed., 1998. *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*. Grand Rapids: Erdmann.

Myers, Kenneth. 1989. *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*. Wheaton: Crossway.

Myers, Kenneth. 1999. "Annual letter to supporters." *Mars Hill Audio Journal Newsletter*. Charlottesville.

Simon, Carolyn. 1998. "On love, destiny, and imagination." *Interview on Mars Hill Audio*. Vol.30 (cassette)

Turner, M. 1996. *The Literary Mind*. New York: Oxford UP.

Wiersbe, Warren. 1997. *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *The Best of A.W. Tozer*. Camp Hill: Christian Publications.

Wilkins, Steve. 2004. *Good Ideas from Questionable Christians and Outright Pagans: An Introduction to Key Thinkers and Philosophies*. New York: InterVarsity.

*Clapham Bulletin*  
Titles in the Series

*A Mid-Winter's Night Tragedy:  
The Asian Tsunami and God's Hand in Suffering*  
Mike Metzger, Phil Burgess

*Trick or Treat...or Treacherous?  
Celebrating or Scorning Halloween, Fairies, and Ghouls*  
Mike Metzger, Phil Burgess

*Sharing God's Big Story:  
How the Arts Give Meaning*  
Mike Metzger, Phil Burgess