

ART AND VOCATION

Bezalel and the Calf

What Our Gifts Are For

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Every painter, organist, woodworker, singer, and poet in the pew carries a question whether they ever say it out loud: what is this for? The world gives several answers. Art is for self-expression. Art is for beauty. Art is for reaching the divine. Art is for making a living. Some of these are partly true, and one of them is dangerous.

The historic Christian faith, and the Lutheran Reformation in particular, gives a better answer. It is not a single slogan. It is a set of convictions drawn from Scripture and the Confessions that place the artist where God placed him: a creature with gifts, living between the font and the grave, serving God and neighbor with his hands and voice. What follows walks through those convictions one at a time.

Made by a Maker

Scripture opens with God making things. He speaks, and light, land, water, and living creatures come to be. At the end of the sixth day, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good!” (Gen 1:31, NET). The first thing we learn about God is that He is a maker who delights in what He makes.

Luther’s explanation of the First Article brings this down to the individual Christian: “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties” (Small Catechism, Creed, Kolb-Wengert). Notice what is on that list. The eye that judges color, the ear that tunes a string, the fingers that find a chord, and the mind that shapes a sentence are all named as gifts. They come before any talent we develop and before any piece we finish.

This sets the first boundary. The Christian artist is a creature, not a creator. Only God makes from nothing. We make from what He has already given: pigment, wood, breath, sound, language, and the bodies that use them. Modern talk about the artist as a godlike genius gets this backward. The artist is not a little god. He is a creature who has been given something, and the right response to a gift is thanks.

Same Hands

In Exodus 31, God tells Moses that He has chosen Bezalel son of Uri and filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, understanding, and knowledge in every kind of craftsmanship: designing in gold, silver, and bronze, cutting stones, and carving wood (Exod 31:1-5). Bezalel is the first person in Scripture said to be filled with the Spirit of God. He is not a prophet or a king. He is a craftsman, and the Spirit gives him skill so that the tabernacle can be built according to God’s Word.

Turn the page. In Exodus 32, while Moses is still on the mountain, the people demand gods they can see. Aaron collects their gold and “fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molten calf” (Exod 32:4, NET). The same gold, the same tools, and the same kind of skill are now put to work for an idol.

Those two chapters sit side by side for a reason. The gift is not the problem, and the gift is not the safeguard. What matters is the Word the work serves. Bezalel builds what God commanded, where God promised to dwell. Aaron builds what the people wanted, a god shaped to their taste.

Artists today face the same choice in quieter forms. The calf is not always gold. It can be self-expression treated as the highest good, fame pursued as identity, or art itself turned into a religion that promises meaning and transcendence. A gift given by God can be offered back to Him, or it can be melted down into something to bow before.

Why We Kept the Pictures

In 1522, while Luther was hidden away at the Wartburg, his colleague Andreas Karlstadt pushed the Reformation in Wittenberg faster and harder than the people could bear. Images were pulled out of the churches, and crowds joined in. Karlstadt taught that pictures in churches broke God's commandment and had to go.

Luther came back to Wittenberg and preached against the haste. A few years later he answered Karlstadt at length in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525). His argument was simple. The images were not the problem; trust placed in them was. Preach the Word, and false trust falls away on its own while the picture stays on the wall. Luther even pointed out that when he heard the account of Christ's passion, he could not help forming a picture in his heart of a man hanging on a cross. If that picture in his heart was no sin, why would it be a sin to have it before his eyes?

This was more than a pastoral judgment about patience. It flows from the center of Lutheran theology. The eternal Son took on real flesh. He still comes to His people through created things: water joined to the Word, bread and the cup that are His body and blood, and a human voice speaking His absolution. The old phrase for this is *finitum capax infiniti*, the finite is capable of the infinite. A God who gives Himself in bread is not threatened by paint.

That conviction shaped the churches. Where some branches of the Reformation stripped sanctuaries bare and silenced their organs, Lutheran churches kept their crucifixes, altarpieces, candles, and pipes. They did not keep them out of nostalgia. They kept them because creation is good, because the Word is the boundary rather than the material, and because matter has already been honored by the incarnation.

Next to Theology

Of all the arts, music held a special place for Luther. In his 1538 preface to a collection of motets, he wrote that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. He loved it as a creature of God, woven into the created order, and he believed it could drive away sadness and the devil himself. He played the lute, sang, and wrote hymns.

The reason music ranked so high was not that it moves the feelings, though it does. It was that music carries words. A sung text lodges in the memory in a way a spoken one rarely does. The Reformation put the chorale into the mouths of ordinary people, and with it the catechism, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the gospel itself. Farmers and their children learned justification by faith because they sang it. Lutheran hymnody became theology set to a tune, a portable catechism carried from the pew into the kitchen and the field.

The tradition that followed bears this out. Paul Gerhardt's hymns carried the comfort of the gospel through the devastation of the Thirty Years' War. Johann Sebastian Bach, a Lutheran church musician to the core, headed his scores with *JJ, Jesu juva*, "Jesus, help," and closed them with *SDG, Soli Deo gloria*, "to God alone be the glory." In the margins of his own study Bible he noted that the Old Testament passages on the temple musicians were the foundation of God-pleasing church music, and that where music is devoutly offered, God is present with His grace.

That pairing at the head and foot of Bach's manuscripts sums up the Christian artist's posture. Before the work, a prayer for help. After the work, the glory given away.

Not a Ladder

Here the Lutheran view of art parts ways with much of the world, and with some of Christendom. A long tradition treats beauty as a ladder. Gaze at what is lovely, the thinking goes, and the soul rises from earthly beauty to heavenly beauty and at last to God. Art becomes a path upward and the artist a kind of priest.

Luther called this the theology of glory. In the Heidelberg Disputation (1518) he wrote that "a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (Thesis 21). God is not found at the top of our climb. He is found where He has hidden Himself and promised to be: in a crucified man, and now in Word and Sacrament. The Augsburg Confession teaches that the Holy Spirit is given through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments (AC V). It names no other instruments. A painting can serve the Word. A hymn can carry the Word. Neither one replaces the means of grace.

This guards the artist as much as it limits him. Art that has to save souls will be crushed by the job. Art that only has to tell the truth is free to do so. And the cross shapes what truth looks like. Isaiah says of the Servant, "He had no stately form or majesty that might catch our attention, no special appearance that we should want to follow him" (Isa 53:2, NET). The most faithful Christian art is not always the prettiest. Sometimes it is the lament, the dark chord, the honest picture of suffering. The Psalter itself, God's own songbook, is full of those.

Lucas Cranach the Elder captured this in the altarpiece he painted for the city church in Wittenberg. On the lower panel Luther stands in the pulpit on one side, and the congregation sits on the other. Between them hangs the crucified Christ, and Luther's hand points to Him. The painting does not point to itself or to the painter. It points to the preached Christ. That is what the tradition asks of every Christian artist.

The Left Hand's Work

Most art is not made for the sanctuary, and it does not need to be. Luther taught that God rules the world with two hands. With His right hand He saves through the gospel. With His left hand He preserves and orders the world through earthly callings: parents, farmers, rulers, cooks, and craftsmen. Each Christian serves God not by escaping ordinary work but by doing it faithfully for the sake of the neighbor.

That places most art squarely in the left-hand kingdom, and it frees the artist from a burden he was never meant to carry. A love song, a landscape, a well-turned bowl, a high school band concert, a quilt for a newborn, or a hand-lettered sign for the café down the street does not need a Bible verse stamped on it to please God. It pleases God because it is good work done by a forgiven person for the good of others. The Christian artist does not have to make every piece "Christian" for it to be godly.

The Confessions add another freedom. In matters God has neither commanded nor forbidden, the church and the Christian are free, so long as faith and love are not harmed (Formula of Concord, Article X; AC XV). Style, medium, and form are not the gospel. A congregation may sing chorale or newer hymns, worship under bare walls or painted ones, and still confess the same faith. What decides the matter is not taste but whether the work teaches truly and serves the neighbor in love.

This is also where the clearest line between human art and machine output runs. A human artist is a creature made in God's image, answerable to God, standing in a place where God has set neighbors in front of him. A tool can be useful in his hands. It cannot have a calling, and it has no neighbor to love.

The New Song

There is one more thing to say about Bezalel and the calf. The story does not end with Aaron at the foot of the idol. A few chapters later, Bezalel and his helpers finish the tabernacle and make the holy garments for Aaron, as the Lord commanded Moses (Exod 39:1). The man who carved the calf is clothed by the work of the man the Spirit filled. The idolater is made a priest, not because his hands were clean but because God covered him.

Every Christian artist has some gold in his past that went into the wrong fire. The answer is not to stop making things. The answer is the same as for every sinner: confession, absolution, and a return to the work God gives, now done under grace rather than to earn it.

And the work has a future. In Revelation the saints around the throne sing “a new song” to the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5:9, NET), and the glory and honor of the nations are brought into the holy city (Rev 21:26). The body that holds the brush and fills the lungs will be raised. Christians do not expect to lose their hands and voices in the age to come. We expect to receive them back, healed and finally free of the calf.

Until then the Christian artist works as Bach did. Jesus, help. To God alone be the glory. In between, the work itself, done well, for the neighbor, by a forgiven creature with borrowed gifts.

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