The Visual Arts and the Christian Faith
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Throughout history, art and Christianity have experienced a tensive, sporadic relationship. On the one hand, the church has been connected to some of the most timeless artistic endeavors in existence—the ambulatory and chapels of Saint-Denis, Michelangelo’s Pietá, DaVinci’s The Last Supper. These works reflect real, meaningful collaborations between art and the Christian faith. However, to the same degree the church has appeared intricately linked to the arts, so, too, has it been wary of them. Iconoclasm has torn art and the Christian faith community apart on numerous occasions throughout history. In addition, many of the churches of the Reformation tended to seriously downplay the visual arts after branching off from Catholicism (Jensen, 298-9). As a result, many of today’s Protestant leaders, though not explicitly opposed to the arts, fail to recognize them as essential to the Christian faith and to worship (Walton 68-9). Robin M. Jensen expresses her concerns on the matter: “I worry that too often art is perceived as a kind of ‘extra’ offering, meant for those of us who can appreciate it or want to be involved, rather than something essential to the shaping of faith and religious experience” (2). And while this is not to suggest that the arts have been forgotten altogether in the Protestant tradition, few churches appear to have established the sort of vibrant, thoughtful, active relationships with the arts which, in light of a theological survey of the topic, appear vital to the Christian faith. For this reason, many modern theologians are now encouraging the Protestant church to rethink its stance on the arts, and to begin viewing them as central to the life of the church and to worship. In light of the theological understandings these scholars present, it seems the church can no longer drift thoughtlessly through its relationship with the arts. Rather, church leaders must begin to see artistic expression as essential to the church’s identity, essential to the worshiping community, essential to what it means to be people of God.

Before we consider some key understandings surrounding art, Christianity, and worship, it must be mentioned that this work will focus primarily on the church’s relationship to the visual arts. Although some of the theological affirmations presented here could certainly apply to other liturgical art forms—song, dance, poetry, story-telling, and any number of other modes of expression—at least in the scope of this paper, we will view the texts as they relate to visual images. In addition, I’ve chosen not to insert gender neutral language into the passages cited here. Although this would be ideal, so many of the excerpts used throughout this work are so infused with male-dominant language, that it seemed best to leave the texts as they are. Instead, I will
simply make reference to the fact that this has not gone unacknowledged and that, in a perfect world, these passages would be more inclusive. With these things said, let us begin our discussion of art and the faith. Let us begin by exploring the Iconoclastic Movement of the eighth and ninth centuries.

CONSIDERING THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND WORSHIP: ICONOCLASM (726-843)

The 20th century Trappist monk Thomas Merton believed strongly enough in the compatibility of artistic expression and the life of the church to make the claim that “[a]rt and worship are inseparable in the Christian view of life” (16). Likewise, priests, pastors, and theologians before and after Merton have supported the ongoing relationship between art and worship, recognizing the arts as essential to the Christian faith. Yet, regardless of these widespread views, the church has not always been on amicable terms with the arts. In fact, the Iconoclastic Movement of the eighth and ninth centuries represents anything but a thriving relationship between art and worship. It was during this era in the Byzantine Empire that religious art was destroyed, religious artists persecuted, and veneration of artistic objects forbidden (New Catholic 278). And though the controversy focuses primarily on issues surrounding icons—images of the Christ, the Madonna, and the saints, which tend to be more prominent in the Orthodox Church—study of the movement offers a historical understanding of issues surrounding art and worship, which undoubtedly aids in our consideration of today’s use of liturgical art in the West. For how are we to develop a current take on art’s relationship to the faith, and to worship, if we do not explore the theological dialogue begun by those who have come before us? In this way, let us allow the iconoclasts’ (“image-breakers””) questions to become our own, and the iconophiles’ (“image-lovers””) defense of icons to serve as a path to understanding the beauty, power, and relevance of sacred art.

As mentioned above, the Iconoclastic Movement centered around artistic icons. The term icon comes from the Greek *eikon* meaning “likeness, image or picture” and is the same word used in Genesis to recount the story of humankind being made in God’s image (Cormack 7, Weiss 134). According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, icons, “as established in the Byzantine Orthodox Church . . . were a liturgical art, theology in visible form” (278). In other words, leaders and members of the church did not view the images created by icon painters as merely material pieces of artwork. Instead, people of the time thought the life and spirit of the figures depicted in icons were somehow contained in the images themselves.

For instance, an image of the Christ, due to its wide eyes and engaging posture, did not simply serve an aesthetic purpose, but was seen as a means
by which to contemplate and communicate with Christ himself. In addition, some icons were thought to hold mystical powers such as healing, protection for believers, and punishment of the wicked (278). For these reasons, icons held a prominent role in the life of the church throughout Byzantine society. The New Catholic Encyclopedia expounds:

By the seventh century icons permeated nearly every aspect of Byzantine life. Multiple icons were combined into an iconostasis, or icon-screen, which separated the sanctuary from the nave in Byzantine churches. Icons were hung on church walls for veneration by the faithful and were displayed in private homes. Monumental two-sided icons were processed through towns and villages and small icons were carried or worn by individuals.

This prevalence of icons throughout society set the stage for the theological questions and debates raised by the iconoclasts in the eighth and ninth centuries. With images circulating throughout society, artistic objects being venerated in churches, and icons assuming an important role in prayer and worship, people began to wonder whether or not scripture and church tradition supported such uses of the visual arts.

**Visual Images and the Second Commandment**

The most obvious objection to images appears in the second of the Ten Commandments of Moses. Here, God declares to Israel: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex. 20:4). At first glance, the command appears rigid and inescapable. In fact, historian Henry Chadwick notes that “Both Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria regarded this prohibition as absolute and binding on Christians” (277). With these interpretations in mind, it is no wonder the iconoclasts questioned the place of visual images in the lives of Christian people. However, historians and theologians are quick to suggest that this command was intended for a certain audience at a certain time. In fact, this understanding served as the iconophiles’ main source of defense for images when begged questions about the Second Commandment.

For instance, John Damascene, who became the leading voice of the iconophiles during the controversy in Byzantium, represents this viewpoint throughout his Apologia Against Those Who Decry Holy Images. Damascenës first argument centers around the distinction he makes between the Jews whom God addressed in the Exodus passage and the Christian faith community in which he lived and wrote. On this note, Damascene states: “These injunctions were given to the Jews on account of their proneness to idolatry. Now we, on the contrary, are no longer in leading strings. . . .We have passed the stage of
infancy, and reached the perfection of manhood” (par.9). In other words, the Commandment which forbids images applies solely to the Jewish community which God addressed. Christians, on the other hand, are not bound by this law. Rather, Damascene viewed the Christian faith community as more mature and able to withstand temptation than people of the Jewish faith. As a result, the Old Testament decree which the iconoclasts took to heart and used as a key defense against icons became irrelevant to iconophiles, who viewed the decree as meant solely for God’s Jewish audience. Although this specific stance reveals anti-Semitic attitudes which the church hardly holds today, it is important in that it began the discussion about whether or not God intended a universal application of the Second Commandment.

Perhaps more helpful for a modern understanding of the decree and its intended audience is the iconophiles’ second response to the Exodus text. This understanding, rather than de-valuing the Jewish faith, focuses on passages in which God shows support for the arts, and, in turn, negates the view that the Second Commandment forbids the creation of visual images. Though God’s directive forbidding the making of any graven image appears explicit and universal, the iconophiles believed otherwise. Much of their bases for this view rested in biblical interactions between God and humankind which suggest divine support for the arts. In his Apologia, Damascene cites instances throughout scripture in which God allows for the creation of images. Here Damascene references Exodus 25: “He [God] allows the image of the cherubim who are circumscribed, and prostrate in adoration before the divine throne, to be made, and . . . What was the tabernacle itself? Was it not an image?” (par.13). Damascene cites these examples to make a point: if God allowed for and endorsed these artistic endeavors, how can one view God’s command in Exodus as encompassing of all forms of religious art? Other passages used to support the use of visual images in worship include 1 Kings 7:13-14 and 2 Chronicles 2:13-14, which clearly demonstrate art’s important role in the construction of the second temple in Jerusalem (Irvine 2).

In light of these passages in which God appears directly in favor of artistic expression, one can hardly assume that God intended a universal application of the Second Commandment. Instead, study of scripture suggests that the command was made to a specific audience with specific types of images and figures in mind (2). Thus, the iconophiles concluded, the church is not bound by the Second Commandment, but can create images freely, bearing in mind the spirit of the Law, which reminds the church to steer clear of idolizing images and losing sight of the God whom the images honor and represent.

Christ as Image and the Doctrine of the Incarnation

Another key argument against icons focused on the concept of Christ as
image. Iconoclasts argued that artists should not depict Christ visually for fear of inadequately representing Christ’s true identity—fully human, fully God. A forerunner of this stance arose well before the widespread use and veneration of sacred images had even occurred. Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived and wrote in the second century, received a letter from the emperor’s sister Constantia asking him for a picture of Christ. In responding to the request, Eusebius offered a sarcastic, less-than-obliging response:

I do not know what has impelled you to command that an image of our Savior be drawn. Which image of Christ do you want? Is it to be a true and unchangeable one, portraying his countenance truly, or is it to be the one which he assumed on our behalf when he took on the appearance of the “form of a slave? (qtd. in Pelikan 85-6).

In his book Jesus Through the Centuries, Jaroslav Pelikan unpacks Eusebius’ response here. According to Pelikan, Eusebius offers two equally ridiculous options: either an image of Christ in the “form of a slave,” which is ultimately “transitory and not permanently relevant,” or else a depiction of the “True Image”—unchangeable and capable of portraying Christ’s countenance fully—yet, regrettably, impossible to create (86). By responding to Constantia in this way, Eusebius outlined the difficult nature of creating visual depictions of Christ. In doing so, he laid the foundation for what would become one of the central issues for Iconoclasm.

Throughout the Iconoclastic Movement, opponents of images returned to Eusebius’ focus on the problems surrounding an artist’s attempt to depict the Christ. Many iconoclasts referred to the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451, both of which clearly forbade “the status of Christ as the Image of the Father” (86). As a result of these texts, a number of problems arose for those wishing to create sacred images. Depicting Christ in his human form risked denying his oneness with the Father. On the other hand, an attempt to depict Christ’s True Image—“beyond description, beyond comprehension, beyond change, and beyond measure”—proved beyond humankind’s abilities (John of Jerusalem qtd. in Pelikan, 87). This left artists in a tough predicament to say the least. Pelikan summarizes the situation in this way:

Either those who painted images of Christ were portraying his deity by an icon, or they were not: if they were, they violated its essential nature as being beyond description and circumscription; if they were not, they were seen as separating the two natures of Christ and thus dividing his single person. In either case they were guilty of blasphemy and heresy against the person of Christ as this had been defined by the orthodox church councils, particularly those of Nicea and Chalcedon. (87)

This sort of dualist thinking by iconoclasts offered some poignant theological
objections to artistic representations of Christ. How can art, which by its very nature emphasizes the material qualities of its subjects, serve as an adequate means by which to experience and enter into communion with God who, by God’s own very nature, cannot be contained by the material? For the iconoclasts, the solution was to be found both in the Eucharist, which they considered the one full and acceptable portrayal of Christ, and in the rejection and destruction of religious art (Irvine 4). However, this solution hardly seemed sufficient to the iconophiles who maintained that art deserved a place in worship and in the life of the church. Rather than sit back and allow the iconoclasts to continue to devalue and deny the acceptability of the arts, they formulated a theological response to the problems laid out by the image-breakers. In fact, many of these developments, as we will see more in the sections to follow, have managed to transcend their historical origins. In this way, they continue to influence and define current understandings and endorsements of liturgical art.

For Damascene, the merit of artistic portrayals of Christ rests in the Incarnation. Damascene and other iconophiles agreed with iconoclasts in their understanding of Christ as the Image of God; however, they disagreed completely with the notion that this assumption negated the legitimacy and value of sacred art. In his Apologia, Damascene offers a number of striking passages which defend and promote Christian art. These selections represent the iconophiles’ view that art’s place in the life of the church rests in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Damascene writes:

When He who is a pure spirit, without form or limit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing as God, takes upon Himself the form of a servant in substance and in stature, and a body of flesh, then you may draw His likeness, and show it to anyone willing to contemplate it. Depict His ineffable condescension, His virginal birth, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Thabor, His all-powerful sufferings, His death and miracles, the proofs of His Godhead, the deeds which He worked in the flesh through divine power, His saving Cross, His Sepulchre, and resurrection, and ascent into heaven. Give to it all the endurance of engraving and colour. (par. 9)

Because Christ came to the earth in the flesh and walked and lived among us, rather than remaining apart from the material world, iconophiles argued that Christ himself opened the door for visual representations of his life on earth. If Christ entered time, space, and humanity, Damascene reasoned, what should stop artists from recalling and celebrating the events of Christ’s earthly life?

Unfortunately for Damascene and the other image-lovers, iconoclasts were not so easily convinced. Regardless of Christ’s life on earth, they thought artistic images elevated the profane aspects of the image of Christ and lent
themselfs to worship of the material world rather than the divine (Pelikan 87-88). To these claims, Damascene retaliates: “I do not worship matter, I . . . worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake, and deigned to inhabit matter, who worked out my salvation through matter” (par. 14). In other words, Damascene distinguishes between the image itself and the God the image represents and is meant to evoke the worship of. In addition, Damascene affirms the material world, calling it good because God made it and because, through it, God saved and redeemed humankind. On this point Damascene continues, and points out ways the church already legitimizes the material world in its practices:

I honour all matter besides, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice happy and thrice blessed wood of the Cross matter? Was not the sacred and holy mountain of Calvary matter? What of the life-giving rock, the Holy Sepulchre, the source of our resurrection: was it not matter? Is not the most holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the blessed table matter which gives us the Bread of Life? Are not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and altar-plate and chalices are made? And before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either do away with the veneration . . . and worship due to all these things, or submit to the tradition of the Church in the worship of images, honouring God and His friends, and following in this the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing is that which God has made. (par. 14)

Here Damascene challenges the church to demonstrate consistency in its practices. If the iconoclasts find no fault in the use of material objects for items such as crosses, altars, and the Eucharist table, how then can they single out icons and artistic representations of Christ based on the danger of their material nature? This inconsistency places much of the iconoclasts’ argument against icons into question and suggests that material arts do hold a role in worship, one that the church has developed and advocated throughout much of its history. It must be mentioned here, too, that the iconophiles’ focus on the Incarnation as a defense for the arts created a foundation for future understandings of art and worship. As we’ll see in the section that follows, the Incarnation rests at the heart of many theologians’ current endorsements of the arts.

These understandings began to slow the wheels of the iconoclasts’ fast-paced movement against religious images and convinced some church leaders to reconsider their stance on icons. In fact, in 787, as a response to the theological defenses outlined above, the iconophiles experienced a noteworthy victory. During the fourth session of the Second Council at Nicaea, members
of the council outlined reasons why the use of images is lawful and even went so far as to burn the books of the iconoclasts (Fortescue par. 2). And although the iconoclasts continued in their cause for years after the council, progress was made in the iconophiles’ favor. As a result, artists surely felt some weight lifted off their shoulders and experienced greater freedom to create and to contribute to the life of the church through their creative pursuits.

Further Understandings in Support of Icons

Before we move on to explore more modern views surrounding art and the Christian faith, it is important to consider, even if just briefly, reasons why Damascene and others in support of icons felt so strongly as to their necessity in the life of the church. As we noted above, Protestant churches throughout the United States have, in many ways, abandoned this early understanding of art’s essential role in matters of faith (Walton 68-9). However, modern theologians within the Protestant tradition are beginning to reconsider and reaffirm the arts. In doing so, many are recalling some of the iconophiles’ most basic understandings surrounding art and worship. Thus, each of the views presented in what follows are not confined to the period of iconoclasm, but are alive today, working as active advocates of artistic expression. With this in mind, let us explore the iconophiles’ support for the arts.

First, Damascene suggests the importance of worshiping and experiencing God by all the senses, and especially that of sight. He says:

We proclaim Him also by our senses on all sides, and we sanctify the noblest sense, which is that of sight. The image is a memorial, just what words are to a listening ear. What a book is to the literate, that an image is to the illiterate. The image speaks to the sight as words to the ear; it brings us understanding” (par. 15).

Damascene argues that we should use all our senses to know and to understand God. For why limit the avenues through which we encounter God? In addition, Damascene makes the point that those who cannot read and experience God through scripture benefit well from visual depictions of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. In this way, he challenges the church to stop confining its worship practices and appealing to only one or two of its members’ senses. For, in doing so, it may be preventing some from coming to the faith by refusing to acknowledge and use an avenue by which they may have otherwise come to know God. As we will see below, this idea which affirms visual images as much as it does written or spoken words, has been reclaimed by a number of modern theologians and serves as one of the many reasons they now promote the use of the arts in worship. Another source of support for visual images used by the iconophiles stemmed from an icon’s ability to connect the worshiper to God. Icons, in all their beauty and mystery,
were thought to bring the worshiper into communion with God in a real and unique way. In their book, *Art and Worship*, Christopher Irvine and Anne Dawtry expound:

> When a person viewed a representation of Christ or one of the saints, then there was in some sense a lapse of distance between the worshiper and the subject of the icon. It was as if the viewer were standing before the depicted event or figure who, according to iconic conventions, faced, and therefore engaged, the viewer. (4).

This engagement between worshiper and icon often served as a means by which to experience and understand God, as well as a way to usher in deep and concentrated prayer. As a result, many worshipers felt inspired and moved by icons—viewing Christ or the saints in such an intimate way left them feeling enabled to live lives of concentration and discipline, lives which were exemplified by the divine figures they encountered through the icons (Cormack 7-8). In this way, the images became a source of inspiration, as well as a call to righteousness, for believers. For these reasons, John Damascene and other iconophiles defended icons and refused to allow the iconoclasts to succeed in their attempt to rid the church of them. Thankfully, these early proponents of the arts won out and their thoughts and ideas paved the way for many of our current takes on art and the worshiping community.

More than anything, the understandings outlined here testify to the power and sanctity of religious art. Throughout history, pieces of art have proven to have the capacity to move people and to communicate something of the greatness and majesty of the divine. For this reason, theologians, artists, iconophiles did not allow the misgivings of the iconoclasts, however strong or widespread, to deter them from defending and endorsing the arts. Instead, they discovered theological affirmation for icons and, in turn, created a clearing for artists who felt called to enrich the life of the church through their craft. As a result, Damascene and the iconophiles laid the foundation for many of our current understandings of liturgical art, for it is by these early conversations about icons and religious images that we now think on and seek to understand the relationship between art, the Christian faith, and, more specifically, worship.

**COMBATING MODERN ‘ICONOCLASM:’ AFFIRMATIONS OF HUMAN CREATIVITY AND VISUAL IMAGES**

Since the time of Damascene and the iconophiles, theologians and church leaders have continue the struggle of determining the place of artistic expression in the Christian faith community. Modern theologians certainly face less resistance than that experienced by icon supporters of the eighth and ninth centuries. However, the artistic apathy demonstrated by church
leaders throughout the United States serves as a sort of modern ‘iconoclasm,’ which members of the Christian faith must address. Whereas the church’s current trend to ignore visual images differs greatly from the eighth and ninth century movement we’ve just explored, the two are similar in that they lead to comparable consequences. For whether we are removing art from the church or simply no longer putting thought and intention into its creation, we are moving toward the same fate: sacred spaces void of art with the power to speak to us, to move us, and, indeed, to transform us.

Fortunately for the modern world, a number of theologians continue to insist on art’s vital role in the life of the church. In their view, the doctrine of Creation, as well as the limitations of predominantly auditory worship experiences, means the Christian faith community can no longer ignore the importance of artistic expression. Instead, modern scholars suggest, church leaders need to “engag[e] the arts both critically and appreciatively,” and to recognize “the ways . . . the visual arts . . . can inform the life of faith and nourish the creative life of the church” (Jensen x). In doing so, Janet R. Walton claims we will recover an “inherited tradition,” which is vital to Christianity, and which comes to us from some of the earliest communities of our faith (19). Walton cites the house church at Dura Europas as an early example of Christianity’s “use of art as an integral part of worship” (22-3). In this small, second-century building, the visual arts played a vital role in the life of the church. Through the narrative scenes painted in its baptistery, the Durenes recalled the stories of their faith; they came in contact with the emotional aspects of the gospel; they experienced art which “complemented and expanded verbal explanations,” and they were given, every day, the hope that the God depicted in these scenes was present, not only throughout history, but in their lives, and through their struggles, as well (24-8). These sort of powerful, hopeful, and multifaceted experiences of God and worship are possible for the church today. In fact, modern scholars argue they are necessary. In light of the Durene community, which demonstrates what a vibrant relationship between art and worship truly looks like, and in light of the theological considerations we are about to explore, perhaps the church can rebuild a relationship with the arts and discover, once again, art’s essential role in worship and in our lives as people of faith.

Before we delve into these modern theological understandings surrounding Christian faith and the arts, it is important to note how deeply woven the doctrine of Incarnation is with each of our next two topics of consideration. As we will see in what follows, the doctrine of Creation stands in direct relation to the incarnational understandings laid forth by Damascene. In addition, theologians’ current call for an emphasis on visual images in worship rests almost entirely on their understanding of God’s action in and through the incarnate Jesus. For these reasons, we must keep Damascene’s discussion of the Incarnation in
mind, even as we explore these more modern understandings of art and our Christian faith. With that said, let us turn to the doctrine of Creation in hopes of better understanding the place of artistic expression in our lives and in the life of the church.

The Doctrine of Creation

Many modern theologians pinpoint Creation as a key source of support for the arts. Recall the beginning of Genesis, in which God creates, forms, and fashions the heavens and the earth. These passages emphasize God’s craftsmanship and creativity. In doing so, the Genesis text reveals something as to the nature and character of God. Dr. Fred P. Edie comments, “God's creativity is portrayed as artful work. God is neither project manager, nor technician, nor gene-splicing scientist, nor paper-pushing bureaucrat, but artist par excellence” (66). Here God presents Godself as artist, quite literally, from the very beginning. Thus, a direct connection is drawn between artistic expression and the Christian faith. As a result, modern theologians are left to explore what this connection means for the church, a body of people made in God’s image, and its relationship to artistic endeavors.

First, the Genesis text demonstrates God’s affirmation of the created world. When all was said and done, and the creative process was complete, God looked upon the world and declared it good (Genesis 1.31). Yet, somehow, despite this blatant acceptance of the material world, the church continues, in many ways, to ignore the visual arts. In doing so, Christian leaders suggest their distrust of the earth God created. Robin M. Jensen comments, “those who cannot imagine worship without the visual dimension . . . argue that the denial of images is tantamount to the denial of . . . the goodness of creation” (55). Thus, in regarding the arts with suspicion, many of today’s churches seem to subscribe, whether consciously or subconsciously, to a dualism reminiscent of Plato. Reflecting on this viewpoint, Edie comments, “According to this way of picturing the world, thinking elevated thoughts in ivory towers receives high marks, while birthing babies, planting crops, and painting pictures are regarded as necessary evils or sinful wastes of time” (70). However, this view seems in direct contrast to God's affirmation of the created world. Furthermore, it seems to ignore the implications of the Incarnation entirely. For even if God's approval of the earth in Genesis cannot convince church leaders of the material world's merit, “the doctrine of incarnation claims that none other than God takes on the earthy materiality of creation in and through Jesus, and therefore endorses and redeems the material world” (71). God's endorsement of the earth begins in Genesis and is re-emphasized in the life of Jesus, the Incarnate One. How, then, can the church justify its continued distrust of materiality? Many scholars argue that it simply cannot. Rather, the Genesis text and God's incarnational nature means that the church must come to terms with the things of this earth.
rather than remain wary of them.

In addition to proclaiming the goodness of the earth, the early chapters of Genesis highlight the necessity of human creativeness as sanctioned by God. In his book, *A Theological Approach to Art*, Roger Hazelton represents this view. Hazelton recalls details of the Creation story, particularly those in which God, after completing God’s initial work, calls on Adam to continue in the creative process. Rather than leaving Adam out of the loop of productivity and innovation, God calls upon Adam to name and tame the animals around him (Genesis 1-2). In light of these passages, Hazelton comments, “As soon as man is created he is called by God to take part in the ongoing creation” (54). God seems to have formed humanity with the intention, not that the creative process was complete, but that human beings would continue theimaginative work begun at the beginning of time. In this way, creativity seems a part of our very identities. To this end, Hazelton remarks:

> The doctrine of creation is not a theory of how the world began, a Christian substitute for the sciences of astronomy and geology. Rather, it is our way of understanding whatever is human and natural in the clear light of faith that to be a creature means to participate in the intention and action of the Creator. (55)

Thus, our role as children of God indicates both our ability and our call to continue the work of God on earth. In light of these assumptions, all creative works, including artistic expression, appear central to God’s purposes for mankind, key to what it means to be human.

Even more than God’s call on Adam, and on us, to partake in creative work, God’s identity as Divine Creator suggests the subsequential creative nature of human beings. In fact, humanity’s unique relation to God, as being formed in God’s own image, makes real claims as to its artistic character. Edie summarizes the connection in this way: “Portraying God’s creativity as artistic endeavor seems to sanction human artistic activity as well. Indeed, some would argue that since God is known as creator, human capacities for imagination and creativity are near the heart of what it means to be formed in God’s image” (66-7). Thus, the church cannot ignore its members’ artistic leanings, but must view them as intricately linked to what it means to be made in the image of God. In this way, artistic expression should be encouraged and made a true priority in the church. For in creating and communing with art, we are affirming a key aspect of our identity as God’s children.

**Expanding our Understanding of the Word**

In addition to the Creation story, many scholars find the limited nature of words an important motive for their support of visual images in worship. Recall Damascene’s charge, early on, that the church appeal to all the human senses;
the spirit of his words ring true today as modern theologians encourage church leaders to make the liturgical arts a priority in their congregations. For we are not merely auditive, cognitive beings, but visual, emotional beings as well. As such, many scholars argue that the church should rely on visual images, and not just linguistics, when planning and conducting worship services.

It must be mentioned that the Protestant church had historical reasons for placing such a heavy emphasis on the Word. Before the time of the Reformation, images dominated the life of the church. As a result of this visual saturation, along with the Church's refusal to make scripture accessible to all people, early reformers sought liberation from images and an opportunity to read, study, and interpret the Bible for themselves (Jensen 298-9). This meant that early churches of the Reformation, after breaking away from Catholicism, tended to focus entirely on the Word. Their visual senses were so over-stimulated from their experiences prior to the Reformation, and they felt so empowered to finally hold the Bible in their own hands, that reformers often ignored the use of images entirely. In fact, leaders became so involved with this new direction of the church, that they began to see worship solely through the lenses of scripture. Robin M. Jensen explains, “Protestant theologians usually claimed that no image could be equal to the biblical text. The purist worship was with the heart, head, and mouth, not with the eye” (59). Thus, the churches of the Reformation found no reason to emphasize the arts, since they saw them as holding little significance when compared with scripture.

It is no wonder, then, why many modern churches are having a difficult time making liturgical art a priority. These historical understandings, though admittedly brief, reveal the church’s de-emphasis of the arts as part of a long-standing tradition. And while this certainly offers us some insight into the church’s present state, it is not to say that the Christian faith community should continue in this direction. In fact, a number of scholars suggest quite the opposite. Thomas H. Troeger, for instance, claims it is the church’s duty to reverse its tendency to ignore the visual arts; he writes: “I am aware of the historic reasons for this [emphasis of the aural in worship] in the reformers’ thrilling reclamation of the Bible as the church’s book. However, to perpetuate their iconoclastic extremism is not to be faithful to the Scriptures they recovered” (123). According to Troeger’s view, it is the church’s responsibility to continue in its love and appreciation for the Word, but to recognize, too, the ways in which the Word can be manifested through visual images as well as written and spoken words.

First, scholars suggest visual images are simply able to speak in ways spoken words are not. In her article, The Role of the Arts in Worship, Joan Carter claims, “Art discloses a deeper level of meaning than that normally called forth by other modes of language” (77). Due to its symbolic nature, as
well as its ability to “give emotion shape and substance,” art communicates to those it comes in contact with on levels beyond the cognitive (77, Walton, 79). In this way, art reaches humans in ways words cannot. Consider, for example, the basilica of Saint-Denis in Paris (see fig. 1). Abbot Suger, who pushed for and led the reconstruction of the abbey beginning in 1135, considered the church “a vehicle for experiencing the inestimable beauty of God” (Walton 34). Suger relied on the lighting, the architecture, the sculpture, the stained glass—all came together to speak to the worshiper of the greatness and majesty of God.

In considering the worship space at Saint-Denis, Jensen concludes, “Art was not merely showy adornment; it was a visual hymn of praise and a powerful devotional aid” (83). In this way, the arts at Saint-Denis precede all the linguistic, cognitive elements of worship, and communicate something of the beauty and vastness of God before services within the church ever call for spoken words.

In the same way the arts of Saint-Denis speak of God’s inestimable beauty, so does the Gero Crucifix from the Cologne Cathedral in Germany tell of Jesus’ suffering (see fig. 2). The six-foot, two-inch figure was commissioned by Archbishop Gero of Cologne around 970 CE (Stokstad, 469). The details of the piece draw on the humanity of Jesus in real, vivid ways. Through the expression on Jesus’ face, the angles of his body, and the streaks of blood running across his forehead, the altarpiece confronts its viewers with the reality and agony of Christ’s sufferings (469).
Such rawness in a work of art can be felt in the pit of one’s stomach— certainly pieces like the Gero Crucifix have a way of communicating to us in real, meaningful ways. Certainly, the church should affirm the use of the arts as an authentic, valuable way to express the stories of our faith.

On a lighter note, the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence, France sings of the celebratory nature of our faith, as well as the beauty of God’s creation (see fig. 3). Henri Matisse designed nearly every aspect of the church—from the architecture, to the stained glass, to the tile murals, to the vestments used in worship (Hazelton 138). Due to the bright colors, the tree of life motif used in the windows, as well as the artist’s use of light and space, Hazelton views Matisse’s work as an expression of the celebratory nature of Christianity. In describing the chapel, Hazelton comments, “The substance of faith is not lost, but instead of being tamely enshrined it is excitingly released in a truly celebrative manner” (139-40). In this way, the Chapel of the Rosary speaks of the vibrancy, life, and joy inherent to the gospel message. Once again, art proves itself capable of speaking, of communicating, of celebrating, something of the beauty and wonder of God.
These examples show the ways art, indisputably, offers a voice in worship which can complement and accompany spoken words, but which cannot be replaced by them. The arts’ ability to communicate in ways beyond our cognitive and intellectual levels suggests their vital role in our places of worship. For in worshiping God, we seek to offer our whole selves—heart, body, spirit, soul—and not merely are minds and our mouths.

Another key source of support for the visual arts is modern scholars’ understanding of the divine Word, not merely as written or auditory, but as visible and tangible as well. Here, again, we find connections to the doctrine of Incarnation. For it is in Jesus Christ that the Word became flesh and took on physical qualities, thus “divinizing” the material world (John 1.14; Edie 68). As a result, the Incarnation seeks to expand our understanding of the Word. In light of God’s revelation through Christ, our perception of the Word should include visual and sensory experiences as well as ones of spoken words and biblical texts. Jensen claims that the early apostles deeply understood this incarnational view of God. She cites John’s first epistle:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. (1 John 1.1-3)

The apostles’ multifaceted experiences with the Word suggest God’s intention to meet God’s people on a number of levels and through a number of senses. Jensen summarizes the passage’s implications in this way, “[F]ollowing the apostles, we must not limit the ways we receive the word nor the mode by
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which we proclaim it” (363). Rather, the church should recognize the essential role of the arts in worship to celebrate and communicate the nature of our incarnational God.

Unfortunately, many of today’s churches fail to live these understandings out in the worship setting. Reflecting on his experiences in reformed congregations, Troeger comments:

I find most churches restrict their understanding of the Word to what is verbal, though in fact biblical concept bursts beyond the boundaries of speech. The LOGOS (Word) of God created what we see and touch as well as what we hear... But our reformed propensity to stress the ear as the gate to heaven has detached us from the materiality of creation. Our worship in effect dis-incarnates the Word by being too exclusively aural. (123)

By continuing to place most of its emphasis on written and spoken words, the church ignores the implications of the Incarnation entirely. Instead, church leaders should seek a balance between the words we hear and the images we see in worship—for our incarnational God did not intend us to “dis-incarnate the Word” as Troeger suggests. Rather, God desires us to experience Godself in and through a number of manifestations of the Word, including visual images.

Despite its historical emphasis on aural representations of the Word, many scholars argue that the Protestant church can no longer ignore the visual arts. Rather, the church must find ways to incorporate the arts into worship and to recognize the inability of written and spoken words to fully communicate God’s nature. In this way, the arts will have a chance to form us, more completely, into people of God and to speak to us in ways words cannot.

The views outlined here represent two of the leading voices surrounding art and the Christian faith today. Both attempt to combat artistic apathy in today’s churches. In the process, each offers key theological insights as to why the arts must play a vital role in our faith communities and worship services. As Fred P. Edie declares, “... [T]he Christians really do need the Artists. Indeed they need to become the artists (or at least to imagine and think and feel with an artist’s touch) for the sake of their lives with God and their lives for the world” (91). These words, as well as our theological explorations of Genesis and the significance of visual images, suggest that the arts are essential to who we are as Christian people. They include us in the ongoing work of God, reflect our identities as God’s children, and communicate to us in ways written and spoken words are unable to. In this way, the arts are essential to who we are as individuals, who we are as the collective body of Christ, who we are as a faithful worshiping community.
CONCLUSIONS

From the time of Damascene to the present state of the church, the use of images in the Christian faith and in worship has been thought upon and wrestled with in theological terms. For the iconophiles, these explorations were done in hopes of saving and continuing the artistic tradition they cherished in the life of the church. In today’s society, scholars study theology and the arts in order to highlight connections between the two, which they feel cannot go unnoticed. In both cases, those who study and invest themselves in the consideration of art and worship find a relationship between the two indisputable and essential to the Christian faith. The arts communicate the incarnational nature of God. They reflect our relationship to the divine Creator, offer us a vital role in the ongoing work and creativity of God, and speak to our senses in ways words do not.

For these reasons, the church must acknowledge its need for an ongoing, active relationship with the visual arts. For in continuing to create and endorse the arts, the church will open itself to knowing and celebrating God more completely, more authentically, more whole-heartedly. Is this not the goal of the Christian faith?

Works Cited


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