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Liturgy as a Way of Life

*Embodying the Arts in
Christian Worship*

Bruce Ellis Benson



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Series Preface

Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find non-denominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions such as What does

postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.

Series Editor's Foreword

JAMES K. A. SMITH

When philosophers and theologians engage postmodernism, they tend to spend their time debating arcane matters of epistemology, hermeneutics, and metanarratives. Meanwhile, a kind of “practical” postmodernism has emerged in the contemporary church in other, more tangible ways. One can read the renewal of the arts in the church—including new concerns about the arts in worship—as evidence that Christianity’s complicity with modernity might be waning, at least in some respects.

Over the past couple of centuries, the church’s worship—perhaps especially in Protestant evangelicalism—unwittingly mimicked the rationalism (and dualism) of modernity. Assuming with Descartes that humans are primarily “thinking things,” worship has been centered on didactic teaching. A few songs merely function as a preface to a long sermon, the goal of which is the dissemination of information to brains-on-a-stick, sitting on their hands. The body has no role in such worship; it is worship for the proverbial brains-in-a-vat of philosophical fame. And because the body has no essential role in such worship, there is also no place for the arts, which are inherently sensible, even sensual. One can sense this in the pragmatism of church architecture, or the stark minimalism of interior design in Protestant churches, where the only adornment

was often scriptural texts emblazoned on the walls. In rationalist worship spaces, even the wallpaper is didactic.

Such “rationalist” worship also tends to not have any real place for the Eucharist. Indeed, I think one can generally note a correlation between the centrality of the Eucharist in worship and an appreciation for the materiality that underwrites the arts. So what’s lost in modernity and our unwitting adoption of rationalism is just the sort of sacramentality that undergirds Christian affirmation of the body—the same sensibility that values the arts. The metaphysics of modernity flattens the world, reducing human persons to information processors.¹ And if we buy into this, we will “worship” accordingly. The didactic will trump the affective; the intellect will crowd out the imagination; the body will be present as only a vehicle to get the mind in the pew. Welcome to the cathedral of Descartes.

But just as evangelicals are rediscovering the sacramental imagination that is carried in the liturgical tradition, they are also beginning to appreciate the importance of the arts—in culture and in worship. Both of these trends, I would suggest, are the fruit of our discomfort with the rationalist model and testify to its implosion and refusal. As such, both developments are also a kind of postmodern critique *in practice*. To appreciate the arts is to appreciate that we are more than *thinking* things. To recover the arts is to remember that we have bodies—which is to remember what Christians knew well before modernity. So we are now seeing an explosion of centers, institutes, conferences, and books devoted to “arts and worship.” More and more congregations are intentionally incorporating the arts into worship—including a range of forms, from visual art to liturgical dance, on top of an explosion of new music. Granted, much of this might simply function as ornamentation of a model that is still largely didactic and rationalist. But there is an intuition at work here that unsettles our modern habits.

So there is good reason to celebrate and affirm this newfound interest in the arts, particularly for those of us who have seen postmodernism as a kind of demodernizing discipline to help the church awake from its modern slumbers, thereby opened to recover the

1. For a diagnosis of this state of affairs and an invitation to recover a sacramental vision, see Hans Boersma’s important book *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

ancient treasury of the church's formative practices. This is what Robert Webber described as an "ancient-future" sensibility: resources for a postmodern future found in the buried treasures of an ancient heritage.

In this book, Bruce Ellis Benson shares the same intuition about a link between liturgy and the arts (and vice versa). So one could hope that a new appreciation for the arts in the church might be a kind of sacramental "gateway drug" that draws congregations to liturgical renewal. Conversely, one could hope that those congregations that are intentionally recovering the rich panoply of the church's liturgical practices might thereby consider how the arts are characterized by the same affective imaginativity.

However, while a renewal of the arts can be read as a "practical postmodernism," we also need to be cautious. For the new emphasis on art, creativity, and imagination could just as easily be simply *another* modernism—a recovery of modern Romanticism, even if that might be an implicit critique of Enlightenment rationalism. As Benson argues, Romantic conceptions of art are still characterized by the hallmarks of modernity, particularly its atomism and emphasis on autonomy. The Romantic notion of artistic creation is modern autonomy by other means: the artist as lone genius, as heroic creator, as independent inventor who creates virtually *ex nihilo*. Sound familiar? Yes, while we might applaud the Romantic critique of Enlightenment rationalism, we should also be careful about what gets put in its place: a view of human creators that makes us tantamount to the Creator, even competitors of the Creator. We can unwittingly end up buying into this when we overplay any analogy between God's creative activity and our creativity. "We are not 'artists' in the strong sense that God is," Benson cautions. "Only God can bring forth creation from nothing." Indeed, "we are likely to go wrong in our thinking about ourselves as artists when we see ourselves as 'like' God." The cult of creativity can be just another way to supplant the Creator.

This is why Benson pushes back against those notions of creativity that idolize the heroic, creative genius and reduce art to the expression of subjectivity. This, he argues, is just another version of modern individualism, autonomy, and independence. (It is also a picture, I'd suggest, that plays right into the hands of what sociologist Christian Smith has described as the "moralistic therapeutic deism" that passes for Christianity in North America. "Making

room for the arts” becomes just another way of making room for individual assertion and preference and taste.)

Thus Benson challenges the cult of creativity—and Christian “we-are-little-creators” rhetoric—and instead sketches a different paradigm for Christian affirmation of art: *improvisation*. Drawing on his expertise in hermeneutics and his experience as a jazz musician, Benson invites us to see artistic creation not as work of individual invention but as communal interaction. Artists don’t create *ex nihilo*; they work with what’s given to them. When we frame art as improvisation, he argues, we see that it exhibits the most basic structure of creaturely existence—the dynamic of call and response. Drawing on Jean-Louis Chrétien, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jean-Luc Marion, and other continental theorists, Benson helps us to appreciate that improvisation is at the heart of discipleship because it is at the heart of being human.

Preface

This book has been many years in the making. It expresses my thinking not just about art and the church but about the very nature of our lives. There are so many people who helped to make this book possible that I am bound to leave someone out. Let me start by thanking the hundreds of students who have been part of my Philosophy of the Arts course over the past twenty years. They have asked probing questions and forced me to think through these issues deeply. My thanks also go to my colleagues in the Philosophy Department at Wheaton, who read portions of the manuscript and gave (as always) very constructive feedback. I have greatly benefited from numerous conversations with colleagues in the Art Department, the Conservatory, and the Theatre/Communications Department. The Wheaton College Alumni Association provided travel funds for this book, and I received release time that made the writing of this book possible. My thanks to my dean, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, for her support. I wish to thank Jamie Smith, who invited me to write this book for his series and has provided excellent advice at crucial points. Thanks to Bob Hosack, who patiently awaited the completion of the manuscript. For continued dialogue on the arts and theology—not to mention much encouragement—many thanks go to Jeremy Begbie. For dialogue on the arts and philosophy, I am pleased to thank Nicholas Wolterstorff. Artists who have read and commented on my work include Bruce Herman and Ted Prescott. My conversation with Enrique Martínez

Celaya has been enlightening, and I am delighted to be involved in his art foundation, Whale & Star. The art historian and erstwhile museum curator Dan Siedell has provided invaluable and generous feedback, not to mention inspiration, at various points along the way. My thanks go to Jeremy Heuslein, who kindly read an earlier version of the manuscript and provided helpful comments. Peter Goodwin Heltzel has provided many constructive suggestions. Thanks to John Walton for his comments on creation and Genesis. I am grateful for conversations with such artists and/or worship leaders as John Bayless, Daniel Bayless, David Davis, Sanford Dole, Makoto Fujimura, Tom Jennings, Dan Kimball, Brandon Muchow, Buddy Owens, Jimmy Owens, and Jeff Warren. My visits to such churches as All Saint's Episcopal Church (Beverly Hills), Redeemer Presbyterian Church (New York City), Rock Harbor Church (Costa Mesa), Saddleback Church and its conference for worship leaders (Lake Forest, California), Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church (San Francisco), Saint Peter's Lutheran Church (New York City), Saint Sabina Roman Catholic Church (Chicago), and Vintage Faith Church (Santa Cruz) have been enormously helpful.

Just seeing that list will tip some readers off to the fact that the folks and institutions I will be discussing as examples of artists, worship leaders, and churches vary. What I have discovered in working on this book is that there are many churches that have markedly differing worship styles and, as a result, are ministering to markedly different people. Thanks be to God! As it turns out, my own preference in worship is rather high-church Anglican/Episcopalian. Yet I hardly think that such worship is necessarily better than all others, nor would I for a moment suggest that everyone adopt it. Indeed, often when I attend other churches I think "this is wonderful!"—even though I am delighted to return to my own church the following Sunday. As becomes clear the more one attends various churches, they have different qualities and worship styles worth commending. Who one is and where one is on one's spiritual journey have a great deal to do with which church one ultimately finds an appropriate fit. For myself, I can say that I learned far more than I could have ever expected from visiting a wide variety of churches and gained a deep appreciation for the Holy Spirit at work in many different settings.

Of course, having said all that, I must add the following regarding a fairly standard convention in writing a book. Although authors

in “acknowledgment” sections often thank various people who helped them with the book, such thanks almost always conclude with something like “any mistakes, of course, remain my own.” But why is it that we would only get *good* ideas from others and the bad ones always happen to be our own? It’s like a reverse practice of insurance companies that call disasters “acts of God,” as if God only gets credit for really bad things! Naturally, we don’t actually believe in this standard author’s reuse. It’s really, as I’ve said, more of a convention. After all, you can’t really say “for all the stupid things I’ve said, so-and-so is equally to blame.”

Yet that convention is upstaged by an even more interesting one—that *I* am the author of this book. Yes, my name’s on the cover and the copyright is in my name, but that’s also more convention than reality. Here I am not arguing for the classic “death of the author” idea propagated by Roland Barthes, who is perhaps best remembered for his famous statement that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.”¹ Thankfully, no one needs to die, in my view. Instead, as should become readily apparent to anyone who reads this book, I’m only the author of it to a certain degree. Lots of the ideas I work with are really someone else’s. To be sure, I do cite various people and even quote from them at points. But I’m really much more indebted to them than any citation, quotation, or acknowledgement section could ever make clear.

In an important sense, that’s what this book is all about—that living (and not simply “making art”) is a process of improvisation, in which one starts with things gifted to us by other people and works from there. Ultimately, I argue that this improvisational practice is best thought of as a kind of liturgy.

I first began thinking about improvisation when I encountered the work of the phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, who wrote on (among other things) musical creation and performance. Although Ingarden provides a highly nuanced view, I began to realize that the model with which he was working simply failed to acknowledge how much improvisation is part of art.² Not long after my article

1. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148. Of course, Barthes is hardly arguing that there are now to be no authors but merely that “authorship” in a strong sense (in which the author is solely in control of the meaning of her text) is neither desirable nor tenable.

2. See Bruce Ellis Benson, “Roman Ingarden and the Problem of Jazz,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 55 (1993): 677–93.

on Ingarden was published, an Old Testament scholar friend of mine (Frans den Exter Blokland) who had read the article astutely responded by saying, “But isn’t what you say about improvisation in music really what I am also doing in interpreting the Bible?” I told him that I thought he was quite right.³ And I soon came to see that *life* is improvisational. Although I have worked out this improvisational aspect in regard to music,⁴ here I want to expand on that work to speak not merely about art in general but life itself. As should become clear, *we are all improvisers in all that we do*.

Yet, if our very existence is improvisational, then this changes the way we think about what we do artistically and otherwise. In other words, it’s not as if *I’m* the one lifting ideas from others and they all got theirs by way of the mystery of genius. T. S. Eliot—certainly one of the more innovative of poets—puts it rather bluntly: “One of the surest of tests [of quality] is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.”⁵ The context for that quote is an essay on the playwright Philip Massinger, and it is quite clear that Eliot thinks that Massinger is an immature writer who merely *imitates* Shakespeare. Speaking of stealing, a quote often attributed to Pablo Picasso (also known for innovation) is, “Good artists copy; great artists steal.”⁶ Whether Picasso knew he was stealing from Eliot is hard to say. After all, a common anonymous saying is, “He who is most creative conceals his sources the best.” And, even before Eliot and Picasso, supposedly Benjamin Franklin said that “originality is the art of concealing your sources.”⁷ But

3. For an account of how biblical interpretation can be explained improvisationally, see Bruce Ellis Benson, “The Improvisation of Hermeneutics: Jazz Lessons for Interpreters,” in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), and Benson, “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Heteronomy, and *Ekklesia*,” in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

4. See Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

5. T. S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger,” in *The Sacred Wood*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928), 125.

6. Steve Jobs quotes Picasso, followed by the comment, “And, you know, we have always been shameless about stealing good ideas”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW0DUg63lqU>. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxatrXaHEXU>.

7. This exact quote is also attributed to Franklin P. Jones (1887–1929). But doesn’t this multiple attribution only provide further support for my point?

Picasso clearly does admit to stealing: “When there’s anything to steal, I steal.”⁸ What else would one expect from a great artist?

Not surprisingly, the view I take of my own authorship is one that I see as central to the creative process in general. I suggest that we think of ourselves as artistically improvising rather than creating. As we shall see, there is a very good theological basis for this way of thinking. On this point, though, I am not alone: others I cite throughout the book come very close to saying exactly that. Of course, I admit that this suggestion goes fundamentally against the grain of what most of us have been taught to think about artists and artistic creation, which we’ll consider in the second chapter. That’s also partly what this book is about—challenging what we think about art: what art *is* and exactly *who* makes art and *how* art is made. In short, I contend that we are *all* artists, that our very lives should be seen *as* art, and that we should live *liturgically* in service to God and neighbor.

Ultimately, my goal here is to explore the deep and interpenetrating relationship of life, art, and worship, though not with the intent of merely sketching some *theory* about their relationship. Instead, it is about working out *a way of life* that can properly be termed “liturgical.”

For a book in which improvisation is central, it should be expected that some of the material appeared in earlier forms. A version of chapter 1 appeared as “Call Forwarding: Improvising the Response to the Call of Beauty,” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, edited by Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007). Other parts of chapter 1 come from “The Fundamental Heteronomy of Jazz,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 60 (2006): 453–67. Much of chapters 2 and 3 is taken from “In the Beginning, There Was Improvisation: Responding to the Call,” *Verge: A Journal of Arts and Christian Faith* 1 (2011): 6–22. Portions of chapters 3 and 5 are from “Chrétien on the Call That Wounds,” in *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, edited by Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

8. Pablo Picasso, *In His Words*, ed. Hiro Clark (San Francisco: CollinsPublishersSanFrancisco, 1993), 53.

Introduction

The Art of Living

The Call and Response

I think it is safe to say that there is nothing more basic to human existence than the call and response structure. It is, quite simply, the very structure of our lives.

If you've never read Scripture in terms of call and response, you may not have noticed just how frequently it occurs. It's virtually everywhere. Consider how the world comes into being: God says, "Let there be light"; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). So the very beginning of the world is the result of a call—God calls, and the world suddenly comes into existence.¹ The pattern does not end there: it continues in all of God's dealings with the world. God calls to Adam and Eve in the garden (his call to them *after* partaking of the fruit is particularly poignant, for now they are reluctant to respond). Then, in the midst of a broken humanity, God calls Abraham to go to a foreign land where he will make Abraham's descendants into a new nation (Gen. 12).

In Gen. 22, we get both the call and the classic form of the response. God calls out: "Abraham!" And Abraham responds: "Here

1. In chapter 3, I will revisit the issue of the creation of the world by considering a possible challenge to the *ex nihilo* account of creation.

I am” (Gen. 22:1). Abraham gives what turns out to be the standard biblical reply, saying (in Hebrew) *hinneni*. But what does *hinneni* mean? In effect, Abraham humbly says, “Here I am, your servant. I am at your disposal. Tell me what you want me to do!” This is a particularly poignant passage, for God goes on to say, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Gen. 22:2). To say that Abraham must have been surprised would be a huge understatement: God is asking him to sacrifice the very son through whom God has promised to build a great nation. But Abraham does exactly what God tells him to do, and the book of Hebrews celebrates him for his faith and trust in God (Heb. 11:17).

This structure of call and response continues in Scripture. When God calls to Moses from the burning bush, God says: “Moses, Moses!” To that call, Moses replies: “Here I am” (Exod. 3:4). Similarly, God calls to Samuel who responds: “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam. 3:9). Indeed, Mary says to the angel that visits her: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Perhaps the ultimate call in the Hebrew Bible is: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4).² In any case, we are constantly being called by God to give the reply “here I am,” which signals our utter openness to God’s command. Again, once one notes this structure, one sees it throughout all of Scripture. And it soon becomes clear that call and response is the most fundamental structure to our lives.

Consider the classic spiritual:

Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
 Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
 Hush! Hush! Somebody’s calling my name
 O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?

Isn’t this always the case? Somebody’s calling my name. I hear the call and I’m faced with questions such as: What shall I do? What *shall* I do? What shall *I* do? Who is this *I* who is being called? And what happens to this *I* in being called?

2. Jean-Luc Marion claims that this is the ultimate call we receive from God. See his *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 196–97.

Even though this pattern of call and response goes back at least as far as creation, there is no *one* call, even in the creation narrative. Instead, there are multiple calls—calls upon calls—and thus responses upon responses, an intricate web that is ever being improvised, resulting in a ceaseless reverberation of call and response. Since this is such an important theme, we will consider it at length in chapter 1.

Presenting Ourselves as Art

In light of this most basic call—God’s call to us to be at his disposal—I turn to another call, one that has to do with artistic creation. One of Saint Paul’s best-known exhortations is that we present ourselves as a sacrifice to God. He writes:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1)

What if we were to read this verse with this small change of wording: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living, sacrificial *work of art*”? True, we don’t usually think of ourselves as works of art. But why not? Are we not among the greatest works of art that God—the ultimate artist—has created? Without doubt, God’s agency is what brings us into being; as the psalmist reminds us, “it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves” (Ps. 100:3 KJV). However, Paul goes on in verse 2 to say, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). People will certainly disagree as to the *extent* of God’s agency in shaping us, but clearly Paul is indicating that we are very much involved in this process. That is, God has created each of us and now calls us to help shape and mold what he has created.

One way of putting this call is as follows: God has created us *in his image*. Thus, if God is a creator, we are likewise intended by God to be creators. Of course, we are not “artists” in the strong sense that God is: only God can bring forth creation from nothing. Indeed, as I argue in chapters 2 and 3, we are likely to go wrong in

our thinking about ourselves as artists when we see ourselves as “like” God. But, still, we have the God-given ability to “create”—or, better yet, *improvise*—which is both a great honor and a mandate from God. Just as we are called to “be fruitful and multiply,” so we are called to be creative in all that we do. After all, one of our most creative acts is precisely that of creating sons and daughters. As creators, we are called to a wonderfully meaningful life. We are not called to live in rote obedience to God; we are called to be creative in all that we do—as opposed to living a life of sheer industrial labor.

So God calls us to be artists, not in some specialized sense, but in our very being. It is *this* sense of being an artist that is most fundamental: all other senses are derivative from it. The idea that we should view ourselves as works of art becomes even clearer when we consider what Paul says in Eph. 2:10 (RSV): “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” The word translated as “workmanship” could quite easily—and very literally—be translated as “work of art.” For the Greek term is ποιημα (*poiēma*), which happens to be a form of the term ποιησις (*poiēsis*). *Poiēsis* is used to denote the kind of knowledge involved in making art. So Paul quite explicitly says that we are God’s works of art, a meaning that the English term “workmanship” fails to capture adequately. As God’s artworks, we have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works,” and we fulfill God’s intentions for us when we “walk” in those good works. Paul reminds us that we “have been saved through faith” and that this is “the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). Indeed, our very being is a gift!

That God has called *all of us* to be “artists” means that being an artist is *not* something just for the few, some select group of “artistically inclined,” rarefied folk. Instead, the task of the artist—the great *ability* to be artists—is something given to all of us. It is a vocation to which we are all called. With that in mind, this book is directed to *everyone*. Of course, I in no way intend to denigrate those who find themselves called by God to be “artists” in the more usual and more technical sense of that word: some of us hear a definite call to be musicians, painters, poets, sculptors, or actors. Indeed, artists quite often feel truly “called” to their vocation (or avocation) as artists—and speak in these terms. In Exod. 31, God specifically tells Moses that he has called Bezalel and Oholiab to

make such things as the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat. God says to Moses:

See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. (Exod. 31:2–5)

Talk about being called by God! Naturally, what I say here will be of *particular* interest to those who consider themselves to be “artists” in this stronger sense. But my intention is to speak to all who wish to cultivate themselves as God calls us to do. Everyone, in this most basic way, is an artist.

Perhaps this is a new way of thinking for you, though it is an old way of thinking in the Christian tradition, and even before the dawn of Christianity. The ancient Greeks saw the individual self as something like a work of art. Indeed, the word “cosmetic” goes back to the Greek verb *kosmeo* (to arrange, with positive connotations of arranging well). The idea here is that, in using cosmetics, one is more fully arranging one’s body to reflect the order of the *kosmos* or universe. Of course, the Greeks sought to bring the entire self—including the mind—into an ordered whole that reflected the order of the universe. Moreover, this idea that we are all called to be artists fits with the ancient Greek conception of *mousikē*. While the principal meaning of this term that we translate as “music” or “the arts” specifically refers to tones, rhythm, dance, and words, it’s much more than that. In ancient Greece, to practice *mousikē* was also to be a scholar or a philosopher. Even more broadly, it can simply mean “the cultivation of the soul.” So what I am proposing is a very old idea. While this notion of seeing oneself as a work of art has more recently been picked up by such philosophers as Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, early Christians such as Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocian fathers were affected by this Greek way of thinking. They realized that the cultivation of oneself requires spiritual disciplines or exercises. As Paul commends, “Examine yourselves. . . . Test yourselves” (2 Cor. 13:5). Of course, as we noted above, Paul calls us not to conform ourselves to “this world” (this *kosmos*) but to arrange ourselves according to the order to which God calls us.

A helpful way of thinking about what it could mean to be living works of art is to consider the meaning of the term “liturgy.” Although “liturgy” is used almost exclusively today in connection with church services, it was originally about how people *lived*. For instance, all of the uses of the term *leitourgia* (*leitourgia*) in the New Testament describe various virtuous actions of ministry and service.³ As Christians, our very lives should be seen as liturgical, since all that we are and do is an offering to God. J. J. von Allmen describes Jesus’s own life as follows: “A superficial reading of the New Testament is sufficient to teach us that *the very life of Jesus of Nazareth is a life which is, in some sense, ‘liturgical.’*” He goes on to say that the life Jesus led was “*the life of worship.*”⁴ By defining “liturgy” in this way, we go beyond the narrow idea that “liturgy” is merely something we do on Sunday morning or that liturgy is something only so-called liturgical churches do. True, there is something quite special about the liturgy on Sunday, and there are definitely Christian traditions that see themselves as “liturgical” in this more specialized sense. Still, human beings inevitably live in a liturgical way. James K. A. Smith has made this point quite forcefully in speaking of human beings as “*homo liturgicus.*” Working from an Augustinian framework, he argues that liturgies shape our desires and thus our lives.⁵ Of course, as we will see, this is a basic insight that goes back to the early church. Liturgy was never intended to be something merely done on Sunday. Instead, liturgy is a way of life. All that we do is ultimately about worshiping God and living lives of worship.

To put this all together, we could say that the fundamental structure of our lives is that of the call and response. We are called and we respond. That call and response can rightly be considered artistic in that we are—in our being—God’s works of art. That we participate with God in developing ourselves (not to mention being creators of specific artworks) is due to our call to be living works of art. And

3. The one possible exception to this is in Acts 13:2, in which the people of the church of Antioch are said to be “worshiping [*λειτουργοῦντων*] the Lord and fasting.” But this reference seems to indicate only worship in general, not a particular sort of ritual.

4. J. J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (London: Lutterworth, 1965), 21.

5. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

the way in which we live our lives, following Jesus's example, is as liturgical beings who worship God in all that we do.

Rethinking Art

Yet we come to an important stumbling block. For our current notion of art—particularly what we might call “high art,” the kind of thing you’d find in a museum or opera house—is problematic, since it is so thoroughly infused with various “modern” or “romantic” conceptions regarding both art and artist. Yet what is so problematic about modern or romantic conceptions of the arts? One immediate problem is that central to these conceptions is the demand that art and artist be freed from the usual expectations of responsibility to the community. Further, following Immanuel Kant, we tend to envision the artist as “genius,” someone who creates in an inexplicable way (think, for example, of Mozart in the film *Amadeus*). As we shall see, this way of thinking about artists and artistic creation is both harmful and largely unwarranted by actual artistic practice and therefore highly problematic. Kant was likewise influential in claiming that art does not express truth but merely emotion, and we tend to think that making art is largely about “expressing yourself.” Tragically, the fact that much art has come to be seen as marginal in people’s lives is the result not of the modern theory of art’s having lost the day but of its having won it. For, if art communicates no truth and is merely about expressing one’s feelings, then why should anyone care about it? It would seem like a frivolous luxury, which is exactly what many people think about much art. Moreover, it becomes something that is only for the *artiste*, as opposed to something for us all. *But art is too important to be sidelined as “simply” a luxury.*

What should be clear is that the modern/romantic conception of art deserves a thorough deconstruction—a thorough rethinking of its basic assumptions—which is the subject of chapter 2. Certainly the “lone creator” myth has no basis. Artists are as much dependent upon others as the rest of us, and so artistic freedom must have limits. Likewise, art involves far more than simply “expressing” oneself: artists almost inevitably communicate their vision of the world and of truth. So we must reenvision art in order to gain a sense of the communal nature of art, to reclaim art as a vehicle for truth, and to view it as something of which we are all a part.

As an antidote to the modern/romantic conception of art, I suggest the idea of improvisation, using jazz as a model.⁶ By using the term “improvisation” instead of “creation,” I mean to stress that artists “fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand” rather than create in the sense of “to produce where nothing was before.”⁷ Building upon Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of play, I argue that improvising is inherently communal, in that we join with others and follow in the footsteps of previous improvisers. Although that communal dimension is particularly evident in “community art,” all artists work within a community. A reciprocal dialogue takes place between artist and audience, which entails mutual responsibility. In place of the cult of genius, then, there is the communion of artists and audience in dialogue. Rather than unregulated freedom, there is freedom within constraints that make the play possible. Although improvisation is dependent upon a tradition that it seeks to carry on and to which it wishes to be faithful, truly faithful improvisation is never simply repetition. Further, I see our improvising as grounded in the very nature of God’s creation. In creating human beings, the Triune Creator says “let us” and sets in motion a reality of continual alteration. Yet, unlike God—who creates *ex nihilo*—we create as “improvisers,” *out of something*. However, if God does not simply set reality in motion but is constantly involved in that reality, then God is an “improviser” too. In *that* sense, we are improvisers in God’s image.⁸ What it means to be improvisers is the subject of chapter 3.

Art, Beauty, and Truth

We have already noted that, in our society, “art”—again, particularly “high art”—is viewed as an “add-on,” the sort of thing one

6. My knowledge of jazz arises both from my study of it as a philosopher and from my experience as a practicing jazz musician.

7. See *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. “improvise,” and *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “create.”

8. Jeremy Begbie puts it as follows: “Human creativity is supremely about sharing through the Spirit in the creative purpose of the Father as he draws all things to himself through the Son.” Begbie goes on to speak of our “interaction with creation” that results in both “*development*” and “*redeeming of disorder*.” See his *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 179.

might have once a society reaches a certain level of development and economic means. Yet this way of thinking about art is simply wrong, on at least two levels. On the one hand, there are *no* primitive cultures—no matter how “primitive” (and I am well aware just how problematic this term and such a judgment are)—that do not have some form of communal art. Art is simply ubiquitous; it’s everywhere. Only if one thinks of art in the “high art” sense is it possible to think of art as being something rarefied. Rarefied art, however, is more or less an anomaly of our time compared to the millennia in which human beings have been making art. One needs only to think of those prehistoric cave paintings in France, such as Lascaux or Chauvet (thought to be thirty-two thousand years old), to graphically demonstrate that we have long sought to express ourselves artistically. Or, to use a different sort of art, virtually all cultures have dances or other kinds of rituals of movement that have religious and communal significance. Where you find a culture or civilization, there you will undoubtedly also find art. One could put this even more strongly: precisely because you have art, therefore you have culture or civilization. Art—of various sorts—is part and parcel of our everyday experience: we find it from symphony halls to billboards, from Broadway to Hollywood, from images on the internet to iTunes.⁹ As we have seen, it is very early on in God’s dealings with the Israelites that he specifically calls for various artistic objects to be made according to very exacting instructions—for his glory. In other words, *our God is a God of art*. He *commands* it to be made. Moreover, he is no artistic relativist: he has highly demanding standards for what the end product should be. That God has such standards can only lead us to conclude that God must have artistic standards for us too.

God’s call to Israel to make works of art according to certain standards is strongly connected with the very notion of the call. The Greek word for “call” (*kalein*) is clearly etymologically connected to the Greek word for “beauty” (*kalon*). Although we will explore this relationship in much greater depth in chapter 1 here we can note that what makes things beautiful is precisely that they call out to us. The beautiful enchants us. It makes us want to look; it makes us want to listen. Or, to go back to God’s calling the

9. As should be clear here, I am using the term “art” in a very broad rather than a narrow sense.

world into being, God *first* calls and *then* pronounces it “good” (which can also be seen as God calling the world “beautiful”). In calling for art to be an intimate part of our everyday lives—even to be a way of speaking of *how* we live our lives—I mean to suggest that beauty is part of our everyday experience. That is not to suggest that there is nothing tragic or broken about the world that we experience, for we truly live in a world of brokenness and one in which even beauty itself is never fully detached from the tragic. Yet beauty is still there. Of course, I have an expansive rather than restrictive sense of the term “beautiful”: there are many ways in which things can be beautiful.

More important yet, I believe that art is just as essential a way of *thinking* about the world as philosophy or physics. My intention here is to move beyond seeing art as merely about our feelings or as a way of expressing ourselves and to move toward a conception of art that is also about *truth*. Let us return to those cave paintings. Admittedly, they are very likely there to convey beauty. But do they not also say something about the lives of those who painted them? Do they, thus, not tell us something *true* about life at that time? These early artists may have been “expressing themselves,” but they were doing much more than merely that. They were also making a statement about their world.

Artistic Dangers

We have already touched briefly on the problems resulting from the conceiving of art in terms of the modern/romantic paradigm. But these are not the only dangers that face us as artists. In the novel *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the character Asher Lev is warned by his mentor about becoming an “artistic whore.”¹⁰ One of the many temptations facing artists is that of providing a “pretty” view of the world (which Asher’s mother keeps asking him to draw).¹¹ Sadly, some Christian art falls prey to this temptation. Given a world marred by sin and violence, honest art must not shy away from telling the truth. Similarly, we as works of art are always broken, even though we try so hard to act otherwise. Cornel West is helpful

10. Chaim Potok, *My Name Is Asher Lev* (New York: Anchor, 2003), 256.

11. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

in this respect, for he reminds us of the tragic nature of our fallen world. What God has made “good” has been marred by sin. Of course, the *opposite* problem is just as dangerous. Asher’s mentor warns him about “selling out” to the art world and its expectations. The artist as Christian faces both dangers, either telling lies to make us feel content or sacrificing one’s identity as a Christian to fit into the “art world.” To be faithful to both God and the community of believers, the artist must engage in an improvisational process of “subverting” whatever is untrue and finding ways to infiltrate and transform the world. We turn to these questions in chapter 4.

Here we come to a related though somewhat different problem. Presumably, our artworks—whether they are our drawings or our lives—should ultimately draw *us* to God. We also are called to live lives that lead *others* to God. It is instructive to consider the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion’s work on icons and idols. In his highly influential text, *God without Being*, Marion reminds us that Saint Paul speaks of Jesus as the ultimate icon, the icon par excellence: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). “Image” is the standard English translation of the Greek word εἰκὼν (*eikōn*). To say that Jesus is “the icon of God” is to say that Jesus both is God and, in his very being, points to God the Father. Historically, icons have been taken by the church—particularly the Eastern church, though not it alone—to be images that lead us to God. As such, they are like windows that do not draw attention to themselves but act as portals to God. As an example, we might say that a good sermon should not leave us thinking “what a wonderful preacher!” but “what a wonderful God!” The preacher is merely an icon. In contrast, Marion likens idols to *mirrors*, for they allow us only to see ourselves: “The idol depends on the gaze that it satisfies, since if the gaze did not desire to satisfy itself in the idol, the idol would have no dignity for it.”¹² We value idols precisely because they allow us to gaze upon ourselves.

We are called to be icons, not idols. Our lives—as works of art—should point both ourselves and others to God. Such a goal raises two very closely connected questions. On the one hand, to what extent are the art that we create and the lives that we live designed for us and our pleasures, versus for God and his pleasure? Perhaps

12. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 10.

there is ultimately no problem here, since the answer might simply be “both.” Yet, often art is seen as something one does merely for oneself, a point that we consider in chapters 2 and 4. On the other hand, there is clearly an artistic difficulty in providing a glimpse of God that is paralleled by the theological difficulty of writing about God. Marion reminds us that no image of God (literal or figurative) is “adequate” to God, who is a “saturated phenomenon” in the sense that God’s fullness exceeds our grasp. Yet we are still called to tell the narrative of God’s redemptive work in history and become partakers with God through art, providing ways of seeing and hearing that speak to new generations of both believers and unbelievers. Part of the artistic work is to “deconstruct” images of God that are inadequate or inaccurate, and art is a powerful medium for challenging the ways in which we conceive God. Yet another part of our artistic responsibility is to become icons ourselves. In other words, as we improvisationally compose our lives, we can become icons that point to God.

Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

So far, our emphasis here has been on liturgy as a way of life. It is something we do every day as part of our very being. Such is exactly the emphasis one finds in *Liturgy for Living*, in which the authors make an important distinction: The term “intensive liturgy” describes “what happens when Christians assemble to worship God.” “Extensive liturgy” describes “what happens when Christians leave the assembly to conduct their daily affairs.” As the authors go on to say, “the two [types of liturgy] are mutually dependent.”¹³ Although we can quite rightly be described as *living* liturgically, there is of course liturgy that takes the form of “worship services.” All churches have their liturgies—their ways of organizing themselves, their specific rites and rituals. Yet even those churches that closely follow a “script” (e.g., written instructions or something like *The Book of Common Prayer*) are always improvising, for liturgy is an event that happens anew each time it is incarnated. Using the Greek notion of *καιρος* [*kairos*], Hans-Georg Gadamer speaks of

13. Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 296.

“festival time,” in which something is repeated in such a way that there is both repetition and development.¹⁴ Consider a festival that recurs each year: each time that it occurs, it does so anew. In festival time, we are taken out of the ordinary sense of time in which minute follows minute; we are moved into a different sense of time. Each time we worship, we celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and his victory over sin and death. And, in that moment, clock time takes a back seat to festival time. Yet liturgy is (to cite the literal meaning of the term) truly “work,”¹⁵ for it requires that we work hard to “hear” God’s voice and to move into a posture of worship. To say that worship is improvisational means that we must be constantly seeking new ways of declaring God’s glory and new ways of hearing God’s voice.

The very structure of the liturgy of the Word and Eucharist is constituted by the call and response. We are always already called to proclaim the Word, and the Word calls out to all assembled. In turn, we respond to the call and yet also turn outward to call to both those in the assembly and those outside of it. Of course, as Jean-Louis Chrétien points out, the call is only truly heard *in the response*. So the call cannot be thought without the response. Similarly, the Eucharist is enacted both because Jesus has called us to “do this in remembrance” and because we are (to use a term from Marion) “the gifted.”¹⁶ That is, we have been given not just the gift of salvation but also the gift of the identity of being Christ’s body. In turn, we offer to God not merely our souls and bodies but also our gifts of bread and wine. The call and response structure is mirrored in our receiving and giving back to God.

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 39–42.

15. The Greek word for liturgy literally means “the work of the people.” We will return to this definition in chapter 5.

16. The word translated as “the gifted” is the French term *l’adonné*. Literally, this means “the devoted” or even “the addicted.” Despite this difficulty, “the gifted” gets at the important aspect of reception. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 268.