

In *Discovering God through the Arts*, discover how the arts can be tools for faith-building, life-changing spiritual formation for every Christian. As art is a reflection, examination, or contemplation of the human experience, then all Christians can find their faiths enriched by infusing art into their spiritual journeys.

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## CONTENTS

Introduction: Discovering the Power of the Arts 7

1. The Arts and Spiritual Disciplines: Two Paths to a Deeper Faith 15
2. Coming Awake: Teaching Us to Pay Attention 29
3. The Eyes of a Child: Rediscovering a Sense of Wonder 47
4. The Mystery Dance: Digging for Deeper Meanings 71
5. A Bigger Picture: Bringing the Scriptures to Life 97
6. The Best Kind of Heartbreak: Helping Us Deal with Our Emotions 123
7. We Are Not Alone: Finding Comfort and Discovering Courage 143
8. A World Bigger Than Me: Making Us More Empathetic 167
9. Prophetic Voices: Awakenning a Passion for Justice 191
10. Quiet Places: Assisting Us in Prayer and Contemplation 219
11. Soul Food: Resources for Your Spiritual Journey 245

Acknowledgments 265


Notes 266



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Arts and the Spiritual Disciplines:

## *Two Paths to a Deeper Faith*



ONE DAY I WAS SITTING IN THE LUNCHROOM where I worked, and I was thoroughly engaged in reading a novel by Kurt Vonnegut. His books have always made me laugh even as they challenged my thinking, and it must have been the snort of mirth I released that made Carl determine that this would be a good time to interrupt me. “Whatcha reading?” he asked, gently closing the Bible that sat on the table in front of him as a sign he wanted to chat. Honestly, I didn’t want to talk right then, as I was kind of lost in my book, but I knew the polite response would be to answer him. So, I did.

“It’s a really great novel by Kurt Vonnegut,” I answered, holding it up so he could see the cover.

“Hmmm,” was his only response, and I detected a disapproving tone in it.

“Yeah, Vonnegut is so creative and such a great cultural critic,” I offered.

“Oh.”

“Have you read any of his books?” I asked, thinking it likely that he had at least been assigned *Cat’s Cradle* or *Slaughterhouse-Five* at some point.

“Nope. I don’t really have time for reading fiction,” he explained. “I mostly just want to read books that will help me in my life or help me grow closer to God. Life is too short to read about things that never really happened. I figure that if I mostly just read the Bible, I am going to learn everything I need to know.” He knew that I was a Christian, so I imagine he thought I would find this convicting somehow.

As we chatted further, I learned that he also didn’t go see movies unless they had a strong Christian message (or at least no swearing or dirty bits), that he rarely listened to anything other than worship music, and that, outside the Bible, his reading was pretty much limited to popular faith-based books about how he could be a better Christian or how he could overcome certain sinful tendencies that he struggled with. Carl felt that it was dangerous to pay too much attention to art and culture, as it might cause a person to doubt or your choices might cause others to stumble.

He was completely sincere, and I knew him to be a person who tried to walk out the implications of his faith. I understood his passion to place every area of his life under the lordship of Jesus. But I found his thoughts to be a little short-sighted and actually not in line with what the Bible teaches or with what Christians have believed down through time. Such thinking, I suggested, could actually cut him off from tools that God might want to use to help him in his spiritual growth.

After some back and forth, I could tell he had decided I was a lost cause on this issue, at least until he could gather some more ammunition for arguing his views. So, he suggested we agree to disagree, and he let me go back to wasting my time with my book. I gladly did so.

There have always been Christians who were suspicious about the value of the arts. It is a conversation that Christians have been having since the early days of the church. Some early leaders suggested that any focus on the *visual* instead of the *verbal* or *written* was potentially dangerous, and, quoting the second commandment, they warned against making any “graven images” (Ex. 20:4–5 KJV). While that passage is focused on forbidding idolatry, some were concerned that a revered piece of art might easily become an idol. Such fears arose again during the Reformation, based on a concern about the excesses of previous centuries; their artistic creations may have, at times, brought people perilously close to confusing the divine with a human creation.

In some cases, these artistic artifacts were believed to have spiritual powers as direct connections with the divine. Some thought, for example, that touching a statue of the virgin or of a revered saint could heal them of their diseases. In response, some of the Reformers took a hard line and stripped their churches of all adornments, even busting statues, whitewashing over frescoes, melting down gold furnishings, and destroying religious paintings. Luther, however, suggested a different approach. He was open to the arts as long as it was clear that they were only symbols of divine truth, and not actually direct channels of any divine power. He saw that art and music could help people understand the new Reformation theology. He even collaborated with his friend, the painter Lucas Cranach the Elder, to create new altarpieces with a more distinctly Protestant message to replace the previous Catholic ones.

And outside the walls of the church buildings, Reformation

polemics on all sides were often carried out by the popular media of broadsheets, paintings, and prints, made possible by the new technology of printing and distributed to the common folk as visual tracts. Or such art could be useful for explaining the meaning of the new Protestant theology in simple terms, as in this wonderfully didactic picture by Lucas Cranach. Such work was art as instruction.



*Allegory of Law and Grace* by Lucas Cranach, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Art as a helpful tool. Art as a dangerous temptation. Both views of art survive into our own time. While some remain cautious, others have seen the great power of the arts to move the human soul and assist believers along their spiritual journey.

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The Bible does not forbid using art as part of religious practice. In fact, it encourages it. The prohibition against graven images, writes Francis

Schaeffer, “does not forbid the *making* of representational art, but rather the *worship* of it.”<sup>1</sup> The artist is free to exercise their creativity, but must never confuse the work of art with that which it points toward.

The Tabernacle, and then later the Temple, were places where worship took place for the ancient Israelites. As we read their descriptions in the pages of the Old Testament, we discover that each was a work of architectural artistry and each was embellished with elaborate ornamentation. When God gave directions for what He wanted these buildings to look like, He did not order up a straightforward or simple design, nor did He instruct the craftspeople to only create the expected religious imagery, but instead had them use images of natural objects such as flowers, trees, and animals. When building God’s temple, King Solomon called for the walls to be encrusted with precious stones. The purpose of such ornamentation was not utilitarian. Its purpose was that it be beautiful (2 Chron. 3:6).

The designs for the Tabernacle and the Temple are a good reminder that God, the One who created everything, delights in creativity, and sees it as a way of pointing toward His truth. And God takes art so seriously that He handpicked a man named Bezalel to undertake this work of creativity and filled him “with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts” (Ex. 31:3–5). It was not enough, in God’s eyes, to create something functional; He wanted something that was exquisitely artful.

Art has been part of the Christian heritage from the earliest days. Deep in the catacombs of Rome, early believers left behind images that reflected their faith and their struggles against persecution. It is really a miracle that any early Christian art still exists today, but some has survived the intense persecution of the faith, the ravages of time, and the suspicion of some early church leaders about the appropriateness of representing the sacred in a visual form. In the early days, there were no public places (no church buildings) to display art and, for the first few centuries, scant financial resources in the churches to patronize artists. With all the challenges, art went underground. Literally. Creative believers left behind their pictures in these burial chambers to celebrate the new faith.

Many of these images focused on Old Testament stories of deliverance, such as the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, the story of Noah

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*The Good Shepherd, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome.*

and the ark, Daniel in the lion's den, and Jonah, whose three days in the belly of a whale was seen as a prefiguration of the three days Jesus spent in the tomb before His resurrection. Other images illustrate stories of Jesus' miraculous healings or celebrate Him as the Good Shepherd. There are, in fact, more than 120 instances of

the Good Shepherd image in the catacombs. This image was never intended to be a literal portrait of Jesus, but it was a potent symbol of His love and care.

As early as 215 AD, the church father Hippolytus allowed new believers to become or remain artists as long as they didn't make idols.



By the time of Gregory the Great (600 AD), a tradition of valuing the arts as a way of communicating truth had become generally accepted, though there would still be a drawn-out iconoclastic controversy, which ultimately had as much to do with political motivations as religious ones. Finally, when the rhetoric cooled and the dust settled, the church came down on the side of embracing the value of images.

Gregory famously wrote, “Pictorial representation is made use of in churches for this reason: that such as are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books.”<sup>2</sup>

He saw the arts as a way to educate the largely illiterate population of his time in theology and spirituality. This perspective was responsible for an explosion of visual art, sculpture, mosaics, and church architecture in the centuries that followed. The views of such thinkers might be encapsulated in this quote from Robin Margaret Jensen, a prominent historian of early church art:

Art crystalizes, or perhaps materializes, certain points of doctrine which, while based on scripture, are sometimes more often encountered in theological arguments than in ordinary daily experience. Images can make the bridge between the material and the intellectual. . . . Visual images also speak directly and clearly, even to the simplest believer.<sup>3</sup>

So artistic images continue to speak to us today, as well as other art forms that comment on the Scripture text, reinforcing Scripture’s power and bringing it to life with dramatic effect. They help us understand the complexities of theology and of life and awaken our spirits

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**Art helps us understand the complexities of theology and of life and awakens our spirits to the wonder of God’s Word and God’s world.**

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to the wonder of God's Word and God's world.

Music found an easier acceptance in the church because of its connection with worship in ancient Israel. From the song of Moses (Ex. 15) to the poetic expression of the Psalms, there is a strong tradition of valuing music in the Bible. The New Testament records that Jesus and the apostles sang a hymn after celebrating the last supper (Mark 14:26), Paul and Silas sang in prison (Acts 16:25), and singing was part of the early gatherings of the church (Acts 2:46–47). In Ephesians 5:19, Paul celebrates the value of “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (ESV). Many scholars even suggest that several Pauline passages may be quotes from the hymns of his day, such as 1 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Timothy 2:11–13, which were used as quick summaries of key doctrinal beliefs. Then there is the book of Revelation, which is filled with instances of worship and singing. Singing, it seems to imply, is nothing less than a foretaste of heaven.

Martin Luther was a proponent of the great value of music in the church. He recognized its ability to communicate the truths of Scripture in a way that could stir the hearts of every man and woman. In fact, he wrote that “next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.”<sup>4</sup> He wrote at least thirty-six hymns and made music and singing a centerpiece of worship. He reveled in the joy that music could bring to the human heart, and memorably said:

This precious gift has been bestowed on men to remind them that they are created to praise and magnify the Lord . . . one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in this wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and round it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping, springing round about,

marvelously gracing the simple part, like a folk dance in heaven with friendly bows, embracing, and hearty swinging of partners. He who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the artistic disciplines we'll be exploring in this book—visual art, music, literature, poetry, architecture, filmmaking, photography, and more—cannot only be a source of enjoyment but also a tool for spiritual growth and formation. The arts can change and transform us within, which is why they are indispensable for our lives. And hey, you don't want to be a "clod," do you?

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Spiritual growth, as most of us can personally testify, doesn't just happen. It requires that we make some choices and some commitments. It requires that we engage with spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines to guide us along the path to spiritual maturity. Our salvation may not be primarily concerned with how diligently we pursue our life with God, but our actual spiritual maturity is most definitely connected to it. Spiritual disciplines are what we do that encourages growth. That's why, when we talk about our relationship with God, we often use metaphors of progression, words and phrases that speak of our spiritual maturity as a walk, a journey, running a race, or moving through stages. When we stand still, we aren't going forward. We practice our faith so we might become more adept as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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If we want to become a better piano player, we must practice in order to improve, and it's the same for playing golf, cooking, painting, or any number of skills at which we want to become more adept. We get better by focusing on the skill at which we want to excel. Similarly, the spiritual life also contains practices that will help us deepen our connection with God and become the kind of people we really want to be. Prayer, reading the Scriptures, meditating on God's Word, and fellowshiping with other believers are just a few of the practices that keep us moving forward on the spiritual path.

Whereas *religion* is often concerned with structures, institutions, and dogmas, growing spiritually is about deepening our beliefs, becoming more aware of God's presence, surrendering to His will, searching for a more profound understanding, finding inner peace, discovering greater freedom and contentment. And, ultimately, it is about transformation. To move forward in the spiritual life is, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, to be "transformed into his image with

ever-increasing glory" into a reflection of Christ's likeness. God wants to do the necessary interior work in our hearts that will manifest itself in outward change. When the inner life is strengthened, the outer life changes for the better. Our relationship

with God is not just about "getting saved," but about "being remade" in the likeness of Jesus. Salvation is the event that begins the journey. True spirituality is not about just believing the right things about God, but about living out those truths in our daily lives.

Whether you are an artist trying to perfect your craft, or a believer seeking a more perfect life reflecting Christ (Matt. 5:48), you must show up every day and do what needs to be done. Even when you

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don't feel like it. And you must do most of the work yourself. You can't rely on your family, your pastor, or your counselor. No one else can do it for you. And spiritual growth takes time and patience. You can't get good at playing the violin, for example, if you only put in half an hour a week. Can you really expect to find more intimacy with God if you just check-in with Him for a few minutes each week? Spiritual growth requires some discipline. Discipline doesn't mean getting caught up in a long menu of shoulds. Discipline isn't meant to lead to guilt, but to a life of more intense devotion. At the start it may feel like hard work, but the end result is worth the energy expended.

To be clear, God doesn't love us more when we are disciplined. Our goal in a disciplined life is not about earning salvation or gaining His attention. It is about a desire to draw closer to Him, to deepen our experience with Him, and above all, to change. When you show up through the disciplines, things start to happen. Not all the time and every day, but increasingly so when intimacy with God becomes a focus for your life.

Discipline is also a critical part of the making of art. Artists must master all the technical aspects of their work before a creative breakthrough can occur. They must learn about line and color and composition, as well as shapes and shades. They must gather their supplies and make certain they have the right tools at hand. Only then can they create a beautiful work of art. So, in the spiritual life, you might need to learn some basics so that your spiritual breakthrough can happen. You might recite some great prayers from Scripture or from believers through the centuries in order to give you the language you need to express your heart to God. You might need to learn how to deal with distractions that rob you of focus. You might want to learn some breathing techniques that help calm and focus your mind.

These are all tools that you can use in a natural way once they become part of your spiritual toolbox. The reason golfers spend a lot of time swinging a golf club in practice is so that when they are standing over the ball and getting ready to hit it, they don't have to even think about the details. It has become ingrained. Second nature. Spontaneity can occur because of all the preparation.

And it requires a commitment to stay patient and keep moving forward. "Spirituality," writes Robert Wuthnow, "is less like a watercolor that can be finished quickly and more like a sculpture that requires a long, slow process of chipping away without seeing any immediate results."<sup>6</sup>

But spiritual growth is not only about spiritual practices, for which the arts can sometimes be a great companion and encourager, but it is also about renewing our spiritual vision and passion, which is precisely where the arts can have the most impact and influence.

The arts are, for most of us, already an important element of our journey of faith. We may not, however, always be conscious of this fact. The architecture of the places and spaces where we worship, along with their stained-glass windows and the vessels for celebrating the Lord's Supper. The music we sing together or listen to a choir perform—hymns, gospel songs, worship choruses, anthems, and musical interludes that occur during key parts of the service. The cross that adorns most sanctuaries. In some traditions, the vestments worn by clergy. The floral arrangements on the altar. Even the creative designs of the bulletins we use are a reflection of our creativity. But we generally don't give much thought to any of these. We take them for granted. They are, however, some of the ways that the arts influence our experience every Sunday.

All these elements may inspire us, move us, and delight us. Or

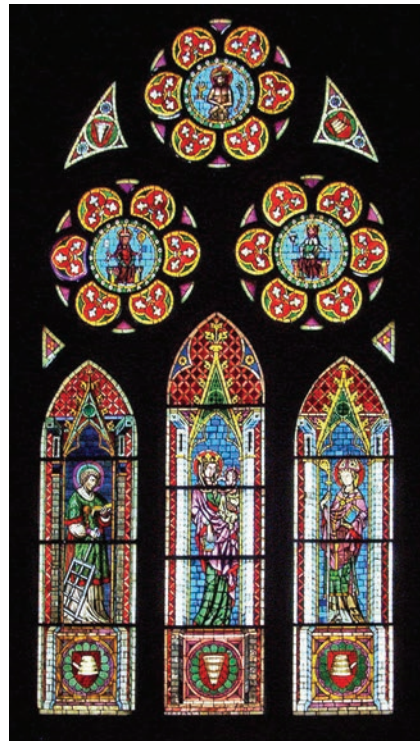
they may disappoint us or cause bafflement, boredom, or tears. But they *will* have an impact.

Whether in a worship service or in our daily lives, beauty often catches us by surprise. We don't expect to be bowled over by it. Other times, though, we intentionally seek it out. We might put on a favorite record, attend a concert, visit an art exhibit, or tour a natural site famed for its beauty. The act of seeing, hearing, and feeling leaves a mark on us, and adds a memory that we can revisit later, or stirs something inside our soul.

Experiencing art is like falling in love. It demands vulnerability at the start, and it often takes a lot of work to keep it alive and growing.

Learning to appreciate great art often takes time. One of the signs of lesser art is that it can be accessed more immediately,

and you can pretty much grasp everything it has to offer very quickly. Such art makes little lasting impact. It generally doesn't stay with us or haunt our thoughts like a more complex work of art might. Such art is often created for propaganda purposes—to sell a product, arouse us to political or social action, convince us of a religious commitment or make us feel more comfortable about holding it. We glance and then forget. We listen and then move on. But the best art, the kind



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Martyrs' Window, Freiburg Minster

of art we will explore in this book, tends to take its time in impacting us, just as spiritual formation does. It is a worthy goal to learn to discriminate between the “just ok” and the “truly great,” to recognize what is of lasting value, to probe more deeply into the ideas that gave rise to it. This can involve a bit of study and reflection rather than just expecting an immediate pleasurable response. Similarly, a sermon that stirs up an audience through rhetorical flourish may not produce the lasting results of one that causes us to have to question and ponder what we already think we believe.

The arts want to create a conversation with you. Are you ready to engage with them and see what they have to say?

## QUESTIONS AND SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. When have you found the arts to be a useful companion to your spiritual journey?
2. Ponder the way that you engage with the arts in your own life. How often is it for distraction, decoration, and devotion? When are such uses valuable and when are they not?
3. In what ways might the arts become a detriment to your spiritual journey?
4. Which spiritual disciplines are a regular part of your walk with God? How might the arts be a useful companion for them?



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