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Our Reformed Heritage and the Arts

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The present interest in Church architecture, liturgy, and interior Church 'decor' is making significant and welcome changes in the structure of Protestant Churches. Many of these Churches inherited a tradition which sturdily refused to provide anything more than a somewhat ornate pulpit within the sanctuary—or auditorium as it was sometimes then called. The stress on worship, and a recovery of the Reformers' emphasis on Holy Communion, have played a part in the new developments. It is common now to find the Cross the dominant motif and a large Holy Table with the symbols of the Cup and plates, in the sanctuary. All this is to be welcomed. But the time appears to be ripe to ask the question whether we have followed a sufficiently radical pattern. Few Protestant Churches appear to be willing to place visible expressions of the faith—statues or paintings of the Christ—within the sanctuary. Two-dimensional stained glass windows have been approved (though their high costs make them the exclusive possession of wealthy middle-class communities), but there is a reluctance to introduce the three-dimensional structures. Is there any valid theological justification for this?

The protest against statues and paintings stems from a desire to be faithful to the Old Testament injunction 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness . . .'. It is argued that this commandment forbids us from using any 'material' to express the Divine. Yet this interpretation fails to do justice to the difference between the Old and New Testaments. The commandment forbidding us to seek to express the Divine has special and necessary meaning in the time of the Old Covenant. This is the period of partial revelation, the period of preparation for the full revelation in Jesus Christ. It is because man, in this time, has no adequate knowledge of the True God that the commandment has validity. Man as sinner has no clear vision of the Eternal God and there is no road from 'below' by which we may travel into the heavens and 'see' God. The commandment protects the Holiness of God and warns men against presumptuous sin. But the teachings of the Old Testament receive radical transformation with the coming of Jesus.

In Jesus the 'gap' in our knowledge of God has been filled—from the other side. God Himself has chosen to express His Life

in the flesh, in material form, as Incarnate Lord. He was not an *avatar*, mere appearance, as Hinduism understands every appearance of God in history, but in the most positive way was embodied in history itself. Matter was used of God to reveal God. The Word was made flesh. In much Protestant thought this Incarnational fact has ceased to play the creative rôle which properly belongs to it. Many Protestants are slightly docetic in their understanding of Incarnational truth. They are so much concerned to protect the 'otherness' of God that they do not adequately understand that the Incarnation holds both 'otherness' and 'nearness', the divine and the human, in perfect unity in the Person of Jesus the Christ. It is this incipient doceticism which makes many Protestants reluctant to use the stuff of history, material form, to express Jesus. Yet in this reluctance, they cannot easily refute the charge that they do not take His Manhood seriously.

But the more serious reason for the reluctance stems from the desire to keep the commandment. Actually, of course, it is only in relation to Jesus Christ that the commandment has meaning for the Christian. The old commandment receives a new depth and dynamism in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If we did not see this, we would be compelled to accept the Muslim charge that we are guilty of idolatry when we worship the One True God in Jesus Christ. But precisely because we do this very thing for us the commandment reads differently. In essence we are warned that worship of any thing or person other than Jesus Christ is forbidden. And conversely, that nothing is idolatrous if it is used to make the worship of God in Jesus Christ more acceptable. Idolatry is no longer the mere 'negative' of Old Testament times, it is that which keeps us from Jesus Christ. And precisely because He was made flesh, the flesh, matter, can be used, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to express His Image.

The idolatrous temptation to identify the Living God with a 'locus' is present and must be guarded against in the response of man in worship. We have been aware of this danger in our reactions to art and sculpture. But it is a present danger in every form of Christian response. There is a form of Bible faith which identifies the Spirit and the word in idolatrous fashion. Creeds and confessions have also been turned into idols. Decorative texts, so popular in Protestant homes, can become loci with idolatrous overtones. Indeed, wherever men are tempted to stop, *en route* to the Divine, in the material alone, idolatrous imaginings are present. Nevertheless, in spite of this risk, we have to continue to make manifest the Truth of the Word made flesh in a response that is total in character.

The liturgical developments within Protestantism have not, for the most part, been cultivated on the basis of theological understanding. Rather aesthetic reasons have predominated and have served to inform the recent stress on new forms in Church architecture and worship. At the same time, we have not

hesitated to use certain modern techniques, filmstrips, projectors, flannelgraphs, to teach the faith—means not available to the early Church—yet it is hard to see what theological reasons we can summon to support their uses, if we continue to resist the use of the more traditional forms—in art and sculpture—within the sanctuaries.

But this radical new way for Protestantism can only come from a radical new insight into the implications of an Incarnational Theology. Protestant Church life suffers perhaps from a degree of anaemia. It does not take seriously the awesome, yet transforming, fact that God was made man, flesh and blood. If it did, there would be a greater desire to embody the Incarnate Christ in the art and culture of our times, so that those who in this generation search after reality might find it in Him. It could be that in our concern to protect the Holiness of God—wrongly conceived—we have effectively kept him out of the actualities of history. We need to learn how to handle history itself, the matter of which history is made, with reverence. This is much the more difficult task. But it is a task which the Incarnation lays upon us. To worship a child and not commit idolatry is not easy. Yet it is precisely this that our faith requires of us. And it is this which our age yearns to see—Our Flesh in the Godhead—the Godhead in the flesh.

Consequently, the plea for a fresh approach becomes the more imperative because of the imperative need for us to communicate the Gospel to modern man. A Christian artist is enjoined to use the inspiration of the faith to express the Word in art, drama, poetry, song and literature. But it is hard to see how this can be effectively done when within the Church building itself he receives little or no encouragement in this direction. Rather, if he is a sensitive soul, he will be aware of a certain reluctance to admit the 'arts' into the main stream of Christian life. For the average Protestant Christian has inhibitions from a Puritan past which act as a barrier to the spontaneous acceptance and use of 'culture'. This makes it difficult for the artist to find real sources of inspiration and encouragement from within the Christian tradition itself. For unless he sees that his work can be used to the greater glory of God within the sanctuary itself, the Christian artist will have a troubled conscience or go elsewhere for light and counsel.

But it is the ordinary worshipper who must be our primary concern. Men need to 'see' the Word of God. The Incarnation itself makes this plain. When men come to worship, the Church must offer them just this sight—through a total response expressed in Word and Sacrament, and art and form, to the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, seeking in every way to enable men to worship 'as seeing the Invisible'.