

**Volume 1 Issue 2**  
**April 1999**  
**The Subject: Art**

## My struggle with faith and art

I think that part of the reason I was drawn to theatre is that it asks questions, at least good theatre does -- ok, at least what I consider good theatre asks questions. Theatre can be and frequently is entertainment, but I prefer the more challenging stuff. I prefer theatre that honestly asks difficult questions: questions that may not have answers, or questions that may not have answers we like. I prefer to see and participate in theatre that examines humanity: small and large issues, pieces of life, hypothetical or real. Theatre is at its best when it just asks.

Now, by nature, we cannot avoid providing our opinion, that is, what we believe to be the truth — even if our position is that we believe there is no truth. But the best theatre provides those opinions without a heavy hand; it is more interested in taking us someplace to have an experience. So nothing is off limits, no issue, no person, no place. If it exists, then it is open to examination. to portrayal and to subsequent opinions formed regarding its origin. position and existence.

This is where I run into problems with “traditional” Christianity. Most Christians tend to believe (as I do) that there is truth, that all truth is Gods truth, and that there are absolutes in the system that was created, that God has set up certain boundaries for our well being. For example, if we are created in God’s image, but sin has broken us, the world and our institutions, then there is an appropriate and healthy way to be what we were created to be and an unhealthy way. I too believe in boundaries, truth and absolutes and seek to be healthy. So, this is why I am torn. Should I not see, read, direct, or play a part that represents a system that I believe to be in error? Because theatre is more than representation, it is living. it is a process, it is communal, it is spiritual - to see, direct or play a part, I must in some way go to that place that I believe to be unhealthy.

The most interesting, challenging and honest theatre cannot be limited to one s belief system. If it is, it becomes nothing more than live propaganda. The majority of “Christian Theatre” has become just that — a glorified infomercial for what Christians believe the world should be like, often without examining or confessing what the world is like. The truth of the brokenness of our world is still truth.

Theatre is about community, about a journey - with the cast, the director. designers and the rest of the audience to a common place: a place where we hope to be challenged. expanded. made aware and drawn together. Fear of that journey has no place in exploring humanity and truth. To represent and examine the world I must be willing to understand it. To honestly present it I need to acknowledge. understand, experience the brokenness in the world and in myself The “traditional church.” from which I came, tends to approach contemporary society and issues with fear if not loathing. Distance, judgment, and pity are far more common.

Theatre can entertain, it can educate, it can challenge, it can build community and it can destroy it. I have experienced all that and more from theatre. I have experienced love and mourning, hate and joy, tenor and safety, each one, toward humanity and with humanity or some piece of it. I have experienced these things as an audience member, as a director and as an actor. I value each experience as worthwhile, as a tremendous journey, and so I continue to do it. I believe that we are far too disconnected from one another - our families, our church, our communities and our world. I believe Christ calls us to community, a unique community that is dependent on one another in a great many ways. I honestly believe that theatre can be and is a part of that process. But if I let certain boundaries hinder the questions I ask, the roles I play, or the shows I direct, how can I examine life and subsequently touch my audience, an audience who probably does not believe what I believe about Christ and community?

I do some theatre that is just for entertainment. I do some theatre that “says” very little, and I do some theatre that I want to ask big questions but doesn’t. And I have been fortunate to have done theatre that did all that I hoped it would. I am in no way saying that all the theatre I do has a significant element of my faith as part of the message, and yet... If it comes from me, a

piece of it is probably there somewhere. I work at it. I take both my artistry and my faith very seriously. I rely on both to carry me through this world and to process what it has to offer me. It is a struggle, but I have found that I have no choice, so I have a few foundational issues that I constantly remind myself of in order to remain faithful to both my God and my art.

- I cannot fear the world. My God is sovereign and reigns over the good and the bad, and even the good is broken. The war is over, we still battle, but the victory is ours.
- I am not merely an individual. I live in community - the most important of which is my Christian community, my church and friends of faith. I share with them. I expect them to support and challenge me, and I them.
- I work it out for each individual project in which I am involved. Sometimes that takes a great deal of work, sometimes not much. Life is huge and has a great deal to teach us. I am always learning, about art, faith and life.
- I know that I live in a state of grace. I am free to fail. I do fail. And I will continue to fail. Christ is still Lord and I am still God's child. And when I fail. I am forgiven.

Just for clarification - I do not try or expect to fail. I work toward and expect to win, to figure it out, to faithfully be a Christian and a theatre artist at the same time, without compromising either. I find that difficult. But for me, both are worth the struggle.

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## The 99 and the 1

One of the most inspiring articles I've read discusses the essence of modern art and music culture in light of Christ's parable about the lost sheep. The point of the discussion is that Christ came not to find the 99 sheep that were safely in the flock, but to seek out the 1 lost sheep. The parallel is: the mainstream art and music culture is the 99 and those musicians and artists on the fringe are the lost sheep.

While some genres, such as ska, punk, or a more generic "alternative" rock have become more generally known, huge country and pop artists still dominate both the mainstream and the ghettoized Christian culture. This isn't to demean or lessen the roles these people play. But I continue to wonder whether the voice of those connecting to lost sheep is not drowned out. Various genres, media, and styles are increasingly represented both in mainstream culture and by like-minded Christians affected by these artistic and musical movements. But the harvest is white.

The role of those involved in the art and music subculture is much more intense and difficult than those going with what sells. It would be nice to see more people willing to venture out into less secure territories. How about getting into the punk revolution, or the more obscure gothic or experimental genres? Those places need Christians who will meet individuals on common ground, communicating through authentic mediums the true spirit of the risen Christ. This is like paying attention to a diverse world culture, akin to foreign missions, speaking to the disenfranchised and disenfranchised in their own dialect in their own land. In art and music, however, a true transformation is not just a bastardization of style, but a true experience of the artistic genre. Or like C.S. Lewis is often quoted as saying, "We need more artists who are Christians, not more Christian artists."

A shining example for me is found in the band Sunny Day Real Estate. Lead singer Jeremy Enigk became a Christian; his conversion sent the band and its growing popularity into turmoil. The band was at the forefront of the emerging "emo" style, a splinter of both the punk and

indie rock music movements. His conversion had a profound effect on the music scene, through both his outspoken beliefs in interviews and the lyrics on a Sunny Day album, and became the source of much discussion and debate. Here, a personal belief in Christ made headway into private conversations and thinking for individuals who were not normally confronted with Christianity in their day to day life. The band has since reunited, and with it, Enigk's spiritual influences mark the music in a subtler, yet definite way. His interviews speak profoundly as to his thoughts and beliefs.

Another example is the growing success of punk band MXPX. In 1996, MXPX actually played at Circle of Hope to an extremely packed out house of 150 or so. Last week, they sold out the Electric Factory with a crowd nearing 2000. Widely accepted by non-Christians as a premier group of punk musicians, MXPX have a unique opportunity: to be world class musicians as Christians. They were part of last summer's Warped Tour, which featured prominent punk bands, and had the chance to speak of their Christianity in a day to day way to the bands on the tour, as well as through their music. Their methods of incorporating their beliefs are subtle and personal, but the band takes the time to speak individually with interested fans and speak through interviews. They are at the forefront of an emerging underground culture.

A final example is a bit more esoteric. My friend Nathan and I run a record label called Velvet Empire Records, which specializes in an obscure style called "dark ambient." Traditionally, the scene is made up of musicians with profound spiritual influences, predominantly of a darker nature. Many are Satanists, witches, pagans, druids, or any other similar type of "religion" The artists involved in our label are all Christians and our releases have been reviewed in many of the same magazines as the other bands. There is an intent to seek out those in this despairing music scene. There have been some interesting relationships grown and a discovery of several individuals in the scene as being Christians.

These instances are not limited to musicians. The 20th century has witnessed many important writers, such as C.S. Lewis, poet T.S. Eliot, author Madeline L'Engle, or short story mastermind Flannery O'Connor, subtly mix in their beliefs with their arts. Filmmakers, such as Wim Winders (Wings of Desire, Until the End of the World, and End of Violence), Krzysztof Kieslowski (the Blue, White, and Red trilogy), and Lars Von Trier (Breaking the Waves, Zentropa), have incorporated aspects of their Christianity into their films, in non-traditional, and perhaps even shocking ways.

The point in all of this is that the role of Christians making art and music is not a particularly set predefined mold. Just like our roles vary in Circle of Hope, there are musicians and artists dedicated to communicating with obscure lost sheep in a variety of places on a variety of different levels. The 99 have many of their musicians and artists already; there are churches supporting many of the 99 sheep, yet the role of Circle has been to seek out those lost sheep wherever they might be. Our support of the arts--visual, audio, written, and performed--is important because these mediums speak in ways that the traditional church is unable, communicating authentic truths to those who may never visit Circle or a more traditional church environment. This is a good goal for Arts Month. Remembering the lost sheep needs to remain part of our artistic outlook since finding those people is an essential activity of our church.

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## Artistic Mediocrity in the 20th Century Church Is There Hope?

*The area of creativity is essential to the Christian life inasmuch as we are created beings. To ignore the centrality of our capacity to enjoy beauty, to communicate artistically and through abstract ideas causes, us to lead poverty-stricken lives, void of the ability to enjoy ourselves, our fellow human beings, and above all, God.*

This statement is at the heart of Franky Schaeffer's book Addicted to Mediocrity- 20th Century Christians and the Arts, a quite hard-hitting book which has helped form and challenge my views on and relationship to the arts. He contends that the church indeed has ignored its capacity to enjoy the beauty which God has given it, amid failed to encourage its artists in their endeavors to express its reality. The result is a lack of Christian artists and a void in our society of art created by Christians. I hesitate to use the term "Christian Art" as I'm not quite sure what that means. I prefer to talk about the church's relationship to the arts and our participation in the arts as Christians.

I will use some of Schaeffer's arguments to help explain myself as well as throwing in a few musings of my own. I know that I offer only one perspective based on my own church background. I can only hope that you will have experienced something far more meaningful than I have. Certainly I will only touch the tip of the iceberg. I feel that I am only at the beginnings of my own journey, one which I began about ten years ago. I began to discover my own talents and cravings for artfully expressed truth and beauty, and in the process I found no place, no inspiration, no role models and no permission in the church. I knew that what I experienced in the various Protestant evangelical and Pentecostal churches I had grown up in and around was not what I wanted — it made my skin crawl much of the time. I saw little difference between the "dramas" and skits (which generally stopped just short of hitting you over the head with an unveiled message about something you had to believe to be a Christian) which were presented by untrained actors, and the skits brought into my Jr. High telling me not to do drugs. The ethnocentric music everyone seemed to be enjoying had its roots in Perry Como and Lawrence Welk. And the visual art (I use the term loosely) consisted of "God is Love" stickers and the odd "He is Risen" banner. So I began my, at times, painful journey to quite literally "find my voice", something I am still trying to do. Helpful to me in this process has been understanding how the Church got to be the way it generally is.

Schaeffer speaks to the various blind spots that the Church has had over the centuries. These usually result, he contends, from an unwitting adaptation to or infiltration of the problems of the society around the church into the church itself. The traditional view of the arts, long—held until the late 1800's, maintained that God is creative and diverse and has thus given us a creative and diverse world. He gave it graciously to us to enjoy with him in order to experience with him the beauty and reality of life. Thus, the arts and the enjoyment of them, all these expressions of human creativity and ability to communicate, need no justification, whether spiritual or utilitarian. They are what they are. The history of the Church and consequently the West is rich with artistic heritage. Though it suffered other blind spots, its high view of creativity affected all of church life and in turn the surrounding culture. Christians with a living faith found a safe place to create and a context in which to flourish.

Our century, however, has seen the relegation of artistic expression and thought, even the enjoyment of God's creation itself, to the bottom drawer of Christian consciousness--despised outright as unspiritual or unchristian. This deficiency has been the cause of many unnecessary guilt feelings and much bitterness, taking us out of touch with the world God has made, with the culture in which we live, and making it largely ineffectual in that culture.

Schaeffer cites two particular viewpoints the church adopted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which led to the demise of creative freedom. First was the separation of the spiritual and the secular. That which was spiritual became defined as that which could be experienced internally only. This belief created a tension between the soul and the body, the spiritual and the temporal. Faith became entirely spiritual and not incarnational and thus God ceased to be Lord and creator of all. Lives became compartmentalized and a sort of hierarchy of spirituality developed. Those seeking to pursue the enjoyment of God's creation were seen as unspiritual and all things material and tangible as outside God's realm.

Secondly, following the Darwinian theory of evolution (survival of the fittest, the onward march of society, etc.), the value of a human life had to be justified in some utilitarian way. Each person was measured by what he or she could achieve, produce, earn and contribute. This world-view infiltrated the church as well. One's contribution had to be useful to the onward march of the church, had to help in its efforts, in its programs, its church growth emphasis week, or whatever. Thus, as Schaeffer summarizes, the arts (along with politics, the media, medical ethics and many other things) were particularly and bitterly affected, first relegated to the basement of the church

as unspiritual and now, whenever they were allowed to see the light of day, demanded to make some useful contribution to that church.

It is no wonder that in this environment artists had to run for their creative lives. The void left by their absence had to be filled with something -- after all, we are created beings and thus at some level must create. The result became largely fearful, thoughtless propagandistic shadows of true art. A slogan had to be tacked on to everything to make an acceptable point. Schaeffer aptly calls it mediocre, media-artistic propaganda. The price that we have paid for the abuse and manipulation of God-given talents through turning them into mere useful tools has ultimately been defacing the image of God before the world. The world has been watching our monstrous commercials for Christ, which the church has accepted as Christian art, Christian media, Christian music amid Christian writing. (I wish I could comment on Christian dance, but that has been taboo since David, never truly finding a place in Christian worship. The Shakers tried...)

Often the excuses heard for this Continental Singer nightmare have been that "sometimes people are saved", or "the spirit can work somehow through or "it's better than nothing." Such arguments just don't make it. We see throughout history that God can bring good from evil, but the evil is not justified. One certainly does not offer it to Him as worship!

So what can we do now to go beyond a century of mediocrity? We must certainly distance ourselves from this debilitating belief that our spirituality is separate from our humanity and that what we create must somehow have Jesus stamped on it in order for it to be redeemed. Many of us are already on this heart-felt journey together, realizing that of all people, we as Christians should be addicted to quality and integrity in every area of life, not looking for excuses for second-best. The wonderful truth of Jesus redemption is taking effect. The truth is, Jesus redeems us in our entirety -- making us free to create out of redeemed lives art that is redeemed. Jesus made that possible for us on the cross.

I believe that we need to continue to challenge ourselves and the Church at large to encourage those in the creative arena. Schaeffer contends that to do so, we must know something about creativity. We must be those that have a great interest in creativity. We must stop asking the question "What's Christian about that?" and embrace the idea that all human endeavor is for Christ (if it is not against Him) and has its origins in God. We Christians should feel the most safe with new artistic ideas, with experimentation and with the dialogue art arouses. If we are solidly rooted in truth, the world need pose no threat.

I know that I still struggle with guilt for embracing the arts and devoting so much of myself to the art that I do. In fact I realize that I have spent most of my time in classical music for safety reasons as much as out of the lack of contemporary material I can feel good about performing. I haven't found much outside of the standard classical repertoire that I can be a part of yet. I am personally quite tired of the Christianization of other people's music and art; "Christian rock," or "Christian Goth," or "Christian Rap," which continues on to become Christian bath towels and Christian fortune cookies (no joke). I am exhausted, in fact. Again it is the Jesus stamp and I wonder at its value.

I long for those who create to develop new forms which embody the depth of the past with the sensibilities of the present and future. Could it not be possible that truly redeemed forms (such as those of the past like the cantata, the hymn, the frescoes that adorn the domes and ceilings of cathedrals, the African-American spiritual etc.) could be born in our time? I long for artists to have the freedom to create, in whatever existing form they choose, the art in their souls with complete artistic license, and for a church that would grant the space for experimentation.

I long for music which lives now and which will live on. Longevity, I think, is the difference between pop culture and artful life. This is hard to find in our basically pop American culture. Not that there is no room for pop culture- it has value all its own, but if this is all we have and all we are, then we are missing a great deal. We desperately need Christian involvement at every layer of our society. We have grown up as a country with the artless Christian world-view -- we perfected it. Our public education system has little room for music, and even less for the fine arts. Our government threatens to cut funding for the National Endowment for the Arts regularly. We are not undertaking a small task, but it is a worthy journey.

I still have many questions for which I don't have satisfying answers. I look forward to a continuing dialogue. Some things I still ponder:

- What is sin in art?

- What art should be a part of corporate worship? Should there be any delineation based on content or form?
- How can those who are not in the arts themselves, but interested in a more creative and sensitive existence improve their awareness and support of the arts and artists?
- How do we as Christians determine what art is quality and has integrity?
- How do we integrate the arts and training in the arts into our church life?

A challenge issued by Schaeffer:

*“An active effort must be made to roll back time in order to be able to discern and nurture an appreciation of quality in each area of the arts. Don’t let your images and ideas about God himself and truth be polluted by mediocre teaching, magazines, hooks, radio, and T V Keep away from it, stop your ears, cover your eyes.”*

Perhaps to put a more positive spin on this I’ll quote another artistic source

*“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

II Corinthians 3:17-18.

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