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THE IMPACT OF THE REFORMATION ON THE FINE ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

Music and art have given expression to the most profound of human longings and emotions. Since ancient times, music and art have plumbed the depths of man's interpretation of his experience with the physical and spiritual worlds. Even a casual study of the history of music and art in the West will reveal not only a wide range of styles and motifs, but also the progression of Western thought from premodern to modern to postmodern. Music and art are frequently known to transcend the writings and the speeches of great men and women who have attempted to give voice to the ceaseless human desire for that which is both beautiful and eternal. Long after the words of great orators have been forgotten, the work of masterful musicians and painters has served to inspire.

Add to this deep significance of art and music the theological, political, and philosophical movement known as the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The great church historian Jaroslav Pelikan has placed the Reformation in the timeline of Western European events between the deaths of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in 1274 to the births of Bach and Handel in 1685.¹ Of course, the historical point of reference most associated with the start of the Reformation is Martin Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the church door at Wittenberg in 1517. Great volumes have been written on the significance of the Reformation upon history, so this is not the place to rehearse what others have said on this subject. Simply to say that the Reformation represents a fundamental shift in the way many European Christians viewed the Bible and salvation will be sufficient here. When music and art are met by this fundamental shift in thought, theology, and practice, the impact of the shift upon them is truly incredible. The present writer will attempt to show that the Reformation made all the difference in the work of two masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) in music and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669) in art. Without the shift in thought, theology, and practice presented to the West by the Reformation, Bach and Rembrandt would not have made the contributions to music and art that they most certainly made. We will first consider some general effects of the Reformation upon music and art in the seventeenth century and will then analyze what impact it made on the music of Bach and the art of Rembrandt in particular.

THE GENERAL IMPACT OF THE REFORMATION ON MUSIC AND ART

Before the years when the ideas of the Reformation spread across Western Europe, music and art existed primarily within the realm of the church. Will Durant, in his monumental study of western civilization, stated that "through nine centuries almost all European art was inspired and financed by the Church; and even when art took a pagan color the popes of the Renaissance continued their patronage. Music in its higher forms was a daughter of the Church."² Prior to the Reformation, the attitude of the church toward the arts was that it ought to be pedagogical. Because the laity did not have free and private access to the Scriptures, the church believed that the purpose of music and art was to give the unlettered a base of knowledge about Christianity in a closely supervised manner. Durant said,

Catholic liturgy was aristocratic, a stately ceremonial rooted in inviolable tradition and standing frankly above the people in language, vestments, symbols and music. In that spirit the clergy defined itself as the Church, and thought of the people as a flock to be shepherded into morality and salvation by myth, legend, sermons, drama, and all the arts.³

This attitude became more acute once the Reformers' influence was felt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In what became known as the Counter-Reformation (the Catholic answer to the Protestant movement), music and art were meant to revitalize and reinvigorate the Catholic faithful and motivate them to resist the forces of Protestantism. Hans Rookmaaker described the art of the Counter-Reformation as portraying "a world of superhumans, extremely muscular and showing superhuman fortitude, within an environment fitting for such beings. . . ."⁴

A parallel artistic movement with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation was, of course, the Renaissance, representing the "rebirth" of classical sources and a resurgence of humanism. The art forms of the Renaissance and the Reformation were not, as Paul Henry Lang wrote, "Joint phenomenon[a] marking the advent of a modern era. . . ."⁵ The art of the Renaissance, according to Lang, "is courtly, aristocratic, learned, and at times snobbishly exclusive."⁶ The Reformation, being concerned with divine revelation, popular and direct access to God, and salvation by grace through faith stood in stark contrast with what seemed to be the earthly concerns of the Renaissance. William Halewood wrote,

There is a fairly obvious sense in which the Reformation was anti-humanist and as such contradicted the spirit of the Renaissance. Its exclusive concern with the relation of God to man . . . led not only to the despising of reason (and the concept of man's essential rationality had been the basis of Renaissance education and ethics) but [also] to the repudiation of the cherished Earthly 'happiness' . . .⁷

The art and music of the Reformation rejected the Catholic and Renaissance forms because the movement was theological at its root. Reformation forms were theocentric, placing their emphasis on God as He is, and His works as they really are. There was an abrupt cease to the portrayal of biblical themes with theatrical flair among Reformation painters, and a turn to realism resulting from the artist's private interpretation of Scripture. Musicians and artists of the Reformation sought to portray man as being in need of God's grace because of sin, thus they sang about passing from death to life and painted themes of redemption and hope through a very human, as well as divine, Christ. Rather than attempting to idealize the creation of God, the Person of Jesus, the obedient of Scripture, or the crucifixion of Christ, artists inspired by the theology of the Reformation were eager to be true to the world, to mankind, and to God.

Rookmaaker wrote that the artists of the Reformation, especially Dutch artists, "Painted life and the world realistically, without idealizing or glorifying the creature but, instead, showing things as they really were and are, not glossing over sin but not exalting it either. . . ."⁸ Francis Schaeffer stated, "*At its core, therefore, the Reformation was the removing of the humanistic distortions which had entered the church*" (emphasis original).⁹ Gene Veith maintained that in Reformation art, "There are still some religious pictures—madonnas, nativities, and crucifixions, but they are strikingly different from those of the Middle Ages; the gold leaf is gone."¹⁰

In the spirit of the Reformation, artists and musicians were not attempting to instruct the laity through their work as those of the Catholic church, nor did they have an agenda to dramatize the Scriptures or idealize the world. They were painting and composing music for the sake of the beauty of their themes. Their work was itself an act of worship designed to aid the church in worship. Moreover, their audiences would not need their works to teach them the Scriptures, because they were counting on the laity to interpret Scripture as they read it in their own language—just as the artists and musicians themselves were doing when they portrayed biblical themes. The Reformation, then, impacted the art and music of the day not only in the styles and forms of the various pieces, but also in their production and intended reception by those who would hear and see them.

Given that the musicians and painters of the Reformation were thus affected, what attitude did Luther and Calvin take toward art? While it is certainly true that the Reformation had a positive impact on the art of the period, it is also true that many Protestant churches across Western Europe, in their zeal to cleanse themselves of the perceived idolatry of the Catholic church, dedicated much art work to destruction. Calvin sought to purge the church of images that fostered idolatry, but did not have a negative view of art on the whole. He wrote, "I know the common proverb, that images are the books of unlettered folk, and that St. Gregory hath thus spoken: but the Spirit of God hath judged otherwise" and that "all that men learn of God through images is frivolous and even abusive."¹¹

At the same time, he saw art as a gift of God that should be encouraged, as long as it glorified Him and did not seek to supplant His authority or majesty. He said, "I am not so scrupulous as to judge that no images should be endured or suffered. . . . Therefore men should not paint nor carve anything but such as can

be seen with the eye; so that God's Majesty . . . may not be corrupted by fantasies which have no true agreement therewith."¹² For Calvin, faith in the gospel through the preached Word was what the Christian ought to allow—to draw him heavenward. Those churches that did destroy their art did so sometimes with pure intentions of rooting out idolatry. Often, however, they destroyed their art with either a wrong motive or a wrong understanding of what Calvin was teaching.

Luther had a much friendlier attitude toward visual art, especially music. He believed that art should always be —used to glorify God and did not ban any form of art, even images. His interpretation of Scripture allowed for art to be used in churches and in private homes to assist in the worship of God. He wrote, "I would fain see all arts, and especially that of music, serving Him who hath created them and given them unto us. . . ."¹³

Luther's love of music came second only to his love of theology.¹⁴ His understanding of music was advanced, and he had an accomplished tenor voice. He and his choirmaster, Johann Walther, produced a hymnbook entitled the *Wittenberg Gesangbuch*. The book was the first of its kind. It contained a great variety of hymns, among them the famous "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*,"¹⁵ which was a product of both Luther's musical talent and theological insight.¹⁶ For the first time, the laity took a practicing role in the worship of God, and music was one of the vehicles by which they were able to do this. This is what set Reformation practice apart from the earlier Catholic style. As Durant wrote, "The people became the Church, the clergy became their ministers, the language of the service was to be the vernacular of the nation, the music was to be intelligible, and in it the congregation would take an active, finally a leading, role."¹⁷ Luther, then, was instrumental in the later development of Protestant music, much more so than he (or any other Reformer) was in visual art. His profound influence on Bach will be shown in the next section.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH AS REPRESENTATIVE OF REFORMATION MUSIC

Wilhelm Dilthey asserted that the significance of the Reformation can not be appreciated merely for the theological prose writings that arose from it. Dilthey included not only the writings of Luther in the form of sermons and commentaries when he spoke of the significance of the Reformation, but also his writings in church chorales¹⁸ and the later sacred music produced by Bach.¹⁹

This short statement by Dilthey illustrates the weight of Bach's impact on musical development, as well as the greatness of the impact of the Reformation upon Bach. Bach is widely seen as the most influential Western musician in history. C. Stanford Terry wrote that Bach marked the beginning of modern music.²⁰ The great musician Robert Schumann (1810–1856) said, "Music owes as much to Bach as a religion to its founder."²¹ The musicologist George Buelow said that Bach, "More than any other has held the world of scholarship and general music appreciation in awe up to the present day."²² He went on to say that, while he is most well-known

for his skills as an organist and harpsichordist, "He has been judged variously in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the 'fifth Evangelist,' as the greatest genius of Western art music, as an icon, perhaps the icon of music history."²³

The theology of the Reformation was central to Bach's compositions. Bach was a careful student of Scripture, who at his death owned an ample library made up exclusively of theological books.²⁴ The music produced by Bach was an expression of his own Christian faith. He made a regular practice, for example, of inscribing his scores of sacred and secular music with the letters J. J. (*Jesu Juva*, meaning "Jesus, help"), S. D. G. (*Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning "to God alone the glory"), and I. N. J. (*In Nomine Jesu*, meaning "in the name of Jesus").²⁵ The theology of the Reformation was so much a part of Bach's music that the two are truly inseparable. Schaeffer said, "There would have been no Bach had there been no Luther."²⁶

The musical innovation that owes its existence to Bach and the Reformation is the cantata, which Stevenson called the "musical counterpart to the sermon."²⁸ Bach developed cantatas for each Sunday of the church year. The biblical sermon for a particular day was preached and the cantata, which was sung by the congregation, reinforced the content of the sermon, having been drawn from the same biblical text. Thus, one of the central aspects of Bach's attitude toward music was that a composer should interpret Scripture in his composition of a musical piece, just as a preacher must interpret Scripture in his development of a sermon. The cantata, according to Cannon, Johnson, and Waite, "provided the opportunity and the responsibility for the musical interpretation of the Word of God." Clearly then, the Christian faith as expressed in the Bible and interpreted by the Reformers was foremost in Bach's heart and mind as he composed his music. In comparing Bach to other famous composers, Stevenson said,

Handel did not write his oratorios for the church but for the concert stage, and during his entire lifetime never conducted any oratorio of his in a church. Mendelssohn, the composer of *Elijah* also wrote for the concert stage, not for the church. Of the better-known "Protestant" religious masterpieces, only Bach's were written for presentation in church, as an integral part of Christian worship.²⁹

Bach was not only a product of his times, but he also made his times a product of his work. His influence upon Western music can not be overstated, and the influence of the Reformation, particularly the Lutheran Reformation, is equally important in Bach's work. Bach was born in the town of Eisenach to Maria Elisabeth Lammerhirt and Ambrosius Bach, an accomplished musician, in 1685. He was the eighth and last child born to the couple but was orphaned within the span of a year when his parents died. His mother died first in May 1694, followed by his father in February 1695. Johann and his brother, Jacob, moved in with their elder brother, Johann Christoph, in Ohrdruf. Johann Christoph was an organist who studied for a time under Johann Pachelbel. Bach matriculated into the Ohrdruf Lyceum where he excelled in his academic courses.³⁰

Bach's career has been described by many as having been typical of other musicians of his time. He was the organist at Arnstadt from 1703–1707 and at

Mühlhausen the following year. He served as Concertmaster in the chapel of the Duke of Weimar from 1708–1717 and as music director at the court of a prince in Cöthen from 1717–1723. He finished his life and career in Leipzig as music director from 1723–1750.³¹ The musicologist Donald Jay Grout described him as having “regarded himself as a conscientious craftsman doing a job to the best of his ability for the satisfaction of his superiors, for the pleasure and edification of his fellowmen, and to the glory of God.”³² What separated Bach from other musicians of the time was that Bach was truly an innovator. He was a composer who founded his work upon biblical theology and lay worship by fully appropriating the musical heritage of the Lutheran Reformation.

To illustrate Bach's place in musical history, consider one of his Catholic predecessors, the composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (ca. 1525–1594). Palestrina is the composer of the Catholic Counter-Reformation known as “the Prince of Music.” Prior to Bach, Palestrina held more fame as a composer than any other. Grout wrote that “he captured the essence of the sober conservative aspect of the Counter-Reformation in a polyphony of utter purity. . . .”³³ Palestrina's music was marked by a professional choir made up of polyphonic voices sung *a cappella*. Neither key consciousness nor measured time was part of Palestrina's compositions. Each vocal piece was sung in Latin, the simple lyrics often being repeated throughout. Palestrina's music is certainly beautiful, and it inspires the awe of a person being transported to a heavenly world.

By the time of Bach, a scant ninety years, music had developed to its modern form. Bach's cantatas were sung by congregations, not professional choirs. He utilized the aria, or solo voice, in his arrangements. He also accompanied the voices with the organ and orchestra. Key consciousness and measured time were also found in Bach's music. Bach did not attempt to introduce drama to the biblical motif, but allowed the drama of the motif to speak for itself; thus the otherworldliness of Palestrina is not to be found in Bach's music. Terry wrote of the changes in musical evolution in this way:

With Palestrina we enter a Golden Age, when musical culture was never so widespread, nor its votaries lit by a holier flame. Vocal polyphony began to move in melodious obedience to rules; and harmony, though still immature, became ordered and expressive. And yet, in their artistry, how immense an interval separates Palestrina's *Stabat Mater* from Bach's *Magnificat*! It could not astonish us if the space between them was measured in centuries. In fact, only ninety years, three generations, divide Palestrina's death in 1594 from Bach's birth in 1685.³⁴

Bach's revolutionary compositions reflect the changes wrought in faith and practice by the Reformation. Congregational worship sung in the vernacular, theological motifs portrayed in realistic rather than idealistic fashion, and a break from established rules of religion and melody all set Bach's music apart from that of the Catholic church.

Bach's use of Lutheran theological motifs is further evidence of the impact of the Reformation upon his work. Throughout Bach's music, the listener discerns

the motifs of justification by faith, theology of the cross, and the supremacy of the gospel over the law.³⁵ In the cantatas, the singer perceives the contrast between sin and salvation along with the suffering of the sinner separated from God and the joyous union of the Christian with Christ.³⁶ Cannon (et al.) stated, “The progression of the former state to the latter is the dramatic pivot around which Bach's cantatas usually revolve.”³⁷

Death is also a central theme in Bach's cantatas, but not in terms of destruction and judgment, but of victory and redemption. Death was seen not only as a curse upon human beings in their sin, but also as a doorway into salvation. Bach clearly longed for death himself as a release from the sorrows of this world. Lang maintained that “while Beethoven, an optimist, was convinced that man can conquer himself in goodness and love, that men can become brothers in joy, Bach, with the dogmatic skepticism of the faithful, was convinced that man will be free in death only.”³⁸ For Bach, death was not the last word for the Christian. Joy dominated Bach's attitude about death rather than despair. Herein lies another aspect of Bach's music and theology that sets him apart from earlier times. As Lang described, “For it is joy, and not the consciousness of sin, which dominates him. While his representations of the sins and miseries of life are as poignant as those of the greatest artists of the Middle Ages, he did not halt at the deathly earnestness of sin, he did not espouse the medieval belief in the insurmountable finality of sin. . . .”³⁹

The cantata and chorale were important musical innovations of the time, but there was another innovation, not invented by Bach but certainly improved upon by him. The oratorio was developed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The oratorio is a cousin to the opera, which began to be developed in earnest, especially in Italy, in the seventeenth century. While the opera is a secular piece which sets drama to music, the oratorio is a musical dramatization of religious themes. Heinrich Schütz was the earliest composer of oratorios, but by 1704 Reinhard Keiser had taken the form and divested it of any biblical text. By the time Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723, the German oratorio was in danger of losing not only its national style, but also its theological and biblical integrity. In his *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion*, Bach rescued the genre from secular influences. He restored biblical text, religious language, and the devotional appeal that were inherent in the oratorio. Terry described Bach's rescue of the German oratorio, or passion, in this way: “Chiefly we bow before the fact that [the German passion] affords a presentation of the Bible story deeply pondered, supremely reverent, fundamentally devotional.”⁴⁰

Bach was profoundly impacted by the Lutheran Reformation. As we turn now to a consideration of just how closely Bach followed Luther in his theology and musical composition, some specific works of Bach and Luther will be examined. Swedish historian Einar Billing summarized the theology of the Lutheran Reformation, saying, “Regard nothing as the theology of Luther that cannot be reduced to a simple corollary of the forgiveness of sins.”⁴¹ Bach based his cantata for the Sunday nearest Reformation Day in 1724 on Luther's hymn, “*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*” (“From the depths of woe I cry to Thee”). While Luther is the author of the words and basic musical structure of the hymn, Bach harmonized

it into a four-part cantata. Luther founded this hymn on Psalms 32, 51, 130, and 143 because these psalms expressed the meaning of what he called *Anfechtung*, or awareness of sin.⁴² The first stanza reads:

From the depths of woe I cry to Thee, Lord
Hear me, I implore Thee.
Bend down Thy gracious ear to me,
My prayer let come before Thee.
If Thou rememb'rest each misdeed,
If each should have its rightful meed,
Who may abide Thy presence?⁴³

Bach grasped this notion of *Anfechtung*, but did not stop with underscoring the gravity of sin. Bach's cantata, "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*" ("O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" from the *St. Matthew Passion*) expresses the great joy of the redeemed soul whose sin has been atoned for by Christ's suffering and death on the cross. Bach understood Luther's notion of *simul justus et peccator*⁴⁴ well, and appropriated it in his compositions, particularly this one. In describing this cantata, Pelikan wrote, "Bach exhibited how profoundly he had grasped the full scope of Luther's doctrine of sin, which transcended despair though faith, by unexpectedly introducing the musical language of joy into a chorale about *Anfechtung*. . . ."⁴⁵ The text reads,

O sacred Head, now wounded
With grief and shame weighed down;
Now scornfully surrounded
With thorns, Thine only crown;
O sacred Head what glory,
What bliss till now was Thine!
Yet though despised and gory,
I joy to call Thee mine.⁴⁶

Another work that illustrates Bach's grasp of *simul justus et peccator* is the cantata "*Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit*" ("Were Not God with Us All the Time"). Just as "*Aus tiefer Not*," this piece was written by Luther but later harmonized into a cantata by Bach for the fourth Sunday after Epiphany on January 30, 1735.⁴⁷ Pelikan asserted that this hymn dealt directly with the Reformation by "employ[ing] the words of Ps. 124 to celebrate the rescue of the pure gospel of God from its enemies in church and state. . . ."⁴⁸ It reads:

Were not God with us all the time
Let Israel now say it:
Were God not with us all the time
We surely would have lost courage.⁴⁹

In the aria, the soloist affirms, "God through thine own strong protection/ Are we from foes set free."⁵⁰ Pelikan noted the connection between the theology of the Reformation, specifically Luther's notion of *simul justus et peccator*, and this cantata: "The freedom that is God's gift, even amid the threats within and without, asserts itself . . . as *simul justus et peccator*, weak by itself but mighty in the 'strong protection' of God."⁵¹

The works of Luther which Bach developed into other forms were not simply adapted to organ preludes and passions. Bach also appropriated the musical heritage of the Lutheran Reformation in order to preserve it for later generations of Christians. Pelikan defined Bach's relationship with the Lutheran Reformation in Aristotelian terms, formal and material. Formally, according to Pelikan, the content of Bach's work is taken from the Lutheran heritage. Materially, the Lutheran principles of worship provided the context for Bach's work.⁵² This is why Schaeffer can rightly say that without Luther there would have been no Bach. Bach sought to carry on the theological and ecclesiological work of Luther, and so the two are inseparable from one another.

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN AS REPRESENTATIVE OF REFORMATION ART

Rembrandt van Rijn is perhaps the quintessential Reformation artist. He began his artistic career following in the footsteps of his contemporary painters. His style in his youth was not unlike that of the great Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640): dramatic, sweeping, and idealized. As the circumstances of his life darkened, and his faith was tested, the changes that took place in his spirit became evident through all his paintings. Rembrandt had experienced a true turning point in his life that forced him to begin to take his faith seriously, rather than use his faith as a mere tool from which to obtain motifs for his paintings. While Rembrandt was not as overtly influenced by the Reformers as Bach evidently was, the Reformed notions of the Person and work of Christ, salvation, and the centrality of the Bible stand out clearly in his work.

Rembrandt van Rijn was born in Leiden near Amsterdam to Gerrit Harmens and Cornelia Willemsdochter van Zuytbrouck. His father added "van Rijn" to his name probably because his house overlooked the Rhine river.⁵³ Rembrandt was born during prosperous times for Holland, which was rising to world power status during this time. After 1609, the Dutch were no longer under the dominance of Spain, so the newly independent nation was free to build a colonial empire and engage in a lucrative trade. This new-found prosperity brought Holland a confidence and comfort that allowed for the leisure that encourages an interest in art among the populace.⁵⁴

Rembrandt entered the University of Leiden, but withdrew after only a year in order to study art. By 1623, he had proved his great worth as an artist, and went

to Amsterdam to study under Pieter Lastman. After a year of studying under Lastman, he returned to Leiden to paint according to his own styles.⁵⁵

Rembrandt became a popular artist while living in Leiden. Most of his commissions were coming from Amsterdam, so in 1631 he returned permanently to live. After two years the young artist had forty commissions. In 1634, he married Saskia Uylenborch, a wealthy but orphaned lawyer's daughter. She gave Rembrandt a dowry of forty thousand guilders,⁵⁶ and with that, Rembrandt became one of the wealthiest artists in a profession notorious for its poverty.⁵⁷

The years 1634–1642 were Rembrandt's years of prosperity. He turned out many masterpieces. Some of these include biblical themes that he would paint again in later years from a fresh, more-realistic, spiritual perspective. In 1639, however, Rembrandt's fortunes began to change. He bought a mansion in the *Joden-Breedstraat*, a district of wealthy Jews, paying the sum of thirteen thousand florins⁵⁸ which was far too much for him. Eventually, this debt would drive him into bankruptcy.⁵⁹

In 1642, his beloved wife, Saskia, died from complications after childbirth. Their son Titus survived, but Rembrandt never recovered from the loss of the wife of his youth. By 1657, Rembrandt was bankrupt and had been evicted from his mansion. He moved from place to place, his finances being handled by Titus and Hendrikje Stoffels, a former maid whom he had come to love. By the time of his death in 1659, Rembrandt had produced 300 etchings, 2,000 drawings, and 650 paintings. His only possession the day he died was his Bible.⁶⁰

Rembrandt's maturation as an artist can be traced alongside the circumstances of his life. During his early years, he was influenced by his contemporaries, especially Lastman, his tutor. Lastman developed his style in Italy, using motifs from history and the Bible. The art of the Counter-Reformation, with its emphasis on idealizing the subjects of the Bible, was dominant in Flanders during Rembrandt's life, and this style had a powerful influence on Rembrandt at first.

W. A. Visser 'T Hooft stated that "we can hardly describe this kind of religious painting as biblical, for it is concerned with the beautiful stories of the Bible rather than with its meaning."⁶¹ Rembrandt in his youth was attracted to the Bible not primarily because of its spiritual worth or because of its authority in the faith of the church but because it offered a plethora of dramatic themes fraught with heroes, villains, dazzling victories, and ignominious defeats. Visser 'T Hooft wrote, "Rembrandt was in search of the grandiose, and the biblical world appeared to him as a world of supermen."⁶²

In the years after the death of Saskia and his impending financial collapse (1648–1656), Rembrandt's shift in style became more apparent. Rosenberg wrote that "disillusionment and suffering seem to have had only a purifying effect upon his human outlook."⁶³ Rembrandt faced a crisis of faith, and his attitude toward his standing with God changed dramatically. He realized that he was in no position to assert himself pridefully, in no position to find his security in his wealth. No longer did Rembrandt look to the Bible simply as a sourcebook for new themes for his artwork. The Bible became his link to God and the source of his spiritual vitality as

well as his art. Instead of merely painting the subjects of the Bible, he interpreted the Bible in his art, much as Bach had interpreted the Bible in his music. Visser 'T Hooft explained the difference between Rembrandt's style and the style of the Counter-Reformation in this way:

The Counter-Reformation was dominated by polemical and didactic aims, and had put all the stress on subjects connected with the Church, without being concerned with the Bible as a whole. For Rembrandt, on the other hand, the Bible alone determines the subject. For that reason his painting is the first example in the history of art of work inspired by the biblical message in all its richness.⁶⁴

Rembrandt's attitude toward art can be identified in terms of four aspects: individual response of faith, realism, relevance in his choice of biblical subjects, and wisdom in his portrayal of biblical themes. Even though Rembrandt's works prior to 1640 were brilliant in their time, his works subsequent to his spiritual turning point reflect more fully the ideals of the Reformation. Rembrandt's four-fold attitude, then, is most pertinent to his works after 1640.

First, Rembrandt was a painter who sought to emphasize the importance of the individual's standing with God. Because of his experiences with loss in the temporal world, Rembrandt understood the significance of personal faith and redemption. In the midst of the stress that he faced with his losses, Rembrandt had only one source of hope, the Bible. Thus, he found no answers in the sweeping, theatrical, and idealistic portrayals of the art of the Counter-Reformation. That art was meant to reinvigorate the church, not the individual believer. Rather, as the art historian Kenneth Clark stated, "To [Rembrandt] the formalized gestures and symbols which make up so much of religious art were evasions" of the responsibility of the individual before God for his spiritual condition.⁶⁵

William Dyrness, in his analysis of Rembrandt's *Raising of Lazarus*, pointed out that the faith response of the individuals in the scene is the central focus of the work. Since the faith response is the defining moment of an individual's life, the most relevant act of a person standing before God, to Rembrandt it must be the central facet of any portrayal of a biblical theme. Dyrness wrote concerning Rembrandt, "The art, then, focuses on the biblical story, but the artist illuminates the reaction of the people as if to say, what do you believe about this miracle worker? What is your faith response?"⁶⁶

The second aspect revealing Rembrandt's attitude toward art is the expression of biblical themes realistically rather than idealistically. Durant wrote,

Where artists like Rubens sought their subjects among the beautiful, the happy, or the powerful, Rembrandt lavished his sympathetic art on the outcasts, the sick, the miserable, even the deformed; and though he made no show of religion, he seemed to embody . . . the attitude of Christ . . . toward those who had failed . . . in the war of each against all.⁶⁷

Rembrandt changed his style over the course of his life from portraying the biblical subjects like Abraham, Jacob, and Christ as superhumans to showing them as simple men among other men living in the fallen world of Adam's curse and yet being used by God to bring about His purposes of redemption. This notion characterizes one of the ideals of the Reformation: That man is fallen in sin, but Christ comes to redeem man out of his state of being under sin's curse. Another ideal of the Reformation was that God had created the world, and that world was good and beautiful as it was seen in everyday life. Calvin said, "let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God, open and manifest in this most beautiful theatre."⁶⁸ Schaeffer stated that "Rembrandt's painting was thus lofty, yet down to earth. There was no need for him to slip into the world of illusion, as did much of the baroque painting which sprang out of the Catholic Counter-Reformation."⁶⁹ So when Rembrandt painted a biblical theme, he painted that theme realistically. He portrayed the biblical subjects as real people in the real world. As he did this, it is clear that he interpreted Scripture, and sought to portray its content and meaning rather than merely its form.

In his choice of themes, Rembrandt sought to portray not just the traditional favorites of his predecessors and contemporaries. He drew and painted outside of tradition, choosing subjects such as the lives of David and Joseph.⁷⁰ Clearly, Rembrandt loved the Bible, for out of 650 paintings, 145 depicted biblical themes. From 300 etchings, seventy had their source in the Bible, and of nearly 2,000 drawings, 575 were taken from Scripture.⁷¹ Visser 'T Hooft said of Rembrandt, "This man who . . . took biblical themes and treated all of them in an individual manner, did indeed live with the Bible."⁷²

Finally, Rembrandt reveals his attitude toward art through his wisdom in portraying the biblical themes of his art. When Rembrandt painted a theme from the Bible, the Bible was, of course, his primary source. However, Rookmaaker pointed out that the Bible was not his only source. He said, "He did draw from Scripture, but the surrounding world contributed to his ability to condense scriptural truth into wisdom."⁷³ Rookmaaker's point was that when a person communicates the message of the Bible through any given medium, the message can not be any more evocative or spiritual than the person is wise. Rembrandt had great wisdom as a result of his experiences and because he was a man of the Bible. Rembrandt represented spiritual reality in his art, and according to Rookmaaker, this art "could only be painted on the solid base of the Reformation and its understanding of the Bible and reality."⁷⁴

In order truly to grasp the meaning of Rembrandt's attitude toward art, one would do well to consider some of his works firsthand. The first piece to be examined is the etching *Faustus*, found in plate 1.⁷⁵ This is a fascinating work because it is fraught with symbolism pointing to the nature of God's revelation. Visser 'T Hooft's examination of the work is helpful. He noted that Faustus, a magician whose character was developed by the German poet Goethe, sees a circle in whose center are the letters INRI, which Visser 'T Hooft took to be the symbol of Christ.

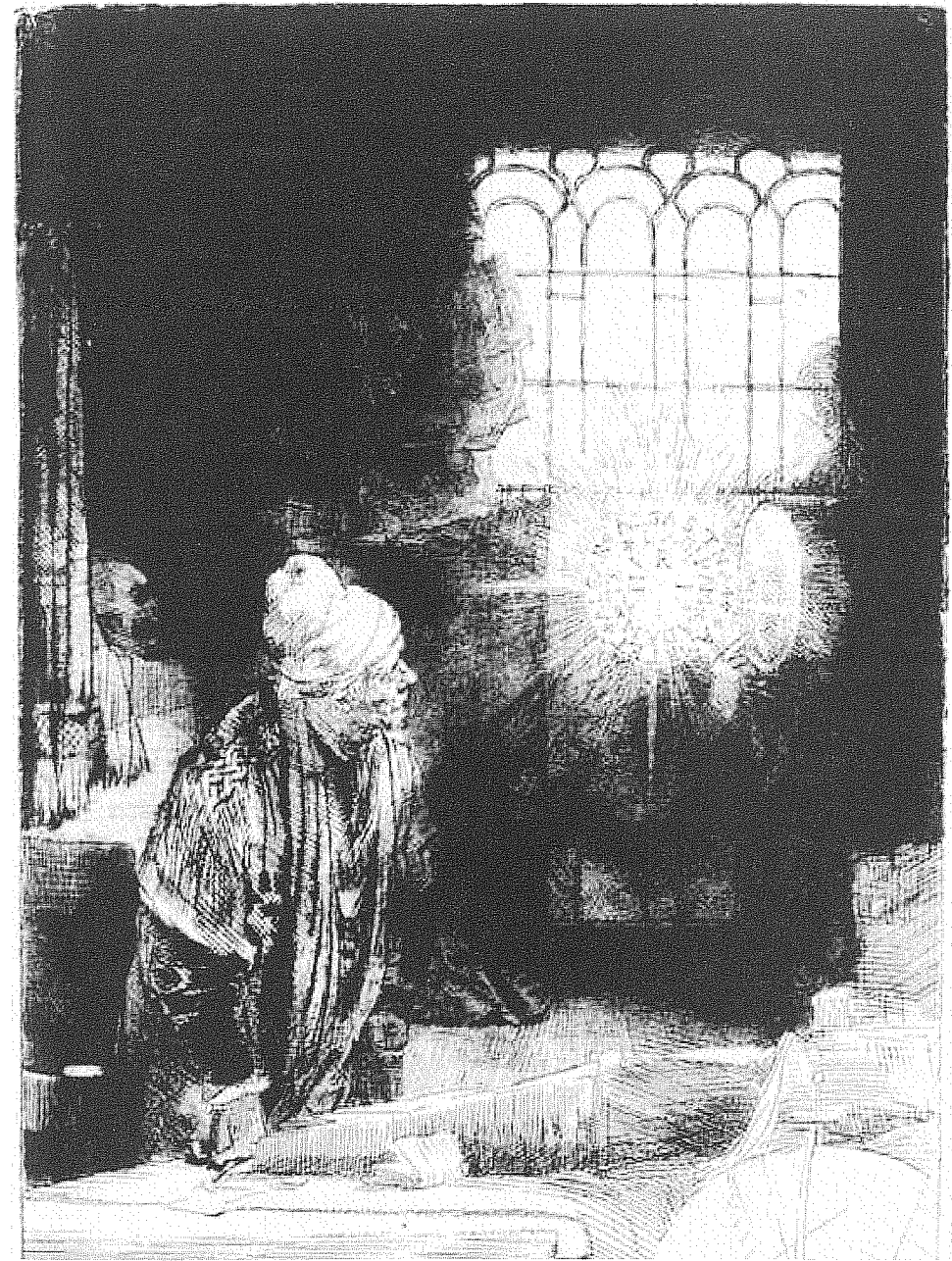


Plate 1: *Faustus*, ca. 1652–1653

A sentence surrounds the letters INRI, which reads, *Tangas larga, latet Amor; Adam te adgeram*.⁷⁶ Visser 'T Hooft maintained that "these words do harmonize surprisingly with what we have discovered in Rembrandt's work. It is the love of God which is hidden under the veil of Christ's humanity, and hence only reveals itself to faith."⁷⁷ Thus, the one who exercises his faith is the one to whom Christ will reveal His wonders. God can not be perceived, nor can the truth of God be known apart from His revealing it to man.

This etching calls Heb. 11:6 to mind, which says, "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."⁷⁸ Thus, the Reformation stress upon the faith response of the individual is clearly seen in this work.

Abraham's obedience on Mt. Moriah, as recounted in Genesis 22, is a favorite subject of Rembrandt's. The first time that Rembrandt depicted this theme, he was a young and wealthy artist living in Amsterdam. He had not yet made his shift from idealism to realism—the Reformation standard of depicting God's world without theatrics had not yet made its impact on Rembrandt. It is remarkable to compare his first depiction of this theme in 1635 with his second depiction of 1655. In plate 2,⁷⁹ we have the earlier painting, and Rembrandt's dramatic portrayal of the biblical event is clear.

Abraham has stretched his son out upon the altar, clasping the boy's face and widely exposing his neck for the slice of the knife. Rembrandt captures the moment when the angel stops Abraham, so the viewer sees the knife drop from his hand and the look of surprise and amazement on his face. Rosenberg asserted that "the main emphasis is still laid on the physical manifestation of the miracle, with a typical Baroque love of ostentatious movement."⁸⁰

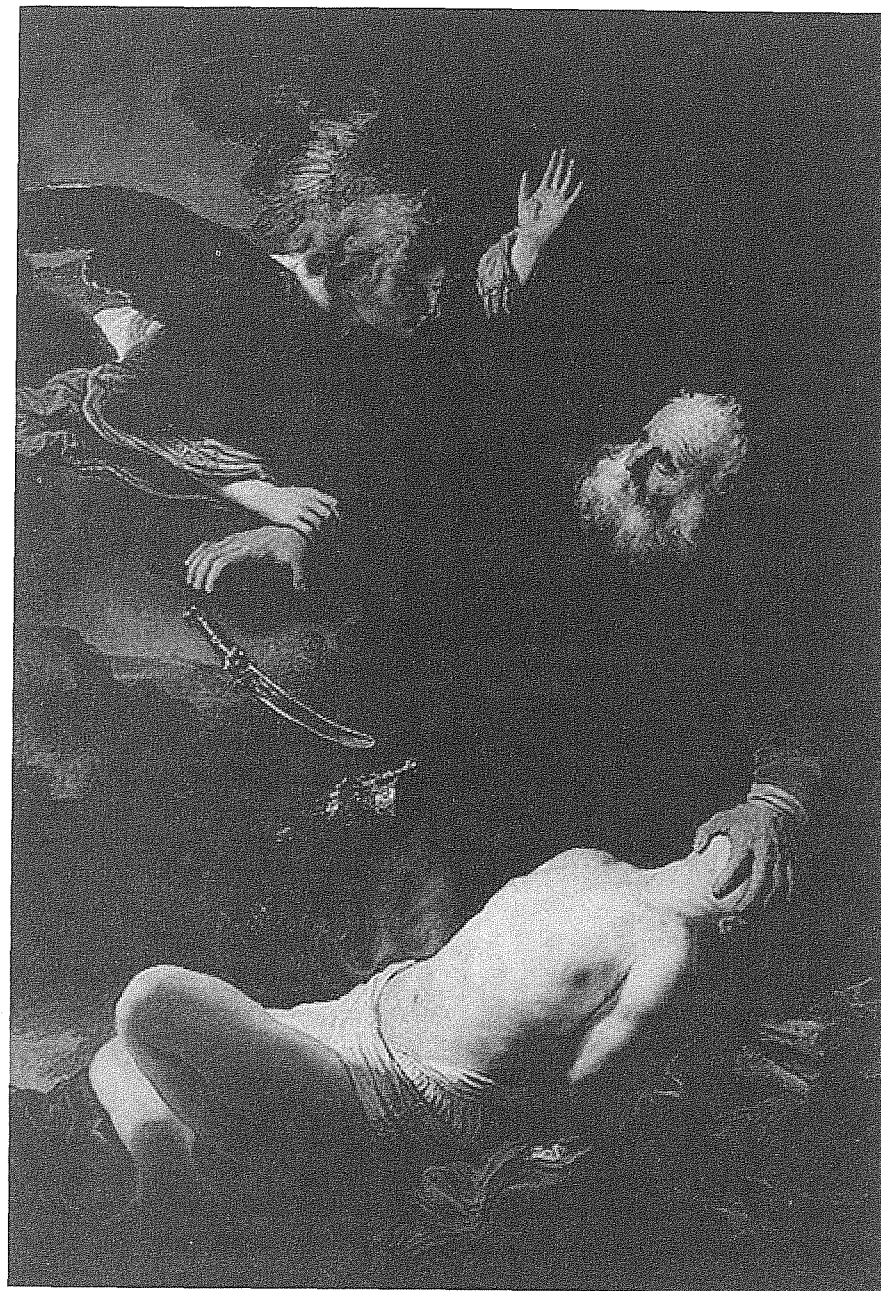


Plate 2: *The Angel Stopping Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac to God*, 1635.

Compare this work with the second depiction found in plate 3,⁸¹ when Rembrandt's wisdom and the influence of the Reformation ideal of faith and simplicity are obvious. The emphasis in this later work is upon Abraham. This earthly father who has been confronted with a crisis of faith without comparison is about to offer the supreme act of obedience to God's command. The conflict that raged with Abraham's spirit is depicted in this etching. It is the inner reality that Rembrandt emphasized in this work, not the outward dazzle of the intervention of the angel of the Lord. Isaac, in contrast to the earlier painting, is not stretched out on an altar, but kneels humbly at his father's side. He is not a muscular, superhuman figure as he is in the 1635 depiction, but is a small boy in the later one. The angel comes from behind Abraham, and is invisible to him, rather than revealing himself in splendor. Rosenberg interpreted this etching in this way:

The father himself has not yet fully grasped the significance of this blessed visitation. As he listens, inwardly, to the unknown voice, the stamp of suffering still marks his features. By thus linking the past moments in Abraham's inner experience with the present advent of the miracle, the artist deepens the spiritual significance of the scene and relieves it of the instantaneous quality.⁸²

Michael Zell noted that Abraham's eyes are darkened, demonstrating that his faith is blind.⁸³ Abraham, as Rom. 4:3 reveals, was a man who believed God, and God accounted his faith to him as righteousness. The stark differences between the two works are evident even in their titles.



Plate 3: *Abraham's Sacrifice*, 1655.

The 1635 depiction has a long and descriptive title, one that underscores the drama of the miracle itself. In contrast, the title of the 1655 depiction is a simple one, leaving the viewer to find its meaning in the work as well as the biblical text.

Perhaps the most moving work of art that Rembrandt ever produced is *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, found in plate 4.⁸⁴ Clark came near to classifying this work as the greatest picture ever painted, saying, "It springs from very deep sources, but affects us immediately."⁸⁵

Visser 'T Hooft called this work the summation of his entire pilgrimage.⁸⁶ He wrote that the son in the painting "is Rembrandt himself, he is man, at all times and in all places, who seeks and finds his father's open arms."⁸⁷ Rosenberg would concur with this view. This work, for Rosenberg, represents the fact that Rembrandt used biblical subjects to "reflect throughout his life his own experience and spiritual growth."⁸⁸ In this painting, the mercy and forgiveness of God the Father toward sinful yet repentant man is clearly expressed. The compassion of the father is the central theme of this work. The father and son are shown in the midst of light, while the rest of the subjects are obscured in darkness. Rosenberg maintained that

the story deals not with the human love of an earthly father, as grasped by the limited comprehension of the elder son, who rebukes his father's action. What is meant and represented here is the divine love and mercy in its power to transform Death into Life. 'For this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.'⁸⁹



Plate 4: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, ca. 1668–1669.

Unlike Bach, Rembrandt was not deeply affected by Luther's writings or music. But like Luther, Rembrandt experienced a spiritual turning point in his life, one that changed his perspective for all time. Luther struggled with the guilt he knew he had incurred because of his sin, and the despair over the futility of overcoming the sentence of death that he deserved. His turning point came from reading the Scriptures, and finding that the forgiveness that he so desperately needed was obtained through faith. Rembrandt struggled with great loss—loss of love and the loss of worldly security and reputation. Just as Luther, Rembrandt found hope in the Scriptures, and found that the faith response to God's Word was what really mattered. Not every subject that Rembrandt painted was a biblical one, but the Bible dominated his art in a way that no other subject could. Rembrandt interpreted the Scriptures as he painted, etched, and drew. He did not follow the traditional rules set forth by tradition, popular will, or the church as he painted, although he began his career doing so. Rather, Rembrandt's faith defined by the Scriptures was his standard. In this, Rembrandt showed himself to be a painter of the Reformation. He stressed the real individual's faith response to the real God. The result would not be images to be worshipped, or even art work that would teach the unlettered the content of the Word of God. The final result of Rembrandt's work was the worship of the good and merciful Father who sent His Son to forgive fallen humanity their sin and release them from the ancient curse of death.

CONCLUSION

Much could be said about the impact of the Reformation on the fine arts. This study has not attempted to analyze this impact on architecture, sculpture, popular culture, or literature. It has not sought to trace this impact beyond the eighteenth century, nor has it looked at any cultural heritage but that of the West. The purpose of this study has been to take a small sample from a specific time and consider how the Protestant Reformation changed the way men and women expressed their deepest longings for the beautiful and the eternal. The Reformation was a theological movement at its root. It answered the most important question that any person could ever ask: What must I do to be saved? Given the fact that the Reformation was a movement dealing at its heart with man's fundamental relationship to God, its impact on the most expressive and intimate exertions of humanity would be immeasurable. Bach and Rembrandt are two quintessential examples of how meaningful the Reformation has been to the fine arts.

NOTES

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 20.

²Will Durant, *The Reformation*, vol. 6, *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 5.

³*Ibid.*, 777–78.

⁴Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker, ed., *The Complete Works of Hans R. Rookmaaker*, vol. 4, *Western Art and the Meanderings of a Culture*, by Hans Rookmaaker (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2002), 171.

⁵Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1941), 200.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷William H. Halewood, *Six Subjects of Reformation Art: A Preface to Rembrandt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 9.

⁸Rookmaaker, 137.

⁹Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 5, *A Christian View of the West*, 2d ed. (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 122.

¹⁰Gene Edward Veith, *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 59.

¹¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, quoted in G. G. Coulton, *Art and the Reformation* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 411.

¹²*Ibid.*, 407.

¹³Coulton, 408.

¹⁴Robert Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1953), 3.

¹⁵The English translation is, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

¹⁶Schaeffer, 127.

¹⁷Durant, *The Reformation*, 778.

¹⁸The chorale finds its birth in the Reformation and its development in the work of Bach. It is what is now known as a hymn, a four-part tune with words sung by the congregation in the vernacular language. Luther's "A Mighty Fortress" was one of the first chorales produced.

¹⁹Pelikan, 17.

²⁰C. Stanford Terry, "Bach," in *From Bach to Stravinsky: The History of Music by its Foremost Critics*, ed. David Ewen (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1933), 43. Terry wrote, "Bach himself, when asked the secret of his mastership, replied simply, 'I worked hard.' " Ibid. Incidentally, Terry included Handel with Bach when he made his distinction.

²¹Ibid., 56.

²²George J. Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 503.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Stevenson, 51.

²⁵Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1945), 32.

²⁶Schaeffer, 128.

²⁷Stevenson, 51.

²⁸Beekman C. Cannon, Alvin H. Johnson, and William G. Waite, *The Art of Music: A Short History of Musical Styles and Ideas* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), 272.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Buelow, *A History of Baroque Music*, 503–4.

³¹Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960), 417.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 265.

³⁴Terry, 46.

³⁵Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 375.

³⁶Cannon, Johnson, and Waite, 273.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Lang, 497.

³⁹Ibid., 498.

⁴⁰Terry, 53.

⁴¹Pelikan, 20.

⁴²Ibid., 21.

⁴³J. S. Bach, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, English version by Catherine Winkworth and John Leavitt (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2002), 29–31.

⁴⁴That is, "Righteous and a sinner at the same time."

⁴⁵Pelikan, 21–22.

⁴⁶J. S. Bach, *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*, English version by James Alexander and John Leavitt (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2002), 51–53.

⁴⁷Pelikan, 22.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 23.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid., 26–27.

⁵³Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, vol. 7, *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 487.

⁵⁴Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 3.

⁵⁵Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 487.

⁵⁶The Durants estimated that a guilder of 1650 was worth about \$10.50 in 1960 US dollars.

⁵⁷Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 488.

⁵⁸This would be about \$162,500 in 1960, according to the Durants. Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 488–89.

⁶⁰Ibid., 490–92.

⁶¹W. A. Visser 'T Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 9.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Rosenberg, 26.

⁶⁴Ibid., 21.

⁶⁵Kenneth Clark, *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 146.

⁶⁶William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 56.

⁶⁷Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins*, 493.

⁶⁸John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1, xiv, 20.

⁶⁹Schaeffer, 133.

⁷⁰Rookmaaker, *Western Art*, 174.

⁷¹Visser 'T Hooft, *Rembrandt and the Gospel*, 19.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Rookmaaker, *Western Art*, 176.

⁷⁴Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker, ed., *The Complete Works of Hans R. Rookmaaker*, vol. 6, *Our Calling and God's Hand in History*, by Hans Rookmaaker (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2003), 282.

⁷⁵Rembrandt van Rijn, *Faustus, etching with drypoint and burin*, 1652–53, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. From www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt.html.

⁷⁶"Things unfolded (earthly) you may touch, but (heavenly) love is hidden. Man, I shall lead you thither."

⁷⁷Visser 'T Hooft, 34.

⁷⁸All Scripture references will be from the Authorized Version, unless otherwise noted.

⁷⁹Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Angel Stopping Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac to God, Oil on Canvas*, 1635, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. From www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt.html.

⁸⁰Rosenberg, 176.

⁸¹Rembrandt van Rijn, *Abraham's Sacrifice, Etching and Drypoint*, 1655, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, Austria. From www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt.html.

⁸²Rosenberg, 176.

⁸³Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 190.

⁸⁴Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Return of the Prodigal Son, oil on canvas*, ca. 1668–69, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia. From www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt.html.

⁸⁵Clark, 137.

⁸⁶Visser 'T Hooft, 17.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Rosenberg, 173.

⁸⁹Ibid., 234.