

Liberty University

Worship Through the Visual Arts

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by

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Abstract

Despite some Protestant churches holding the view that creating visual art is a spiritual practice of Christian worship, many still do not recognize it as a spiritual practice that Christians who are called to be visual artists should be taught and encouraged to practice. This qualitative research study focuses on the reasons that creating visual art is a spiritual practice of Christian worship and should be encouraged by church leadership. Visual art has been abused in the history of the Christian church. People have worshiped the creation instead of the Creator. Due to such unfortunate practices and abuses, some Protestant church leaders have been wary of supporting the creation of visual art in the context of worship. This has alienated many Christians who have been called and anointed to be visual artists and to create visual art as a spiritual practice of their worship, encouraging them to seek places outside the church for artistic encouragement and expression. This study provides insight to church leaders on biblical and inductive reasons visual art can be used as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. While literature exists that supports the concept that the practice of Christians making visual art is not sinful, this study focuses specifically on the relationship between visual artmaking and worship. This study can help provide insight to church leaders as encouragement that Christians can create visual art as a spiritual practice. Such an outcome can bring artistically inclined people to the church as they learn how to use their artistic calling to glorify God.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife, Alicia, who has been my encouragement through years of research and during many of life's changing events: marriage, our first dog, the global pandemic, and becoming a father. She is my partner in ministry, the one who worships the Lord by my side—a true blessing of grace.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In many ways, if Christians feel a calling to be a visual artist, there is pressure to join a local art community or to even move to a large city where copious art galleries exist with ample opportunities for exhibitions and career success. Secular art communities often encourage pushing the limits and creating with expressive and powerful meaning. When Christians desire to be artists, it is not common for people to direct them to a regular Protestant church. Musicians are encouraged to join worship teams. Writers are pushed to help share their thoughts on theology in advanced Bible studies. Thespians can participate in church Easter and Christmas drama productions, but visual artists often feel they do not have a place in the church. Although some of them are called and anointed by God to be visual artists and to use their artmaking as a way of worshiping him, such artists can only worship by creating in their own private homes and studios. The secular world does not accept them, and the Protestant church is often unsure how to allow them to make visual art in the worship service in a way that is God-honoring.

This study focuses on Christians creating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship. Michael Walters states, “Theologians have held for centuries that the artistic impulse, the desire to create works of beauty and imagination, is a part of our God-given impulse to worship. Thus, to separate art and worship is to violate the intent of the Creator himself.”¹ There is a place for visual artmaking in the worship service. Although there can be many possible ways to incorporate the creation of visual art in the corporate worship service, this study considers two specific and practical ways: visual sketchbooks and meditative painting. Walters explains, “To

¹ Michael Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday: Leading Your Congregation in Authentic Worship* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 2249, Kindle.

give art and aesthetics their proper place in worship is not to adopt a New Age approach to worship, as some may fear.”² The practices of prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting come from Biblical principles. Robert Morgan states, “We practice biblical meditation by noting, quoting, and devoting ourselves to whatever passage of Scripture we’re reading or studying, based on the premise that God’s Word is flawless, faultless, and unfailing. Meditation helps and heals the mind while shoring up the soul.”³ The practices of prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting help Christians meditate on God in a way that is helpful for believers who are more artistically inclined to creating and synthesizing visual images. Walters explains, “For too long Protestant worship has been focused on reaching people through the ear alone. Finding ways to visually express the grandeur and majesty of God, the glory of His Creation, and the grace that surrounds human life will enhance the ability of our people to ‘enter his courts with praise.’”⁴ To include various demographics in the corporate worship service, including the younger artmakers, church leaders must consider more inclusive biblical methods and liturgy. Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray state, “To engage multiple ages in a unified worship experience, we must be continually learning and exploring new approaches to how we lead worship.”⁵ Although God’s truth and message of his Word will always stay the same, culture changes. Some could argue that during the Reformation, visual art needed to be temporarily removed from the church due to the horrific abuses that were done with it by the Catholic church. Karin Maag states, “Most fundamentally, the Reformed teachings on the majesty and sovereignty of God left no place for

² Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2280.

³ Robert Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation: Find True Peace in Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 10, Kindle.

⁴ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2315.

⁵ Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray. *Hungry for Worship: Challenges and Solutions for Today's Church* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2014), 554, Kindle.

images in churches, especially as these were seen as contravening the Second Commandment: ‘Thou shalt have no graven image.’”⁶ That was a different time and a different culture than today. Today, such “safeguards” of the removal of art are now keeping artistically inclined Christians from worshiping God through their gift of artmaking.

There are always ways for people to use visual art as false or idol worship. The arts will be abused by some at times, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” as stated in Romans 3:23 (English Standard Version). But music has been abused in the church and is even credited for the many worship wars that have taken place and divided numerous churches, but Protestant churches continue to use music to worship God. Likewise, creating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship should not be neglected due to a bad past or even because it may be abused by a few. This study aims to help church leaders implement this spiritual practice in a way that places all the glory upon God and not the human creator, as literature is examined to conclude that Christians can indeed create visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

Background of Topic

On this researcher’s first day of residency of Azusa Pacific University’s 2013 MFA in Visual Art program, chairman and professor Bill Catling told the new class of graduate students that they were on holy ground. He spoke about Moses being in a sacred place when he met God with the burning bush in Exodus 3. Catling explained that one of the ways artists meet with God is in their time of artmaking—a holy time. The researcher spent over three years learning how to make art for a purpose, not his purpose but God’s purpose. He studied how to be used as an

⁶ Karin Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 29, Kindle.

instrument to take the colors and shapes that God created to form them together to create works of visual art that bring about meaning, purpose, and expression.

With his current vocation as a high school art teacher in a public school, he has the privilege to provide an environment for his students to come and create. Some are followers of Christ, and many are not, but they all get to display part of God's image. They get to be creators and artists as they use the elements that God originally created to create something new with their own hands. Robert Webber states, "Persons made in the image of God are gifted by him with creativity."⁷ As his students grow and eventually graduate from high school, some stop creating, but others find various ways to still be visual artists as they carry on their creative endeavors for the rest of their lives. His wife's grandfather was an example of this. In his later years, he still proudly identified as an artist and would recall how he studied art when he was in high school, and he drew and painted wonderful works of art for his family.

It is this researcher's vocation to teach all students to be visual artists, but as with any of the arts in high school, only some will carry on afterwards and continue to practice their art post-high school into their busy adult lives. One of his concerns is for those who continue to be visual artists and who are Christians with a special calling to be visual artists. Some Christians have an anointing to preach or to lead the choir, while some have the anointing to create visual art. Although most Protestant churches believe that Christians are biblically allowed to create visual art, it is often left out of the church. James F. White states this concern: "We do not yet have enough varieties of Christian worship. What can be done to help liturgically disenfranchised groups to express their worship of the Christian God in forms that are natural to them? How do

⁷ Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 3865, Kindle.

such groups learn to be themselves in their worship of Jesus Christ?”⁸ As a Christian who has been called to be a visual artist, one way he worships God is through creating art. This is often a private time where he is being led by the Holy Spirit to carry out God’s calling to create, but this private time of worship through creating does not transfer over to the corporate worship services in most churches in his city. He could not bring his easel and canvas to paint during the musical part of the worship service on Sunday morning due to it being a distraction to others.

Although the researcher is a musician, and he has a great love for music, he brings his sketchbook to church and sometimes sketches out images that God places on his mind. For him, notes in sentence form are sometimes forgotten, but images are powerful and stick with him much longer. When he sees an image that he recorded in his sketchbook, he recalls the message that was behind it along with the emotion that came with the powerful truth as well.

Unfortunately, there has been times that he was given a bad look while sketching in his prayer sketchbook at church and some have even made negative comments to him: “Are you really going to draw right now? Are you even paying attention at all?” Not only is he paying attention, but he is digesting the message and synthesizing it by placing it into a visual image so that he will remember it for years to come, while some are just blankly staring and thinking about matters that are far from spiritual. The researcher is not concerned about how he is treated during a corporate worship service, but he is concerned about how others may be treated, especially when he thinks about some of his Christian art students in church. This study is to ultimately help church leaders understand and then teach the value of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Although art has and still can be abused in the church—just like music—with the right instruction and guidance, it can be used as God created it; it can be a gift for believers to

⁸ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 179, Kindle.

use to glorify the Lord as Paul states in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Problem Statement

This study focuses on the problem that some Protestant churches do not understand and do not encourage or even allow artistically inclined Christians to worship by making visual art. There is a lack of value on visual art in some of these Protestant churches. This is problematic because God places value on visual art. In Exodus 31, God calls Bezalel and fills him with his spirit to have great skill in craftsmanship to create artistic designs in gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. God also calls and anoints Oholiab to help Bezalel as an artisan. They are both called to help create the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant aesthetically. This part of scripture shows that God values visual art because he desires for the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant to be visually specific. Allen Ross states, “So along with the practical features for approaching God, there was an increasing beauty and value to the parts of the tabernacle the closer one got to the divine presence.”⁹ God did not command his people to simply leave the ark or tabernacle blank nor did he just let anyone create and decorate them. There are particular visual and artistic details that were so vital that God anointed and called specific artists for the important task. In 1 Kings 6, God gives exact details for the temple. 1 Kings 6:12 states, “Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father.” God values the hearts of the people who built his tabernacle, and he also values their physical work on his sanctuary. Ross states, “When we turn

⁹ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 1840, Kindle.

in the Bible to the record of God’s instructions for the building and furnishing of the sanctuary, we find gold and precious gems there as well.”¹⁰ Such artistically visual aesthetics help the earthy seem more heavenly. Ross explains, “Like the Garden of Eden, the sanctuary was the place where heaven and earth converged—the Lord was in heaven, and he was also in his holy temple.”¹¹ The visual features of God’s earthly, physical sanctuary represent the heavenly. Ross adds, “What better plan to follow than that which was given as the earthly copy of the heavenly sanctuary, the hope of glory we share.”¹² Overall, when God made his sanctuary on earth in the tabernacle, ark, and temple, he had very specific visually artistic requirements that demanded such skill that he anointed particular people with artistic gifts to complete the important tasks. Just as God carefully created the heavens and the earth and the creatures and people on it in visual beauty, he held the creation of his earthy sanctuary to a high standard of visual awe as well in the Old Testament. This reveals a little more of God’s mysterious nature—that he values visual art, but some Protestant churches do not.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use literature to show that visual art is a spiritual practice of Christian worship that should be taught and encouraged for those believers in the Protestant church who are called to be visual artists. Bruce Ellis Benson states, “So we must reenvision art in order to gain a sense of the communal nature of art, to reclaim art as a vehicle for truth, and to view it as something of which we are all a part.”¹³ Not only is the purpose to

¹⁰ Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 871.

¹¹ Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 756.

¹² Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 2511.

¹³ Bruce Ellis Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship (The Church and Postmodern Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 25.

encourage the creating of visual art for the aim of glorifying God but for the church to reclaim visual art for the kingdom of God. Benson explains, “God intends us to be artists. Art is part of our being—and should be part of both our individual lives and the very life of the church.”¹⁴ When Protestant churches are compared to other environments in modern culture where visual art is ubiquitous, it is clear that there needs to be a change in the church. William A. Dyrness states, “The Fact that much controversy attends the use of arts in worship, that artists in Christian communities continue to be marginalized, and that Christians still express confusion regarding their engagement with the arts indicates unfinished business.”¹⁵ A change to encourage the visual arts in the church is not a new endeavor but a tradition that goes back to the tabernacle and the temple. Even when the church was under grave persecution they expressed their faith through visual arts. Images have been found hidden in catacombs and burial places of early Christians, which is where many met around 200 AD. Dyrness explains, “The visual culture of the early church had to be modest; indeed, the church itself was in many ways virtually invisible to outsiders.”¹⁶ This changed drastically after the recorded conversion of Constantine. Dyrness states, “After the conversion of Constantine in 312, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and Christian art and architecture were free to celebrate the triumph.”¹⁷ After the iconoclasm and the Reformed iconoclasm, Christians eventually became free to make visual art in the church to glorify God, but it is unfortunate that church leaders are fearful and hesitant to encourage or even allow it in their congregations. The purpose of the study is to reconcile such

¹⁴ Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life*, 69.

¹⁵ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 67.

¹⁶ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 26.

¹⁷ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 27.

a problematic hesitancy and help the Protestant church become a place where artistic Christians can create visual art as a spiritual practice of worship to glorify God.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to use literature to show that artistically inclined Christians can create visual art as a spiritual practice of worship. Such findings can change the way Protestant churches view the creation of visual art in and out of the corporate worship service. J. Scott McElroy states, “When we choose to inspire, disciple and empower the artists in our churches, guiding them into a collaborative relationship with God, they will help lead the rest of the congregation on the path to unlocking our inherent creativity. The result—a creative church—can change the world.”¹⁸

Some Protestant churches are slowly beginning to understand the great value and importance of visual art in the church service and in the daily lives of believers as they worship the Lord with their entire lifestyle. Some church leaders are agreeing that it is time to reclaim the visual arts for the purpose of glorifying God. Robert Webber explains, “In worship renewal today much attention is given to the artist and to the use of their artistic gifts. The power of visual symbol, congregational movement and physical participation, appropriate uses of drama, the recovery of the senses, and the engagement of the whole person in worship have all been rediscovered.”¹⁹ When church leadership teaches the value of visual art and its rightful place in the worship service and in the daily lives of believers, the church can once again be the hub for artists as it was during the Old Testament worship in the tabernacle and temple and during the

¹⁸ J. Scott McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook: Releasing the Power of the Arts in Your Congregation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) 60.

¹⁹ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 158.

Byzantine period. Artists can come to church to partake in the arts instead of leaving church to create. Webber states, “Thus, the artist in the service of God (the Creator) displays redemption through artistic creativity and sets creation free to worship God. Therefore, environmental art, the visual arts, and the movement arts are not primarily presentational or witness arts in worship, but acts of worship that serve the goal of pointing all of creation toward the praise of God.”²⁰ The Christian church still has a long way to go. White explains, “We do not yet have enough varieties of Christian worship.”²¹ This lack of variety applies to the modern sanctuary as well.

Many modern Protestant sanctuaries are often bare. At best, they sometimes have mass-produced, Christian bookstore art on the walls in the foyer. Walters suggests, “Providing some direction to the flower committee, or whoever takes responsibility for the visual aspects of the sanctuary, can create an appropriate look for a given worship service.”²² Bare sanctuaries can express the false idea that God is bare, simple, and boring. The physical place of corporate worship can be decorated in a way that helps worshipers better understand the power, might, and mystery of God through visual art. Walters explains, “The visual starvation of worshipers with plain meeting rooms is one reason so many evangelicals have joined the procession of the so-called Canterbury trail into Anglicanism—and some into Eastern Orthodoxy. Good liturgy is holistic; therefore, it must be visual as well as aural.”²³ Church leaders can form committees of church members to help add artistic expression to the church building in a way that expresses biblical truth and God’s holy attributes. Walters states, “Some churches are finding innovative

²⁰ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 3875.

²¹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 179.

²² Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 1024.

²³ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 1579.

ways to employ art, like sponsoring shows featuring the work of church members, hiring staff people devoted to cultivating artistic expression in the church, and, yes, forming banner committees.”²⁴ Churches can also expand the responsibilities of worship pastors or hire other church ministers with artistic callings to bring greater artistic expression to the modern sanctuary. Such changes can help visual creators feel more comfortable at church, and they can help communicate God’s glory to younger generations that are not as literary. As said many times, a picture can be worth a thousand words. Walters explains, “The church’s capacity to embrace the arts is a key to its gaining a hearing in postmodern culture.”²⁵ Adding visual art to the physical church building can change the negative mindset that many artists feel about the church concerning a lack of artist support or support of visual art in general. David W. Manner states, “Artistic worship beyond music is often seen as an extra offering meant for those who appreciate it and understand it but not for the rest of us. But we must all understand that art beyond music is, instead, an equally viable worship action essential to shaping our faith and worship understanding.”²⁶ Adding art to the sanctuary can help other believers understand that there are ways to worship outside of music, and creating visual art is one of those ways. The significance of this study is to not only help teach and encourage visual artists to worship God by creating as a spiritual practice but also by helping Protestant church restore visual art back to the entirety of the church.

²⁴ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2293.

²⁵ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2419.

²⁶ David W. Manner, *Better Sundays Begin on Monday: 52 Exercises for Evaluating Weekly Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 1386, Kindle.

Research Questions

Christians who are artists, are not artists for themselves. They are artists because they are called to such a practice for the purpose of glorifying the Lord, and when they live out their calling, they are worshiping God faithfully. Christian artists create visual art as a spiritual practice in their worship unto the Lord. Some church bodies understand, support, and encourage this spiritual practice, but unfortunately, some discourage it due to a lack of biblical understanding of the true idea of whole-life worship—lifestyle worship. Paul states in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” If more church leadership could understand how creating visual art can be a spiritual practice of Christian worship, then an artistic demographic of the body of Christ would feel more encouraged to worship in a unique way that is in relation to their calling. The following research questions aim to help this purpose.

Research Question One: What biblical principles of worship can be applied when advocating for the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship?

Research Question Two: How can artists be encouraged to utilize artmaking as an expression of worship in both public and private worship?

Hypotheses

Research Question One may be answered with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis One: Biblical principles related to lifestyle worship and corporate worship support the practice of creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

God has called some to be visual artists for his divine purpose. When such called artists are faithful to create through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they are worshiping God by carrying out his will and walking in his calling—lifestyle worship. In Galatians 5:16, Paul states,

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Artists are not to create to gratify or glorify their own flesh. Art was created for the purpose of glorifying the Lord. It is a gift given from the Father of lights (James 1:17) to be used to bring light, not darkness.

Paul states in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” In the Old Testament, God uses visual art in his sanctuary. Visual art has a purpose of glorifying God. Therefore, it can be used for good. Artists can use the gift of art to create images that promote thoughts of the things that are worthy to think about. That is really what an image does; it promotes a possible thought. Christian artists promote thoughts that focus on God and his truth so that he may be glorified. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” Although artwork is temporary, the message that it can promote can be eternal—it is a vehicle for an eternal message. But there must be a clear understanding that art is to glorify God and not the artist or the art itself. Miller explains, “In the church, art is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. While we strive to use art to communicate the glory of God, the art is always subservient to its intended purpose; namely, making Jesus famous—to glorify and honor Him in the sight of all who hear and see.”²⁷ Vernon Whaley states, “Remember that all things were created to worship God.”²⁸ Even simple drawings and sketches can be used to worship the Lord,

²⁷ Stephen Miller, *Worship Leaders: We Are Not Rock Stars* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2013), 109.

²⁸ Vernon Whaley, *Called to Worship: From the Dawn of Creation to the Final Amen* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 27, Kindle.

and when Christians are called to be artists and create visual works of art, they are worshipping the Lord in their creation process that brings God glory.

Research Question Two may be answered with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis Two: Artists can be encouraged to utilize artmaking as an expression of worship in both public and private worship by utilizing methods such as meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks.

Biblical meditation, like art, was created to ultimately help people glorify the Lord, but it has been used for evil. Robert Morgan states, “Biblical meditation is not just *reading* Scripture or *studying* Scripture or even thinking *about* Scripture; instead, it is *thinking* Scripture—contemplating, visualizing, and personifying the precious truths God has given us [emphasis original].”²⁹ Christians can practice meditative painting, which is when believers paint as they prayerfully meditate on God’s truth and his divine attributes. Christian artists take a section of scripture and pray about it in meditative thought, and while they focus on that section of scripture, they can paint out visual representations of what it means.

Christians can also practice prayer sketchbooks. This is similar to notetaking in a journal but uses visual images instead of just words, although words can be included as well. An advantage to biblical meditative sketching is that when people think about a biblical passage long enough to prayerfully process what it may look like to draw it, literally or symbolically, that passage becomes more engrained in the memory. When it comes to memory, images can last longer than words. Also, sketching for artists can help relax their minds and calm their anxiety to help them be in a mental state to more calmly listen to God through his Word and his Holy Spirit. Although images are sometimes more ambiguous than words, they can help capture some

²⁹ Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation*, 10.

of the mystery of God. Stephen Miller states, “The arts are often abstract and mysterious, echoes of the mystery surrounding an infinite God—billows of smoke rising from the raging fire of His holiness.”³⁰ Churches can even encourage their artistic members to carry portable sketchbooks with their Bibles to sketch out the thoughts that God has given them. Unfortunately, some churches may frown upon church members sketching during a sermon or time of musical worship, but biblical meditative sketching may be one aspect of their worship unto the Lord. If saved, such sketchbooks may even be passed down to future generations with prayers and words included in them. Such prayer sketchbooks can be used as tools to share what God has done. Miller explains, “The Artist made us artists. And all so that we might reflect the beauty of His character and wonder of His story! The art we are blessed to create is all ultimately intended to point to the Creator.”³¹ Sketchbooks, illustrations, paintings, comics, animations, and many other visual artforms can be created to share biblical truth with others.

Core Concepts

Lifestyle worship is a core concept of this study because it provides the foundation that worship is more than music. Webber states:

A worship old and new also draws on the arts. In worship renewal today much attention is given to the artist and to the use of their artistic gifts. The power of visual symbol, congregational movement and physical participation, appropriate uses of drama, the recovery of the senses, and the engagement of the whole person in worship have all been rediscovered.³²

³⁰ Miller, *Worship Leaders*, 109.

³¹ Miller, *Worship Leaders*, 109.

³² Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 158.

Creating visual art is part of many people's lifestyles, so if they are to worship with their entire life, then they are to also worship by creating visual art. Corporate worship is the worship that takes place during the worship service in the physical church, with the church congregation worshipping together through the elements with planned church liturgy.

Meditative painting, in terms of the Christian community and church, is painting while focusing on scripture, theology, and/or God's holy attributes. The aim is to paint in a relaxed manner while focusing on God. This can include worship music and listening to a sermon while painting as well. Although this practice can be set up in the corporate worship service, it is more commonly a spiritual practice to be done elsewhere due to the practicalities of the setup.

Prayer sketchbooks are similar to prayer journals, but they are for those who are more visual thinkers and for those who are more artistically inclined to the visual arts. Instead of just writing out prayers and scripture, people can sketch out their prayers and scripture that they are meditating on. Prayer sketchbooks can include written words as well, but visual images are sketched out to help people remember better and to allow time for meditation upon prayers and scripture.

Webber states, "The Scripture affirms the visual arts, particularly through the use of the arts in the temple (2 Kings 6-7). The temple artists, under the direction of God, brought theological themes into the temple so that God's people could actually see God's truth."³³ In a similar way meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks do the same in that they allow Christian artists to create images to help them reflect and remember God's truth.

Visual artist is a concept that differs from a general artist because a general artist could include a musician as well, and this study is specifically focused on visual artists. Visual art

³³ Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 3887.

includes art that is made to see, including but not limited to the following: painting, illustration, sketches, digital art. Art such as performance art, musical art, literary art, found objects, and conceptual art are excluded from this study.

Artistically-inclined Christians are believers who have an anointing or calling to the visual arts. Walters states, “Theologians have held for centuries that the artistic impulse, the desire to create works of beauty and imagination, is a part of our God-given impulse to worship. Thus, to separate art and worship is to violate the intent of the Creator himself.”³⁴ Although all believers have forms of creativity, some have a unique calling to be visual artists.

Definition of Terms

Lifestyle worship means that worshiping God is not just a singular act but an entire lifestyle that takes place in thought and action. *Corporate worship* is the worship that takes place during a church service with the church congregation. *Meditative painting* is painting traditionally on canvas or a similar surface or painting digitally while focusing on scripture, theology, and/or God’s holy attributes. *Prayer sketchbooks* are sketchbooks that are dedicated to writing notes of thoughts, theology, Bible verses, and prayers while sketching visual images to go along with such meditative thoughts. This can be done in traditional and portable media such as pencil, pen, marker, and watercolor. *Visual artists* are artists that specifically create artwork that can be seen with the eye, such as paintings, drawings, illustrations, and sketches—digital or traditional. *Artistically inclined Christians* are believers who have been called and anointed to create visual art that is meant to bring glory to the Lord.

³⁴ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2249.

Summary

This is a qualitative study that researches and observes writings on the topic of worship and the arts. Although there is a gap in research pertaining to creating visual art as a spiritual practice, there are studies showing the relationship between visual art and the church. Also, there is sufficient research on worship beyond music and whole life worship—lifestyle worship. There is also research concerning the absence of visual art in the Protestant church. All of these areas of research are combined to qualitatively study the biblical principles of worship of creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship, practically looking at meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks.

Overall, visual art was created and given to people for ultimately glorifying the Lord, and God has called some to be visual artists for this divine purpose. When such called artists are faithful to create through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they are worshiping God by carrying out his will and walking in his calling. Art was created for the purpose of glorifying the Lord. Even simple drawings and sketches can be used to worship the Lord, and when Christians are called to be artists and create visual works of art, they are worshiping the Lord in their creative process that brings God glory, and this can be done during the corporate worship service and during private worship as well.

Chapter two summarizes and evaluates relevant sources focusing on worship and visual art. Selected sources include texts on the documentation of Christian Art in the early church to writings on the importance of the incorporation of visual art into the modern-day worship service. Chapter three explains the methods of this qualitative study, looking at descriptive data and identifying key terms in reference to creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Chapter four focuses on the findings of the research and demonstrates that creating

visual art can be a spiritual practice during corporate and private worship. Chapter five proposes select ways visual art can be used as a spiritual practice of worship, focusing on meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks as exemplary suggestions.

Chapter 2

The Creative Beginning

Scripture begins by stating that the Creator *created* in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (English Standard Version). Before there was anything, God was present, and he created as his spirit moved across the waters and his voice spoke out to declare light. This contrasts with the ancient pagan religions that told creation stories containing multiple gods. It is also in contrast with the modern belief of macro-evolution and the Big Bang theory. According to scripture, the world and life did not struggle through millions of years of death and survival to become what it is today; it was immaculately designed by God. John MacArthur explains, “This word is used here of God’s creative activity alone, although it occasionally is used elsewhere of matter which already existed. Context demands in no uncertain terms that this was a creation without preexisting materials.”¹ The beginning of the Bible shows God as the original Creator; he is the one who creates and is able to call his creation good. Psalm 102:25 states, “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” This language demonstrates God’s artistic creative nature.

The Creation of Humans

Genesis 1:27 states, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.” At this point in chapter 1 of Genesis, God is shown as the Creator, and he creates humans in his own image. By verse 27 when reading Genesis chronologically, what the reader would know most about God is that he is a great Creator. Genesis 2:7 states, “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 8, Kindle.

and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” Here, God created man by forming him from the ground. MacArthur explains the word *formed*: “Many of the words used in this account of the creation of man picture a master craftsman at work shaping a work of art to which he gives life.”² Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham state:

The first point is emphasized in this verse by the use of the verb *formed*, which, when not applied to God’s creation of man, is typically employed, especially as a verbal adjective, to describe the role and work of a potter—which, perhaps more so than any other human activity, requires the careful and gentle use of the potter’s own hands. Since God could have created humanity in any other way He chose, such as by simply calling a man into being (as He did for everything else), the question naturally arises, “Why did He create humanity in *this* way?” And the answer is, “To demonstrate His special care (love) for man and His desire to relate to him in an intimate way [emphasis original].”³

Humans are created in the image of God in an intimate way as God is the great craftsman.

Isaiah 45:9 states, “Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’” Referencing Isaiah 45:9, Paul in Romans 9:20-21 states, “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?” In this illustration, God is an artisan carefully forming the clay in his hands. Warren W. Wiersbe explains, “We have feelings, intellect, and willpower, and we can resist Him if we choose. But it is God who determines whether a man will be Moses or a Pharaoh. Neither Moses, nor Pharaoh, nor anyone else, could choose his parents, his genetic structure, or his time and place of birth.”⁴ God is shown as the

² MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 13.

³ Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 87, Kindle.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Matthew-Galatians* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 544.

ultimate artist who decides how the clay will be initially molded, and there will be deep suffering and sorrow for any who quarrel with their maker.

God did not just create humans plainly, but he did so in a way that is artistic and wonderful. Psalm 139:13-16 states:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Wiersbe describes this as the following: "In the mother's womb, the Lord weaves and embroiders a human being."⁵ God's attribute of being a creator and artist is displayed in his creation of each person. Matthew Henry explains, "He that framed the engine knows all the motions of it. God made us, and therefore no doubt he knows us; he saw us when we were in the forming, and can we be hidden from him now that we are formed?"⁶ God knows every inner detail of people because he created all of them with great care.

Ephesians 2:10 states, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Paul shows that humans were created as the creative work of God for specific purposes. God's people were not just created to be put away or abandoned, but they were created carefully with a plan.

⁵ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Matthew-Galatians*, 367.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2010), 172302, Kindle.

The Creator of All Things in Heaven and on Earth

Zechariah 12:1 states, “Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him.” As Zechariah preaches his first sermon on repentance, he begins by reminding God’s chosen people about God’s attributes. God is the Creator of the heavens and earth, and he formed the spirit of man. Not only is he the artist of the physical body but of the spirit as well. He is the Creator of all things, the seen and unseen, and the human spirit can even be more wonderful than the human body as the body came from the ground, but the spirit was breathed in by God. Ecclesiastes 12:7 states, “And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

Colossians 1:16 states, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Paul explains that not only did God create the visible, but he also created the invisible. God is the artistic Creator of the invisible dominions and rulers in heaven and on earth. MacArthur explains the thrones, dominions, rules and authorities: “These are various categories of angels whom Christ created and rules over. There is no comment regarding whether they are holy or fallen, since He is Lord of both groups.”⁷ He concludes, “As God, Jesus created the material and spiritual universe for His pleasure and glory.”⁸

In the Ezekiel 1:5-14, Ezekiel recorded his unique vision of cherubim as the following:

And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four

⁷ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1733.

⁸ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1733.

had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Such descriptions tell of angelic creations made by a God who is wonderfully creative. The details show beings who are similar to humans in some ways but clearly not human. Wiersbe explains, “Like the Apostle John describing the beauty of the holy city, the prophet ran out of words and had to draw pictures!”⁹ Ezekiel’s ambiguous and possibly symbolic descriptions reinforces the awe that comes with reading about some of God’s heavenly creations.

Imitators of the Creator

Followers of Christ are called to imitate Christ. Paul states in Ephesians 5:1, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” MacArthur writes, “The Christian has no greater calling or purpose than that of imitating his Lord. That is the very purpose of sanctification, growing in the likeness to the Lord while serving Him on earth.”¹⁰ There are multiple verses showing how God is the great Creator. MacArthur remarks, “As God’s dear children, believers are to become more and more like their heavenly Father.”¹¹

Romans 8:29 states, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” The

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Isaiah-Malachi* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 165.

¹⁰ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1697.

¹¹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1697.

Christian elect are called to be conformed to be like Jesus. Wiersbe explains, “He has a perfect plan. God has two purposes in that plan: our good and His glory. Ultimately, He will make us like Jesus Christ!”¹² Rydelnik and Vanlaningham write, “Being conformed to the image of His Son probably pertains not only to what will happen on the day of Christ’s return but also what happens in the lengthy period before that return.”¹³ As an example, Paul even states, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” in 1 Corinthians 11:1. Overall, Christians are called to be like Christ, and scripture shows Christ as a creator since he is the active part of the holy trinity based upon 1 Colossians 1:16: For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”

Visual Images of the Tabernacle and Temple

In Deuteronomy 10:1-2, God tells Moses: “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to me on the mountain and make an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall put them in the ark.” Moses obeyed God and made the ark out of acacia wood. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham write, “This ark was most likely the precursor to the ark of the covenant, which Bezalel later artistically fashioned.”¹⁴ The ark is functional and was used, but later, God calls for it to be embellished.

In Exodus 28, God instructs Moses to gather his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons to serve the Lord as priests at the tabernacle. God designed for them to wear specific garments to set them apart. Wiersbe remarks:

¹² Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Matthew-Galatians*, 541.

¹³ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 4367.

¹⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 697.

In serving God and the people, the high priest wore seven pieces of clothing: undergarments; a white inner robe; a blue robe over than, with bells and pomegranates on the hem; the ephod, a sleeveless garment of gold, blue purple, and scarlet, held together by a jeweled clasp on each shoulder; a girdle at the waist; a jeweled breastplate, held in place on the ephod by golden chains attached to the shoulder clasps; and a white linen turban with a golden plate on it that said “Holy to the Lord.”

Each piece of clothing was designed for symbolic meaning and purpose. Wiersbe notes, “The significant thing about this ephod was not the fabric or the colors. It was that the names of six tribes of Israel were engraved on each onyx stone on the shoulder clasps, according to their birth order. Whenever the high priest wore his special robes, he carried the people on his shoulders before the Lord.”¹⁵ There were details on each piece of clothing. Wiersbe explains further, “On the breastplate were twelve beautiful jewels, arranged in four rows, each stone representing one of the tribes of Israel. The stones were probably arranged according to the order of the tribes as they marched.”¹⁶ Wiersbe writes that even the hem around the blue robe visually displayed symbolic meaning: “Finally, around the hem of this garment hung pomegranates made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn, which golden bells hanging between them. The pomegranates symbolized fruitfulness and the golden bells gave witness that the high priest was ministering in the holy place.”¹⁷ The turban was only worn by the high priest, and the other priests wore linen bonnets. Wiersbe states, “At the front of the turban was the golden plate that read ‘Holiness to the Lord.’”¹⁸ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, “They were designed to impress. (This was much like a case in which ‘the clothes made the man.’) They were unique, unlike the daily wear of the

¹⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 240.

¹⁶ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Matthew-Galatians*, 241.

¹⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Matthew-Galatians*, 241.

¹⁸ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 242.

common people. This was for an obvious reason: The priests performed unique duties so unlike those of the common person.”¹⁹ The visual images of the priestly garments were designed by the Lord and were important to him, being visual representations of the spiritual world.

Artistic Creators

Although the visual images in the Tabernacle and Temple were designed by God, they were made by skillful artists who were filled with a spirit of skill as Exodus 28:3 states: “You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood.” God used people with artistic skills to create visual images, so he would be worshiped properly.

Exodus 31:1-11 states:

The Lord said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.”

Two artistic people are called to the important task of making visual creations for the worship of the Lord. Although the Israelites had the opportunity to give materials for the tabernacle and the objects involved in worship, God called two specific artists to be equipped for the important task, Bezalel and Oholiab. MacArthur remarks, “God identified two men by name as specifically chosen and divinely endued with ability, or Spirit-filled, to make all He had revealed to Moses.

¹⁹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 393.

None of the craftsmen were left untouched by divinely bestowed understanding in the intricacy of their work. They were called ‘craftsmen,’ suggesting previously developed skill.”²⁰ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain the meaning of Bezalel’s name: “Of the many skilled craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle, the passage names only two: Bezalel (whose name means ‘in the shadow of God,’ indicating ‘protection.’”²¹ Oholiab was from the tribe of Dan and was an engraver, designer, and embroiderer according to Exodus 38:23. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain the different technical skills and workers that building the tabernacle required: “The work of building the tabernacle required a wide variety of technical skills—metallurgy, carpentry, molding, wood-carving, metal engraving, sewing, embroidering, weaving, perfumery and overall design and more. The work occupied every skillful man.”²² God used artistic people to carry out the construction of the objects that were required to be used for his people to worship him.

Exodus 35:30-35 states:

Then Moses said to the people of Israel, “See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab the son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer.

Bezalel and Oholiab are given special gifts as they are called to build the tabernacle.

Although they are artisans prior to this calling, God fills them with skill to do the work that they

²⁰ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 127.

²¹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 402.

²² Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 402-403.

are called to do for the Lord. MacArthur remarks, “The Lord also gave the two named craftsmen skill in teaching their trades. This substantiates that they were, most probably, the supervisors or leaders of the construction teams.”²³ It is likely that many artistic and skilled people worked under the leadership of Bezalel and Oholiab since they were inspired to teach as well. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham state, “Thus, it would seem that the ‘skillful’ were already capable craftsmen who were given increased facility in their area of expertise in order to work on the tabernacle. Not only did they execute the necessary works of skilled craftsmanship but they taught others how to perform the work as well.”²⁴

Scripture shows examples of art as a skill. In 2 Samuel 5:11, the king of Tyre sends carpenters and masons with materials to build David a house after he is established as king: “And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, also carpenters and masons who built David a house.”

1 Chronicles 22:15-16 states, “You have an abundance of workmen: stonecutters, masons, carpenters, and all kinds of craftsmen without number, skilled in working gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Arise and work! The Lord be with you!” When David begins getting the plans for the temple ready for Solomon, he finds artistic builders and workers for the mighty task.

In 2 Chronicles 2, Hiram, the king of Tyre, helps David with building the temple by sending wood and skilled artists, specifically Hiram-abi. 2 Chronicles 2:13-14 states:

Now I have sent a skilled man, who has understanding, Hiram-abi, the son of a woman of the daughters of Dan, and his father was a man of Tyre. He is trained to work in gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone, and wood, and in purple, blue, and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and to do all sorts of engraving and execute any design that may be assigned him, with your craftsmen, the craftsmen of my lord, David your father.

²³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 130.

²⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 402.

Such an artist of great skill was a valuable gift from Hiram to help with the completion and decoration of the temple. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, “The man to be sent by Hiram was Hiram-abi, a man especially qualified to assist in building the temple. He was not only uniquely skilled but he also was partly of Israelite ancestry.”²⁵

When the temple needed to be restored, the king of Jerusalem, Joash, decided to restore it by having tax to help with the repairs. 2 Chronicles 24:12-13 states, “And the king and Jehoiada gave it to those who had charge of the work of the house of the Lord, and they hired masons and carpenters to restore the house of the Lord, and also workers in iron and bronze to repair the house of the Lord.” Artistically skilled people were hired to repair the temple, and they did so properly.

In the Bible, women are also artistically skilled. Proverbs 31 describes an excellent wife, and she is artistic. Proverbs 31:24 states, “She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.” Not only does she make them, but she makes them so well that others purchase them. John Wesley describes them as, “Girdles—curiously wrought of linen, and gold, or other precious materials.”²⁶ MacArthur writes, “With all her other responsibilities faithfully discharged, she took the time to make items of clothing for the purposes of trade.”²⁷

Elaborate Details

Scripture shows that art can be elaborately detailed and beautiful. When God prepares to dwell with his people, he gives detailed instructions on how the tabernacle should be formed and

²⁵ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 1458.

²⁶ John Wesley, *Complete Bible Commentary* (n.p.: Hargreaves Publishing, 2014), 3738, Kindle.

²⁷ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 730.

detailed, along with the elements in it, including the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 25-40 gives numerous specific details on exactly how the tabernacle and its elements should be created, but much of those details are visual. Exodus 25:17-20 is one of the many examples of such commanded detail, stating:

And you shall make an atoning cover of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. You shall make two cherubim of gold; make them of hammered work at the two ends of the atoning cover. Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the atoning cover at its two ends. And the cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the atoning cover with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the atoning cover.

Here, visual art is important to God because he includes specific instructions on how to create the visual images for the place where he will meet with his people.

In 1 Kings 6, God provides great detail on how he wants the temple to be constructed where he requires artisans to create a beautiful place of worship for his chosen people. One of the many examples of this is the following in 1 Kings 6:29-30: “Then he carved all the surrounding walls of the house with engravings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers, for the inner and outer sanctuaries. And he overlaid the floor of the house with gold, for the inner and outer sanctuaries.” The artistic images were plentiful in the temple of the Lord.

Even the furnishings for the temple were visual art. 1 Kings 7:19-22 describes the details concerning the pillars of the royal palace:

The capitals which were on the tops of the pillars in the porch were of lily design, four cubits. So there were capitals on the two pillars, also above and close to the rounded projection which was beside the lattice; and the pomegranates totaled two hundred in rows around both capitals. And he set up the pillars at the porch of the main room: he set up the right pillar and named it Jachin, and he set up the left pillar and named it Boaz. On the top of the pillars was the lily design. So the work of the pillars was finished.

Wiersbe elaborates, “The work on the temple structure was completed in seven years, but it took several more years for Hiram and his crew to decorate the interior and construct the

furnishings.”²⁸ William MacDonald states, “Solomon’s house, or the royal palace, took thirteen years to build. It was located slightly southeast of the temple and just outside the wall of the inner court.”²⁹ This amount of time by some of the most skilled artists of the day shows how visually amazing the finished temple must have been. The temple was a place where people saw God’s greatness through the visual images that were created. These images worked together to bring God glory as his people worshiped him.

Moses’ Visual Artwork

In Numbers 21:8, God calls Moses to make a unique work of visual art with purpose: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’” Wiersbe explains: “Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross. (‘Lifted up’ was a phrase used in that day to refer to crucifixion.) The comparison between the bronze serpent in Moses’ day and the cross of Christ help us better understand the meaning of God’s grace in salvation.”³⁰ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, “Jesus referred to this account to describe the manner of His execution. By focusing their gaze upon Jesus on the cross, lifted up and dying for sin, believers are able to contemplate the depths of their sin and the greatness of His mercy.”³¹ Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown explain, “This peculiar method of cure was God’s power and grace, not the effect of nature or art, and also that it might be a type of the power of faith in Christ to heal all who look to Him

²⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Joshua-Esther* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 433.

²⁹ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 46, Kindle.

³⁰ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 347.

³¹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 600.

because of their sins.”³² Although the bronze serpent was later destroyed so people would not worship it, it was a work of art created by Moses used by God. MacDonald explains, “This incident was used by the Lord Jesus to teach Nicodemus that Christ must be lifted up on a pole (the cross), so that sinners looking to Him by faith might have everlasting life. The serpent later became a stumbling block to the nation and was finally destroyed in the days of Hezekiah.”³³ Not all artwork is merely for aesthetic purposes. The bronze serpent is an example of visual artwork with a purpose. Its purpose was to visually represent the coming Messiah who would be crucified (lifted up) for the sins of the world—the cure to sin.

Joseph’s Multicolored Robe

Genesis 37:3 states, “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors.” Joseph’s father gives him an artistic article of clothing to wear. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham remark, “This was a continual visual reminder to the brothers of Joseph’s favored status.”³⁴ MacDonald states, “The tunic of many colors was a sign of his father’s special affection, and it stirred up the jealous hatred of his brothers.”³⁵ The color piece of clothing must have stood out among the clothing of the brothers, as it brought special attention and focus to Joseph.

³² Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2011), 7305, Kindle.

³³ MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 246.

³⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 235.

³⁵ MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 94.

The Beauty of Humans

Visual beauty is also found in humans in scripture. In Song of Solomon 7:1, a beautiful young woman is seen as a creation of art: “How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.” In Genesis 39:6, Joseph is described as handsome: “Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.” The image of God that is visual in humans captures some of the beauty of the Lord.

The Beauty of the Lord

Psalm 27:4 states, “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.” God’s people are encouraged to focus on the beauty of the Lord. God is the apex of beauty. Psalm 50:2 describes God’s beauty: “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” Isaiah 33:17 states, “Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar.” MacArthur explains, “The prophecy moves beyond Hezekiah in his sackcloth, oppressed by his enemy, to Messiah in His beauty. Seeing Him in glory is another reward of the righteous.”³⁶ Overall, God is the Creator of beauty, and his glory is beautiful. Although God’s beauty may not always be directly visual, as people do not physically see Jesus, beauty can be seen through his creation. Romans 1:18-19 states, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” Therefore, anyone who has seen the beauty of God’s creation knows that he is beautiful.

³⁶ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 797.

Jesus' Earthly Job as an Artist

Mark 6:3 states, “‘Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him.” Jesus’ daily career prior to his open ministry is commonly known as being a carpenter. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham write, “Those who listened were astonished, marveling at His wisdom and wondering about its source. They also wondered about the miracles He was performing. They had seen Him work with wood as their carpenter for many years.”³⁷ There is some speculation that the word for carpenter, *tekton* could also imply that he was a stonemason. Jordan K. Monson states, “After all, when the townspeople in Mark 6:3 called Jesus a tekton, they were actually speaking Aramaic, which the Gospel writers later translated to Greek when they recorded their histories of Jesus. So in Aramaic, they would have called Jesus a haras. And whether the builder was using stone or metal or wood, the Septuagint translates it as tekton.”³⁸ Acts 4:11 matches this idea: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.” 1 Peter 2:4-5 matches this theme as well: “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Contrary, Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross, so there is thematic support for both ideas. Either way, Jesus had a skill, and whether he was laying stones in a precise manner or delicately working with wood, or possibly both, Jesus used artistic skill and could be considered an artist in his daily work prior to his open ministry.

³⁷ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 3784-3785.

³⁸ Jordan K. Monson, “The Stonemason the Builders Rejected: Jesus’ Vocation Has Always Been Scandalous, Even if It Wasn’t Carpentry,” *Christianity Today* 65, issue 9 (2021): 38, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A687462136/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=summon&xid=27d7fce6.

Artmaking for the Glory of God

In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul states, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Since people are made in the image of God—the great Creator—people are creators as well. Some are called to specifically be artistic creators like Bezalel and Oholiab. For those called to the visual arts, creating should not be done for the purpose of self-glory. For the Christian believer who is called to the visual arts, this means to create art for the glory of God.

In Romans 12:1, Paul states, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Followers of Christ are called to submit their entire bodies and all that their bodies do as a living sacrifice to God, and this obviously includes artists as well.

John 4:21-24 states:

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

MacArthur observes, “Both Jews and Samaritans recognized that God had commanded their forefathers to identify a special place for worshiping Him. The Jews, recognizing the entire Hebrew canon, chose Jerusalem.”³⁹ Jerusalem, being where the temple was located, would no longer be the place of worship because the temple would be destroyed in 70 AD. 1 Corinthians 6:19 explains that the new temple is the collective body Christian believers: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You

³⁹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1363.

are not your own.” Visual art was very much a part of the temple as visual art can be a part of the lives of believers as well when they use it to bring glory to God like the original temple art. This kind of worship is called *lifestyle worship*, where believers are called to worship God with all their life. Jesus explains this in Luke 10:27: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Regarding visual artists creating works of art, Colossians 3:23 can be applied concerning lifestyle worship: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” MacDonald explains, “In this sense, there is no difference between secular and sacred work. All is sacred. Rewards in heaven will not be for prominence or apparent successes; they will not be for talents or opportunities; but rather for faithfulness.”⁴⁰

God’s Use of Visual Illustrations

God uses visual images for illustrations to his people. Genesis 15:5 states, “And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” God provides a visual illustration for Abram to show him the number of his future offspring. God could have easily just told him, but he demonstrates this visually to him. Genesis 15:12 explains that the sun was going down during that time, so the visual illustration could have been ongoing as stars continued to appear in the sky to insinuate God’s meaning.

Another visual illustration that God uses with Abram in the same chapter is in verses 9-11: “He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.’ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and

⁴⁰ MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 2938.

laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.” This was a cultural visual representation of a covenant. Wiersbe explains:

What is described in verses 9-17 was known in that day as “cutting a covenant.” This solemn ritual involved the death of animals and the binding of people to a promise. The persons making the covenant would sacrifice several animals and divide the bodies, placing the halves opposite each other on the ground. Then the parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrifices in declaration that, if they failed to keep their word, they deserve the same fate as the animals.⁴¹

God knew that providing a visual and cultural illustration for Abram to see was so important that he did so in a vision. Abram would not have to walk through the animals because the covenant did not involve any promise on his part, so the vision was sufficient.

After the great flood, God put an amazing work of art in the sky. Genesis 9:12-15 states:

And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh.”

God promise could have just been his faithful word, and that would have been enough, but he went beyond by providing a visual image for all people to see even to this day. Wiersbe explains the rainbow, “To help His people remember His covenants, God would give them a visible sign.”⁴² Such a sign would have been breathtaking to those viewing it for the first time. Wiersbe continues, “God’s covenant with Noah and the animal creation was sealed with the sign of the rainbow. Whenever people saw the rainbow, they would remember God’s promise that no future

⁴¹ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 82.

⁴² Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 55.

storm would ever become a worldwide flood that would destroy humanity.”⁴³ Such visual arrangement of color would have been an artistic display full of awe.

Another visual sign God had with his chosen people was circumcision. Although this might not seem like a common visual sign in today’s society, it was considered a sign and a seal of righteousness then. MacDonald explains, “Circumcision was adopted by God as a physical sign of the covenant between Him and His people. Thus all descendants of Abraham became known as ‘the circumcision’ and Gentiles were called the ‘uncircumcision.’ It is also the sign and seal of the righteousness which Abraham had by faith.”⁴⁴

In Daniel 5, a unique visual sight takes place that shocks all who see it, especially King Belshazzar while he and his large crowd drank wine and praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Daniel 5:5-6 states, “Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.” Although the supernatural appearance of words would have conveyed a message, God used the visual image of the fingers of a hand. Wiersbe explains, “Without warning, the fingers of a human hand appeared in an area of the plastered wall that was illuminated by a lampstand, and it must have been an awesome sight.”⁴⁵ God used a visual image to capture the attention of the king along with many others to provide a message, similar to how visual art works.

⁴³ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 55.

⁴⁴ MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 71-72.

⁴⁵ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Isaiah-Malachi*, 273.

Daniel 2:1-2 states, “In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king.” God gave Nebuchadnezzar a visual dream. MacDonald states, “Daniel made known that the king had seen a great image, both splendid and awesome.”⁴⁶ This visual dream has important symbolic meaning that Daniel interprets. Each visual part of the dream is significant.

The Idol Worship and Destruction of Visual Images

Even though God is the great Creator in Old Testament and calls people to be like him in the New Testament, the iconoclasts focus on scripture that may seem to rival the concept of Christians creating visual art. Exodus 20:2-4 states, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Wiersbe remarks, “The idol worship of the pagan nations was not only illogical and unbiblical, but it was intensely immoral (temple prostitutes and fertility rites), inhuman (sacrificing children), and demonic. No wonder the Lord commanded Israel to destroy the temples, altars, and idols of the pagans when they invaded the land of Canaan.”⁴⁷ MacArthur writes, “The mode or fashion of worship appropriate to only one Lord forbids any attempt to represent or caricature Him by use of anything He has made. Total censure of artistic expression was not the issue; the absolute

⁴⁶ MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 1446.

⁴⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 221.

censure of idolatry and false worship was.”⁴⁸ The issue was not the art, but how the art was used in idol worship. Art is not meant to be worshiped. MacArthur continues, “The worship of man-made representations was nothing less than hatred of the true God.”⁴⁹ Exodus 20 is specifically focusing on worship, not art making.

Rydelnik and Vanlaningham comment:

Thus any physical representation will misrepresent Him and lead to false notions about Him. All idols are thus false gods, and even an idol meant to depict or represent the true God by some carving, statue, or any other physical representation is deforming of the truth about God. The prohibition extends to any likeness of creatures heavenly, earthy, or of the sea (water under the earth).⁵⁰

They explain that God is a jealous God and that his blessings from obedience extend to future generations.

Judges 6:25-26 states, “That night the Lord said to him, ‘Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.’” Wiersbe explains:

The assignment wasn't an easy one. God told him to destroy the altar dedicated to Baal, build an altar to the Lord, and sacrifice one of his father's valuable bullocks, using the wood of the Asherah pole for fuel. Jewish altars were made of uncut stones and were simple, but Baal's altars were elaborate and next to them was a wooden pillar dedicated to the goddess Asherah, whose worship involved unspeakably vile practices.⁵¹

⁴⁸ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 112.

⁴⁹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 112.

⁵⁰ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 346-347.

⁵¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Joshua-Esther* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 117.

The idol and false altar had to be destroyed because it promoted worship of another god. Such hinderances should be removed and/or destroyed, for they bring distraction from true worship.

Jeremiah 1:9-10 states, “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, ‘Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Some see this section of scripture as support for destroying visual art.

Wiersbe writes, “Jeremiah’s ministry was difficult because he had to tear down before he could build, and he had to root up before he could plant. In too many ministries there are organizational ‘structures’ that don’t belong there and should be torn down because they’re hindering progress.”⁵² Overall, Jeremiah 1:9-10 deals with changing the idol and false worship within a nation and exclusively worshiping the one true God. To do this, idol and false worship must be removed completely and/or destroyed.

There are other instances of removing and destroying idols and altars concerning idol and false worship. Exodus 24:24 states, “You shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.” Exodus 34:13 states, “You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim.” Numbers 33:52 states, “Then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places.” Sometimes in scripture, people are even called to be removed or destroyed. Deuteronomy 7:5 states, “But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.” Deuteronomy 7:25-26 states:

⁵² Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Isaiah-Malachi*, 77-78.

The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God. And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.” Such artifacts were created for the worship of false gods. These false gods can be considered demons and agents of Satan. The removal and/or destruction of demonic and satanic visual art is obvious, especially when the art relates specifically to worship.

Deuteronomy 12:1-4 illustrates more of this destruction:

These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.

Judges 2:2 states, “And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars. But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?” In the Old Testament, God’s people disobeyed God’s commandment and went back to worshipping other gods. Jeremiah 50:2 states, “Declare among the nations and proclaim, set up a banner and proclaim, conceal it not, and say: ‘Babylon is taken, Bel is put to shame, Merodach is dismayed. Her images are put to shame, her idols are dismayed.’” Such sections of Old Testament scripture all relate to the removal and destruction of image bearing items and altars that are involved with false and idol worship that God’s people are to have nothing to do with.

2 Corinthians 10:5-6 states, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.” MacArthur writes, “Thoughts, ideas, speculations, reasonings, philosophies, and false religions are the ideological forts in which people barricade themselves against God and the gospel.”⁵³ MacArthur continues, “Paul

⁵³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1642.

would not stand idly by while enemies of the faith assaulted a church under his care. He was ready to purge them out as soon as the Corinthian church was complete in its obedience. When that happened, the lines would be clearly drawn between the repentant, obedient majority and the recalcitrant, disobedient minority.”⁵⁴ No specific details of visual art are included in the church’s disobedience. This section of scripture does not pertain to visual art as visual art is not mentioned or implied.

Romans 1:24-25 states, “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” MacArthur remarks on why God gave them up: “This is a judicial term in Greek, used for handing over a prisoner to his sentence. When people consistently abandon God, He will abandon them.”⁵⁵ The creature here does not refer to visual art, but rather mankind. MacArthur explains how this section of scripture refers to impurity and sexual immorality: “It speaks here of sexual immorality, which begins in the heart and moves to the shame of the body.”⁵⁶ Henry writes, “They ascribed a deity to the most contemptible creatures, and by them represented God. It was the greatest honour God did to man that he made man in the image of God; but it is the greatest dishonour man has done to God that he has made God in the image of man.”⁵⁷ He continues, “The sin itself was their worshipping the creature at all; but this is mentioned as an aggravation of the sin, that they worshipped the creature more than the

⁵⁴ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1642-1643.

⁵⁵ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1507.

⁵⁶ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1507-1508.

⁵⁷ Matthew Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2010), 320839, Kindle.

Creator.”⁵⁸ Not only should people not worship visual art, but they should not worship God’s visual art either. His creation should not be worshiped. All worship should be faithfully devoted to God.

Literature Beyond Scripture

Scripture is the first source for truth, but literature concerning visual art is also helpful in understanding visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Although there is a gap in literature concerning this topic, there are writings concerning visual art in the church along with it being used in worship.

Schaeffer’s Support for Visual art

Francis A. Schaeffer comments on a popular Bible verse concerning visual art and idols, Leviticus 26:1. He states, “This passage makes clear that Scripture does not forbid the making of representational art but rather the worship of it. Only God is to be worshiped. Thus the commandment is not against making art but against worshiping anything other than God and specifically against worshiping art. To worship art is wrong, but to make art is not.”⁵⁹ He explains how scriptures does not contradict itself: “One major principle of interpreting Scripture is that Scripture does not contradict itself. This is why it is important to note that on Mount Sinai God *simultaneously* gave the Ten Commandments and commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle in a way which would involve almost every form of representational art that men had

⁵⁸ Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 320839.

⁵⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 20.

ever known.”⁶⁰ Scripture must be studied holistically, so particular verses are not taken out of context.

Schaeffer discusses the visual art of Solomon’s throne described in 1 Kings 10:18-20, which states, “The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps, and the throne had a round top, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. The like of it was never made in any kingdom.” Schaeffer states:

Every time I read this description I am intrigued. I would like to have seen this magnificent work of art—“ivory overlaid with the finest gold” and guarded by two lions by the side of the throne and twelve lions on the stairway to the throne. Some scholars who have wondered why the two lions and the twelve lions are mentioned separately have suggested that the two lions at the top were alive and the other twelve were cast. We cannot be sure whether that is the case or not, but just imagine it, for a moment: Imagine yourself Solomon, sitting up there with the two lions roaring away on *either* side of you, chained *securely*, no doubt, but what a throne! What a piece of secular art!⁶¹

Such a creation would have been a stunning sight to see as a magnificent piece of art.

Concerning visual art that God commanded to be destroyed, Schaeffer explains that such destruction was for a specific reason. 2 Kings 18:4 states, “He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).” Schaeffer explains that God was pleased with the destruction of the bronze serpent because God did not want it to become an idol of worship. Schaeffer states, “Did he smash it because it was a work of art? Of course not, because God had commanded Moses to make it. He smashed the work of art because men had made it an idol. What is wrong with representational

⁶⁰ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 20.

⁶¹ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 31-32.

art is not its existence but its wrong uses.”⁶² Schaeffer discusses how God is not anti-art, but he is anti-false worship. Concerning God creating humans, Schaeffer writes, “God is interested in beauty. God made people to be beautiful. And beauty has a place in the worship of God.”⁶³ God created beauty as he himself is the essence of beauty.

The Beauty of the Temple

Concerning visual art in the tabernacle, Allen P. Ross notes, “Like the Garden of Eden, the sanctuary was the place where heaven and earth converged—the LORD was in heaven, and he was also in his holy temple.”⁶⁴ The beauty of the tabernacle increased in visual beauty closer to God’s presence. Ross explains, “So along with the practical features for approaching God, there was an increasing beauty and value to the parts of the tabernacle the closer one got to the divine presence.”⁶⁵ The theme here is that the closer one moves to God, the more beauty they see because God is the source of everything beautiful and good.

Early Christian Art

Some of the earliest surviving Christian visual art can be found in the labyrinth of tombs underneath the city of Rome. When the church was heavily persecuted, Christian art was used to decorate the tombs of loved ones with simplistic Christian symbols and bible stories. Terry Glaspey writes, “One of the common images in early Christian art, an image that can frequently be seen in the catacombs as well as in mosaics and in the earliest statuary, is the depiction of

⁶² Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 33.

⁶³ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 26.

⁶⁴ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 756.

⁶⁵ Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 1840.

Christ as the Good Shepherd.”⁶⁶ This image could communicate a message to believers without causing suspicion from hostile authorities. Glaspey remarks, “Since the early Christians had few other public places to display their art, the catacombs are one of the main places in which it can be found.”⁶⁷ She goes into detail to explain what these early Christian artists drew:

These early Christian artists drew especially upon the redemptive stories of the Old Testament, stories where God was portrayed as a deliverer, such as the story of Daniel and the lions, the three Hebrew brothers in the fiery furnace, Noah and the ark, or the trials of Jonah (who was considered as a prefiguration of Jesus and His resurrection). Their favorite subjects from the life of Jesus were the miracle stories, especially stories of healing. Interestingly, images of the cross and the crucifixion are very rare in early Christian art, and it seems there was a distinct preference for images and symbols that represented resurrection and immortality—images such as doves, palms, peacocks, the phoenix, and the lamb. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of Christ, as became so common in later Christian art, these early artists seemed more interested in painting pictures that offer hope.⁶⁸

The Book of Kells is another early Christian work of visual art created in 550 AD. It is an illuminated copy of the Latin translation of four of the gospels. The visual art in it is “finely detailed, intricate, and imaginative.”⁶⁹ Glaspey explains:

It evidences a sense of respect for the holiness of the labor of illuminating the Word of God, as well as an undisguised playfulness in creating the interwoven loops and curves and tangled vines and dizzying spirals. Peering out at the reader are a teeming zoological plenitude—birds, snakes, butterflies and moths, cats, dogs, and mice, otters, and may purely fantastical beasts. They share space with portraits of the four gospel writers, tangled and twisted in human figures (some likely the images of fellow monks), and angelic beings. It is high and holy art combined with a deep humanity.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Terry Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015), 19, Kindle.

⁶⁷ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 21.

⁶⁸ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 21.

⁶⁹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 24.

⁷⁰ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 24.

Although illuminated manuscripts contained text, they were a work of art due to their many detailed illustrations. Glaspey explains, “Each and every page was an original work of art, created by hand and likely guided by prayer. They copied carefully and added miniature paintings within the text. They sometimes used gold leaf and expensive colors in great profusion.”⁷¹

Although many cathedrals exist that are wonderful works of visual art, the Chartres Cathedral stands out as a prime example of visual awe. Glaspey describes the visual art in the Chartres Cathedral:

Chartres Cathedral contains the most extensive collection of stained glass in any cathedral, with 165 windows including three rose windows. One of the most popular windows in Chartres is the Noah window, which beautifully depicts the story of Noah and the ark with delightfully intricate detail. The windows at Chartres not only celebrate the glories of the Christian faith but also commemorate the merchant brotherhoods who donated money for building this spectacular edifice. The careful observer will find small images of wheelwrights, shoemakers, butchers, carpenters, and other skilled laborers pursuing their craft and trades.⁷²

After a fire, the Chartres Cathedral was reconstructed. Its wooden roof was replaced with a stone roof. There was a desire for more elaborate windows to allow more light, but the stone roof weighed more. Glaspey remarks, “This led to the invention of flying buttresses, supporting structures attached to the sides of the building that transfer most of the weight of the roof off the roof of the main walls. This allowed for taller, thinner walls and offered the possibility for builders to create structures of dizzying heights.”⁷³

Glaspey writes:

⁷¹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 26.

⁷² Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 31.

⁷³ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 33.

For a preliterate population, the cathedral was a visual “book” they could read to learn the stories of the Bible and of the saints, as well as the key doctrines of Christianity—a virtual encyclopedia of faith in stone and glass. The cathedrals were decorated with images not only of the supernatural world but also of the natural world, with images illustrating the everyday life of the average person.⁷⁴

Concerning floorplans, many cathedrals are in the shape of a cross, like the St. Sernin in Toulouse, France. Glaspey explains, “This medieval architectural style has come to be known as Romanesque. It generally features a tower (or towers), a cruciform floor plan (with wings jutting out from both sides in the form of a cross), barrel vaulting, smaller windows, and rounded arches in the windows and interior.”⁷⁵

The upper chapel of Sainte-Chapelle has been known as “one of Heaven’s most beautiful rooms”⁷⁶ due to its interior of light coming through high stained-glass windows. Glaspey notes, “Stained glass windows are the work of artists and engineers who create them by taking small, shaped pieces of glass in a variety of colors, arranging them in an eye-pleasing design, and painting the finishing details onto their surfaces.”⁷⁷ Colorful light shines through them creating a visual metaphor as Glaspey explains, “Light is a common metaphor for the experience of God’s power and glory, one used throughout the Scriptures.”⁷⁸ Light passing through visual art, along with sculptures, paintings, and architecture all work together to tell stories from scripture.

In Padua, the Scrovegni Chapel contains many painted surfaces featuring a series of frescoes by Giotto that show stories from scripture about the life of Christ. Glaspey comments:

⁷⁴ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 33.

⁷⁵ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 32.

⁷⁶ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 40.

⁷⁷ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 42.

⁷⁸ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 42.

There, in a small private chapel paid for by Enrico Scrovegni as atonement for his father's usurious and unsavory financial dealings, is a breathtaking series of frescoes by Giotto illustrating the life of Mary and the life of Jesus, as well as a depiction of the last judgment. Nearly every surface is covered in paint, from floor to ceiling, including a bright blue night sky in the curved vault of the roof. There are about forty painted panels, each bursting with creative illustrations of the great sacred stories.⁷⁹

One of the most recognized of these panels is *The Lamentation of Christ* where Giotto captures the emotion of the moment when the Christ dies.

William A. Dyrness discusses early Christian art in the midst of persecution. He states:

The visual culture of the early church had to be modest; indeed, the church itself was in many ways virtually invisible to outsiders. The reasons for this are not difficult to pinpoint. The small struggling congregations from the beginning faced misunderstanding, suspicion, even persecution. Until roughly A.D. 200 most visual imagery was found in catacombs, the burial places (and sometime hiding places) of Christians.⁸⁰

He explains that Christians borrowed visual art from Greek imagery. He states, "Christians from the beginning used this pagan vocabulary to express Christian sentiments, while carefully avoiding the humanistic connotations."⁸¹ He continues, "The images' mediated quality meant that the objects—often borrowed from Greco-Roman art—were not direct references to spiritual reality or spiritual truth but indirect ones. The viewer was supposed to look beyond the objects to the stories and reality that lay behind them."⁸² When people view art, they are not to only focus on the physical paint or medium of the work of art but on the meaning being expressed by the artwork. This is similar to reading where people do not focus on the letters or words, but the meanings behind the actual words in context.

⁷⁹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 44.

⁸⁰ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 26.

⁸¹ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 26.

⁸² Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 26-27.

James F. White notes how the earliest surviving Christian art was mostly concerning the burial of dead believers. The cross did not appear until much later. He states:

Most of our earliest surviving liturgical art was associated with burial of the dead. Not surprisingly, it featured resurrection themes, often in Old Testament terms: Jonah and the whale, Daniel and the boys in the fiery furnace, the raising of Lazarus. Occasionally Christ is portrayed as the Good Shepherd or the Church as a praying woman. The cross does not appear until the fourth century and then often with a lamb on it. Not until the end of the seventh century do we discover the familiar crucifix. After the Marian debates at the Council of Ephesus in 431, figures of Mary became prominent. The churches were learning a new visual vocabulary, one image at a time. By the end of the patristic period many images had become familiar for visual expression in worship.⁸³

The prominent symbol of the cross representing Christianity was not common in early Christian art as believers looked for symbols of clear hope not associated with death due to heavy Christian persecution.

The Beginning of Iconoclasm

In the 1600s, icons became more important to the Byzantine Empire due to the spiritual crisis and worries brought by the Islamic conquests. Leslie Brubaker states: “Changes in practice by around the year 680 generated, a decade later at the Quinisext Council of 691/2, the institution of canonical legislation regarding the proper use of Christian imagery.”⁸⁴ Soon after the emperor Justinian II (669-711 AD) introduced a new design for a coin that featured the portrait of Christ. The debate about images began near the 720s and is first mentioned in three letters of the patriarch Germanos (715-730 AD).⁸⁵ The First Iconoclasm began around 726 and 787 while the Second Iconoclasm began around 814 and 842 where there were bans on religious images.

⁸³ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 73-74, Kindle.

⁸⁴ Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 18.

⁸⁵ Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 22.

Although Leo III (675-741 AD) is often accredited with being responsible for the First Iconoclasm, Brubaker challenges such history. He writes:

It used to be assumed without question that the emperor Leo III was a fervent iconoclast, responsible for unleashing the anti-icon movement by removing an icon of Christ from above the main ceremonial entrance to the palace, the Chalke gate, in either 726 or 730, perhaps as a reaction to a volcanic eruption on the Aegean island of Thera. This assumption rests on three documents, all of which are problematic.⁸⁶

Brubaker argues that it was Leo III's son Constantine V (718-775 AD) who was the true iconoclast in the late 740s or early 750s when he called a church synod to make the official policy against religious images and idols.⁸⁷ Either way, iconoclasm took place and changed the history of visual art in the Christian church. The struggle to have images in the church battled back and forth, until images were allowed again. Then came the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation Iconoclasm

Ludwig Haetzer is the author of *A Judgement of God our Spouse Concerning How One Should Regard All Idols and Images*. This popular pamphlet summarized why he believed religious images were forbidden by God according to scripture, and it also encouraged the destruction of all such idols.⁸⁸

Ulrich Zwingli and his followers were some of the leaders who were for the destruction of religious images. Eire explains, "Attacks on images and the mass intensified in the sermons of Zwingli and his associate Leo Jud, and also in some of the literature that made its way to

⁸⁶ Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 27.

⁸⁷ Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 33.

⁸⁸ Carlos Eire, "Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation," *Journal of Art Crime* 20 (2018): 20, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/jartcrim20&div=6&id=&page=>.

Zurich.”⁸⁹ Multiple disputations took place until the death of a Catholic counselor. Then iconoclasm intensified greatly. Carlos Eire explains:

On 15 June 1524, as sporadic acts of iconoclasm intensified, the city council called for an orderly removal of all of the sacred art in Zurich, and for the dismantling of all its pipe organs. The city’s three people’s priests—Ulrich Zwingli, Leo Jud, and Heinrich Engelhard—were placed in charge of the project. Craftsmen were selected from the relevant guilds, and they went to work immediately, obliterating with stunning speed all the artistic treasures that Zurich’s churches had amassed through the centuries. One by one, Zurich’s churches were closed as workmen carefully dislodged and demolished all sacred images and ritual objects, including crucifixes, holy water fonts, communion vessels, votive lamps, vestments, organs, and carved choir stalls.⁹⁰

Much more than paintings and statues were destroyed during this time of the iconoclasm of the Reformation. Zwingli believed that such items had to be removed and destroyed because they were dangerous to keep. Eire writes, “Moreover, Zwingli was convinced that the presence of images in churches always necessarily led to a decrease in faith because human beings are naturally drawn to worship them. For this reason, he thought religious images were inherently dangerous and should be abolished.”⁹¹

John Calvin was also concerned that people were worshiping idols. Susan Hardman Moore elaborates, “Calvin’s theological convictions made him deeply hostile to religious art. He joined a long line of Christian image-critics, running back through figures like Erasmus, Bernard of Clairvaux and Byzantine opponents of icons.”⁹² Calvin states about worship concerning images:

It is an imprudent falsehood to deny that the thing which was thus anciently done is also done in our day. For why do men prostrate themselves before images? Why, when in the

⁸⁹ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 20.

⁹⁰ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 21.

⁹¹ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 22.

⁹² Susan Hardman Moore, “Calvinism and the Arts,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2009): 79. <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/5733>.

act of praying, do they turn towards them as to the ears of God? It is indeed true, as Augustine says that no person thus prays or worships, looking at an image, without being impressed with the idea that he is heard by it, or without hoping that what he wishes will be performed by it.⁹³

He clarifies that he does not believe that all visual art is wrong for the believer:

I am not, however, so superstitious as to think that all visual representations of every kind are unlawful. But as sculpture and paintings are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be used purely and lawfully—that gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon us, for his glory and our good, shall not be preposterously abused, nay, shall not be perverted to our destruction.⁹⁴

Calvin makes the deductive argument that since it is wrong to make art to visually represent

God, it is even more wrong to worship the created art:

If it be unlawful to make any corporeal representation of God, still more unlawful must it be to worship such a representation instead of God, or to worship God in it. The only things, therefore, which ought to be painted or sculptured, are things which can be presented to the eye; the majesty of God, which is far beyond the reach of any eye, must not be dishonored by unbecoming representations.⁹⁵

Calvin believed that the early church was free from visual art for 500 years. He states, “First, then, if we attach any weight to the authority of the ancient Church, let us remember, that for five hundred years, during which religion was in a more prosperous condition, and a purer doctrine flourished, Christian churches were completely free from visual representations.”⁹⁶

Glaspey discusses the visual images of the catacombs of the early church along with the reality that art was limited due to extreme persecution. Concerning early images of Christ depicted as the good shepherd, Christ was created to look similar to Apollo, and images were chosen that

⁹³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 53, Kindle.

⁹⁴ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 53.

⁹⁵ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 53.

⁹⁶ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 53.

would not draw unwanted attention from those who might persecute Christians. Describing Christ as the good shepherd, Glaspey notes, “His features bear a strong resemblance to traditional depictions of Apollo in classical art—handsome, strong, and dignified—and He is tending to His flock with gentle care, usually with a lamb draped over His shoulders.”⁹⁷ Overall, the early church made visual art during its first 500 years, and it was art based on the style of Roman art.

Although leaders like Zwingli and Calvin helped lead and encourage the Reformation iconoclasm, it was built upon late medieval religion as Moore explains, “Reformation iconoclasm built on the critique of late medieval religion launched by Erasmus and others, to separate the spiritual from the material.”⁹⁸ Moore continues, “Calvin took up the cause with particular intensity, and drilled his thinking further and deeper to define the sin of idolatry.”⁹⁹ Eire notes, “The Protestant attack on Roman Catholic ‘idolatry’ begins with Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg.”¹⁰⁰ Eire continues, “Karlstadt began to strike out against the prevailing religious externalism of his day, hoping he would be able to reassert the primacy of the Word. He became convinced of the contingency of created elements, and said that since God is a spirit, visible and external acts of worship were of little value in themselves.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 19.

⁹⁸ Moore, “Calvinism and the Arts,” 80.

⁹⁹ Moore, “Calvinism and the Arts,” 80.

¹⁰⁰ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 55.

¹⁰¹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 55.

Consequences of the Reformation Iconoclasm

Karin Maag explains some of the outcome of the teachings from the Reformation

iconoclasm:

Most fundamentally, the Reformed teachings on the majesty and sovereignty of God left no place for images in churches, especially as these were seen as contravening the Second Commandment: ‘Thou shalt have no graven image.’ The Catholic distinction between veneration and adoration was largely lost on Reformed leaders, and as a result, churches in Reformed areas went through more-or-less violent processes of image removal. In Geneva, all the images that could be removed were taken down, with the exception of those in the stained-glass windows, as the risk of misplaced worship of an image in a window seemed low and the cost of replacing glass was very high.¹⁰²

J. Michael Walters adds context to this outcome by explaining the lack of art in evangelical churches today: “The visual starvation of worshipers with plain meeting rooms is one reason so many evangelicals have joined the procession of the so-called Canterbury Trail into Anglicanism—and some into Eastern Orthodoxy. Good liturgy is holistic; therefore, it must be visual as well as aural.”¹⁰³ It is obvious that modern Protestant churches today lack the visual art of historic churches.

Webber explains the outcome of removing visual art from the Protestant church, “The twentieth-century Protestant church woke up to the unfortunate realization that by its neglect of the visual arts, drama, and dance the world now owned what rightfully belonged to the church.”¹⁰⁴ Although some Protestant churches are embracing visual art again, many still stay far away from supporting such a practice of making visual art as a spiritual practice of worship.

¹⁰² Karin Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 29, Kindle.

¹⁰³ J. Michael Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 1579, Kindle.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Webber, *Worship, Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 3969, Kindle.

Visual Art in Lifestyle Worship

Lifestyle worship is the concept that Christians worship God through every aspect of their life, not just during the corporate worship service although that is included. Gary Mathena states, “Lifestyle worship boiled down to its basic essence is the attitude that every situation of life is a call to worship.”¹⁰⁵ MacArthur explains, “Worship does not occur in a vacuum. As believers, we are responsible to the rest of the church to maintain a consistent lifestyle of genuine, acceptable worship.”¹⁰⁶ Vernon W. Whaley states, “Worship is NOT the music, the methods, or the messenger. Worship is our expression of *love* to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, lived out in our daily lives.”¹⁰⁷ Christian worship must involve one’s whole life as God requires the whole heart. Even the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy explains this in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Visual Art in Corporate Worship

Corporate worship can include visual art. David W. Manner writes, “Artistic worship beyond music is often seen as an extra offering meant for those who appreciate it and understand it but not for the rest of us. But we must all understand that art beyond music is, instead, an equally viable worship action essential to shaping our faith and worship understanding.”¹⁰⁸ John

¹⁰⁵ Gary Mathena, *One Thing Needful: An Invitation to the Study of Worship* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2016), 1740, Kindle.

¹⁰⁶ MacArthur, *Worship*, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Vernon W. Whaley, *Called to Worship: The Biblical Foundations of Our Response to God’s Call* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 333, Kindle.

¹⁰⁸ David W. Manner, *Better Sundays Begin on Monday: 52 Exercises for Evaluating Weekly Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 1386, Kindle.

Jefferson Davis explains that visual art should be present within the worship service: “It is fitting, then, for the physical space in which the assembly gathers for worship to symbolically, visually and liturgically enrich the Christian’s imagination with images of the heavenly court and of a creation waiting for full redemption.”¹⁰⁹ Stephen Miller explains, “In the church, art is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. While we strive to use art to communicate the glory of God, the art is always subservient to its intended purpose; namely, making Jesus famous—to glorify and honor Him in the sight of all who hear and see.”¹¹⁰ Visual art is a tool to be used to glorify the Lord, similar to music, and there are some very practical ways to implement such a spiritual practices.

Prayer Sketchbooks

Prayer sketchbooks are a practice of incorporating sketching and doodling in a sketchbook while praying. J. Scott McElroy states, “Art has been intertwined with prayer for thousands of years. The builders of the medieval cathedrals took a lesson from the Hebrew temple and fashioned architecture that can be seen as a prayer in itself, pointing the viewer toward heaven on the inside and out.”¹¹¹ Visual art can be used to help people pray. He explains:

Singing or music is a central part of this movement, but expression with visual arts is also common. Many of these churches have a dedicated prayer room that often overflows with art during prayer weeks as pray-ers discover that picking up an artistic implement to express themselves to God is a joyful, freeing experience. Anyone can discover a wonderful freedom in making prayer-room art.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 207, Kindle.

¹¹⁰ Stephen Miller, *Worship Leaders: We Are Not Rock Stars* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2013), 109.

¹¹¹ J. Scott McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook: Releasing the Power of the Arts in Your Congregation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 29.

¹¹² McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 29.

Some churches call this time “personal prayer art” as they use creating visual art as a form of praying.¹¹³

Creating visual art during prayer may cause some people to be uncomfortable, especially if they have never had experiences with art-making or if they come from churches that abuse visual art during worship. McElroy states:

This history sometimes makes Protestants wary of icons, but most Orthodox churches, many Anglican, Episcopalian, and Catholic, and some other traditions use them in prayer and meditation today. They’ll tell you they are not worshiping the icon but instead see it as a window into the eternal and a legitimate way to connect with God in prayer. These thoughts were backed up by the Second Council of Nicaea in A.D. 787.¹¹⁴

The visual arts are not implemented to take away glory from God but to help people focus more on God and his spiritual principles. McElroy explains, “The incarnational nature of the arts and creativity—making the invisible visible—can provide wonderful assistance in focusing our prayers and building our faith.”¹¹⁵

Explaining the concept of prayer sketchbooks, Sybil MacBeth states, “Doodling prayer/*praying in color* is not about creating a great work of art. It is a way to stay focused in prayer.”¹¹⁶ MacBeth expands on this idea, “Praying in color is an active, meditative, and playful prayer practice. It is both a process and a product. The process involves re-entry into the childlike world of doodling, coloring, and improvising to create a quiet time of prayer and meditation. The product is a visual prayer, a reminder of your time spent in prayer, and a prompt

¹¹³ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 30.

¹¹⁴ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 30.

¹¹⁵ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 31.

¹¹⁶ Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019), 66, Kindle.

for ongoing prayer.”¹¹⁷ The visual prayers created in these prayer sketchbooks do not require artistic skill. MacBeth directs people on how to get started drawing their prayers: “Start with God. My first *praying in color* prayers were pages of doodles for the people on my prayer list. Now, whether I am praying for others, for myself, for thanksgiving, or for forgiveness, I like to begin my prayers with my attention to God [emphasis original].”¹¹⁸

Meditative Painting

Meditative painting can take place in the corporate worship session or in the confines of private worship, similar to prayer sketchbooks. Whereas prayer sketchbooks are smaller and designed more for pencils, pen, marker, and watercolor, meditative painting is more specifically painting on a larger surface, using actual paint and paint brushes. Concerning the idea of meditation for Christians, Robert Morgan states, “Biblical meditation is not just *reading* Scripture or *studying* Scripture or even thinking *about* Scripture; instead, it is *thinking* Scripture—contemplating, visualizing, and personifying the precious truths God has given us [emphasis original].”¹¹⁹ In corporate worship, meditative painting can take place on stage, off stage, on a back or side table, or in a separate prayer room. McElroy states:

There can be live painting on the stage, in front of the whole congregation which I’ll call platform painting, and live painting done by individuals in the congregation as a personal expression, off to the side of the church, in the back or in the pew. It’s similar to the arrangement of worship leaders singing on stage in front of the whole congregation and individuals singing at their seats in the sanctuary.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ MacBeth, *Praying in Color*, 21.

¹¹⁸ MacBeth, *Praying in Color*, 51.

¹¹⁹ Robert Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation: Find True Peace in Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 10, Kindle.

¹²⁰ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 153.

McElroy explains:

More recently, another stream of live painting has come to the forefront of churches, literally. It's often done by someone from the congregation and takes place on the stage or to the side of it. These painters may be professionals or hobbyists but they paint whatever they feel led to, usually during the worship part of the service and sometimes continuing while the speaker is bringing the message. They generally are not the featured part of the service—not a performance—but one of the elements. It's another creative expression of worship more than a novelty or special event.¹²¹

Some members of the congregation may be called to paint but just not in front of others. For these visual artists, art tables being placed in the back of the worship sanctuary can allow more to participate in meditative painting as a spiritual practice of worship. McElroy elaborates:

There may be artists in your church who will not ever feel comfortable or skilled enough to paint on the platform but who enjoy worshiping while making art. Art tables may fulfill their desires, but you could also try making a designated, protected (floor and wall coverings) area where they can set up an easel and paint. This might be out of the line of sight of the congregation, in the back by the art tables or somewhere similar.¹²²

Providing such spaces with areas to paint incorporate many who would never feel comfortable worshiping by painting in front of others. Meditative painting to them may be a more personal practice of worship.

Incorporating Visual Art in Worship

Such practices of meditative painting during the worship service bring great creativity and encouragement to the congregation. McElroy explains, “Inviting artists to produce their work live in the church is a key to unlocking the creativity of a congregation.”¹²³ Webber explains this as the following: “Thus, the artist in the service of God (the Creator) displays

¹²¹ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 152.

¹²² McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 163.

¹²³ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 151.

redemption through artistic creativity and sets creation free to worship God. Therefore, environmental art, the visual arts, and the movement arts are not primarily presentational or witness arts in worship, but acts of worship that serve the goal of pointing all of creation toward the praise of God.”¹²⁴ He explains the image of God in people concerning creativity, “Persons made in the image of God are gifted by him with creativity.”¹²⁵ Webber discusses how worship is changing today in some churches and beginning to incorporate visual art again, “In worship renewal today much attention is given to the artist and to the use of their artistic gifts. The power of visual symbol, congregational movement and physical participation, appropriate uses of drama, the recovery of the senses, and the engagement of the whole person in worship have all been rediscovered.”¹²⁶ Walters adds to this change concerning visual art in churches, “Yet some churches are finding innovative ways to employ art, like sponsoring shows featuring the work of church members, hiring staff people devoted to cultivating artistic expression in the church, and, yes, forming banner committees.”¹²⁷ He continues, “For too long Protestant worship has been focused on reaching people through the ear alone. Finding ways to visually express the grandeur and majesty of God, the glory of His Creation, and the grace that surrounds human life will enhance the ability of our people to ‘enter his courts with praise.’”¹²⁸

Such changes to some church worship services can cause stress amongst the congregation, but Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray write, “To engage multiple ages in a unified

¹²⁴ Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 3875.

¹²⁵ Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 3865.

¹²⁶ Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 158.

¹²⁷ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2293.

¹²⁸ Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2315.

worship experience, we must be continually learning and exploring new approaches to how we lead worship.”¹²⁹ Such changes can help artistically-inclined Christians feel that they have a place in the church today. J. Oswald Sanders elaborates, “Many artists feel as if the church is an intolerant institution that puts different perspectives to death and creates mindless, indoctrinated drones. Some stay in the church and suffer, but many others just leave.”¹³⁰ Dyrness adds, “The fact that much controversy attends the use of arts in worship, that artists in Christian communities continue to be marginalized, and that Christians still express confusion regarding their engagement with the arts indicates unfinished business.”¹³¹ Many church leaders look for ways to incorporate more people in the church participating in corporate worship, and by incorporating visual art in the worship service, more people would feel included to openly participate in corporate worship. This new group of unique worshipers could include a demographic of people who may feel excluded from the church in many ways—the artistically included Christian who feels called to worship the Lord through art-making.

¹²⁹ Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray. *Hungry for Worship: Challenges and Solutions for Today's Church*. (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2014), 547, Kindle.

¹³⁰ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2017), 178.

¹³¹ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 67.

Chapter 3

Introduction

Given the Catholic church's abuses of visual art were most egregious in the Middle Ages, the modern-day Protestant church maintains a distance that allows artistically-inclined Christians to seek and use their artistic calling as a way to worship God through creating visual art in corporate and private worship. This study focuses on examining the current literature on the topic of creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. While there are many Protestant Christians who are supportive of the inclusion of the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of worship, there are still Christians who feel that it is too close to the abuses that took place where Christians venerated visual artifacts in the worship services of Catholic churches. This study focuses on creating visual art as not a means to make art but as a spiritual practice of worship to bring God glory by using the gift of visual art that some Christians have been given to worship.

Research Design

The methodology of this study is qualitative as it researches and observes literature on topics concerning lifestyle worship, corporate worship, and visual art. Qualitative research is purposely chosen as a method to explore understanding while searching for insight on the issue of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Such qualitative research is focused on the observation and life experiences of individuals in the fields of worship and visual art.

The original interest in this study comes from a gap in the literature concerning visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Although there is a plentiful amount of literature on the topic of Christian worship, particularly concerning music, there is a large gap in the literature

concerning the creation of visual art in corporate and lifestyle worship. Concerning visual art and the Christian church, most literature focuses on the iconoclasm—medieval and Reformation. These were events where church leadership publicly denounced visual art being any part of the worship service. Little has been written about the allowance of, and support for, Christians creating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship today. Although it would have been desirable to have a larger pool of literature to pull from while conducting research on this topic, this study is a representation of the literature that is currently available on the topic along with select representative literature on lifestyle worship, corporate worship, and overall worship theology. Literature on visual art is used for elements such as prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting.

Visual Art as a Spiritual Practice of Worship

A few sources precisely examine the topic of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Francis A. Schaeffer combats the argument against visual art in *Art and the Bible*. William A. Dyrness addresses the Christian culture concerning visual art in a dialogue of worship. J. Scott McElroy provides a plethora of information in reference to how church leaders can encourage creativity in their churches, giving practical guides matched with theological support. Other literature focuses on the topics of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship more indirectly.

Indirect Literature

There is literature concerning visual art, worship, and the church that focuses specifically on the loss of visual art in the church. Visual art was commanded in the tabernacle and temple, scarce in the early church due to persecution, abundant in the Catholic church, and then outlawed around the time of the Reformation. There is literature concerning visual art being removed from

the church in the early iconoclasms. Such literature is analyzed to form ideas concerning the appropriacy of the presence of visual art in the church today. These indirect arguments and theological thinking concerning art in the Byzantine period is analyzed and applied to the conversation of visual art in the church today.

Lifestyle Worship Literature

An old and new idea that is becoming more popular after the praise and worship movement of the 1960s and 1970s is the concept of lifestyle worship. Robert Webber's *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction*, along with John MacArthur's *Worship: The Ultimate Priority*, are two examples of such books that focus on worshipping God beyond the corporate worship setting and in every part of life. Although a basic concept, after the praise and worship movement, many believers began to view the term *worship* synonymously with *worship music*. This is problematic because it leads to the underlying assumption that worship only takes place at church, which is contrary to Jesus' words in John 4:23-24: "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (English Standard Version).

Corporate Worship Literature

In order to properly research and study visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship, the corporate worship service must be specifically examined. Although there is a gap in the literature concerning this specific area of research, there is ample literature on the corporate worship service concerning music and liturgy. These sources are reviewed, and their arguments are represented for this study on visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

Visual Art as Spiritual Practices

Due to the gap in this area of research, there is limited literature on prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting as a practice of worshiping God through the creation of visual art. One very practical resource is Sybil MacBeth's *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God*. Other sources of literature include books on biblical meditation like Robert Morgan's *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation: Find True Peace in Jesus* to be applied to meditative painting. Since there is a gap in the research, much literature concerning meditative painting is based on secular and Middle Eastern philosophies.

Selected Literature

The qualitative literature that is selected for this study is chosen based on its focus on the two research questions of this study, which were chosen in order to clarify the nature of the development of this study. The following research questions are answered in this study:

Research Question One: What biblical principles of worship can be applied when advocating for the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship?

Research Question Two: How can artists be encouraged to utilize artmaking as an expression of worship in both public and private worship?

The following are the hypotheses in this study:

Hypothesis One: Biblical principles related to lifestyle worship and corporate worship support the practice of creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

Hypothesis Two: Artists can be encouraged to utilize artmaking as an expression of worship in both public and private worship by utilizing methods such as meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks.

The selected literature focuses on answering these two questions, along with providing the history that brought such conflict between the relationship of worship and visual art.

Today, literature about visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship is developing, so many Christians who are artistically inclined and called to be creative visual artists can be included in the worship service. Currently, many Protestant churches still do not teach or encourage Christians to create visual art as a spiritual practice of worship, especially during the corporate worship service, but Christians are beginning to see the value of allowing visual art back into the church while still being cautious that Christians never worship such art but only God. The concept of lifestyle worship is helping this cause as people again see that worship is a larger concept than just singing during the corporate worship service. Although singing is commanded in scripture and making visual art is not, making visual art is allowed during corporate and private worship—it is a part of lifestyle worship. Such growing literature goes beyond worship being allowed in the church as a spiritual practice that is not sinful. This study focuses on creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship for those who are called to be visual artists to worship God with their own individual callings to glorify God and edify the church. The literature on this practice to carry out the creation of such visual art in the corporate worship service is currently limited. Prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting can be further studied as literature grows to add more to this area of research for practical ways of encouraging the inclusion of the creation of visual art in the corporate worship service as a spiritual practice of worship.

The selected sources are collected and then organized into general categories focusing on Old Testament instances of visual art, New Testament instances of visual art, early church visual

art, the iconoclasm, the Reformation, and then modern-day instances of corporate and private practices of making visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

Selecting literature for this topic has the overall goal of seeking truth, as Paul states in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The reason for truth-seeking is to glorify God. Such written thoughts that are truthful do that as well. That is really what a visual image can do. The visual image can promote thoughts that focus on God and truth as he is glorified. Although people see the artifact, they also see the meaning behind it. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” People may focus on the form of the artwork, but it is the message that often makes a piece stand out. The artwork is temporary, but the message that it promotes can be eternal. So visual art, like literature, can be a vehicle for the eternal message of the gospel of Christ when art is created for the purpose of worshipping God.

Participants

The participants of this study include groups of people throughout history, along with those living today. The groups of people include the Israelites from scripture, the early Christian church, Christians during the Byzantine period, Christians during the Reformation, and modern-day Christians today. They are studied qualitatively through the literature as data is collected to find emerging themes relating to the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of worship. John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell state, “In contrast to other designs, the qualitative approach includes comments by the researcher about their role and their self-reflection (or reflexivity, it is

called), and the specific type of qualitative strategy being used.”¹ The historical people include some of the following: Moses, King David, Leo III, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. These people played a role in how people worshiped God in new, revised, and restricted ways. Data on them is gathered in order to help focus on themes concerning corporate and lifestyle worship. Another group of participants includes more recent and current theologians and church leaders such as John F. MacArthur, William A. Dyrness, and Francis A. Schaeffer as they discuss corporate worship in the Christian church today. Although the data from the previous participants is non-numerical, it does present beliefs and ideas that can be studied to learn about the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship.

Analysis of Data

The process of analyzing various forms of qualitative data involves dissecting specific sections of literature to discover descriptions, themes, and observations to form larger cohesive ideas concerning visual art as a spiritual practice. Creswell and Creswell explain:

In terms of overall findings, the question “What lessons could be the researcher’s personal interpretation, couched in the understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from a personal culture, history, and experiences. It could also be a meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with information gleaned from the literature or theories. In this way, authors suggest that the findings confirm past information or diverge from it.”²

Many documents were examined in search of the following themes: Old Testament visual art commanded by God, Old Testament visual art commanded to be destroyed by God, New Testament examples of visual art while focusing on Christ, the early church’s visual art, the iconoclasm, the Reformation, and modern art making practices that can be involved in the church

¹ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2022), 256, Kindle.

² Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 273.

and private worship today. Due to a long history of visual art in the Catholic church, much of the history of the removal and reinstatement of visual art during the Byzantine period is limited, as it is not the focus of this study.

Overall Aim

Overall, the methodology of this study is qualitative as it researches and observes writings on the topics of worship and visual art. Although there is a gap in research pertaining to creating visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship, there is literature showing the relationship between visual art and the church. There is sufficient research on worship beyond music and lifestyle worship—whole life worship. There is also literature about the absence of visual art in the Protestant Christian church. All of these areas of research are combined to qualitatively study the biblical principles and concepts of worship related to creating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship while considering practical means of carrying such worship via prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting. The goals of this methodology are to seek out the truth in finding ways to incorporate visual art within corporate and lifestyle worship while also considering the dangers of idol worship that were present during the Byzantine period. Like music, the creative arts can find their place within the church as a spiritual practice. There is no aim to glorify the artist, but all focus is on using visual art as a tool to allow believers to worship God in a way that aligns with their own specific calling so that God may be worshiped and glorified more as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

Chapter 4

God as a Creative God

From the beginning of scripture, it is evident that one of God's prominent attributes is that of being a creator—the first Creator. Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (English Standard Version). Before there was anything, there was God. Then his spirit moved across the waters, and his powerful voice spoke out to create light. Such a monotheistic foundation greatly contrasts with that of the ancient pagan religions that held to belief of polytheism. The Bible's creation story also contrasts with the modern secular thought of macro-evolution and the Big Bang Theory. According to Genesis, a book that Jesus quotes in Matthew 19:4-5, life was not created in a low form that took millions of years of death and survival to finally become the human form that Jesus embodied to come as the Savior of the world. The world and life in general were all immaculately designed by God, and it was good. John MacArthur expands upon Genesis 1:1 concerning creation, “This word is used here of God's creative activity alone, although it occasionally is used elsewhere of matter which already existed. Context demands in no uncertain terms that this was a creation without preexisting materials.”¹ God is not just a maker, he is the original Creator, and this is the beginning of biblical truth. William MacDonald explains, “These first four words of the Bible form the foundation of faith.”² Psalm 102:25 reinforces this idea: “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” God is not a disinterested creator; he creates as an artist.

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 8, Kindle.

² William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 48, Kindle.

The Bible begins with stating that the Creator created. That is what someone learns about God when they begin reading scripture. In Genesis 1:26, God states, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” This is restated in Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” A first-time reader of Genesis would only know at this point that God is a good Creator and that God made humans in his image, which would be in the image of the Creator.

The details of God creating humans is described in Genesis 2:7: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” God creates man by forming him from the ground. MacArthur explains the word *formed*: “Many of the words used in this account of the creation of man picture a master craftsman at work shaping a work of art to which he gives life.”³ Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham remark:

The first point is emphasized in this verse by the use of the verb *formed*, which, when not applied to God’s creation of man, is typically employed, especially as a verbal adjective, to describe the role and work of a potter—which, perhaps more so than any other human activity, requires the careful and gentle use of the potter’s own hands. Since God could have created humanity in any other way He chose, such as by simply calling a man into being (as He did for everything else), the question naturally arises, “Why did He create humanity in *this* way?” And the answer is, “To demonstrate His special care (love) for man and His desire to relate to him in an intimate way [emphasis original].”⁴

God’s way of *making* was done with careful consideration and love, like the way a mindful artist creates important artwork. Psalm 139:13-16 states:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I

³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 13.

⁴ Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 87, Kindle.

was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Warren W. Wiersbe explains, “In the mother’s womb, the Lord weaves and embroiders a human being.”⁵ He describes God weaving and embroidering, which are artistic skills. Matthew Henry explains, “He that framed the engine knows all the motions of it. God made us, and therefore no doubt he knows us; he saw us when we were in the forming, and can we be hidden from him now that we are formed?”⁶ Henry explains the detail of how God specifically and artistically designed each human like an engine. Paul sums up this idea of humans being God’s workmanship in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

God was creative when he created the heavens and the earth. He was creative when he created humans, and he is still creative as he creates each individual life. To call God an artist does not do him justice, but to say that he is *not* an artist would be incorrect. Colossians 1:16 states, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” God is not only the Creator of all things seen, but of things unseen—the spiritual world. God created the invisible dominions and rulers in heaven and on earth. MacArthur explains, “As God, Jesus created the material and spiritual universe for His pleasure and glory.”⁷

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Job-Song of Solomon* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 367.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2010), 172302, Kindle.

⁷ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1733.

The heavenly hosts are amazing examples of God’s heavenly creations. In Ezekiel 1:5-14, Ezekiel recorded his unique vision of possible cherubim (from Ezekiel 10) as the following:

And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Such unique descriptions show angelic creations by a God who is wonderfully creative. Wiersbe explains, “Like the Apostle John describing the beauty of the holy city, the prophet ran out of words and had to draw pictures!”⁸ Ezekiel’s ambiguous and possibly symbolic descriptions reinforce the awe that comes with reading about some of God’s heavenly creations—the heavenly hosts.

A recurring theme in scripture is one of God’s creative nature that brings him glory. His artistic creation is a testament of his sovereign reign and power as its intricate details are evidence of his great love. Romans 1:19-20 states, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” What is seen from God’s own visual art is

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Isaiah-Malachi* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 165.

proof of his existence and love, and this brings him glory as people learn about God through his creation, worship him, and imitate his creative nature.

Paul states in Ephesians 5:1, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”

MacArthur explains, “The Christian has no greater calling or purpose than that of imitating his Lord. That is the very purpose of sanctification, growing in the likeness to the Lord while serving Him on earth.”⁹ God is the great Creator of the best visual art ever created, Christians can be imitators of God in terms of creating visual art. MacArthur states, “As God’s dear children, believers are to become more and more like their heavenly Father.”¹⁰ God’s creative nature is clear throughout scripture, and it would seem difficult to teach that Christians are supposed to imitate God without being somewhat creative in the arts. Wiersbe states, “He has a perfect plan. God has two purposes in that plan: our good and His glory. Ultimately, He will make us like Jesus Christ!”¹¹ There are obvious limitations to this idea. For example, Christians should be like Christ, but they are never going to be Christ or equal to Christ. Imitating God’s creative nature of making things wonderfully visual is a characteristic that people can imitate.

God’s Visual Art of the Tabernacle and Temple

In Deuteronomy 10:1-2, God tells Moses: “Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to me on the mountain and make an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall put them in the ark.” Moses obeyed God and made the ark out of acacia wood. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, “This ark was most likely the precursor to the ark of the covenant, which Bezalel later artistically

⁹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1697.

¹⁰ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1697.

¹¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Matthew-Galatians* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 541.

fashioned.”¹² Here, the ark is functional and used, but later, God calls for it to be embellished. Therefore, the embellishment was not for function but for God’s own desire. God wanted visual art on some of his most important physical places. God called for the ark to be decorated when it was already functional, so art has value and importance to God beyond function. This same concept can be witnessed throughout creation, as God has created many things with visual beauty that goes far beyond their function.

Visual art was so important to God that he did not just allow anyone to create it. He anointed and called specific people for this important task who had artistic skills. The creation of visual art was not a secondary thought but a serious job that needed to be completed with specific requirements. Such a job was so important that God called two specific people who were already skilled and trained. Exodus 31:1-11 states:

The Lord said to Moses, “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do.”

God tells Moses that he specifically called two men for the creation of his visual art concerning the tabernacle—Bezalel and Oholiab. The Israelites gave materials for the tabernacle and worship, but it was God who called the two artists to be equipped for his important task. If visual art was not important in the construction of the temple, then any person could have completed

¹² Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 697.

the task. MacArthur explains, “God identified two men by name as specifically chosen and divinely endowed with ability, or Spirit-filled, to make all He had revealed to Moses. None of the craftsmen were left untouched by divinely bestowed understanding in the intricacy of their work. They were called ‘craftsmen,’ suggesting previously developed skill.”¹³ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham write the different technical skills and workers that building the tabernacle required: “The work of building the tabernacle required a wide variety of technical skills—metallurgy, carpentry, molding, wood-carving, metal engraving, sewing, embroidering, weaving, perfumery and overall design and more. The work occupied every skillful man.”¹⁴ MacArthur explains, “The Lord also gave the two named craftsmen skill in teaching their trades. This substantiates that they were, most probably, the supervisors or leaders of the construction teams.”¹⁵ So many skilled and artistic people worked on the places of worship for the Lord. God used artists, and he used many of them to carry out the important task of embellishing his holy place where he would meet with his people surrounded with visual art. Allen P. Ross notes, “Like the Garden of Eden, the sanctuary was the place where heaven and earth converged—the LORD was in heaven, and he was also in his holy temple.”¹⁶ The beauty of the tabernacle increased in its visual beauty the closer one got to God’s presence. Ross explains, “So along with the practical features for approaching God, there was an increasing beauty and value to the parts

¹³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 127.

¹⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 402-03.

¹⁵ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 130.

¹⁶ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 756.

of the tabernacle the closer one got to the divine presence.”¹⁷ This beauty was largely visual and served the purpose of showing a holy and heavenly God meeting with his human creation.

Such value of visual art was not only placed on the tabernacle and temple but on other items that were used during worship as well, such as garments. Exodus 28:3 states: “You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood.” Like with Bezalel and Oholiab, people who are skillful are sought out as God fills them with even more skill for his purpose of making the visual art on the garments of the priests. God instructs Moses to gather his brother Aaron and Aaron’s sons to serve the Lord as priests at the tabernacle. God designs for them to wear specific garments to set them apart. Wiersbe writes:

In serving God and the people, the high priest wore seven pieces of clothing: undergarments; a white inner robe; a blue robe over that, with bells and pomegranates on the hem; the ephod, a sleeveless garment of gold, blue purple, and scarlet, held together by a jeweled clasp on each shoulder; a girdle at the waist; a jeweled breastplate, held in place on the ephod by golden chains attached to the shoulder clasps; and a white linen turban with a golden plate on it that said “Holy to the Lord.”¹⁸

Each piece of clothing was designed for symbolic meaning and purpose. Wiersbe explains, “The significant thing about this ephod was not the fabric or the colors. It was that the names of six tribes of Israel were engraved on each onyx stone on the shoulder clasps, according to their birth order. Whenever the high priest wore his special robes, he carried the people on his shoulders before the Lord.¹⁹ There were intricate details on each piece of clothing. Wiersbe explains further, “On the breastplate were twelve beautiful jewels, arranged in four rows, each stone representing one of the tribes of Israel. The stones were probably arranged according to the order

¹⁷ Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 1840.

¹⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 240.

¹⁹ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 240.

of the tribes as they marched.”²⁰ Wiersbe explains that even the hem around the blue robe visually displayed symbolic meaning: “Finally, around the hem of this garment hung pomegranates made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn, which golden bells hanging between them. The pomegranates symbolized fruitfulness and the golden bells gave witness that the high priest was ministering in the holy place.”²¹ Wiersbe notes, “At the front of the turban was the golden plate that read ‘Holiness to the Lord.’”²² Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, “They were designed to impress. (This was much like a case in which ‘the clothes made the man.’) They were unique, unlike the daily wear of the common people. This was for an obvious reason: The priests performed unique duties so unlike those of the common person.”²³ Such priestly garments were designed with visual images that were important to the Lord as they were images that were representations of the spiritual world although some church leaders teach that Christians should never make any representational art of anything spiritual. Here, both representational art and symbolic art is commanded by God. Some of this art was representational art of the physical, and some of it was representational art of the spiritual. Francis A. Schaeffer states, “One major principle of interpreting Scripture is that Scripture does not contradict itself. This is why it is important to note that on Mount Sinai God *simultaneously* gave the Ten Commandments and commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle in a way which would involve almost every form of representational art that men have ever known [emphasis original].”²⁴

²⁰ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 241.

²¹ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 241.

²² Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 242.

²³ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 393.

²⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 20.

God's Visual Illustrations in Scripture

God uses visual images for illustrations to his people in scripture. God understands the power that visual images and art has on impacting people. One early example is God's interaction with Abram in Genesis. Genesis 15:5 states, "And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." God could have simply told Abram this promise with words, and God's word would have been sufficient, but God demonstrates to Abram visually. Genesis 15:12 explains that the sun was going down during that time, so God's visual illustration might have been ongoing as stars continued to appear in the sky to reinforce the understanding of God's amazing promise. God used visual images—his own art—to add emphasis to his message. People can follow God's example and use visual art to add emphasis to the sharing of God's message as well.

Another visual illustration that God uses with Abram in the same chapter is in verses 9-11: "He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away." This was a cultural visual representation of a covenant. Wiersbe notes:

What is described in verses 9-17 was known in that day as "cutting a covenant." This solemn ritual involved the death of animals and the binding of people to a promise. The persons making the covenant would sacrifice several animals and divide the bodies, placing the halves opposite each other on the ground. Then the parties would walk between the pieces of the sacrifices in declaration that, if they failed to keep their word, they deserve the same fate as the animals.²⁵

²⁵ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 82.

God knew that providing a visual and cultural illustration for Abram to see was so important that he did so in a vision. Abram would not have to walk through the animals because the covenant did not involve any promise on his part, so the vision was sufficient. God's faithful word would have been sufficient, but God uses a visual image in a vision. Although people cannot use visual images in visions, they can use visual images in other media to share spiritual truth.

God also uses his own visual art in Genesis 9 when he places his colorful rainbow in the sky after the great flood. Genesis 9:12-15 states:

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh."

God went beyond words and provided a visual image, not only for the people present at the time, but for all generations to see. Wiersbe explains the rainbow: "To help His people remember His covenants, God would give them a visible sign."²⁶ Such a supernatural work of art would have been breathtaking to those viewing it for the first time as the colorful arrangement of colors bowed in the sky over the dry land.

Another example of God using visual images to relay and intensify his message is in Daniel 5. This bizarre sight shocks all who see it, especially King Belshazzar, as his large crowd drank wine and praised the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Daniel 5:5-6 states, "Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together." Although spoken words in a divine voice would have conveyed God's message, God

²⁶ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 55.

uses the visual image of the fingers of a hand. Wiersbe writes, “Without warning, the fingers of a human hand appeared in an area of the plastered wall that was illuminated by a lampstand, and it must have been an awesome sight.”²⁷ God creates an awesome sight for people to see to capture their attention. Today, visual artists use the same technique. Similarly, artists today use the power of the visual image to relay a message instead of just speaking the message. Being the Creator of humans, God clearly knows that people are visual beings, so he uses visual images at times.

In Daniel 2, God gives Nebuchadnezzar a dream of important symbolic meaning. Daniel 2:1-2 states, “In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king.” William MacDonald states, “Daniel made known that the king had seen a great image, both splendid and awesome.”²⁸ This clearly was no regular dream; it contained visual imagery that was grand and impactful to the king. Today, artists still use symbolic visual imagery to share powerful messages. In summary, God clearly uses artistic visual images that are representational of the physical and spiritual to relay messages to people, good and bad, and people can do the same being imitators of him.

Being Imitators of God’s Creativity

The creativity of God’s people can be seen through specific stories in the Old Testament. When the first temple was built, immaculate detail was added, but it was also added in

²⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Isaiah-Malachi*, 273.

²⁸ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 1446, Kindle.

Solomon's house as well. William MacDonald remarks, "Solomon's house, or the royal palace, took thirteen years to build. It was located slightly southeast of the temple and just outside the wall of the inner court."²⁹ Thirteen years with many skilled artists and workers all working together show how visually elaborate Solomon's house must have been as it was close to the temple. Solomon's throne is described in 1 Kings 10:18-20: "The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps, and the throne had a round top, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. The like of it was never made in any kingdom." This is a magnificent example of visual art Scripture. Schaeffer comments:

Every time I read this description I am intrigued. I would like to have seen this magnificent work of art—"ivory overlaid with the finest gold" and guarded by two lions by the side of the throne and twelve lions on the stairway to the throne. Some scholars who have wondered why the two lions and the twelve lions are mentioned separately have suggested that the two lions at the top were alive and the other twelve were cast. We cannot be sure whether that is the case or not, but just imagine it, for a moment: Imagine yourself Solomon, sitting up there with the two lions roaring away on *either* side of you, chained *securely*, no doubt, but what a throne! What a piece of secular art [emphasis original]!³⁰

With Solomon's power, wealth, and authority, such a throne would have been an amazing sight and a representation of his ruling power.

Joseph's multicolored robe was another item that could be easily described as a work of visual art. Genesis 37:3 states, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors." Jacob gave his son Joseph the artistic clothing as a good gift—not as a sinful deed. Art here was given by a loving father to his son. MacDonald writes, "The tunic of many colors was a sign of his father's

²⁹ MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 460.

³⁰ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 31-32.

special affection.”³¹ The artistic clothing item was never a sin to give or have, as it was a representation of Joseph’s father’s love.

Visual Art of the Early Christian Church

The earliest surviving Christian visual art can be found in the labyrinth of tombs underneath the city of Rome. Since the church was heavily persecuted during that time, Christian art was used to decorate the tombs of loved ones with simplistic Christian symbols and visual images from bible stories. Terry Glaspey explains, “One of the common images in early Christian art, an image that can frequently be seen in the catacombs as well as in mosaics and in the earliest sanctuary, is the depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd.”³² This image could communicate a message to believers without causing suspicion from hostile authorities. Glaspey maintains, “Since the early Christians had few other public places to display their art, the catacombs are one of the main places in which it can be found.”³³ William A. Dyrness explains early Christian art in the midst of persecution:

The visual culture of the early church had to be modest; indeed, the church itself was in many ways virtually invisible to outsiders. The reasons for this are not difficult to pinpoint. The small struggling congregations from the beginning faced misunderstanding, suspicion, even persecution. Until roughly A.D. 200 most visual imagery was found in catacombs, the burial places (and sometime hiding places) of Christians.³⁴

Glaspey goes into detail to explain what these early Christian artists drew:

These early Christian artists drew especially upon the redemptive stories of the Old Testament, stories where God was portrayed as a deliverer, such as the story of Daniel

³¹ MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 94.

³² Terry Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015), 19, Kindle.

³³ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 21.

³⁴ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 26.

and the lions, the three Hebrew brothers in the fiery furnace, Noah and the ark, or the trials of Jonah (who was considered as a prefiguration of Jesus and His resurrection). Their favorite subjects from the life of Jesus were the miracle stories, especially stories of healing. Interestingly, images of the cross and the crucifixion are very rare in early Christian art, and it seems there was a distinct preference for images and symbols that represented resurrection and immortality—images such as doves, palms, peacocks, the phoenix, and the lamb. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of Christ, as became so common in later Christian art, these early artists seemed more interested in painting pictures that offer hope.³⁵

Not only did the early Christian church create representational visual art, but they also did so while borrowing from Greek imagery. Dyrness remarks, “Christians from the beginning used this pagan vocabulary to express Christian sentiments, while carefully avoiding the humanistic connotations.”³⁶ He continues, “The images’ mediated quality meant that the objects—often borrowed from Greco-Roman art—were not direct references to spiritual reality or spiritual truth but indirect ones. The viewer was supposed to look beyond the objects to the stories and reality that lay behind them.”³⁷ Like visual art today, the viewer is not to only focus on the physical paint or medium of the specific work but on the meaning being expressed, just as people do not focus on the actual letters of words in a book but on the overall meaning of the words in context. The early church created limited visual art because they sought to keep low profiles due to the many dangers of persecution as the meaning and content behind the visual images was illegal. James F. White discusses how the earliest surviving Christian art was generally concerned with the burial of dead believers. The cross did not appear until much later. He states:

Most of our earliest surviving liturgical art was associated with burial of the dead. Not surprisingly, it featured resurrection themes, often in Old Testament terms: Jonah and the whale, Daniel and the boys in the fiery furnace, the raising of Lazarus. Occasionally Christ is portrayed as the Good Shepherd or the Church as a praying woman. The cross

³⁵ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 21.

³⁶ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 26.

³⁷ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 26-27.

does not appear until the fourth century and then often with a lamb on it. Not until the end of the seventh century do we discover the familiar crucifix. After the Marian debates at the Council of Ephesus in 431, figures of Mary became prominent. The churches were learning a new visual vocabulary, one image at a time. By the end of the patristic period many images had become familiar for visual expression in worship.³⁸

The prominent symbol of the cross, representing Christianity, was not common in early Christian art as believers looked for symbols of clear hope not associated with death due to the heavy Christian persecution that the early church was facing.

The Book of Kells is an early Christian work of visual art, which was created in 550 AD as Christianity was becoming more accepted. It is an illuminated copy of the Latin translation of four of the gospels. The visual art in it is “finely detailed, intricate, and imaginative.”³⁹ Glaspey writes:

It evidences a sense of respect for the holiness of the labor of illuminating the Word of God, as well as an undisguised playfulness in creating the interwoven loops and curves and tangled vines and dizzying spirals. Peering out at the reader are a teeming zoological plenitude—birds, snakes, butterflies and moths, cats, dogs, and mice, otters, and many purely fantastical beasts. They share space with portraits of the four gospel writers, tangled and twisted in human figures (some likely the images of fellow monks), and angelic beings. It is high and holy art combined with a deep humanity.⁴⁰

Although illuminated manuscripts contained text, they were a work of art due to their many detailed illustrations. Glaspey explains, “Each and every page was an original work of art, created by hand and likely guided by prayer. They copied carefully and added miniature paintings within the text. They sometimes used gold leaf and expensive colors in great profusion.”⁴¹

³⁸ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 73-74, Kindle.

³⁹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 24.

⁴⁰ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 24.

⁴¹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 26.

As Christianity became accepted and even encouraged, cathedrals were built as wondrous works of art. The Chartres Cathedral stands out as a prime example of visual awe.

Glaspey describes the visual art in the Chartres Cathedral:

Chartres Cathedral contains the most extensive collection of stained glass in any cathedral, with 165 windows including three rose windows. One of the most popular windows in Chartres is the Noah window, which beautifully depicts the story of Noah and the ark with delightfully intricate detail. The windows at Chartres not only celebrate the glories of the Christian faith but also commemorate the merchant brotherhoods who donated money for building this spectacular edifice. The careful observer will find small images of wheelwrights, shoemakers, butchers, carpenters, and other skilled laborers pursuing their craft and trades.⁴²

After a fire, the Chartres Cathedral was reconstructed. Its wooden roof was replaced with a stone roof. There was a desire for more elaborate windows to allow more light, but the stone roof weighed more. Glaspey writes, “This led to the invention of flying buttresses, supporting structures attached to the sides of the building that transfer most of the weight of the roof off the roof of the main walls. This allowed for taller, thinner walls and offered the possibility for builders to create structures of dizzying heights.”⁴³ With taller walls, more art could be added with stained glass windows and wall paintings. Glaspey states:

For a preliterate population, the cathedral was a visual “book” they could read to learn the stories of the Bible and of the saints, as well as the key doctrines of Christianity—a virtual encyclopedia of faith in stone and glass. The cathedrals were decorated with images not only of the supernatural world but also of the natural world, with images illustrating the everyday life of the average person.⁴⁴

The floorplans of many cathedrals are visually in the shape of a cross, like St. Sernin in Toulouse, France. Glaspey comments, “This medieval architectural style has come to be known as

⁴² Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 31.

⁴³ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 33.

⁴⁴ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 33.

Romanesque. It generally features a tower (or towers), a cruciform floor plan (with wings jutting out from both sides in the form of a cross), barrel vaulting, smaller windows, and rounded arches in the windows and interior.”⁴⁵

The upper chapel of Sainte-Chapelle has been known as “one of Heaven’s most beautiful rooms”⁴⁶ due to its interior of light coming through high stained-glass windows. Glaspey explains, “Stained glass windows are the work of artists and engineers who create them by taking small, shaped pieces of glass in a variety of colors, arranging them in an eye-pleasing design, and painting the finishing details onto their surfaces.”⁴⁷ Colorful light shines through them creating a visual metaphor as Glaspey adds, “Light is a common metaphor for the experience of God’s power and glory, one used throughout the Scriptures.”⁴⁸ With light passing through visual art, along with sculptures, paintings, and architecture all working together, the stories from scripture are visually shared with all who look upon them.

In Padua, the Scrovegni Chapel contains many painted surfaces featuring a series of frescoes by Giotto that show stories from scripture about the life of Christ. Glaspey states:

There, in a small private chapel paid for by Enrico Scrovegni as atonement for his father’s usurious and unsavory financial dealings, is a breathtaking series of frescoes by Giotto illustrating the life of Mary and the life of Jesus, as well as a depiction of the last judgment. Nearly every surface is covered in paint, from floor to ceiling, including a bright blue night sky in the curved vault of the roof. There are about forty painted panels, each bursting with creative illustrations of the great sacred stories.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 32.

⁴⁶ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 40.

⁴⁷ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 42.

⁴⁸ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 42.

⁴⁹ Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*, 44.

One of the most recognized of these panels is *The Lamentation of Christ* where Giotto captures the emotion of the moment when Christ dies.

Such visual art created by the Israelites, the early Christian church in persecution, and the church after persecution all have a rich history of visual art. There are times in scripture where God tells his people to make visual art. Sadly, there are times when early Christians had to visually express their spiritual beliefs in dark catacombs. Then, Christians were able to visually express their beliefs upon the towering structures of the cathedrals. Not only is it inaccurate, but it is also sad when church leaders today make claims that Christians should not make visual art and that such an act is not a practice of worshiping God. Such claims hide and discredit all the work that previous followers of God have faithfully carried out.

Art and Idolatry

As the Christian society grew and politics were mixed with the church, scripture became less studied. Christianity had become a large religion, and abuses in the church took place. Unfortunately, visual art was one of the many parts of the abuse as people venerated some icons in the church. In the 1600s, icons became more important to the Byzantine Empire due to the spiritual crisis and worries brought by the Islamic conquests. Leslie Brubaker remarks: “Changes in practice by around the year 680 generated, a decade later at the Quinisext Council of 691/2, the institution of canonical legislation regarding the proper use of Christian imagery.”⁵⁰ Then the emperor Justinian II (668/69-711 AD) introduced a new design for a coin that featured the portrait of Christ. The debate about images began near the 720s and is first mentioned in three

⁵⁰ Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (50 Bedford Square, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 18.

letters of the patriarch Germanos.⁵¹ The First Iconoclasm began around 726 and 787 while the Second Iconoclasm began around 814 and 842 where there were bans on religious images.

Although Leo III (685-741 AD) is often accredited with being responsible for the First Iconoclasm, Brubaker challenges such history. He explains:

It used to be assumed without question that the emperor Leo III was a fervent iconoclast, responsible for unleashing the anti-icon movement by removing an icon of Christ from above the main ceremonial entrance to the palace, the Chalke gate, in either 726 or 730, perhaps as a reaction to a volcanic eruption on the Aegean island of Thera. This assumption rests on three documents, all of which are problematic.⁵²

Brubaker argues that it was Leo III's son Constantine V (718-775 AD) who was the true iconoclast in the late 740s or early 750s when he called a church synod to make the official policy against religious images and idols.⁵³ As most Christians would agree that many elements of the church at that time were Biblically misguided, visual art was among the things that was targeted. Instead of such beliefs and practices being corrected and rectified, visual art was removed and destroyed. 2 Timothy 3:16 states, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," so church leaders could have used the Word of God to correct such practices of idol worship concerning visual art instead of removing all visual art completely. When iconoclasm took place, it changed the history of visual art in the Christian church. The struggle to have visual images in the church battled back and forth, until images were allowed again. The Protestant Reformation aimed to rectify many of the unbiblical practices of the Catholic church at the time, which included issues concerning visual art, leading to the Reformation Iconoclasm.

⁵¹ Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 22.

⁵² Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 27.

⁵³ Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm*, 33.

The Reformation Iconoclasm

Ludwig Haetzer wrote a pamphlet titled *A Judgement of God our Spouse Concerning How One Should Regard All Idols and Images*. This popular pamphlet summarizes why he believed religious images were forbidden by God according to scripture, and it also encouraged the destruction of all such idols.⁵⁴

Ulrich Zwingli and his followers were some of the leaders who were for the destruction of religious images. Eire explains, “Attacks on images and the mass intensified in the sermons of Zwingli and his associate Leo Jud, and also in some of the literature that made its way to Zurich.”⁵⁵ Multiple disputations took place until the death of a Catholic counselor. Then iconoclasm intensified greatly. Carlos Eire writes:

On 15 June 1524, as sporadic acts of iconoclasm intensified, the city council called for an orderly removal of all of the sacred art in Zurich, and for the dismantling of all its pipe organs. The city’s three people’s priest—Ulrich Zwingli, Leo Jud, and Heinrich Engelhard—were placed in charge of the project. Craftsmen were selected from the relevant guilds, and they went to work immediately, obliterating with stunning speed all the artistic treasures that Zurich’s churches had amassed through the centuries. One by one, Zurich’s churches were closed as workmen carefully dislodged and demolished all sacred images and ritual objects, including crucifixes, holy water fonts, communion vessels, votive lamps, vestments, organs, and carved choir stalls.⁵⁶

Much more than paintings and statues were destroyed during this time of the iconoclasm of the Reformation. Zwingli believed that such items had to be removed and destroyed because they were dangerous to keep. Eire states, “Moreover, Zwingli was convinced that the presence of images in churches always necessarily led to a decrease in faith because human beings are

⁵⁴ Carlos Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” *Journal of Art Crime* 20 (2018): 20, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/jartcrim20&div=6&id=&page=>.

⁵⁵ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 20.

⁵⁶ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 21.

naturally drawn to worship them. For this reason, he thought religious images were inherently dangerous and should be abolished.”⁵⁷

John Calvin was also concerned that people were worshipping idols. Susan Hardman Moore elaborates, “Calvin’s theological convictions made him deeply hostile to religious art. He joined a long line of Christian image-critics, running back through figures like Erasmus, Bernard of Clairvaux and Byzantine opponents of icons.”⁵⁸ Calvin states concerning worship and images:

It is an imprudent falsehood to deny that the thing which was thus anciently done is also done in our day. For why do men prostrate themselves before images? Why, when in the act of praying, do they turn towards them as to the ears of God? It is indeed true, as Augustine says that no person thus prays or worships, looking at an image, without being impressed with the idea that he is heard by it, or without hoping that what he wishes will be performed by it.⁵⁹

Calvin clarifies that he does not believe all visual art is wrong for the Christian believer:

I am not, however, so superstitious as to think that all visual representations of every kind are unlawful. But as sculpture and paintings are gifts of God, what I insist for is, that both shall be used purely and lawfully—that gifts which the Lord has bestowed upon us, for his glory and our good, shall not be preposterously abused, nay, shall not be perverted to our destruction.⁶⁰

Calvin’s main concern appears to be a valid one. He is concerned with people worshipping something other than God, and this is a good concern. Referring to the Reformed iconoclasm, Susan Hardman Moore notes, “Calvin took up the cause with particular intensity, and drilled his thinking further and deeper to define the sin of idolatry.”⁶¹ Many elements and church liturgy have become distorted throughout the history of the Christian church, and church leaders refer to

⁵⁷ Eire, “Art Destruction During the Swiss Reformation,” 22.

⁵⁸ Susan Hardman Moore, “Calvinism and the Arts,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16, no. 2 (2009): 79. <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/5733>.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 53, Kindle.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 53.

⁶¹ Moore, “Calvinism and the Arts,” 80.

the Bible to rectify such practices, so they are congruent with scripture and bring glory to the Lord. In dealing with visual art, this was not the case as it was simply removed or destroyed. There have been many debates and worship wars concerning the element of music in the church, but music has not been removed completely. Music and singing are clearly commanded in scripture while creating visual art is not a requirement for everyone, but it is a unique gift for those who are called by God to be visual creators. It is important to be careful and cautious concerning the incorporation of any of the arts during worship because, as Calvin noted, they could possibly be perverted. Worship should always be protected by being aligned to biblical truth, but visual art should not be specifically attacked because it can be used for glorifying God since it is a gift from him.

The consequences of the Reformed iconoclasm can still be seen today in Protestant churches all over the United States. Karin Maag explains:

Most fundamentally, the Reformed teachings on the majesty and sovereignty of God left no place for images in churches, especially as these were seen as contravening the Second Commandment: ‘Thou shalt have no graven image.’ The Catholic distinction between veneration and adoration was largely lost on Reformed leaders, and as a result, churches in Reformed areas went through more-or-less violent processes of image removal. In Geneva, all the images that could be removed were taken down, with the exception of those in the stained-glass windows, as the risk of misplaced worship of an image in a window seemed low and the cost of replacing glass was very high.⁶²

Many church paintings and artifacts are now lost that could have shared a rich history of the church although the visual art on stained glassed windows have survived due to the high cost that it would have been to replace all the glass windows in all the churches. J. Michael Walters adds context to this outcome by explaining the lack of art in evangelical churches today, “The visual starvation of worshipers with plain meeting rooms is one reason so many evangelicals have

⁶² Karin Maag, *Lifting Hearts to the Lord: Worship with John Calvin in Sixteenth-Century Geneva* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 29, Kindle.

joined the procession of the so-called Canterbury Trail into Anglicanism—and some into Eastern Orthodoxy. Good liturgy is holistic; therefore, it must be visual as well as aural.”⁶³ Instead of correcting the bad usage of visual art in the church to keep it holistic, it was simply done away with completely. Robert Webber explains how this outcome affected the Protestant church, “The twentieth-century Protestant church woke up to the unfortunate realization that by its neglect of the visual arts, drama, and dance the world now owned what rightfully belonged to the church.”⁶⁴ The church gave up a gift to the world that was meant to be used to bring God glory, and now people who are artistically inclined and called to the visual arts feel the need to seek outside the church for a creative art community. J. Oswald Sanders elaborates, “Many artists feel as if the church is an intolerant institution that puts different perspectives to death and creates mindless, indoctrinated drones. Some stay in the church and suffer, but many others just leave.”⁶⁵ The effects of the Reformed iconoclasm moved the creation of visual art out of the worship service. Dyrness comments, “The fact that much controversy attends the use of arts in worship, that artists in Christian communities continue to be marginalized, and that Christians still express confusion regarding their engagement with the arts indicates unfinished business.”⁶⁶ Instead of fixing the abuses of visual art in the church, visual art was removed. Church leaders took a gift that was intended to be used as a blessing to honor the Lord and cast it out to the secular world to be used for evil. 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul states, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you

⁶³ J. Michael Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 1579, Kindle.

⁶⁴ Robert Webber, *Worship, Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 3969, Kindle.

⁶⁵ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2017), 178.

⁶⁶ Dyrness, *Visual Faith*, 67.

do, do all to the glory of God.” What was designed for worshipping God was left to be used for satanic worship. A sad example of this is the Salem Art Gallery that is at the Satanic Temple Salem. The Satanic temple in Salem is shared with an art gallery. Although church leaders may have been trying to help people worship God properly, they gave over visual art to the enemy, and they did so by interpreting scripture incorrectly to come to a conclusion that is against God’s original design for visual art. From God’s demonstration of visual art in nature and his directions for anointed artists to carry out his specific details on visual art concerning the tabernacle, temple, priestly garments, altars, and even the bronze serpent, Christians can come to the conclusion that God created visual art for his people to worship him—not for the enemy.

Responding to Iconoclasts

Critics of Christians using visual art as a spiritual practice to worship God and to bring him glory use verses like Exodus 20:2-4: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” Wiersbe notes, “The idol worship of the pagan nations was not only illogical and unbiblical, but it was intensely immoral (temple prostitutes and fertility rites), inhuman (sacrificing children), and demonic. No wonder the Lord commanded Israel to destroy the temples, altars, and idols of the pagans when they invaded the land of Canaan.”⁶⁷ The images that are forbidden are images used in false and idol worship, which were connected with all sorts of pagan debauchery. Such evil practices come from the fallen human heart as Jeremiah 17:9 states, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Romans

⁶⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 221.

1:21-23 states, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” Created things and images are not evil in themselves, but they become sinful when people do not fear and honor God and live a lifestyle that worships things instead of the maker of all things. MacArthur adds, “The mode or fashion of worship appropriate to only one Lord forbids any attempt to represent or caricature Him by use of anything He has made. Total censure of artistic expression was not the issue; the absolute censure of idolatry and false worship was.”⁶⁸ Nothing should be made to falsely represent God, but verses like these are not prescriptive to banish all artistic expression, especially artistic expression that praises God. The issue was not the visual art but how it was used to worship something other than God. Art is a tool to worship God, not a thing to be worshiped. MacArthur explains, “The worship of man-made representations was nothing less than hatred of the true God.”⁶⁹ Visual art, like music and other elements in the worship service, can be misused and abused, but misuse and abuse call for rectification not permanent abolishment because such abolishment is giving a worship gift over to the enemy, but more importantly, it is taking away one of God’s good gifts that could be used to bring him glory.

Judges 6:25-26 states, “That night the Lord said to him, ‘Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a

⁶⁸ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 112.

⁶⁹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 112.

burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.” Bible verses that mention the destruction of altars related to pagan worship have been used to argue against visual art in Christian worship. Wiersbe explains the differences of altars:

The assignment wasn't an easy one. God told him to destroy the altar dedicated to Baal, build an altar to the Lord, and sacrifice one of his father's valuable bullocks, using the wood of the Asherah pole for fuel. Jewish altars were made of uncut stones and were simple, but Baal's altars were elaborate and next to them was a wooden pillar dedicated to the goddess Asherah, whose worship involved unspeakably vile practices.⁷⁰

God was not calling for altars built unto him to be destroyed. God commands the altars built to the pagan deities to be removed and destroyed. Such hinderances of worship unto God should be removed and/or destroyed, for God is a jealous God. If certain visual art becomes a tool for worshiping anything but God, then do away with it, but just like the altars built unto the Lord, visual art can be made to bring worship to God, and such art should be allowed and encouraged.

Jeremiah 1:9-10 states, “Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, ‘Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.’” These verses have been used to support the destruction of visual art in the church. Wiersbe observes their context, “Jeremiah's ministry was difficult because he had to tear down before he could build, and he had to root up before he could plant. In too many ministries there are organizational ‘structures’ that don't belong there and should be torn down because they're hindering progress.”⁷¹ If something is causing a spiritual hinderance, remove or destroy it, especially if it distracts from worshiping God faithfully. If artwork is causing spiritual

⁷⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Joshua-Esther* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 117.

⁷¹ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Joshua-Esther*, 77-78.

hinderance, remove or destroy it too, but do not stop there. Redirect the hearts of the people misusing and abusing the artwork by the direction of scripture and the Holy Spirit. The artwork is not the problem, but the heart is. Although the simple removal of the artwork may be a short-term correction, the problem of the heart worshiping something other than God is still the main issue. Misguided hearts need spiritual help and biblical direction. After the matter of the heart is resolved, then the previous distraction can be reinstated, depending on the specific situation. Such removal or destruction of artwork are not prescriptive commandments in scripture to remove and destroy all visual art at church or in the home. Christians deal with the removal of distractions in all different areas of life. Some Christians have temporarily removed things like radio, certain books, shopping, and even eating (fasting) so that they could focus more on God without distractions. In a similar way, if artwork is causing a distraction, people can distance themselves from artwork for a time in order to get their heart right before the Lord. But after the heart is focused fully on God, hopefully the artwork can be reinstated if it is used for bringing glory to God.

Numbers 33:52 states, “Then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places.” This verse speaks of destroying images of idol and false worship, but it also includes driving out people as well. It is one of the many verses that can be used out of context by critics of Christians using visual art as a spiritual practice of worship. Scripture is bold and clear that people are to only worship God and to have no other gods. Visual art should never be a tool of idol and false worship, and if it is, that particular pieces of visual art should be removed or destroyed. Nor should visual art ever be the subject of worship. It is a tool, like music, to be used to ultimately bring glory to God. Jesus states in Matthew 22:37, “You shall

love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” All that people do should be done loving God, including creating art. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 10:5-6, “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.” Things that are against God are to be removed and destroyed. Visual art, when being use as a tool to worship God, does not need to be removed or destroyed.

Romans 1:24-25 states, “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.” MacArthur comments regarding God’s reason for giving them up: “This is a judicial term in Greek, used for handing over a prisoner to his sentence. When people consistently abandon God, He will abandon them.”⁷² The creature here does not refer to visual art, but rather mankind. MacArthur explains how this section of scripture refers specifically to impurity and sexual immorality: “It speaks here of sexual immorality, which begins in the heart and moves to the shame of the body.”⁷³ Matthew Henry observes, “They ascribed a deity to the most contemptible creatures, and by them represented God. It was the greatest honour God did to man that he made man in the image of God; but it is the greatest dishonour man has done to God that he has made God in the image of man.”⁷⁴ He continues, “The sin itself was their worshipping the creature at all; but this is mentioned as an aggravation of the sin, that they worshipped the

⁷² MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1507.

⁷³ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1507-1508.

⁷⁴ Matthew Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2010), 320839, Kindle.

creature more than the Creator.”⁷⁵ Visual art, like anything else, should not be worshiped; only God should be worshiped.

Leviticus 26:1 states, “You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the Lord your God.” Schaeffer explains, “This passage makes clear that Scripture does not forbid the making of representational art but rather the worship of it. Only God is to be worshiped. Thus the commandment is not against making art but against worshiping anything other than God and specifically against worshiping art. To worship art is wrong, but to make art is not.”⁷⁶ He explains how scripture does not contradict itself: “One major principle of interpreting Scripture is that Scripture does not contradict itself. This is why it is important to note that on Mount Sinai God *simultaneously* gave the Ten Commandments and commanded Moses to fashion a tabernacle in a way which would involve almost every form of representational art that men have ever known [emphasis original].”⁷⁷ Scripture must be studied and applied wholistically, so particular verses are not taken out of context.

Moses’ bronze serpent from Numbers 21 was commanded by God to be destroyed years after it was used. 2 Kings 18:4 states, “He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).” God was pleased with the destruction of the bronze serpent because God did not want it to be an idol of worship. Schaeffer explains, “Did he smash it because it was a work of art? Of course not,

⁷⁵ Henry, *Unabridged Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 320839.

⁷⁶ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 20.

⁷⁷ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 20.

because God had commanded Moses to make it. He smashed the work of art because men had made it an idol. What is wrong with representational art is not its existence but its wrong uses.”⁷⁸ God is not anti-visual art, but he is anti-false worship. A piece of art can be sinful to some people if it is abused but a blessing to others if it is used to glorify God. The art piece itself is neutral as it is just an item. The condition of people’s hearts determines if art will be used to distract people from God or to give God glory.

Although visual art was a part of the church and worship according to the Bible, John Calvin believed and taught that the early church was void of any representational visual art. Calvin writes, “First, then, if we attach any weight to the authority of the ancient Church, let us remember, that for five hundred years, during which religion was in a more prosperous condition, and a purer doctrine flourished, Christian churches were completely free from visual representations.”⁷⁹ Visual art is clearly mentioned in scripture, and it was a part of the culture of the early persecuted church as it was created to point people to Christ.

Art as the Representational Messaging of Scripture

In Numbers 21:8, God calls Moses to make a unique work of visual art with a specific purpose: “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’” Wiersbe notes: “Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross. (‘Lifted up’ was a phrase used in that day to refer to crucifixion.) The comparison between the bronze serpent in Moses’ day and the cross of Christ help us better understand the meaning of God’s grace in salvation.”⁸⁰ It could be argued that

⁷⁸ Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 33.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 53.

⁸⁰ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Genesis-Deuteronomy*, 347.

Moses' bronze serpent was the first symbol of the cross. Rydelnik and Vanlaningham explain, "Jesus referred to this account to describe the manner of His execution. By focusing their gaze upon Jesus on the cross, lifted up and dying for sin, believers are able to contemplate the depths of their sin and the greatness of His mercy."⁸¹ Moses' art piece did not hold special powers, but it pointed to the God who does. Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown write, "This peculiar method of cure was God's power and grace, not the effect of nature or art, and also that it might be a type of the power of faith in Christ to heal all who look to Him because of their sins."⁸² Scripture shows that artwork does not have powers within itself, but it can point to the one who is all-powerful—Jesus Christ. MacDonald explains, "This incident was used by the Lord Jesus to teach Nicodemus that Christ must be lifted up on a pole (the cross), so that sinners looking to Him by faith might have everlasting life. The serpent later became a stumbling block to the nation and was finally destroyed in the days of Hezekiah."⁸³ Like many things, although something was first created for good, if it becomes a stumbling block, it should be removed or destroyed. Artwork is no exception, and God called for it to be destroyed when it was abused, but by no means, did God mean for all visual artwork to be destroyed because God is the one who told Moses to make it.

The discouragement of representational paintings and drawings, especially in the worship service, exists alongside the allowance of representational visual art in many other places in the church. This is similar to the leaders of the Reformed iconoclasm allowing the visual images of stained-glass windows but removing other visual art pieces. People in the modern congregation

⁸¹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 600.

⁸² Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Kyiv: Osnovy, 2011), 7305, Kindle.

⁸³ MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 246.

often wear scripture-themed clothing that contains representational visual art. If visual art is not allowed on the walls, but on the church members, it is still very much present. It can also be present on church members in the form of tattoos, as there are now many in the congregation that have tattoos with Christian themed and secular images. Photography is a form of visual art that is often present on church bulletins, fliers, and online websites. Iconography, such as the cross, dove, and crown of thorns, is commonly present in churches. Church children's centers and nurseries often have walls covered in painted illustrations of Bible stories and themes. Children's Bibles are often illustrated with representational art as they teach scripture to children who cannot yet read. Some churches have worship services for deaf people that rely on American Sign Language, which is a complete and organized visual language made up of many visual representations through hands and motions. Although ASL does not classify as visual art, representational images are used through it while people learn scripture and worship God.

If including representational visual art in the worship service and church is really a sin, then many churches are holding weekly sinful worship services. In actuality, visual art is already used heavily in the Protestant worship service in many subtle ways, and it is being used to bring God glory through the representational messaging of scripture although people often do not realize its active presence. More obvious practices of visual art in the worship service are often not encouraged such as drawing or painting during the corporate worship service and sometimes even in the privacy of the home. Some church leaders do not accept creating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship although Christians have been making art from the days of the Early Church. Walters concludes, "For too long Protestant worship has been focused on reaching people through the ear alone. Finding ways to visually express the grandeur and majesty of God,

the glory of His Creation, and the grace that surrounds human life will enhance the ability of our people to ‘enter his courts with praise.’”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ J. Michael, Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 2315, Kindle.

Chapter 5

The Visual Creator

The Bible begins with explaining that God is the great Creator, and humans are made in his image. God commanded how visual art should be made for his tabernacle and temple. He told Moses to make a visual artifact of a bronze snake. He placed a wonderful bow in the sky that contained a spectrum of bright colors and contrasted against the muddy landscape. His people built, sculpted, painted, weaved, sewed, danced, sang, and made music that all glorified the Lord. God's people are like him; they are creative, and this includes being visually creative. God created humans with eyes and hands and minds full of creativity with the purpose of using it all to bring him glory.

God created humans with visual beauty to be like his beautiful glory. In Song of Solomon 7:1, a beautiful young woman is seen as a creation of art: "How beautiful are your feet in sandals, O noble daughter! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand" (English Standard Version). In Genesis 39:6, Joseph is described as handsome: "Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance." The image of God that is visible in humanity captures some of the beauty of the Lord.

Psalm 27:4 states, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." God's people are encouraged to focus on the beauty of the Lord. God is the apex of beauty. Psalm 50:2 describes God's beauty: "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." Isaiah 33:17 states, "Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar." John MacArthur remarks, "The prophecy moves beyond Hezekiah in his sackcloth, oppressed by his enemy, to Messiah in His beauty. Seeing Him in

glory is another reward of the righteous.”¹ God is the Creator of beauty, and his glory is beautiful. Although God’s beauty may not always be directly visual, beauty can be seen through his creation. Therefore, anyone who has seen the beauty of God’s creation knows that he is beautiful. God created humans to be able to see not only his beauty, wonder, and awe but his creation that points to his glory as well. Visual images are even used to describe God when abstract words could have been used instead. God is referred to as a shield (Psalm 28:7), a rock and fortress (Psalm 18:2), and a shepherd (Psalm 23:1). Christians create visual art that points to God’s glory. Some are called to specifically be artistic creators like Bezalel and Oholiab. Christians who are called and anointed to be visual artists can create visual art that points to God so that he receives the glory, and this is one of their spiritual practices of worship.

Lifestyle Worship

In Romans 12:1, Paul states, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Followers of Christ are called to submit their entire bodies and all that their bodies do as a living sacrifice to God, and this includes artists. John 4:21-24 states:

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Jerusalem, being where the temple was located, would no longer be the place of worship because the temple would be destroyed in 70 AD, and the new temple would be the church body as 1 Corinthians 6:19 states, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 797, Kindle.

you, whom you have from God? You are not your own.” Visual art was very much a part of the temple, and visual art can be a part of the lives of believers as well when they use it to bring glory to God like the original temple art. This kind of worship is called *lifestyle worship*, in which believers are called to worship God with every aspect of their life. Jesus explains this in Luke 10:27: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” As Christians make visual art, they can do so as a spiritual practice of worshiping the Lord as Colossians 3:23 states, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” All art that Christian artists make should ultimately aim to bring glory to the Lord. William MacDonald writes, “In this sense, there is no difference between secular and sacred work. All is sacred. Rewards in heaven will not be for prominence or apparent successes; they will not be for talents or opportunities; but rather for faithfulness.”² Artistically inclined Christians should make visual art as part of their lifestyle worship as they create art as one of their spiritual practices.

Corporate Worship

The spiritual practice of creating visual art should be allowed and encouraged in the corporate worship service. David W. Manner observes, “Artistic worship beyond music is often seen as an extra offering meant for those who appreciate it and understand it but not for the rest of us. But we must all understand that art beyond music is, instead, an equally viable worship action essential to shaping our faith and worship understanding.”³ Often, much attention and focus is placed upon music during the corporate worship service, and little or none is placed

² William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 2938, Kindle.

³ David W. Manner, *Better Sundays Begin on Monday: 52 Exercises for Evaluating Weekly Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 1386, Kindle.

upon visual art or the making of visual art. John Jefferson Davis writes, “It is fitting, then, for the physical space in which the assembly gathers for worship to symbolically, visually and liturgically enrich the Christian’s imagination with images of the heavenly court and of a creation waiting for full redemption.”⁴ Obviously, such images should never be worshiped, as only God should be worshipped. Visual art is only a tool to serve in the glorifying of the Lord. Stephen Miller concludes, “In the church, art is a wonderful servant but a terrible master. While we strive to use art to communicate the glory of God, the art is always subservient to its intended purpose; namely, making Jesus famous—to glorify and honor Him in the sight of all who hear and see.”⁵ There are some practical ways of carrying out the spiritual practice of creating visual art during the corporate worship service. Two simple ways for the congregation that is new to incorporating visual art are prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting.

Prayer Sketchbooks

It is not uncommon for Christians to carry notetaking journals with their Bibles to church to jot down notes during the corporate worship service. Prayer sketchbooks are similar to notetaking journals, but they include sketching as well. Prayer sketchbooks are the practice of incorporating sketching and doodling in a sketchbook while praying and meditating upon the Lord. This can happen during the musical section of the worship service or during the teaching of the Word. J. Scott McElroy writes, “Art has been intertwined with prayer for thousands of years. The builders of the medieval cathedrals took a lesson from the Hebrew temple and fashioned architecture that can be seen as a prayer in itself, pointing the viewer toward heaven on

⁴ John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 207, Kindle.

⁵ Stephen Miller, *Worship Leaders: We Are Not Rock Stars* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2013), 109.

the inside and out.”⁶ Churches can even provide prayer sketchbooks or drawing paper as an optional choice with church bulletins to help encourage this spiritual practice as it helps people focus while being in a state of worship and prayer. McElroy remarks:

Singing or music is a central part of this movement, but expression with visual arts is also common. Many of these churches have a dedicated prayer room that often overflows with art during prayer weeks as pray-ers discover that picking up an artistic implement to express themselves to God is a joyful, freeing experience. Anyone can discover a wonderful freedom in making prayer-room art.⁷

Churches can even assign specific areas or rooms of the church for helping congregants in their personal prayer life while participating in this specific spiritual practice.

As some people may come from a background where churches have abused the visual arts, creating visual art during the worship service and in prayer may cause some to become uncomfortable. McElroy explains:

This history sometimes makes Protestants wary of icons, but most Orthodox churches, many Anglican, Episcopalian and Catholic, and some other traditions use them in prayer and meditation today. They’ll tell you they are not worshiping the icon but instead see it as a window into the eternal and a legitimate way to connect with God in prayer. These thoughts were backed up by the Second Council of Nicaea in A.D. 787.⁸

It is helpful for church leaders to teach and remind people that the visual arts are not to take away from the glory of the Lord or to give glory to any individual artist. They are to help people focus more on God and his spiritual principles. McElroy maintains, “The incarnational nature of the arts and creativity—making the invisible visible—can provide wonderful assistance in focusing our prayers and building our faith.”⁹

⁶ J. Scott McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook: Releasing the Power of the Arts in Your Congregation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 29.

⁷ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 29.

⁸ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 30.

⁹ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 31.

Sybil MacBeth explains the concept of prayer sketchbooks, “Doodling prayer/*praying in color* is not about creating a great work of art. It is a way to stay focused in prayer.”¹⁰ Prayer sketchbooks should not place value on the art, but on the Lord. MacBeth expands on this idea, “Praying in color is an active, meditative, and playful prayer practice. It is both a process and a product. The process involves re-entry into the childlike world of doodling, coloring, and improvising to create a quiet time of prayer and meditation. The product is a visual prayer, a reminder of your time spent in prayer, and a prompt for ongoing prayer.”¹¹ The visual prayers created in these prayer sketchbooks do not require artistic skill. People do not need expensive or messy media. A simple pencil will do, but convenient media options include pencil, pen, color pencil, marker, and even portable watercolor. Digital drawing tablets like iPads can also be convenient, but they are less affordable. MacBeth directs people on how to get started drawing their prayers: “Start with God. My first *praying in color* prayers were pages of doodles for the people on my prayer list. Now, whether I am praying for others, for myself, for thanksgiving, or for forgiveness, I like to begin my prayers with my attention to God.”¹² The practical practice of prayer sketchbooks is often spirit-driven as people sketch out drawings and illustrations that help them focus while praying to God or doodle down something that God is telling them. Prayer sketchbooks are also helpful for memorizing spiritual truth. People often write down sermon notes and points, but they do not always remember what they wrote down. Sometimes a simple doodle or sketch can stay in a person’s memory far longer than words. This has been a practice in the church for children in the worship service as children often doodle during the worship

¹⁰ Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2019), 66, Kindle.

¹¹ MacBeth, *Praying in Color*, 21.

¹² MacBeth, *Praying in Color*, 51.

service on paper, and they color in linework of biblical illustrations during Sunday school. Prayer sketchbooks can also bring God glory by referring back to them in time and noting all the prayers that God answered in his own sovereign way and timing. Prayer sketchbooks are very portable, so people are able to bring them to church during the corporate worship service but also use them at home in their own private prayer times.

Meditative Painting

Meditative painting is another way to incorporate visual art as a spiritual practice of worship in the corporate worship service and privately at home as well, similar to prayer sketchbooks. Meditative painting does require more setup and is less portable as more materials are often required. Whereas prayer sketchbooks are smaller and designed for more portable media, meditative painting is more commonly painted on a larger surface, using actual paint and paint brushes. Concerning the idea of meditation for Christians, Robert Morgan writes, “Biblical meditation is not just *reading* Scripture or *studying* Scripture or even thinking *about* Scripture; instead, it is *thinking* Scripture—contemplating, visualizing, and personifying the precious truths God has given us.”¹³ Although some Christians may feel uneasy with the word *meditation*, meditation is found many times in scripture as believers are called to meditate upon God’s Word. Joshua 1:8 states, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” Simply, meditative painting is painting while focusing on the Lord and his Word.

¹³ Robert Morgan, *Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation: Find True Peace in Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 10, Kindle.

In corporate worship, meditative painting can take place on stage, off stage, on a back or side table, or in a separate prayer room. McElroy comments:

There can be live painting on the stage, in front of the whole congregation which I'll call platform painting, and live painting done by individuals in the congregation as a personal expression, off to the side of the church, in the back or in the pew. It's similar to the arrangement of worship leaders singing on stage in front of the whole congregation and individuals singing at their seats in the sanctuary.¹⁴

Some Christian musical events have even featured live visual artists painting in front of the audience below the stage on large canvas. McElroy observes:

More recently, another stream of live painting has come to the forefront of churches, literally. It's often done by someone from the congregation and takes place on the stage or to the side of it. These painters may be professionals or hobbyists but they paint whatever they feel led to, usually during the worship part of the service and sometimes continuing while the speaker is bringing the message. They generally are not the featured part of the service—not a performance—but one of the elements. It's another creative expression of worship more than a novelty or special event.¹⁵

Not all visual artists are called to practice meditative painting in front of others, just like not every singer should be on stage leading worship. For these visual artists who are not called to be in front leading, art tables can be placed in the back of the worship sanctuary to allow more people to participate in meditative painting as a spiritual practice of worship during the corporate worship service. McElroy elaborates:

There may be artists in your church who will not ever feel comfortable or skilled enough to paint on the platform but who enjoy worshiping while making art. Art tables may fulfill their desires, but you could also try making a designated, protected (floor and wall coverings) area where they can set up an easel and paint. This might be out of the line of sight of the congregation, in the back by the art tables or somewhere similar.¹⁶

¹⁴ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 153.

¹⁵ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 152.

¹⁶ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 163.

Providing such spaces with areas to paint invite many visual artists who would never feel comfortable worshipping by painting in front of others. Meditative painting to them may be more of a private practice of worship. This is like Christians who want to sing in the congregation but not on the microphone.

Visual Art During Worship

Overall, practices like meditative painting and prayer sketchbooks are practical ways to incorporate visual art as a spiritual practice of worship during both the corporate worship service and private worship. Christian visual artists can worship God in all of their visual artmaking—lifestyle worship. Such practices that allow and support visual art in the church for the purpose of bringing God glory bring great creativity and encouragement to the congregation. McElroy writes, “Inviting artists to produce their work live in the church is a key to unlocking the creativity of a congregation.”¹⁷ A creative congregation is one that represents God’s creativity well. Robert Webber discusses how some church leaders are beginning to incorporate visual art again into the worship service: “In worship renewal today much attention is given to the artist and to the use of their artistic gifts. The power of visual symbol, congregational movement and physical participation, appropriate uses of drama, the recovery of the senses, and the engagement of the whole person in worship have all been rediscovered.”¹⁸ Walters adds, “Yet some churches are finding innovative ways to employ art, like sponsoring shows featuring the work of church members, hiring staff people devoted to cultivating artistic expression in the church, and, yes,

¹⁷ McElroy, *Creative Church Handbook*, 151.

¹⁸ Robert Webber, *Worship, Old and New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 158, Kindle.

forming banner committees.”¹⁹ Some churches today have begun hiring creative art directors to their staff to help have someone in charge of issues related directly to the arts.

Potential Challenges

When change comes to churches, it is common for stress and discomfort to be present at first during the growing stage. Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray explain, “To engage multiple ages in a unified worship experience, we must be continually learning and exploring new approaches to how we lead worship.”²⁰ Allowing and encouraging visual art in the worship service is a way to engage an age demographic that has been missed in some congregations. Such changes and growth can help artistically inclined Christians feel that they have a place in the church today as they become involved in ministry and grow spiritually in the Lord while worshipping God with their entire lives. James F. White notes, “We do not yet have enough varieties of Christian worship.”²¹ Incorporating the creation of visual art as a spiritual practice of worship can help add variety to the corporate worship service to include people who are more artistically inclined. J. Michael Walters adds, “Theologians have held for centuries that the artistic impulse, the desire to create works of beauty and imagination, is a part of our God-given impulse to worship. Thus, to separate art and worship is to violate the intent of the Creator himself.”²² Like with any changes that take place in the church, some will not approve of change, but scripture should be examined,

¹⁹ J. Michael, Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), 2293, Kindle.

²⁰ Frank Page and L. Lavon Gray. *Hungry for Worship: Challenges and Solutions for Today's Church*. (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2014), 547, Kindle.

²¹ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 179, Kindle.

²² Walters, *Can't Wait for Sunday*, 2249.

studied, and taught wholistically, so all kinds of people can come together to worship God, even people who are called to be visual artists.

Future Research

The limitations of this study are the lack of research in visual art as a spiritual practice of Christian worship. Elmer L. Towns and Vernon M. Whaley write, “More and more churches are emphasizing the arts in worship.”²³ With more churches beginning to include visual art in the worship service, more literature should be written in the future, which will allow this topic to be further researched. One specific area that could be researched more is the practical ways that creating art as a spiritual practice can be implemented during corporate and private worship. This study focuses on prayer sketchbooks and meditative painting as solutions to practical ways for this to be carried out, but there are likely more practical ways that are currently being developed that will allow more people to worship through the creation of visual art. Clay, wood, and other material shaping media can be explored in the future. Just like with the changes and advancements of musical worship, worshipping through creating visual art will most likely go through processes of change, especially to fit the specific needs of individual churches. Overall, the limitation of this study is the lack of literature, specifically concerning practical ways such worship can be carried out in and out of the church service. There are some practical concerns that still need to be addressed in future research such as: should nonbelievers and/or visitors take place in the practice of worshipping through the creation of visual art? If they are not Christians, then what would they be worshipping through such visual creation? Would the allowance of creating visual art be the tool that encourages some artistically inclined people to become

²³ Elmer L. Towns and Vernon M. Whaley, *Worship Through the Ages: How the Great Awakenings Shape Evangelical Worship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 5199.

involved in church and follow Christ? Some might argue that since the church allows nonbelievers to sing during the worship service, then they should be able to create visual art during the worship service as well. As more literature becomes available, such questions could be addressed in future research.

Conclusion

In some churches today, it would be considered irreverent to pull out a sketchbook and sketch or doodle during the worship service. Even if that person is called to be a visual artist and is artistically inclined as a visually creative person, the others around might give bad looks or even make a comment concerning the importance of focusing on the Lord during corporate worship. This study focuses on helping Christians understand that artistically inclined Christians who have been called to be creative visual artists can create visual art as a spiritual practice of worship. Although singing is clearly commanded in scripture, there are multiple examples where Christians are told to make visual art. As believers are called to be imitators of God—the great Creator—they can create too. Although creating visual art as an expression of worship is not a biblical mandate, it can help people worship God by expanding their expression of worship. The long history of Christians creating—from the tabernacle to the catacombs to the cathedrals—shows a visually artistic lineage of visual artists using the gift of visual art as a way to bring God glory by making art that tells of his character and holy scripture. Webber remarks, “Thus, the artist in the service of God (the Creator) displays redemption through artistic creativity and sets creation free to worship God. Therefore, environmental art, the visual arts, and the movement arts are not primarily presentational or witness arts in worship, but acts of worship that serve the

goal of pointing all of creation toward the praise of God.”²⁴ In all of corporate worship and lifestyle worship, believers are to point all to glorify God as they worship him in spirit and truth. They can do this by the reading of the Word and by the singing of hymns and spiritual songs. They can also do this by using their creativity, that God has given them in his likeness, to give back to God by using it to worship him. All visual artmaking of the believer should ultimately be done to worship God and bring him glory. Whether by prayer sketchbooks, meditative painting, or another practical means of incorporating visual art as a spiritual practice of worship, such practices can be accepted and encouraged as long as they ultimately bring glory to the Lord as Christians worship him fully and faithfully.

²⁴ Webber, *Worship, Old and New*, 3875.

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