



THE STRATEGY OF GIVING AWAY GIFTS: CULTURAL GUIDELINES FOR ARTISTS

How can modern art—from advertising to architecture, painting to PR—be a language of healing insight, if Christian artists themselves cannot distinguish their art as Spirit-lit, collaborative, and patient?

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The historical reality we inhabit is complex. The scriptural direction is singularly clear: give back to the Lord and to your neighbour the gifts the Lord has given you, in a ministry of reconciliation ([2 Corinthians 5: 17-19](#)), joyously redeeming the time despite the tears

([Colossians 4: 5, 6](#)).

Do not become an ideological lobby group. Do not settle for the vanity of kitsch. Do not be confused about what you are doing. You may be doing handicraft, or art, commercial design, advertising art, song or hymn writing, you may be making monuments or painting murals, you may be in propaganda, posters, PR or the media. But let each one give away whatever kind of gift you have received from the Lord, give it away in a holy spirit, with a sure skill, as an innocent and wise, faithful, compassionate deed ([Ephesians 4: 7, 12-16](#); [Matthew 10: 16](#)), no matter how imperfect. That is all the Lord requires of you as one of Christ's body on earth (cf. [Micah 6:8](#)).

In *Rainbows for the fallen world* I gave five directives for those who want to be christian artists, distinguished *in their artistry* by the holy spirit of compassionate judgment proclaiming the Rule of Jesus Christ:

First, for those who want to be christian artists, that is, musicians, painters, poets, novelists, graphic designers, dramatists, cinematographers, distinguished in their artistry by the holy spirit of compassionate judgment proclaiming the Rule of Jesus Christ:

(1) Become filled with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Unless one's vision is full-orbed and one's discernment of what God wants done is sure, one will be weak in artistic leadership and uncertain in testing the spirit of the art facing you and your neighbour. One's roots have to be deep in Jesus Christ and one's sensitivity to creation has to be uncommonly rich, if you mean to be vitally redemptive in doing anything with christian identity in this secular age. Christian artistry *cannot* be done by formula—choose these topics, refrain from that, add a prayer, and give a double tithe of the proceeds—no! It will take a prayer and fasting habit to exorcise secularism from our artistic deed (cf. [Matthew 17: 14-21](#)); so, like making a vow, one has to decide whether to suffer such a level of commitment (cf. [Ecclesiastes 5: 1-7](#), [Philippians 1: 27-30](#)), and then plead with the Lord to use oneself for establishing his Rule. Without the working presence of the Holy Spirit in the

product of our hands, mouth, feet or body, the "christian art" will be a sham, in vain. Unless the river bed of our consciousness is as deep as the living Spirit of God, no matter how fast the water flows or sparkling it seems, it is christianly shallow.

(2) Conceive art as work and undergo its training like a trade.

No one thing has ruined art so much in Western civilization as the cumulative nonsense about the artist as supra-rational genius, the pious talk about "creativity," and the Romanticist creed that an undisciplined bohemian life affords the milieu most conducive for having artistic "inspiration" strike. Such adulatory isolation may prime artistic egos, but it inevitably undermines the ministry of christian art. Art is a task like building bridges and fixing meals; it takes intelligence, sensitivity to needs, and specialized knowledge. Good intentions and prayerful dedication are not enough in building bridges or seasoning foods: you fall through or the food is flat if the product is not sound. A weak-kneed poem or a shoddy, gaudy painting likewise will mislead little ones who come looking for shalom, and if they stumble on account of one's irresponsibly botching it, one is in trouble as an artist, according to the Scriptures (cf. [Luke 17: 1-2](#)). The burden of producing masterpieces and of being "a star" is not necessary, it is not the easy yoke of Jesus Christ; but art is a job that one may be called to do—writing a song, repairing a chair, composing a speech, sculpturing stone—and after a period of apprenticeship it is important to become a qualified journeyman approved by God lest our painting or novel let our neighbour fall through.

(3) Distill a fruitful christian art historical tradition in your own blood and pioneer its contribution in our day.

Christians have no right to be ignorant of history just because they stand in the truth. As guardians of culture Christians should explore omnivorously whatever men and women have done in the Orient and Africa, Europe and the Americas, in ancient times and today, not to paste bits and pieces eclectically together and not to assimilate a nondescript "best" that has been artistically done throughout the ages, but in order to know surely the consistency and

contours of one's own particular christian tradition so that one can work out the integrity of our christian minority culture set off from but in the context of all the other ways men and women have invented cultivating responses.

I personally come at a christian culturing from a Reformation christian tradition that is Calvinian, Kuyperian, Torontonian—a perspective and dynamic which is not pre-Reformation mediaevalist nor an American Great Awakening Baptist tradition, but one that has a definite shape one can call "Reformational"—coursing deep I think, for example, in the blood of Henk Krijger's paintings; and it is different from the local christian tradition Gabriela Mistral breathes, a mystical Catholicism of some Spanish variety reaching back to St. Francis of Assisi as patron saint. But both Krijger and Mistral are united as brother and sister in breaking at the heart of their art with secularity. The holy spirit impelling them which surfaces in their artistry is one foreign to accommodating what's going on; it's not even reformist—accepting something secularly current and snipping away at the edges. Their art is spirited, the very grain of the shaping colours and so silent flow of the words, as I perceive them, is cradled from the start in a singular affirmation of creation and its fullness as belonging to the Lord, of sin as a waste God hates, of present redemption possibilities and a future judging reconciliation of things back to God so that followers of Jesus Christ may look and read and sing through their tears. Krijger and Gabriela Mistral are examples of maturing indigenously in a christian tradition and of being unashamed at being positively christian (even though they wouldn't [bruit](#) it about in my formulation). That is why both Krijger and Mistral are considered oddities by their secular colleagues who admit, nevertheless, to the quality of their art.

I believe it is a mistake to try to go back and recapture some earlier, canonic christian synthesis: a holy spirited undertaking will always be driven to work reformingly with an historical inheritance. But it is crucial for would-be christian artists in their youth to realize you *cannot* go it alone; and it is short-sighted, not to say stupid, in the correct desire to be relevant as christian artist in an unchristian age, to pick up the secular fashion of the immediate generation before us and immerse oneself in that as your tradition (cf. T.S. Eliot,

in "[Tradition and the Individual Talent](#)," 1919, in *The Sacred Wood*, London: Methuen & Co., 1960, pp. 48-49). That is why christian artists so often seem to be a generation late, rootless and drifting all by themselves, and seldom stand out from their day with art that raises the scandal of christian artistically presented insight.

A friend and I heard Allen Ginsberg and W.H. Auden at a poetry reading in London, England, several years ago. Two days later we happened upon Ginsberg downstairs in the Tate Gallery, peering intently at one after the other of William Blake's paintings housed there. Since he was on crutches, having broken a leg recently, he had to sit down to rest; so we struck up a conversation about Blake's [Swedenborgianism](#) and mythology. Ginsberg told us about learning mantras and we argued about whether Paul's experience of the third heaven was a drug trip. Why was Ginsberg interested in Blake? Early revolutionary Ginsberg had said:

“
*... the world is a mountain
of shit: if it's going to
be moved at all, it's got
to be taken by handfuls.*

But Allen ("Howl") Ginsberg had found out that shit doesn't handful well, and here he was, later, filling in chinks of a tradition in mysticism so he could stay alive poetically and do more than rant in verse about the Pentagon. When he stood up to leave, "Pay special attention to the yellow," said he, pointing to the paintings lining the walls; "that's where it's at." And he hobbled off on his crutches.

Van Gogh's yellow is closer to where it's at, I think, than William Blake's. But the point is— even though it takes years of maturing before you have really distilled an art historical tradition and made it your own: as christian song-writer plumbing the soul of black spirituals or the joy of early jazz, as christian poet getting blood transfusions from Chaucer, Spenser,

Donne, Milton, Hopkins and Thompson, or as painters finding roots in Breughel, Rembrandt, Jan Steen or [German "Expressionist"](#) figures, it is imperative that one enters a communion of artistic saints if one would produce poems and songs and paintings of a third and fourth generation of those kept faithful by the Covenanting God of history.

(4) Integrate yourself as a band of christian artists with christian taskforces in other cultural areas in order to reach out as a peoplehood of God to the public at large.

Culture always has a global spread; so a minority culture cannot long, purposefully exist as a mini culture, a few loose strands. Christian schooling limps without supportive christian family life; the christian forming of certain abilities can go down the drain if they are ensnared in an utterly unredeemed, mercenary business enterprise; christian artistry remains badgered if there be no gallery outlet or publishing firm or media center that has ended initiation fees, "best seller" strictures and demands of crowd guarantee. There are numerous exasperating problems in building an integrating minority culture within a dominant, monolithic secular culture (Black culture found this out), for the current monolithic culture tries to disintegrate everything that resists its technocratic mould. I would be a false prophet to predict success for a christian minority culture in our age. But the point is this: the most full, cultural obedience by the communion of saints is not the stand-up testimonial of a lone christian artist, to which one may applaud, but rather an international community of christian artists' showing themselves, in all their dedicated weakness, as one open door in a christian cultural ark not established by human hands, where young and old believers and unbelievers may enter as a relief and workshop, out of the pouring secular rain—an open-door, christian minority culture.

(5) Persevere in unfolding art historically, with a generations-long patience and hope.

Culture honouring the Lord has been born long ago (even though it doesn't have birthdays),

and in our seeing to it responsibly that christian culture gets born anew in our increasingly secularized day, we must plan long-range and take comfort in the promise of God that the believing generations still in our cultural loins will be given the time and grace to develop our communal offering (cf. Psalms [89](#), [145](#)). Culture by nature is an ongoing affair that lasts longer than anyone's lifetime. Therefore, to live under the promise of blessing upon the faithful cultivating responses of coming generations taking up our same task in the same spirit of praise and reconciliation takes the pressure off us Christians to set everything straight ourselves, something that bedevils counter-cultural movements. Christ's body does not need to finish its cultural task in a given generation: it only needs to be faithful with what it is entrusted.

Such faithfulness includes, along with distilling a christian art tradition, acting in the present with communal horizons, being a qualified artisan filled by the Holy Spirit, that one unfold the specific creaturely strength of the art in question. In order for christian artists to extirpate the plague of elitism from themselves and be able to offer truly diaconal service to God's people and the present-day men and women inundated by the mass media cultural hypnosis, painters may need to exchange easels and oils temporarily for murals like the "[Wall of Respect](#)" at 43rd and Langley in Chicago during the 1960s, and poets may need to forget ode structure and the elegant lines of blank verse for the rollic of ballads. But one may not go historically backward and run dissonance and steel out of our song and architectural experience or head toward picturesque scenes of [Millet](#) instead of "[Harmony of Grey and Green](#)" (1874) by Whistler. Christian artists who before God know what they are doing artistically—wary of being fooled by the artistic principalities and powers of this age—must persist in converting modern art into a language of healing insight. God's people everywhere should pray for christian modern artists.

These five directives are still the best counsel I have from Scripture today, but I would like particularly to underline the fourth and fifth ones. We do not bring Christ's Rule complete to the earth in our lifetime, and we need a vision that will reach across the generations. We only need to be generous stewards of what we have inherited, to edify the faithful and provide

direction for the neighbour. God's providing grace and the promise of Christ's Rule is sure. Therefore we may develop a body of redemptive artists, art critics, art historians, art brokers, art theorists, surrounded by a host of historical witnesses, in hope. Perhaps someday you may sculpt a figure which will give cheer to someone whose life has been broken, as Ernst Barlach did with the aching curve of the doubting Thomas' reunion with Christ [*Die Wiedersehen*]. Perhaps you may carry on Henk Krijger's brief artistic ministry which led to little jewels like the smile of *Somebody loves me, I wonder who?*, where sunlit fields and a quiet sky form the ordered backdrop to the mailbox on which a homing pigeon stands to deliver a letter to a wondering fellow, almost like the dove's proffering an olive branch to Noah. But whatever your talent be, remember the comfort of [Psalm 2](#): Blessed be all those who have run artistically to take shelter with God.

This article consists of segments previously published in Rainbows for the fallen world (1980, 2005) and Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves: Alternative Steps in Understanding Art (2000). For more information see <http://www.seerveld.com/tuppence.html>. 

Topics: [Arts](#) [Culture](#)



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but its loves in order.*



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