

# Church Powerful Art?

By: Andrew Seivright

Talk about a crowd being riveted. The applause was deafening. Tears of wonder and passion flowed as hearts were deeply touched. Some laughed. Some cheered. The responses differed, but everyone was inspired by that incredible, intangible spark that ignites the human spirit and makes them feel connected to the Creator of life – and to each other.

During the standing ovation the only words spoken by Johann Sebastian Bach after performing his magnificent *Saint Matthews Passion* were “for the glory of God.” This was not strange; Bach was so open about his devotion to God that at the bottom of the sheet music of even his non-religious compositions he always wrote, “In the Name of Jesus.”

During the renaissance and the ensuing Reformation and Baroque eras, many were fortunate to personally experience the incredible leap forward in new artistic expressions. They were to hear Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *Ayre in G*, or the reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Some stood in silent awe at the unveiling of *Down from the cross* by Rembrandt. It was all extraordinary art, done by artists who created it for the glory of God.

Great art has a quality that gently pulls us into a higher level of perception. How we love that kind of art! It meets such a profound need in the human spirit. Yet why is great art so scarce?

I believe the answer to that question is because there is a price for individual artists and the Church to pay for its emergence, and with the world so in need of God, a price I hope we will now pay.

As a result of the 1960s Renaissance, the Western world became more engrossed with artistic expression – music, literature, painting, illustration, sculpting, drama, dance, video, film – than ever before. Now in the 90s, in one single day, the arts command the rapt attention of over two billion people – which is many times more than those who will actually hear the Gospel in weeks or even months. **The arts are the most powerful of all communication**

**tools for reaching the majority of people on earth.**

The first great Renaissance of the 1400 to 1600s was started primarily by a handful of Christian artists, like the writer Dante, the sculptor Giotto, and the painter Cimabue. They were brave enough to break with traditions and forge a new approach. They were criticized at first, but soon droves of secular artists followed.

Christian leadership in the arts didn’t stop there. The Reformation period that followed was led by Christians like Bach, Handel, Rembrandt, Milton, Vermeer, and others. Christians led and the secular world followed. During the Renaissance, patrons (often Christians) took artists into their homes to help them financially and with their careers. Christians were willing to invest in those artists who bore great talent so their gifts could be nurtured and developed. They knew in time that those gifts could touch the masses with God’s glory. Most of the Church understood the far-reaching importance of God-inspired art, so they made the sacrifices necessary to nurture and promote their artists. This support from the Church enabled artists to mature in their craft and go on to lead the world of art.

## **The Next Renaissance**

The next Renaissance that rolled around three hundred years later was a different story. Though short-lived, the Renaissance of the late 60s was so incredibly powerful that it made a lasting impact on the world. It forever changed the way the world looks, dresses, thinks, and communicates. This time, however, the Church was not at the forefront of the arts because we had lost our appreciation of art’s *ministry* potential and hadn’t been properly nurturing and stewarding our artists. Though much advancement in the art of the 60s was positive, instead of a spiritually pure message shining across the earth, we’re still reeling from the bitter spiritual fruit of the 60s Renaissance “preachers” who naively unleashed a powerful wave of deception, eastern mysticism, drugs, and immorality upon the world. Christianity did, however, receive some great blessings.

As the Church caught the last wave of the 60s Renaissance our music, literature, and art was

radically changed. Now, instead of mostly southern gospel music, we're expressing Jesus with every style of music imaginable. Our paintings and books changed a lot, too, as we explored and increased in scope, style, vision, and our ability to communicate.

### **The 60s**

I am grateful for the 60s renaissance. The parameters of artistic expression greatly expanded and the whole world is richer for it. Though the church (not being in a position of artistic influence) was unable to stem the tide of moral decline that followed, it did, however, rise to pick up the pieces during the well-documented Jesus Movement that resulted. Young people across America became disillusioned when they couldn't find the true "peace and love" preached during the 60s Renaissance. They realized the unselfish love and inner peace they chided their parents for not having could only be found by coming into a relationship with the Creator of those things. They found the answer in Jesus Christ and it made the headline news as millions came into the kingdom and began to reshape the following years of the Church.

As glorious as that was, just think about how many more might have come to the Lord had the Renaissance message at the outset been filled with spiritual light instead of darkness.

It is vital that we learn quickly from our past mistakes, because I believe we're on the verge of another culture-shaping, value-changing Renaissance – which will be much bigger than the one in the 60s! The social and cultural indicators I've seen, along with my own spiritual sensing, have been confirming this not only to me, but to other leaders in the body of Christ as well.

Because of the vast potential of the arts, and particularly the power of great art to minister, I'm concerned about an extremely far-reaching issue for the Church. How does the church currently steward the arts? Are we overseeing them and cultivating them the way the Lord wants us to? How can we prepare for and take a position of leadership in the coming Renaissance of the arts?

### **Training in the Temple**

In Old Testament times, the leaders of Israel understood the spiritual power of music and worship. So they stewarded their musicians by bringing them to live at the Temple site. As they lived and learned with other music ministers, they were challenged, trained, and nurtured in spiritual

and technical excellence by Asaph and Heman. The religious leaders of that day provided structures to help the Levites of Israel reach their potential of using their gifts powerfully for God. In Jerusalem alone, 4,000 musicians and 288 singers lived and trained in the Temple. (I Chron. 23:5:7,8) By today's population comparisons of the Church worldwide, that means 694,000 Christian musicians were being embraced, supported, and trained by the Church for the purpose of declaring God's glory. There is no evidence that this "system of stewardship of artists" ever ceased in Israel whenever there was a king in power that loved the Lord.

### **Stewarding Our Artists**

Somehow the Church lost sight of her biblical responsibility shown in this example of stewarding musicians. What has been lost by way of the millions who could have been changed toward righteousness by an abundance of great art from the Church is deeply sad. It is incumbent upon the Church to reach out to her artists once it's apparent their work clearly has ministry potential. The artist needs to be nurtured, encouraged, and helped with tangible support. Of course, the Church is not called to take total responsibility – but we could help them receive the same kind of technical and spiritual training we would quickly give to an emerging evangelist or Bible teacher. This "stewarding" should not be limited to musicians but to the gifted in all areas of art.

At present we have naively left our artists to "fend for themselves" – leaving them without spiritual structures to nurture and challenge them in their giftings, and to provide the needed training and accountability in the "ministry" aspects of their art.

Why isn't the Church raising up Christians that will lead the world in the arts? Aren't you tired of hearing about artists who felt there was no place in the Church for their gifts so they went elsewhere to find support and encouragement –and in this process became spiritually shipwrecked?

Where are today's Christian "heroes in the arts?" Those respected by the whole world, and not just the Church for their creativity and innovation? Why do we usually see secular idols filling that void? Why have we abdicated this extremely crucial pole? Perhaps it's because Satan also knows the power of art and its ability to reveal spiritual truth so that people are radically impacted. Perhaps Satan has

been working overtime to keep the Church in the dark about stewarding her artists.

For hundreds of years before the Reformation, Satan successfully kept the most central doctrine of “Spiritual Rebirth” (being Born Again) from most who believed in God. It took someone like Martin Luther to take radical, controversial steps before that vital spiritual principle was reclaimed for God’s people. He also endured radical persecution. I believe it will take the same radical action for the Church to reclaim this crucial responsibility to be about the business of stewarding its artists to reflect God in excellence, power, and beauty for the world to see.

Today a war is raging for the heart and soul of a sight and sound generation. Why are only one percent of the films (that reach billions) made by Christian filmmakers? Where is the Church? Someone recently said, “If you want to know where America is headed, don’t look at those who govern us – look to those who mold us, through the control of contemporary culture. It is on this cultural battlefield in the arts... that the struggle for America’s soul is taking place.” The same could be said of about four-fifths of the world.

### **New Wineskins Needed**

Since the Church has not kept abreast of the arts, it has lost its ability- and credibility- to train and nurture her artists adequately. Privately owned Christian businesses have emerged for the Christian artist to release their own works to the public. While some owners of these Christian recording and publishing companies aren’t Christians, many are sincere, honest lovers of Jesus- but often they have molded their companies after their secular counterparts.

I think the problem arises from the fact that when businesses oversee artistic ministry gifts- and the ministering artists themselves- there need to be more of a link between normal business practices and pastoral care and accountability.

I think most Christian publishers assume their artists are adequately covered by their own pastor and their local church. On the other hand, many pastors feel unqualified to speak into an artist’s life who is often isolated or out of town impacting crowds with their art. They think they must be doing okay with God or He wouldn’t be blessing them.

Sadly, artists often feel short-changed by both sides. They are rarely really understood, covered, or really sent out by their churches. They also know the primary focus of their relationship with their publishers is on building the “career” side of their ministry, and will only last as long as they yield the required amount of profits.

It’s not that the Lord hasn’t used Christian publishers. He most certainly has. But maybe it’s time to explore some new ways to do things. Though many publishers may hold different values from those held by the world, their systems (wineskins) are built, for the most part, on making money- not making disciples (Mathew 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit). I’m not saying making money is wrong, or that making disciples is of no importance to these publishers, but the “gravitational pull” of this profit-driven, celebrity-making system give little room for what Asaph and Heman focused their attention on - artist that *move strongly in God’s anointing* and had true artistic excellence. The existing structure mostly makes way for artists with commercial appeal, while anointing and ministry value are of lesser consideration.

Unfortunately, “commercial value” usually means that the art looks, feels, or sounds like the current popular secular art. A recent quote in Newsweek magazine reporting on the “copy catting” of Christian publishers, said, “Christian marketers have always profited by imitating pop culture.” When we set our sights at being “as good as the world,” that’s what we achieve, but when we push past the perceived parameters of what has already been established, God is ready to inspire that which is innovative.

For instance, when a particular style of pop or rock music is “hot” in secular music, a few months later you’ll hear the same sounds on Christian radio. In graphic arts, when a certain “look” becomes cool soon we see it copied in Christian graphic and illustrative art. When secular book publishers make millions on the astounding variety of self-help books, Christian publishers start pumping out Christian self-help books *en Masse*.

I’m not against any of the sounds, looks, or books just mentioned, and I believe that secular artists have God-given talents as do Christian artists and are equally capable of being inspired by God. But I am bothered by the fact that artists with fallen

wordly values keep setting the standard for us – instead of us setting it for them!

### **The Need To Take Risks**

Also, we Christians are lagging behind in the arts because we're reluctant to take risks! We need to go after new horizons of godly artistic expressions that lie far ahead of the world's limited perceptions.

Wouldn't it be great if Christian publishing executives would gather their top artists and say, "You know the world is really into 'this particular style of product' right now. I challenge you to seek God for something new, creatively different, and anointed. Jesus wants our art to be a light on a hill – and it can't be if we blend in with everybody else. Let's get something fresh and ground-breaking from God!"

Frank Gaebel in his book *The Christian, The Arts, and Truth – Regaining the Vision of Greatness* wrote:

"Fear of what's new can cripple Christian responsibility in the arts... ..talent now, as in the past, has to launch out in new directions. The open mind, open eyes, and open ears in the arts are a part of our artistic stewardship."

I know excellent Christian painter and illustrators who are deeply frustrated by their distribution companies where they're confined to "commercial art" – the stuff used on T-shirts, posters, and book covers. Is there a potential "Rembrandt" out there? We may never find out!

After writing *This Present Darkness* Frank Peretti went to 14 Christian companies trying to get it published. They all turned him down. They said it was too radical, too different from the norm. They told him, "We don't have a market for it. We can't make money on this book." A small publisher decided to take the risk, and it went on to become the decade's best-selling Christian book— selling four million copies! One publishing authority said, "Peretti's book did more to make the Church aware of the reality of spiritual warfare than any single book in history besides the Bible." And to think we almost missed the benefits of this book because it wasn't viewed as "commercial" enough!

In Franky Schaeffer's book, *Addicted to Mediocrity*, he writes about Christian publishers: "The publishing houses churn out a landslide of material which can scarcely be called books, often composed of the same themes rehashed endlessly. One could sum it up by saying that the modern Christian world

is marked, in the area of the arts, by one outstanding feature— its addiction to mediocrity."

### **Responsibility of Promoters**

Also, there is a spiritual responsibility that comes with the ability to promote an artist and his or her ministry. Spiritual guidelines for releasing someone into ministry are not only based on a person's talent, popularity, and ability to generate sales. Things like spiritual maturity, the ability to handle the spotlight, teachableness, strength of marriage and family life, and character must all be considered. An open relationship that goes beyond business must be developed. Then if an artist begins to flounder, he can be approached, prayed with, and maybe even encouraged to take a break if needed.

For most artists, especially musicians and writers, the system and pricing policies leave them with slim financial benefits unless they're top sellers. They usually need to repay the company for manufacturing their artistic product, then buy it back from them to sell when they minister. But for many, their buy-back price does not leave them much personal profit. As a result, many artists spend most of their time "on the road" to support their families— and to keep sales up so they won't be dropped by their publishers. This is often a detriment to their families— and to their spiritual lives if they're gone for long periods without spiritual accountability on a more personal and accurate level.

We're not dealing with used car salesmen here. We're dealing with artistic ministers. If they are allowed to keep running on spiritual "fumes" because they have "contracts to fulfill," they will— as we have already seen— crash and burn. But often artists will hide their problems because they can't financially afford to take a break. Of course, every artist is personally responsible for his or her choices and actions, but the current system isn't much help either.

*It's no wonder that a Christian musician who's won multiple awards recently wrote this to his record label: "I am angry. Angry at the system that produces disasters; that breeds idolatry; that provides the environment where sin is conceived. A system that violates biblical principles to achieve success. A system that destroys families."*

Where does it say in the Bible that God's artists are supposed to be "stewarded" with the same structures, policies, pricing, contracts, methods of distribution, and marketing that the world uses?

Sadly, working for a Christian company often holds no greater assurance of promises being kept. I know of many instances of broken contracts and broken promises, and the artists' families have suffered for it. This is not a problem in every company, but neither is it uncommon. These breaches usually go uncontested because the artist is reluctant to take a Christian company to court to keep them accountable.

### **Accountability of Publishers**

Accountability is a scriptural foundation, yet many Christian companies have no official links to a recognized spiritual authority. Often their Board of Directors consists of relatives, friends, and business executives. If a Christian leader is on the Board, it's usually in name only, with very little input or involvement. I'd like to see Christian publishers open their Boards to known and respected spiritual leaders with a heart for the arts. This would facilitate greater input and prayer toward developing more systems to nurture and steward the artists of those companies to be anointed ministers that win hearts of God.

### **The Sad Result**

The sad result of the Church's neglect to actively steward the arts is that God's covering, protection, and greatest anointing has not rested on many of His artists to the degree He has desired— and we are the worse for it.

### **What Can You Do?**

So why am I telling all this to you? Because, my beloved brothers and sisters, it is immensely important for you to understand what I am saying—as you are part of the solution. I am not calling for the downfall of Christian publishers. I'm calling for *the Church to take its place*. Together we can change things. We can bring about a greater stewarding of the arts and greatly encourage the artists (God's 20<sup>th</sup> Century media ministers) He wants to raise up.

If you have a desire to see a new era where anointed Christian artists fill the world and the Church with the creative beauty God has given His artists to display, then I challenge you and your churches to begin seeking ways to “steward the arts.”

### **A Brand-New Renaissance**

Websters defines a paradigm shift as, “a change in position or direction of a pattern or model.” It's a phrase used to reflect a whole new way of looking at

and approaching something. In the 1600s the Church underwent a paradigm shift with the ushering in of the Reformation.

Today the Church needs another paradigm shift in her perception, value, and approach to the arts. She needs a “New Reformation” that ignites the Church's desire to steward and nurture her artists. Imagine with me for a minute. Imagine established church structures where artists can grow and flourish! This could be easily attained if we'd make it a priority.

Remember Bach. His impact was so strong that musical history has been officially divided into two categories: Before Bach and after Bach. Remember Rembrandt, Handel, and Milton, who created art the whole world embraced and who turned their cultures toward the heart of God.

T.S. Eliot, the well-known Nobel prize recipient for literature, was inspired by his feelings about the Christian's role in leading the arts. He wrote: “What is incumbent on all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism *over and above* those applied by the rest of the world.”

I am convinced that another Renaissance is coming in the immediate years ahead— and hopefully on the cutting edge of this new Renaissance will be Christian artists fully supported by the Church, nurtured and embraced by a new system of stewardship.

Let your imagination go and dream with me... There are sounds and visually impacting sights never seen or heard before. There are fresh new ways to present our beautiful God, ways that grab people's hearts and spirits like never before. These new artistic expressions will be so overwhelmingly anointed that untold numbers will grasp the reality of the risen Christ and seek His kingdom. In fact, the creative anointing will be so great that in every area of art, the secular art world will be going to Christian artists asking, “How did you create that?” It will be an awesome time when the culture is being changed and God— through art— gives answers for the trouble that is besieging the world.

This is not a dream. This is a reality beating passionately in the heart of God this very second! He wants to pour His creativity out in an unprecedented flow that will be greatly received, then stewarded, by His family, the Church.

Let's open our hearts— let's play our part to bring forth a Renaissance of God's anointed art!

## Stewarding the Arts

### Practical ideas for you and your Church!

- ✍ “Adopt” a gifted artist and help him tangibly with training, encouragement, and prayer.
- ✍ Start an Art Gallery in a room of your church, or even better, in the lobby. Fill it with works from artists in your congregation. Play music from the musicians in your church in the background.
- ✍ Encourage those with artistic desires to pursue training – and applaud their achievements, big and small.
- ✍ Start an Artist Support Group in your church where artists can gather to pray for and learn from each other.
- ✍ Support an artist with a monthly financial gift. We do it for evangelists and teachers. Artists with potential to touch the world with their art are just as deserving. Maybe you can help an artist with art college expenses.
- ✍ Organize regular city wide Christian art exhibitions – to pull artists together and encourage the Church with the giftedness that is in it.
- ✍ Make room for musicians, poets, dancers, painters, video and filmmakers, etc. to do a special segment in your church service.
- ✍ Bring skilled instructors to your church to give seminars on worship, drama, painting, singing, sculpturing, poetry, video, filmmaking, writing, etc.
- ✍ Ask your pastor to read this article and pray about different ways to steward the arts in your church.
- ✍ Pray for more Christian institutions to be raised up that desire to train artists in their craft as well as in their spiritual walks.
- ✍ Write church leaders in your area and recommend a citywide board made up of leaders and those who have a heart to steward the Christian artists of the city. It could become a haven of encouragement, cooperative education, prayer, and accountability for the artists.

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