The Challenge and Dilemma of Being a Christian in the Arts

Part 1 of 5: Beginnings in Media Arts
with Darrell L. Bock and Reg Grant
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of connection between theology and culture. And my guest today is Reg Grant, who not only was a classmate of mine at Dallas Seminary many, many, many years ago – you can tell that we’ve been around awhile – but also now directs the Media Arts program here at Dallas Seminary, and I’ll get him to talk about that in just a second.

I am Darrell Bock, executive director for the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement. We’re glad you’re with us today, and our topic for today is probably one a little bit different than what we normally do, the kind of thing we normally do, and that is the arts and cultural engagement and how those two relate to one another. We’re going to talk about the arts and how they work in a way that helps us to understand both the challenge and the dilemma of being a Christian in the arts in the context of our culture. But first, Reg, tell us about the media arts program here at Dallas. Tell us about what’s involved in that and your role in it.

We started a program in media arts back in 2005. Actually, that was the beginning for the master of arts in media and communication degree program. Prior to that, in 1994, we had begun a THM emphasis – back in those days we called them “tracks” in the Master of Theology program, the four-year program that we have here – called the “media arts ministry track.” So we sort of combined them. We have ThM students in the program now, and we’ve had master’s level students in the program since 2005.

I’m the director. I designed the program and I’m directing the program now. We have 60-something at this point in what we call the MAMC, the master of arts in media and communication degree program.

That’s 60-something students.

Students, yes, and around 20-something, which has been fairly consistent since 1994, in the ThM emphasis part of the program. So roughly 100-ish, 90 to 100 students in the program.

So when we say media arts, what are we talking about specifically? What kinds of specific skills are the students coming with.
Reg Grant: It’s fairly broad based, Darrell. We have three emphases within the program. One is a writing emphasis, one is a presentation emphasis, and one is a worship emphasis. And when we began the program, the one with the least oomph to it was the worship part of it. We were strong in writing, strong in presentation. The worship component of it was the weakest, but over the years since 2005 in particular, we’ve had more and more students wanting training in worship and especially the theological and biblical components of worship. How do I know when I go out that I am going to be able to present accurately, clearly, interestingly, relevantly the Word of God? And so we equip those students who are going into worship ministries in local church with those tools, and we are bolstering that part of the program now so that it is truly the third leg of the stool for Masters of Arts in Media students.

Darrell Bock: I see lots of people who engage in worship, and basically they go and they play their music, and oftentimes they don’t talk about what’s behind the hymns or help the audience relate to what it is that they’re singing, so that’s actually a pretty important skill in terms of framing a worship service in such a way that you get the full impact and appreciation of what it is that you’re singing or doing.

Reg Grant: Yeah, context is key. You need to know the context of the composition of the hymn or the praise song. In what social context was it developed, what was it intended for, and how does that mesh with your biblical content that you’re going to be having in the worship service, the preaching and the whole worship service? Looking at it holistically and less compartmentalized so that what you emerge with as a person who commands that contextual setting and understanding is something that is much more holistic. It’s much more a unit and integrated as part of something that can glorify the Lord and build up his people.

Darrell Bock: Now, let’s come to the writing part because I take it that the writing here is all kinds of things. It can be magazine writing. It can be non-fiction. It can be opinion pieces and editorial work. Am I right in saying that that’s kind of the scope of what you’re trying to get?
Reg Grant: Right, and one of the biggest blessings that we have here is Sandra Glahn, who is the general editor for <em>Kindred Spirit</em>, our magazine that we publish here at the seminary. She brings the disciplines of journalistic composition to the classroom in her course that she offers, and she can teach all of the courses in writing. We have three that are offered now. We can focus the student in her particular course on more journalistic forms of writing, non-fiction types of writing.

In my course, the beginning creativity course, and the second course in advanced creative writing for ministry, we can take students into the realms of novel, screenplay, poetry and fiction forms of literature. But there’s a movement and has been for a number of years in writing circles in what they call literary non-fiction. So there are non-fictional pieces that are done but it’s not a non-repetorial style, but it’s one that embraces literary value and imposes that onto a non-fiction piece.

Darrell Bock: So it’s kind of a mixed genre really.

Reg Grant: Yeah. George Will is a great literary non-fiction writer. His book on baseball is one of my favorites. It’s a great book and it’s very well written. James Kilpatrick is another one that is wonderful – his book <em>The Writer’s Art</em> was a formative book in my own training and one that I continue to recommend to students, an outstanding book that embraces literary qualities and uses that in composing non-fiction material.

Darrell Bock: Now, presentation. I take it that’s recitation of scripture in the midst of the service all the way over to what we call sermons that are developed around characters, so moving almost into acting? Are we kind of in that direction or would …

Reg Grant: That’s part of it.

Darrell Bock: Okay, what else?
Reg Grant: That’s part of it. There’s some technical training, although we will never become a technical school in that sense. Our main goal is to get artists who have some experience in their fields – whether they’re technicians or whether they’re actors or public readers of scripture doesn’t matter – and bring them into an environment where they can focus on biblical and theological content and then give them enough classes in their particular disciplines to exercise, sort of like a crucible, where they can test their biblical and theological knowledge so that they emerge with a kind of a grid, a mesh through which they can interpret all the stuff the world is going to throw at them and say okay, this is good. This is good aesthetically so we have an aesthetic judgment on it, and this is good biblically and theologically. I put those two things together, and I present a package to my congregation.

And also it’s something that we’re trying to invite in people from the community who are not in active ministry. It’s sort of like if you’re going down a road and you have a fork in the road. Some of my students take this fork, and that fork is for people who are going into full-time Christian ministry. They’re going to go in and be the media guy or gal in the local church.

Darrell Bock: So when you mean technician, you’re talking about things like audio and video, right?

Reg Grant: Audio and video, yeah, and audio is so much broader than in the old days when we talked about radio.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Reg Grant: There’s so much more going on in audio: audio podcasts and a myriad of other applications.

Darrell Bock: Mix, how you mix the sound in a service and all that kind of stuff?

Reg Grant: Yeah and how you shoot the stuff and it’s like this, the cameras.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I actually have a son-in-law who has done both audio in the context of service and now does video out in the public square. He goes to sporting events and helps to run the equipment that does all of the instant replay and that kind of stuff.
Reg Grant: Well, there you go. That’s that second path. If the person isn’t going to go into the local church, but they want to go into a more secular environment or parachurch environment, that’s that other path. And they can take this technical expertise out into the marketplace and make a difference for Christ out there.

Darrell Bock: So your goal is not merely to train people who end up necessarily ministering in the church. They can end up ministering anywhere.

Reg Grant: Yeah, the key is ministry.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Reg Grant: And the environment in which they minister is broad and variegated.

Darrell Bock: Okay, so we have writing and presentation and worship, and that’s the core of the media arts program. How long a program is it?

Reg Grant: It’s a two-year program, 67 hours, so it’s a hard two years, easier three years or two and a half years, and we have 15 hours of electives built into that 67-hour program.

Darrell Bock: Great. Well, I appreciate you overviewing that for us and getting a sense of kind of where you’re coming from. Talk about your own experience in the arts. Where did it start and what different things have you done? You’ve done a lot of different things, so just share a little bit of that with us so we have a context for the conversation we’re about to have.

Reg Grant: I grew up in a storytelling family in South Texas. My great uncle Rocky Reagan was one of the last great old South Texas cattlemen.

Darrell Bock: Down in South Texas.

Reg Grant: South Texas, yes sir. And we celebrated his birthday on the Fourth of July, and Uncle Rocky was my grandfather’s brother, and he had a little stage, and they would put his old rawhide rocker up on that stage. And all the grandkids, great-grandkids and great-great-grandkids would sit around him and he would tell stories.
Darrell Bock: So Rocky was a rock for a long time.

Reg Grant: He was a great man and a small man. He always worked cattle, interestingly enough, in a white long-sleeved dress shirt. He always wore that when he was working cattle. I have pictures of him doing that. He would tell stories, and we were just fascinated by his stories, so I caught the bug as a very small child. And then my dad always told us stories. One night it would be Zane Grey. One night it would be Shakespeare and one night it would be make-up. And we just, my sister and I both, loved hearing my dad make up stories, and Dad got me to start telling stories to families at family gatherings. And from that point on, it took off and I started acting when I was about nine.

Darrell Bock: So you say he made up stories, so these are stories that he created that were variations on themes of what you’re used to or they could be all over the map?

Reg Grant: Oh, they were all over the map. I remember we were at the end of a seven-year drought in South Texas in 1959.

Darrell Bock: Okay, that’s a lot of dry land.

Reg Grant: It’s a lot of dry land. It was really a horrible drought. I mean, as far as you could see, you couldn’t see anything or very little green. Nothing on the ground. Trees occasionally but nothing on the ground. And I remember one occasion when I heard thunder, and I remember clearly wondering what that was. It was the first time I had seen it rain, and Dad came into the bedroom where my sister and I were sleeping, and he scooped up my sister and carried her. I went barefoot because there were not stickers. There was nothing, no stickers to grow. We ran down to our old tin barn and Daddy said, “Just listen,” and we lay back in the hay.

And the pigs were over there, and the horse was over here, and the cattle were over here, and we lay back in the hay and just listened to that rain on the roof. It was like my dad had the ability to just transform anything. In that case it became a tin cathedral and we just listened, and he told us some stories there laying back in the hay about Sammy Blue Jay – Sammy Coyote it was. Billy Blue Jay I think it was, and they were all farm animals. His stories all had the animals that we grew up with, and I grew up telling those stories. And I should say too my whole family was storytelling, but the community was a storytelling community.
Darrell Bock: Now, where is this in South Texas?

Reg Grant: It’s in Live Oak County. It’s named for all of the beautiful live oaks that grow down there. Oakville is my hometown.

Darrell Bock: Population?

Reg Grant: Three hundred on a good day. It’s tiny. It was the county seat. It was founded in 1856 and remained the county seat.

Darrell Bock: For what? Four people?

Reg Grant: No, back then it was much larger.

Darrell Bock: Oh, really?

Reg Grant: Yeah, it was much larger. What killed Oakville was when the train came through in 1950, it went. There are some stories about bribes …

Darrell Bock: Yeah, we probably shouldn’t go there.

Reg Grant: … that went over a little bit farther to the south and to the west, and George West.

Darrell Bock: That killed Oakville, huh?

Reg Grant: Killed Oakville, yep, yep, but it was a great place.

Darrell Bock: So that’s as a child so what about when you hit college and that area? What art and media experience do you have?

Reg Grant: Mainly theater. Mine was mainly theater. My high school teacher, Maryann Pavlik, would take me, set me aside in a little room and she told me – she’s tough. Still going, still going. And she said, “Reg, I will work with you as long as you’re serious about this. The minute that you’re not serious about this, that’s our last day.” And for six years I had her from seventh grade all the way through the end of high school. She moved up to high school when I went to high school.
And she trained me to listen, to really hear words. I could tell a story but I didn’t understand about the rhythm and the cadence of words and the beauty of poetry. She would put a tape recorder in front of me and she’d say, “Okay, now, here’s a poem. I want you to read it into this tape recorder.” And she would come back in 20 minutes and she’d play the tape back and she’d say, “Now, why did you pause here? Look at the construction of this sentence. There’s a comma here. Why didn’t you pause? It’s a thought break.” She did that for me for six years. And when I went to college, I went on a scholarship, an acting scholarship, largely because Maryann Pavlik poured her life into me in those early days.

**Darrell Bock:** And where’d you go to college?

**Reg Grant:** Texas Tech. Go Raiders.

**Darrell Bock:** Woo, okay, all right. So you’re Low Buck so you went from South Texas to North Texas.

**Reg Grant:** Yeah, boy, I was in love with a little girl up there and we had a wonderful time there at Tech. In those days there was usually an acting core of students who would go through together, and then they would sort of pass off the scene, and I hit it just right as this old acting core that had been there much too long was leaving the set, and I came in at a really good time.

**Darrell Bock:** You were part of the newbies.

**Reg Grant:** Yeah, I got to do between – I had it added up at one time – between 25 and 30 shoes at Tech in four years, and it was just a great experience. Ron Schultz was the director in those days, great director.

**Darrell Bock:** Now you haven’t just acted. Your acting is famous on our campus because you have reincarnated all kinds of poor souls of our past, Lewis Sperry Chafer being among them. But beyond acting, what else have you done that’s involved with the arts?

**Reg Grant:** I got to work with RBC Ministries up in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Darrell Bock:** Sure.
Reg Grant: The old radio Bible class.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, Jeff Baxter’s up there now.

Reg Grant: Jeff Baxter, yes, and Fred Hollis. The great team that they have together. As a matter of fact, Jeff just stayed with me. Jeff and Sandy stayed with me last weekend. They were down visiting.

Darrell Bock: They do all kinds of video as well as they’re responsible for all kinds of things. I’ve done a ton of video with them related to biblical themes, so it’s a fine organization.

Reg Grant: It is. They’re people of high integrity, and I was – for lack of a better term – like a field producer for them for about ten years. We did local and international shoots, and I would be on those shoots. Sometimes I was acting. Sometimes I was coaching talent. We had one in particular where Dr. P, Dr. Pentecost, went over to Israel in 1985 because we thought Dr. P was kind of getting up in years, and we ought to try to do something before he faded from the scene.

Darrell Bock: He’s still here. He’s still fading. He’s still here and fading.

Reg Grant: It’s been a long fade, and he’s just going great and he’s teaching, and we got to go to Israel with him and shoot the Life of Christ and I was like his attaché.

Darrell Bock: That was in the 1980s.

Reg Grant: ’85, yeah it was in ’85 with Jeff and Fred and the boys.

Darrell Bock: I remember when that took place.

Reg Grant: They were here then. Jeff was here then. And being able to be with these men, these godly men like Dr. P, I tell you one of the greatest things about being with him and with these other people, it’s all part of this media arts environment. We were shooting once on the Mount of Olives, and we had a shot set up in the early morning where it’s just opposite of Stephen’s Gate where we think perhaps the soldiers exited to come across the Kidron to get Jesus from Gethsemane. And it was my job to prep Dr. P and give him the cue to go, and so the cue is “action.”
**Darrell Bock:** Prep didn’t mean prep him for what he was going to say but for timing.

**Reg Grant:** No, prep him for timing and make sure he had his makeup on and make sure he was comfortable and things like that, so he was oh, 30 or 40 yards away, and I saw him looking right across the Kidron at St. Stephen’s Gate, and I said, “Okay, Dr. P, you ready?” And he nodded and I said, “Okay, and action!” And he paused and nothing happened. And I looked up at my DP, at the director of photography, Fred, and I said, “We’ll do it again.” “Okay and action!” And nothing happened. And I looked down and he took out a handkerchief and he had to wipe his eyes. He was weeping. It was his 15th time to Israel. This wasn’t a new experience for him.

**Darrell Bock:** Yeah but it was still moving.

**Reg Grant:** He’s so connected to the story and to the land and to his Savior that we were witness to the ongoing transforming effect of a man whose life has been given over to serving Jesus Christ. And we got to see it because we had the privilege of recording it and putting it out there for people to enjoy from then on.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay so you’ve done acting. You’ve done the technical side of media arts. I know you write, so where did that come from?

**Reg Grant:** Oh boy, I think it’s combined with film. My love for film and my love for writing happened sort of at the same time. When I was a boy, there were two films that influenced me for the rest of my life. And I’ll show you how that relates to the writing part of it. When I was about ten, I saw a film called *Lost Horizon* with Ronald Coleman, an old 1937 I think it was film, and I believe he won Best Actor or it won Best Picture, something like that. Well, that film made me want to be an actor. Like the next year, I saw another another film that was called *Good-Bye, Mr. Chips*, and it was a wonderful film, and that film made me want to be a teacher. I was about 11. Those films stuck with me so much, and I fell in love with the words in the films, and I started writing as a result of viewing those films. I started writing little essays, and I became the editor for The Short Horn, which was the newspaper in my junior high school.

**Darrell Bock:** Oh, wow.
Reg Grant: Became the editor of that and then did other writing things. Well, years rolled by and I’m writing mostly novels. I’ve written two textbooks, a couple of novels. And we were shuffling around some books on my bookshelf at the house. And you know how when you’re in, Darrell, you’re in a bookstore and you see a book and you think yeah, I’m going to get that book. I’ll read it someday and then you put it on your bookshelf and it’s ten years later and you haven’t read it yet. I was going along and I saw the book <em>Good-Bye, Mr. Chips</em> on my shelf. I didn’t even remember buying it. And I thought, I’m just going to read that book, and I pulled it off, and I was moving down the shelf, and on the same shelf was another book that was <em>Lost Horizon</em>. I had bought both books separately years before. I looked on the spine of the book. They were both written by James Hilton, and I had no idea that he had authored both books. That said to me there is something about this. There’s some resonance going on between a reader and some writers with whom they …

Darrell Bock: Connect.

Reg Grant: … match up, they connect, that made me say okay, there’s somebody out there that might read one of my books that would be inspired to give their lives to the Lord in a self-sacrificing loving way. And if I can just influence one person to do that, then the ripple effect will take care of itself.