The Challenge and Dilemma of Being a Christian in the Arts

Part 3 of 5: Stories Mirror the World and Invite Reflection
with Darrell L. Bock and Reg Grant
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It strikes me – I’m a novice – but it strikes me in thinking about this that, again, the backdrop of cultural engagement is that we get a lot of stories that are told to us in the culture. Now I’m talking about written by anybody. I’m not necessarily talking about written by a Christian. And the moral premise in the story is some form of declaration of independence if I can say it that way, some form of affirmation of particular human practice or human condition or whatever that almost screams “I’m free” with a lack of accountability and a lack of groundedness in some cases. Again, to create this view of a world that is both a reflection of the way many people will live but also in some cases to create space so that people can live in places where they might not go otherwise. It seems to me that that’s often the message that we’re getting so that the challenge – I am wrapping this into a big question – but the challenge on the other end is to write as creatively, if I can use that word, and as effectively about a different kind of story with different kinds of moral premises.

Yeah, I think that that’s our challenge is to find out, is to develop – what we try to do here in the program – to develop a theological and biblical grid that allows you to not only interpret the data that’s coming to you but interpret the data that’s coming out of you so that you get an idea, and you say okay, I’m going to do a biblical theology on this. Is this consistent with the biblical witness? Is it something that I really want to put out there or am I creating as the world does in its constant striving and kicking against the goads? Is there something in this that is not only true but aesthetically pleasing that is going to help influence my culture for the cause of Christ?

And as a believer you have an infinitely deep well of creativity available to you through the person of the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus and the Father all inhabiting, so that what comes out has the potential to accurately reflect the big T truth. But if we don’t have this biblical and theological understanding informing our production, then we’re at loose ends. We’re not sure how to compose all of this information, all of this wellspring of creativity. We’re not sure how to package it, if I can use a secular term, in a way that is going to be both aesthetically pleasing so that you make money at the box office because you do need to make a living doing this; and doesn’t preach in the bad sense, doesn’t take a soapbox, stand up on it and scream at the society; but gets the message across in a way that is attractive and at the same time doesn’t compromise our position.
Darrell Bock: You’ve said things – I’ve got about three different questions. I’m not sure which one to ask first, so I’m going to try and put one of them in a cache back here to go back to because I do want to go there, but I want to ask you this: When Christian writers write, you use the phrase “soapbox.” There is a sense in which when you engage... I’m going to use this model: the challenge of the Gospel is to offer an invitation in the midst of a challenge that says “you can’t fix yourself.” And in the midst of offering that invitation, in the midst of that challenge, you’re trying to get the person who doesn’t have Christian roots necessarily or Christian background, you’re trying to get them reflect on both how they live and how they can connect to a transcendent. Now I said that very abstractly, but my point is that there’s a tension there, and the tension in doing that is if you’re on a soapbox, you just tell. I’m going to tell you what to do.

Reg Grant: It’s not a conversation.

Darrell Bock: That’s right. It’s not a conversation. But what you’re saying is the arts in many cases to be effective at getting to reflection, genuine reflection that reaches down and gets your gut, has to put it in such a way – I’m going to say it this way – that it’s subtle, that it leads you into reflection and to pause as opposed to kind of slapping you in the face. Is that a fair metaphor to be working with when we talk about the arts?

Reg Grant: Yeah, I think so. I think it has to come out of reflection as well. When Betty Edwards was writing her book Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain and she wrote a companion volume to it, Drawing on the Artist Within – both of them excellent books – and I try to get my students in my writing course to read those books that are art books because her technique is exactly what we’re teaching here. In surveying different creativity approaches and creative problem-solving approaches, she said in Western culture the No. 1 missing ingredient, whether it was a three-step program, a five-step program, ten-step program, didn’t matter. The one missing ingredient was time for reflection, was time for meditation in the composition of the art, whatever venue it was in and whatever form it took.
So what we need to do if we want people to reflect on our work is it needs to be borne out of reflection. It needs to be borne out of a careful consideration of all of the elements, how they go together, what we’re saying, how we’re saying it, how we package it and then to pace it in a way that allows for reflection in situ, that is, in the place where they encounter the art but also after, after they encounter the art.

**Darrell Bock:** So it has an impact. It has a lasting impact.

**Reg Grant:** Yeah, exactly. Great art, like if you go to see a Matisse or you go to see a Gauguin or another great painting artist, or you go to see Mako Fujimora. You enter the exhibit space and you encounter it for the first time. You see Water Lilies for the first time, Monet’s Water Lilies for the first time, the big one, the huge one in New York. And you say, this is incredible. This is great and you stand there. Most people stand in front of an average painting at the DMA, at the Dallas Museum of Art for six seconds, and then they move on. It’s not reflective time.

**Darrell Bock:** That’s me oftentimes. I say I’ve got to get through this exhibit.

**Reg Grant:** Well, but the thing is that the great ones invite a return visit.

**Darrell Bock:** Or a picture.

**Reg Grant:** Or a picture, that’s right, that’s right. You want to own this in some kind of digital format or something that I can reproduce and put up over my couch so that I can look at it and reflect on it and appreciate different things about it along the way.

My son Nick and I were in New York when he was little, really little, prior to reading age. We went down into the subway. We were on our way to the Met, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and for some reason Mom wasn’t there. Lauren was doing something else with the other kids. It was just Nick and Dad. We went down into the subway, and if you’ve been in the New York subways, which I know you have, you sometimes see things spray painted on the walls that are not very nice. Well, there was a really bad thing spray painted on the wall, but it was spray painted in neon orange and green. And Nick went over to it and he said, “Dad.” And I thought oh, but he couldn’t read. He said, “Look at the pretty colors. Isn’t it beautiful?” And I said yeah, Nick, that’s pretty. Let’s go get on the train and we’ll go look at some more pretty colors.
So we got on the train, went over to the Met, got out, went in, and it was a Monet exhibit. And we were going in, and he was looking at one of the small versions of Water Lilies and you know what he said? He said, “Dad, look at the pretty colors.” At that age he didn’t have the ability to distinguish or to discern, but I said Nick, yes, pretty colors but look, there are other things to appreciate about it. There’s design and there’s order and there’s composition. I didn’t use the word composition but I wanted to invite him to appreciate –

Darrell Bock: Go beyond the colors.

Reg Grant: Yeah, go beyond the colors and just see how much, how deeper and more three-dimensional this image was even though it was presented in a two-dimensional space than what he had seen down in the subway.

Darrell Bock: You know, I don’t want to turn this into an art appreciation podcast, but it strikes me – things like the Mona Lisa. Most people walk up to the Mona Lisa when they see it for the first time, and they go, “I had no idea it was that small.” They think because of its reputation, what they’ve heard about it and the pictures they’ve seen, this must be a big painting. And they walk in and, of course, what grabs you about the Mona Lisa are the eyes, and most great paintings that are portraits, there’s something going on with the eyes or there’s something going on with the way in which the person is presented that draws you and you go, “I’m not just looking at a face. There’s almost a soul that I’m seeing as I look at this” that causes you to pause to the point where, of course, what they ask about the Mona Lisa everyone asks well, “What is she thinking about?” which I always think is a strange question to ask of a painting. How does paint think?

Reg Grant: I don't know but isn’t it interesting that it engenders that? That it invites that kind of reflection because it’s the enigmatic smile. It’s what’s going on in the eyes. What is she – it makes you ask the question. It invites you to participate.