The Challenge and Dilemma of Being a Christian in the Arts

Part 4 of 5: The Calling of a Christian Artist in the Media
with Darrell L. Bock and Reg Grant
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**Darrell Bock:** My point here is – and this is really why I wanted you to talk about this and to talk about it from a cultural engagement standpoint – is to have us think about and reflect on what it is that the arts is designed to do, what it is that the artist is called to do, and that the artist is called to do it oftentimes in ways that isn’t explicit but implicit because of what he’s driving at. He’s driving at a participation and he’s driving at a reflection about the mirroring of life or life’s potential in such a way that the person isn’t told oftentimes but is shown. And it’s showing whether we’re talking about video or we’re talking about words. What you’re doing is you’re trying to show the person through the expression and get them to think about things perhaps in ways they haven’t thought about it before. Is that fair?

**Reg Grant:** Yes. We’ve used the word reflection a lot, and reflection is a bounce-back mechanism. As an artist, I want to emulate the Lord Jesus in his life here on earth so I start there. I look at the life of the Lord Jesus. How does that apply to me as an artist, the way that he’s wired me? In the book of John there are several occurrences where Jesus says, “I never speak anything that I don’t hear the Father speak first. I don’t do anything that I don’t see the Father do first.” He is completely dependent on the Father, and he is absolutely and accurately reflective of the Father. But it is not in a way that I think is – when we would think about if Jesus was in the carpenter shop and Joseph was showing him how to cut a board and Joseph says, “Okay, son, this is how you cut a board like this,” and Jesus watches him and he copies him. It’s not that in relation to Jesus and his Father.

It is a mirror, and the closest word that I can come to is “mimesis” the Greek word memesis. It is a mirroring theologically because when you’re in a mirror and you see movement, who moved first? Well, it’s at the same time. They move at the same time. You can’t separate them in time, and you can’t separate them in purpose or function. So you see, when the Father moves, Jesus moves. When the Father speaks, Jesus speaks. But it’s not a look and copy. It is they are so one, so much one that when one moves, the other moves. And what does Jesus pray for us in John 17? That we may be one even as he and Father are one. Not that we may become God but that we may become one in purpose and so immersed in the character of our Lord Jesus that when he moves, we are motivated to move.
**Darrell Bock:** But here’s a question that comes up that I think gets at kind of the core of the challenge at the same time. When you do art and when you talk about life, life is messy – there’s a lot of bad, there’s a lot of evil, that kind of thing. Most people when they think about Christian art think about a very – I can only describe what I’m going through here – a very pristine, very pure, very puritan kind of story, okay. But the problem is if that’s the only thing you’re writing about, you’re not engaged with the world in which people live. So sometimes I hear Christians say, “Well, Christians shouldn’t read this book because it has this kind of immorality in it.” Okay, in thinking about art, how do we sort that?

I’ll take a simple one that everyone has to go through probably when they go through elementary school, *The Scarlet Letter*, okay? Great piece of literature challenging people to rethink how they think about the adulterer. You talk about reframing a moral perspective and a book that’s had impact, and almost anyone who’s in any middle school or upper school English program is going to read that as one of the great novels ever written in America.

**Reg Grant:** Not only thematically but aesthetically.

**Darrell Bock:** Aesthetically it’s the whole shootin’ match, that kind of thing. But it’s in the middle of the messiness of life, if I can say it that way. I’ll ask it this way. You’re a Christian parent and your school assigns your middle-school age child *The Scarlett Letter*. Are you going to go to the school and say, “I don’t want my child reading that because of the subject matter,” or are you going to handle that a different way? How do you deal with art that’s involved in something like that?

**Reg Grant:** I try to teach my kids that, as my mentor here John Reed was fond of saying, all of life is an adjustment and you adjust based on the maturity level of the kid. No two children are the same. You adjust based on the principle that if exposure to a piece of literature would tempt Child A to sin in that way, if you know your child and you know that exposure to that literature would open a door for temptation, you’ve got a serious decision to make because if you allow the child to encounter that literature, then you’ve got to be having ongoing conversations with that child and probably with that child’s teacher even if the teacher is a secular teacher.

But the goal that I tried to get across to my now grown children, same ages as yours, was that they needed to be prepared when life, which is not scripted, presents you with …
Darrell Bock: And is not pristine.

Reg Grant: And is not pristine. It’s messy. So this is how I got it across to my kids. There’s a great, probably the greatest Russian director ever in the history of the world is Constantine Stanislavsky. I mean, the guy’s just unbelievable. Lived at the end of the 19th century into the early 20th. Stanislavsky had a thing that we wound up calling “method acting.” And the basic idea is the more completely, the more fully you are immersed in the character that you are portraying, then when an unexpected event happens on a stage where it is scripted, you will have been so immersed in that character that you will respond appropriately to that character.

Darrell Bock: That’s your adjustment.

Reg Grant: That’s your adjustment. Well, all of life is an adjustment. All of life is impromptu. We don’t have a script, so the key to an appropriate response to *The Scarlett Letter* or *Les Mis* or whatever artistic thing comes into your life, is to say, “I want to be so immersed in the character of Christ that when presented with an opportunity to provide an improvisational answer, it will be consistent with the character of the one with whom I am identified. So I will reveal Christ in all of these impromptu situations no matter how messy they are so that ultimately the circumstance ceases to matter. Ultimately, I don’t allow the circumstance to dictate my response. My response comes to whatever circumstance based upon my identity in Christ.

Darrell Bock: In fact maturity is probably the ability to deal with whatever gets dealt you.

Reg Grant: Absolutely. That’s why Paul could say, “I’ve learned to be content with a little or a lot.” The circumstance didn’t really matter for him. It was his identity in Christ.
Darrell Bock: Okay, I have one final direction I want to go because a lot of what we’ve done in this, and it’s just kind of the way the conversation is going, it’s kind of pitted Christianity and the world almost at odds with one another in the midst of the arts. But I think it’s fair to say that the arts – and I’m talking about the arts in general now, not Christian artistic efforts – has been a source of terrific inspiration over the years, whether you think about music or you think about painting or whatever. There are moments that come out of a human being that’s made in the image of God, where depiction of what life is really like that really shine through. The thing that’s been in the back of my head is a movie like Schindler’s List, okay. What is it that makes Schindler’s List or a movie like Schindler’s List so drawing? And you talk about an event portrayed in the midst of a messy human situation. There probably has not been as messy a situation as the Holocaust in our recent life’s memory. And yet, out of this shines this level of human engagement in the midst of all this mess that’s going on around that is powerfully portrayed. Isn’t it true that art when it’s done well, whether it’s coming from a Christian perspective or outside a Christian perspective, illumines the human condition in such a way that we are either inspired or caused to reflect in a way that makes us think about how we should be better people?

Reg Grant: Absolutely and it doesn’t – the art doesn’t have to be produced by a Christian to have that effect. It can be produced by a Caravaggio. We can look at a Caravaggio and the Conversion of St. Paul.

Darrell Bock: My daughter’s favorite artist.

Reg Grant: Really?

Darrell Bock: She was an art history major, and she was an art history major. That’s her favorite artist.
Reg Grant: He is the greatest baroque artist out there or was out there. Drunken reprobate till the day he died as far as we know, but had the ability because God had so gifted him to recognize the truth and translate that truth onto a canvas. Although he never bent the knee to Christ as far as we know, there is one thin hope because the only – just as a side note – the only painting that he signed is The Beheading of John and he signed it. He signed his name in the blood of John the Baptist that’s on the floor of the prison. It’s the only painting he signed, and some people are saying there may have been – it was one of the last ones he did as well – maybe we will see Caravaggio.

I hope so. It’s a thin thread to hang our coats on.

But he had that ability. Tchaikovsky had that ability to translate his passions, which were sometimes homoerotic, into pieces of music that you would play on Good Friday. They’re gorgeous pieces of music, and once you find out the context in which the music was composed, some of my students have a little bit of pause to say, “Well, I’m not sure I would really use that,” and I say why not? Redeem it. It’s beauty. It’s truth. Take it in and use it to glorify God.”

So, yeah, I think when you talk about something like <em>Schindler’s List</em> and something that employs so many of the archetypes that we talked about earlier, so many of them, the little girl in the single piece of color, that red coat, just brilliantly conceived and brilliantly placed and used, I thought. You still have the invasion of a worldview with which we wouldn’t agree. I know the line producer for <em>Schindler’s List</em>. His name is Jerry Mullen. And there was one scene, a questionable scene, in the movie, in the whole context of the movie, that Jerry and other people on the production staff felt did not need to be included in order to make the movie work. And the director, Mr. Spielberg, insisted that it did and they left it in, and I think the movie is worse for it. It would’ve been better had that scene been shot in a different way.

When you use a scene like that, when you compromise your moral integrity in an effort to make that work, it helps the actor or the director who’s a young Christian and doesn’t know whether or not they really want to follow through with this to say “Okay, would I ask my daughter to play this scene? Would I feel comfortable with my wife seeing this scene?” And if nothing else, that will often put a hedge around the kind of material that we would shoot. I would never ask a woman or a young man to perform in scenes like that that would force them to compromise their integrity.
Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, I hope we’ve communicated a little bit of the challenge of what’s involved in the arts in what we’ve done and said today. I’m going to ask the standard journalistic question at the end of a long interview like this. Is there anything that I haven’t said or we haven’t covered that you would like to say about the arts or is there a way you’d summarize what we’ve talked about that would help people think through the arts and cultural engagement?

Reg Grant: I think that I would get a book by Frank Gaebelein to start out. If you’re looking to start out and you’re a young artist or you’re an old middle-aged artist or an older artist and you’re really serious about reflecting a Christian worldview in your art, I would start out with a book by Frank Gaebelein. It’s edited by Bruce Lockerbie. It’s called *The Christian, the Arts and Truth*, and it will give you a good base biblically and theologically for launching into the murky waters of how to decide what to do, how to do it, but it will be crystal clear that whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God.

Darrell Bock: Well, thank you, Reg, for being in with us and we thank you for joining us at The Table today where our topic has been arts and cultural engagement. And I hope that this has been enlightening to you and that you have come to see that arts is far more than just entertainment.