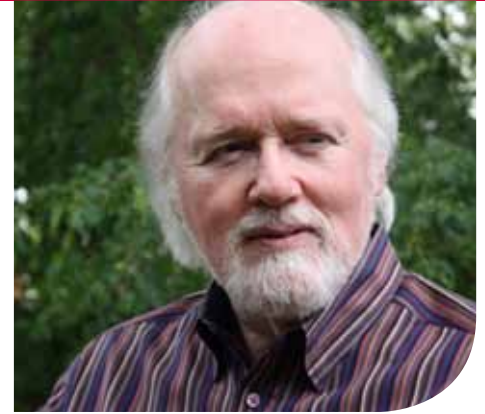


BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

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Arts and the Missional Task John Franklin

PRACTISING HOSPITALITY

Living as we do in a global community, we regularly encounter deep cultural differences, deep religious differences, and great divergences in our social practices. We also experience the attendant fears and insecurities that accompany these differences. In our pluralistic world, we are told that the way to deal with these differences, to diffuse them, is to practice tolerance. My sense is that tolerance has been politicized—it is now merely a social practice designed to keep us civil in our social relationships. Tolerance is not necessarily a bad thing, but I think it is overrated and possibly bad counsel. I venture a perspective on this “virtue” that may well be controversial. I suggest that tolerance—at least the version we are sold in our current culture—is not a Christian virtue.

Ralph Wood, professor of Theology and Literature at Baylor University, wrote an essay on G.K. Chesterton and his view of tolerance that I stumbled upon.¹ G.K. Chesterton, a Christian writer of the early twentieth century, was capable of holding a strong opinion and was not hesitant to express it. Chesterton says, “Modern toleration is really a tyranny. It is a tyranny because it is a silence. To say that I must not deny my opponent’s faith is to say I must not discuss it.” Chesterton described toleration as “the virtue of a man without convictions.”

Nevertheless, tolerance has become a dominating “virtue” in contemporary society. What should be the Christian’s response? The virtue to be invoked

as a Christian alternative to tolerance is hospitality. The decisive difference between these two is nicely stated, if perhaps oversimplified, by Ralph Wood, when he writes: “Tolerance somewhat condescendingly declares that we will “put up with” others even when their views and habits are ones we do not like. Hospitality by contrast offers to “put them up” and allows us to make even our enemies our guests and thus our potential friends” (p.56).

Hospitality as a Christian virtue has been both neglected and trivialized. This is a term we need to rehabilitate—to invest with new meaning and bring back to the heart of our Christian living. Hospitality is a gift we need to rediscover and a practice we need to cultivate. If you think for a moment about what God has done for humanity, you will see that hospitality is a central feature of the Gospel. We are adopted, made friends of God, beneficiaries of grace, comforted and guided by the Holy Spirit, promised life eternal and sustained by divine love. Surely hospitality should be at the heart of Christian mission.

So how might all this fit with art? Art at its best reaches into the deep places of our humanity. We are often drawn to art in ways that we are unable to explain. Because of its power to move us and to inspire us, art is capable of bridging our differences. This capacity is one feature of the hospitable nature of art.

On the other hand, in the West we

are aware that the term “mission” and its practical outworking fall into the category of “politically incorrect.” Mission is seen as coercive, imperialistic, culturally insensitive and disrespectful of others. In short a moral failure. One cannot escape the threads of truth in these claims, but neither can one escape the clarion call of the Christian faith to affirm the universality of the Good News and its missional character. So how do we do mission that is invitational, not coercive; vulnerable, not imperialistic; culturally sensitive, not insensitive; and fully respectful of others.

Might art serve to diffuse the cultural shock so common in our missional work? Could the arts soften the hard edges of our sometimes preachy style? Could the arts provide openings for exploring the big questions of human existence—which are essentially theological questions, questions with spiritual import? Art is certainly capable of bridging our differences and helping us to see what we as human beings hold in common.

It has been typical of some who engage in mission to think of others in merely objective terms—and to consider souls not whole persons. Perhaps artistry can serve to bring us to attend to the whole person. The sensual nature of the arts makes it hard to ignore the bodily reality of who we are as image bearers of God. Moreover, the arts provide a reminder that we are creatures of

¹ Ralph Wood, "Hospitality as the Gift Greater than Tolerance: G. K. Chesterton's *The Ball and the Cross*," from *The Dialogue of Cultures: A Conference Sponsored by the University of Notre Dame, December 1, 2007*. ² Calvin Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves*, Carlisle, UK: Piquant Books, 2000. ³ Said tells this story under the title *Bonding Across Cultural Boundaries*

sign and symbol embedded in culture with diverse means for understanding ourselves and our world. The arts speak to our need to move beyond prose and to step into the world of the poetic, of image, metaphor, drama, movement—all ways of communication expressing more than we can say. Much could be said about the healing power of art, of its therapeutic value, or its connection with the spiritual and its capacity to deepen our understanding of the truth, or to enrich our experience of liturgy and life.

These are preliminary thoughts on the connection between art and mission—I set them out to signal the growing interest in generating conversation on how art and mission might work together. Calvin Seerveld suggests that just as the dove, in coming to Noah "bearing fresh olive leaves," was a sign of hope and newness, perhaps our artistry will be a similar sign in an uncertain world.²

I close with a story about a Palestinian academic and an Israeli musician.

Edward Said, a Palestinian, taught comparative literature at Columbia University and Daniel Barenboim, an Israeli pianist and conductor, is one of the most accomplished musicians in the world. They had a chance meeting in the lobby of a London hotel in 1993. Said, who recognized Barenboim, makes clear that it was difficult for him as an Arab to approach this Israeli musician, but he made his move quickly. He writes, "Some immediate but forcefully profound recognition passed from one to the other of us, as it so fortunately but so rarely does in life."³ There began a deep friendship that lasted until Said's death in 2003. Through his connection with Said, Barenboim was invited by the President of Birzeit University to give a recital. This was the first ever recital at the University and the first by an Israeli in Palestine. Said writes, "...everything that evening was utterly transformed, as all of usmentally scrambled to grasp what new and unprecedented thing had quite amazingly transpired."

An ongoing story comes out of this relationship. In August 1999, Barenboim, Said, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma convened a carefully selected group of seventy-eight Arab and Israeli musicians, aged eighteen to twenty-five. This led to the forming of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which travels the world making music with its mix of Palestinian and Israeli members from many countries. The social, cultural and religious differences are somehow transcended in the commitment to making music together. In this they express a unity that seems so elusive and even impossible in the ordinary political oppositions between these two cultures. Art created a situation in which tolerance, merely giving over each group to their own opinions, was transcended. Hospitality, which must ensue as they labor together in their music, is a result ●

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