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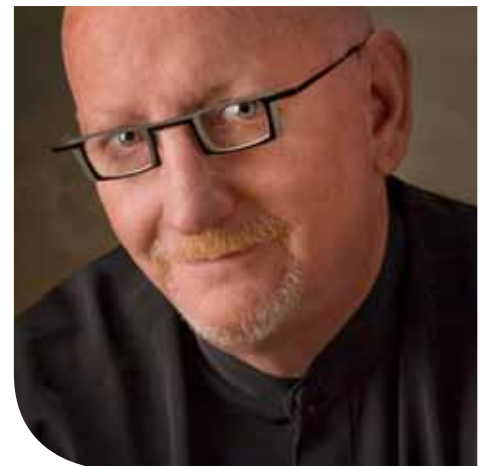
ART AS AUTHENTIC WITNESS

In mid-sixties Britain, when “Beatlemania” was all the rage and contemporary Christian music was in its infancy, a rock group called The Witnesses emerged onto the scene. I was the drummer in the band. The name defined our identity and our mission. We were making and playing music to the glory of God. It was our response to the commission given by Christ on a mountain east of Jerusalem—to be His witnesses to “the ends of the earth.”

Since that day, witnessing to our faith in Christ has been deeply embedded in the theology and mission of the Church. Yet our understanding and outworking

of this important concept is often flawed. Every Christian, including the artist, is called to be a witness. What does it mean to be a witness for Christ? Should artists witness through their art? What makes a work of art an authentic witness?

The mandate to take the message of the gospel to “the ends of the earth” was initially carried out through oral stories, passed down from those who had actually witnessed them. Witness is bifocal in its connotation: it involves knowing and making known. A witness is one who has information or knowledge and can therefore bring to light or confirm something.



In the context of Christian mission, to witness is to announce the good news of the gospel. The apostles Peter and John declared, “We cannot stop speaking of what we have seen and heard.” For believers, these two components are inseparable. We are compelled to make known_ to others what we ourselves know. This is authentic witness.

¹ Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York 1995), p. 84. ² Frank Whiting, *An Introduction to the Theatre* (New York 1978), p. 105.

On another mountain, in an earlier time, the divine lawmaker gave a commandment that is fundamental to any ordered society. He declared, “You shall not bear false witness.” If authenticity is the hallmark of true witness, false witness occurs when witness is inauthentic. This includes testifying to what we do not know or adding to what we do know.

The most powerful testimony to the truth of the gospel is the witness of the community life of the Church and the daily lives of its members. Too often there is a “disconnect” between verbal and behavioral witness, leading to accusations of hypocrisy and a lack of integrity. To give the impression of always “having it together” is to deny ourselves the possibility of authentic witness, however spiritual we may think we appear.

In an age when things are often not what they seem, truth is elusive. When words are parsed, visual images manipulated, and spin doctors practice with surgical skill, authentic witness can be a lonely voice crying in the wilderness of the non-contextual sound bite. Neil Postman writes in *The End of Education*,

To use language to lie and to blur distinctions, to say more than you know or can know, to take the name of the truth in vain—these are offenses against a moral order, and they can, incidentally, be committed with excellent pronunciation or with impeccable grammar and spelling.¹

The issue of authentic witness must be confronted in the world of the arts. In

his “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the English poet John Keats declares,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to
know.

This beautifully constructed language disguises a distortion and in the process disqualifies its own view of reality. A lie can be beautiful. The form can be executed with the highest level of technical excellence and artistry and the meaning still be a lie, a distortion. When art is a true witness there will be an inner witness to the truth of the artwork. To use T.S. Eliot’s phrase, it will have a “ring of truth” to it___.

In the rush of daily life, we look at many things, but “see” very little. Frank Whiting captures this lack of awareness when he writes, “Most of our lives drift along in a hubbub of the trivial, the confused, and the habitual, our vision numbed by the blind staggers of conformity.” He goes on to describe those eye-opening moments of revelation when “the trivial, confused, and habitual disappear and an awareness of meaning and beauty sweeps over us.” He concludes, “It is with moments such as these that great art deals.”²

These “moments” can be so striking that there is a compulsion to express or recreate what has been witnessed. When a fragment of life comes into focus, artists seek to capture it on a canvas, in a dance, through a theatrical work, in a musical expression, or in a literary form. As they show their work, they hope others will “witness” something of what they have “seen.”

One function of art is to make the familiar appear unfamiliar. This progression from familiar to unfamiliar would appear on the surface to contradict the idea of authentic witness. How can transforming something into what it is not help us to see its true nature? Picasso informs the question by the use of paradox when he describes art as a lie that tells the truth. G. K. Chesterton further points out that the role of paradox is to stand truth on its head. As we engage any subject at hand from a different vantage point, it invites us to “see” with fresh eyes and receive new insight.

Brush strokes, movements or gestures, theatrical sets, or musical scores in and of themselves do not constitute reality. They offer windows through which we can observe some aspect of life or human experience. When the actors leave the stage and the theatre goes dark, we are not under any illusion that what we saw was real. Art by its nature has to do with the imagination. When combined with artistic skill and insight, it can have a profound impact on those who engage it. As has been rightly observed, the purpose of a work of the imagination is not to take us away from reality, but to make reality real. When this happens, art is acting as an authentic witness.

The biblical narrative is authentic. It is a true witness of human nature at its best and at its worst. It tells of personal success and personal failure. It does not try to cover up or excuse the depravity of humankind. It never glorifies the sin and the rebellion that it exposes. Rather, it shows God’s broken heart over His Creation and points to

the possibility of restoration through Christ.

For art to be a truthful witness, it must engage all of life—the good and the bad. It should be an honest exploration of the human condition set within a redemptive and transcendent framework. To compromise or distort the truth for misguided motives, political correctness, personal recognition, or

economic necessity is to be a false witness.

In the end, all evidence must be weighed and judged, including that of the artist and the artwork. As Christians, we are called to be witnesses in our lives and in our art. For a work of art to be a true witness it must be deeply authentic in its portrayal of life as we experience it, yet thoroughly biblical in the breadth of its vision and worldview.

As artists, we must embrace God's command and Christ's commission to be faithful witnesses of what we have seen and heard ●

(Colin Harbinson is International Director for StoneWorks, "Forming Artists to Reform Culture" <http://Stoneworks-arts.org> (from Creative Spirit 2003)