

The Whole world's a stage!

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Ask the average Christian to identify what we would consider as “Spiritual Gifts” and more likely than not they will recall those catalogues from Paul’s epistles including preaching, prophecy, healing and the like. Even those who might not so rapidly look to Scripture and likely, at least initially, to similarly define spiritual gifts as those that are principally exercised in maintaining the institutions and rituals of the church.

It is quite interesting therefore to discover that the first reference, as far as I can tell, that Scripture makes to an individual being “filled with the Spirit of God” results not in their becoming a great preacher or prophetic leader, but an artist! The character in question is Bezalel (Exodus 31 v 2), who along with his assistant Oholiab is described by God as having been filled *“with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze”* And it is clear that God does not restrict his anointing to these two specific individuals, for he goes on to tell Moses that all the people whose creative abilities will be harnessed in the construction of the Tabernacle, have been divinely enabled.

Of course we can argue that, like the prophets and teachers of the New Testament, the featured craftsmen are putting their skills to use in the building up of God’s temple. But God is clear that it is not the use to which they are put that defines these skills as Spiritual Gifts, but the source from which they have come. They are gifts of the Spirit in their own right.

Throughout the centuries, the arts have always played an important role in helping Christians explore, understand and express the deepest truths and experiences of our faith. Our great cathedrals with their vivid stained-glass, intricate sculptures and rich tapestries remain some of the finest art galleries in our land, while the music of virtually every age and genre has been inspired by the truths and experiences of Christian Faith.

But for many Christians whose gifts and calling lie in the world of the arts, it is not our churches and cathedrals where those talents will be displayed, but in theatres and galleries or broadcasted through the medium of television and radio. Of course we love to claim the Christian celebrities such as David Suchet of “Hercule Poirot” fame or Sir Cliff Richard, but as in every other aspect of life, for every celebrity there are dozens of individuals who labour and struggle far from the reach of the limelight.

And I suspect that for these folk, their spiritual gift is seldom if ever recognised and affirmed. When I was growing up, I had a friend who announced to the church youth group his intention to become an actor. At first he just wasn’t taken seriously, but as his career began to develop, frankly I don’t think as a church we knew how to cope. The unsociable hours of late-night and evening performances, the need to tour and travel, and of course the fact that from time to time he found himself portraying characters, attitudes and behaviour that are largely frowned upon by Christian people all added to his struggle. His God-given talent, instead of being the means by which he expressed the Spirit’s presence within him, became perceived as the opponent to faith that “pulled him away” from church. This is a story that I suspect could be repeated hundred’s of times.

I fear that when it comes to the world of the arts, the institutions of the Church have built up a serious debt. This is an aspect of the world of work from which we have received a great deal, and yet, I suspect, given relatively little.

It is ironic that as I am writing this article, Christians in my home city of Liverpool, are mobilizing themselves for a major demonstration outside one of our leading theatres. This is soon to be the venue for a live performance of “Gerry Springer—the Opera”, and I am not afraid to say that I count myself among those who are dismayed at the content and subject of this particular production.

And yet as we rush to condemn, I wonder whether we have been so eager to support those theatres and galleries whose productions and exhibitions have enriched our lives and promoted Christian values. Equally, I wonder how many far more wholesome productions have never come into being because the Christians that might have written, produced or performed in them have never been encouraged or sustained in “making the connection” between their work and faith.

It is ironic that the world of the arts has become for Christians both a vital source of enrichment, and the source of so much that dismays us. This, if nothing else, shows how seriously we need to take it, and what a significant part of the Body of Christ are those who work within it. This is a particular reality for someone who seeks to be a church leader in what will become in two year’s time the European Capital of Culture, but I believe is a reality for all of God’s people.

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