

Voices: The responsibilities and joys of being a Christian artist

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Those of us involved with the arts hear continual references to talent. In a Christian context, we speak often of the “gifts” we have been given by God. And as artists, we frequently are reminded of our “talent.”

The enjoyment or appreciation of our work often elicits such comments as, “You are so talented,” “You are so gifted” or “I wish I had such a gift.” These sorts of comments often imply there is no responsibility on our part, that we have been given something special, and all we have to do is accept and use that gift.

There is a real danger in accepting our casual use of these words and their implications. Consider this: Does being “talented” mean it is easy to do what you do? Does it mean those who are not “talented” cannot do what you do?

If the answer is, “Yes,” then I might think the following: If someone is “better than me,” that means she or he is more talented than me. Since I have been given less talent, I can never be better than I already am. Since this is no longer easy for me, I must not really be talented.

This thought progression can easily lead a student to feel there is no point in trying, because others are always going to be more talented. If you believe your “performance” is limited by your lack of a special innate gift or by a lack of general abilities, then there’s no chance you will do the work. But many studies have concluded in order to achieve mastery, we must devote 10,000 hours to the development of a skill.

Accountable for developing our gifts

There is evidence those we have long believed to be prodigies really started acquiring their skills at a younger age and were more devoted to that development, often because of parental demands.

In many respects, these theories debunk the myth of talent and challenge our biblical understanding of God's gifts. Of course, if we read our Bible carefully, we find many instances where we are to be held accountable for the development of our gifts.

The well-known parable of the talents is an obvious example. Each of the first two servants was rewarded for investing their talents wisely and doubling the value of their gifts. The third was punished for hiding his talent and keeping it safe where it could not grow and develop.

God expects us to do our part to develop and realize the gifts he has planted in us as seeds.

God's true gift

While studies can explain the 10,000 hours needed to be "great," what can't be explained is why some people are willing to spend those hours doing the same thing over and over. This is the true gift: God gives us the desire and the willingness to devote our lives to developing our talent. And this is just as true for all of those "gifts" not in the arts.

We use these words regularly in the arts, but everyone has some sort of talent or gift. It is our responsibility to do the hard work necessary to hone and develop the skills God has put within our reach.

A significant part of an educator's job is to help each student recognize his or her "talent" and to teach students it takes a lot of effort to be good at

anything. We owe it to our Creator to put in that effort and strive to become all he means for us to be.

The struggle of Asher Lev

My favorite book is *My Name is Asher Lev*, by Rabbi Chaim Potok. This book was shared with me during my undergraduate years by one of my professors. It tells the story of a Jewish boy who is an artist, despite his father's desire for him to be a "good Jew." As he grows, his art often causes conflict in his family and in his Jewish community. He struggles to remain faithful to his religion and his art.

This book had a huge impact on me, because even though I was in the somewhat sheltered environment of a Christian university, I still could see the conflicts between religion and the arts.

Those of us who are Christian artists or musicians must address the question of what it means to be a Christian artist. There are too many who believe that to be a Christian artist, you have to create Christian art, meaning explicitly religious art.

The church's relationship to art

Historically, the origins of great art often were centered in the church. We celebrated the creative arts as a representation of our Creator God. Stained glass windows were used to tell the gospel story to those who could not read. Plainsong developed to take advantage of the size and structure of churches and cathedrals.

The church of Rome was at the center of European power and was responsible for supporting many of the greatest artists of all time, like Michelangelo and Raphael. But all of this changed with the Protestant

Reformation.

We took great art out of our churches, and art patronage was taken over by noblemen and wealthy merchants. Protestants destroyed much of the Christian art because they were opposed to the decoration of churches and feared the appreciation of visual images and sculptures would lead to the worship of these objects. Many artists ended up “left out” of the church, as our “gifts” were deemed too worldly.

Being a Christian artist

It is not uncommon to find people who believe the world of the artist, actor or musician is one inhabited inherently by sinners passionately pursuing hedonistic pleasures. The reality is every profession is full of sinners.

Those of us called to be artists have the same responsibility to share our faith as those who happen to be ministers, accountants, doctors, etc. We are not called to isolate ourselves, interacting only with other believers. We are called to “go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything (Christ) commanded.”

Christ is to be Lord over all, not just over our times of corporate worship and prayer. He is interested, not just in the “religious” parts of our lives, but in all of our life and work.

EDITOR’S NOTE: See Kathryn Fouse’s [Deep in the Hearts of Texans interview](#) for more about her experience in music education.

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