The Future of Theology amid the Arts: Some Reformed Reflections

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The ferment of “theology and the arts” shows no signs of waning. It burgeons in colleges, universities and churches. Theological internet-watchers observe its fast-expanding presence, and publishers are beginning to see it as a serious niche market. In this essay, I want to home in on just one feature of this encouraging groundswell of interest, especially noticeable in recent years – what appears to be a distinct unease or awkwardness about Protestantism, and especially of the Reformed variety. Undoubtedly it would be easy to exaggerate this, but I doubt if I am the only one to have had the sense at many discussions that although Christians of this ilk are usually welcome at the table, the best they can do is catch up with the profounder and unquestionably more fruitful wisdom of others – which by and large means those of a Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic or Eastern Orthodox persuasion.

The reasons are not hard to see. The weaknesses of the Reformed tradition have been regularly rehearsed: an exaggerated fear of idolatry, an excessive suspicion of the arts (a “frigid Philistinism”), a tendency to distrust all images, a paucity of reflection on beauty, a frequent inability to take physicality seriously, and so on – the territory is familiar to any who explore the field. To be sure, much scholarship has questioned the caricatures and sought to provide more balanced perspectives. But this has not prevented many in the Reformed stream, not least evangelicals, assuming that the theological grass will be greener elsewhere – especially in modern Roman Catholic writing, or in the pre-Reformation wisdom of Aquinas, Dionysius or Augustine.

This eagerness to move outside one’s camp is in many ways surely healthy. When I first put my toe in the Christianity and arts river in the early 1980s, I recall three main currents of writing available: the Roman Catholic (drawing on Maritain, Rahner and others), the liberal Protestant (looking especially to Tillich), and the Dutch Neo-Calvinist (Rookmaaker, Seerveld, with Nicholas Wolterstorff sitting a little to one side). Serious dialogue between these seemed

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relatively rare. Today, the currents converse and mingle freely, often pulling others into the mix: nowadays artistic Reformed evangelicals are as likely to get their inspiration from Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac as they are from Rookmaaker or Seerveld. This criss-crossing of perspectives has undoubtedly borne immense fruit. However, amid the ecumenical conviviality I am inclined to think that shame about parts of the Reformed inheritance has been overplayed, and that the riches that this tradition can hold before the wider Church with regard to the arts are too easily overlooked. Indeed, I believe that in some respects the tradition is sorely needed in the present conversations.

This is not of course to imply that the critical wisdom in this area belongs solely to the Reformed Churches, or that its traits and concerns are wholly absent elsewhere. In any case, the tradition itself is hugely complex and varied. I harbour no assumptions about being able to identify a single monolithic Reformed theology, and have no interest in defending all that has emerged within the tradition. (It is perhaps worth adding that I have never been a member of a Presbyterian or centrally Reformed Church or denomination.) Still less am I interested in shoring up what some would say is a waning Protestantism in our culture. I am concerned rather with certain casts of mind – conceptual concerns and strategies, especially insofar as they arise from close attention to the theological dimensions of biblical texts – that are more typical of the Reformed tradition than any other, and that I believe deserve to be heard in the current debates. If, as some think, we are witnessing a modest resurgence of interest in “Calvinism” (in the United States at least), perhaps that can provoke us to ask whether some of these casts of mind might have rather more to offer the current conversations about faith and art than has often been supposed. In this connection, a remark of Trevor Hart’s about the relevance of strands of Reformation thinking is worth quoting:

[In an age where, for many, aesthetic experience has effectively substituted itself for religious faith as a perceived window onto “spiritual” realities… we may find that Reformation perspectives possess a curious freshness, reminding us of things which some theological approaches to art (not least some in the Protestant tradition) appear to have forgotten or broken faith with.]

I want to explore this “curious freshness” with respect to some key elements of the Reformed heritage. To structure the discussion, I will focus on just three areas of interest I find prominent in much contemporary writing about theology and the arts, at popular, semi-popular and academic levels – beauty, sacrament and language.

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The Allure of Beauty

After seasons of exile, the theme of beauty seems to be enjoying something of a comeback. In artistic circles there are signs of an energetic interest, and the philosophical world has seen a steady stream of studies. Among theologians it is proving ever more popular. Impatient with what Edward Farley calls “the new problematic of beauty” engendered in particular by the eighteenth century’s “relocation of beauty from an external property to a human sensibility,” many want to reinstate beauty by speaking of it as integral to the created world, and perhaps to the identity of God. Hence the appeal of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, of Augustine and Aquinas on beauty, and the increasing fascination with Jacques Maritain. Along with this often goes an almost immediate association of the arts with beauty – to care about the arts, it is assumed, is to care about beauty, and vice versa.

To call any of this into question might seem very odd, even bizarre – especially in a culture so obviously in need of beauty, and when Protestant Christians habitually neglect beauty in favor of the other two “transcendentals,” truth and goodness. Nevertheless, I believe it is worth sending some friendly warning shots across the bow of this fashionable theological steamer. The first is a formal point about the assumed mutual entailment of beauty and the arts. It may well be that beauty (variously defined) can and should be considered a desirable quality in the arts. But to suppose that the presence of, or aspiration towards beauty is a necessary condition for something

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to be considered as art is much more debatable, as is the stronger view that the arts are to be
distinguished from other cultural activities and products by their investment in beauty. It is not
hard to think of exemplary art that most would not call beautiful (e.g. paintings by Max
Beckman; Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*), and not hard to find a significant concern for
beauty in other fields – say, in mathematical physics. Prior to the eighteenth century the links
between what we now call the arts and beauty were not nearly as strong as is often presumed;
certainly, this goes for most of the classic theologies of beauty. Thus I have a certain sympathy
with Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff when he questions a simple correlation of art
and beauty (and the cluster of ideas that tend to be associated with this correlation), and with
Calvin Seerveld from a Dutch Neo-Calvinist perspective, who is also strongly opposed to any
automatic coupling of the two. Exercising a little caution here means we will be much more
likely to notice that when von Balthasar expounds a “theological aesthetics” he is not
principally concerned with the arts (though he certainly engages the arts at length) but with
beauty as a dimension of theology; or that when David Bentley Hart writes so eloquently about
“aesthetics,” he has in mind largely the beauty of God and God’s creation (he makes only
fleeting references to the arts).

The second point concerns the controls shaping our concepts of beauty. The Reformed tradition
is well known for its stress on the noetic effects of the fall, its insistence that human sin does not
rise to the neck and suddenly halt just below the cerebellum – our conceptual categories require a
continual re-formation by the Spirit to be conformed to the pattern of Christ, this re-
configuration being internal to the dynamic of redemption. In this light, I suggest that if we *are*
to speak of beauty as belonging to God and/or the created world, and conceive it (provisionally
at least) according to some version of the so-called “great theory” – where beauty is said to be
characterized, for example, by proportion and consonance of parts, brightness or radiance,
perfection or integrity, and as granting pleasure upon contemplation – these strands will need to
be subject to a constant re-shaping through the Church’s repeated return to God’s reconciling
self-disclosure.

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12 For Wolterstorff, “aesthetic excellence” is characterized by unity, internal richness, and “fittingness-intensity.” He
believes that beauty (which he understands in terms of proportion, consonance, brightness, and affording pleasure
upon contemplation) is not the necessary and sufficient condition of aesthetic excellence. We judge many works of
art as aesthetically excellent that we would not normally judge as beautiful – and still regard them as works of art.
Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 156-
13 Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Toronto: Tuppence Press,
17 Von Balthasar properly insists that it is to the economy of salvation that we must go to discover God’s beauty
(and thus the ultimate measure of all beauty), since the incarnation, death and raising of Jesus display God’s love
in its clearest and most decisive form; here, above all, we witness the mutual self-surrendering love of Father and Son
in the Spirit for the healing of the world. He urges that we “ought never to speak of God’s beauty without reference
to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history.” And later: “God’s attribute of beauty
can certainly . . . be examined in the context of a doctrine of the divine attributes. Besides examining God’s beauty
as manifested by God’s actions in his creation, his beauty would also be deduced from the harmony of his essential
attributes, and particularly from the Trinity. But such a doctrine of God and the Trinity really speaks to us only when
and as long as the θεολογία does not become detached from the οἰκνομία, but rather lets its every formulation
It is this alertness to theological criteria grounded in the self-identification of God that needs to be borne in mind when reading the Reformed theologian Karl Barth on beauty. 18 Barth could not bring himself to speak of beauty as a “perfection” of God: beauty is rather the form of God’s glory in his self-revelation, that about God’s self-presentation that attracts rather than repels, that redeems, persuades and convinces, evokes joy rather than indifference. If we judge him over-cautious, we should not do so without first heeding his anxiety about an “aestheticism” that would turn a pre-set notion of beauty into an absolute to which the God of Jesus Christ is expected to conform. 19

In very compressed terms, then, we might propose that divine beauty be conceived as the form of love of the Son for the Father and the Father for the Son, 20 a dynamic self-surrender that implies neither merger nor homogeneity but the “distance” of love. Insofar as the Spirit is the personal unity of the mutual outgoings of Father and Son, the impulse towards self-sharing in God’s life, and the one who establishes particularity, we might describe the Spirit as the “beautifier” in God. 21 The integrity and proportion of God’s beauty is the ceaseless self-donation of Father to Son and Son to Father in the ecstatic energy of the Spirit. Further, if Christ is the measure of God’s beauty, so also of creaturally beauty. Here – in the one conceived and empowered by the Spirit, born in a stable, dragged to a shameful death, vindicated by God on the third day and exalted as a “spiritual body,” the stuff of the earth made new – creation’s beauty is brought to its culmination. Further still, it makes good sense to see the Spirit as related directly to the axis of attraction and longing, allure and desire which seems integral to our perception of the radiance of both divine and created beauty.

What, then, of beauty and the arts? Even if we reject a necessary mutual entailment of the two, this does not mean rejecting the category of beauty (carefully qualified) as naming a desideratum in the arts. On this, I limit myself to three comments, with the Reformed tradition especially in view. 22 First, a vision of beauty re-formed along the lines suggested above will celebrate the ability of the arts to voice creation’s praise, and thus its beauty, in its very createdness. This was

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19 ” . . . we must be careful not to start from any preconceived ideas, especially in this case a preconceived idea of the beautiful . . . God is not beautiful in the sense that he shares in an idea of beauty superior to him, so that to know it is to know him as God. On the contrary, it is as he is God that he is also beautiful, so that he is the basis and standard of everything that is beautiful and of all ideas of the beautiful.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 656.

20 Undoubtedly, the Reformed luminary Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) has a considerable amount to offer when accounting for beauty in trinitarian terms, whatever hesitations we may have about a Platonic seam in his thought. He writes of “primary beauty,” whose chief instance is God’s own triune benevolence, the mutual generosity and “infinite consent” that constitutes the life of God. Roland André Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), chs. 7 and 8; Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 80-85 et passim; Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, ch. 4.

21 For an exposition of the Spirit in relation to beauty, see Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*.

another key concern of Barth, exemplified in his (doubtless inflated) adulation of Mozart. For Barth, Mozart’s music embodies the ability of creation to praise its Creator, *as created*. This composer, he writes, “simply offered himself as the agent by which little bits of horn, metal and catgut could serve as the voices of creation.”

In another place he says of Mozart:

> The sun shines but does not blind, does not burn or consume. Heaven arches over the earth, but it does not weigh it down, it does not crush or devour it. Hence *earth remains earth*, with no need to maintain itself in a titanic revolt against heaven.

This is not a demeaning of creatureliness in the name of divine transcendence, as is so often thought; the point is that creation fulfils its character precisely insofar as it *is* limited, not-divine (yet fully real); its distinctive beauty and goodness are inseparable from its createdness.

There is another dimension of this worth highlighting. For Barth, Mozart enables creation’s praise while still conceding that its beauty has been marred and corrupted. Some writers and artists broadly in the Reformed tradition have thus spoken of a “broken beauty”: where the artistic evocation of beauty bears the marks of the world’s tragedy that Christ has penetrated and healed at Golgotha. John Walford has shown how some seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painters portray the natural world in anything but idealized terms; here is a beauty that takes account of the marks of distortion (transience, decay, storm damage). Ultimately such beauty
can only be discerned and interpreted aight through the lens of the crucifixion. And this takes us to our second main comment about a re-formed vision of beauty for the arts: insofar as it refuses to marginalize the cross and all that is implicated there it spurns sentimentality, any downplaying of the moral corruption that threatens creation and creaturely activity. God’s self-presentation in Christ intrudes starkly on all sanitized theologies of beauty. Divine love speaks its most exalted word just as it plunges into unspeakable degradation. In his humiliation and execution we witness God’s supreme self-revealing, the ultimate triumph over sin and death. God enacts beauty this way.

Of course, Reformed thinkers are not the only ones to argue in this way, and they have often failed to do so, despite the fact that many of their theological distinctives strongly resist a sentimental ethos. From a Roman Catholic perspective, for instance, Richard Viladesau has written along these lines; von Balthasar has insisted that a theology of beauty can do no other than proceed by way of the cross; and the distinguished composer James MacMillan has consistently sought to defy the seduction of sentimentality through resolute attention to the crucifixion.

A third comment: a re-formed vision of beauty will be charged with promise. If the risen and exalted Christ pre-figures the final re-creation of all things, then earthly beauty at its richest will share in that pre-figurement. Reformed theologian Eberhard Jüngel writes: “The beautiful...carries within itself the promise of truth to come, a future direct encounter with the truth...the beautiful is a pre-appearance directed to a goal.” The agent of this pre-appearance is the Spirit, the evidence and guarantee of the glory yet to come. For a contemporary example of this in action, a recent sculpture from Mozambique comes to mind. It bears the title “The Tree of Life” and for a short time stood in the atrium of the British Museum in London. A tree grew in the garden of Eden but access was forbidden. In Revelation 22 the tree reappears, standing on each side of the river of the water of life that flows from God’s throne, its leaves for the healing accordance with what is seen and heard.” Italics original. There is clearly an eschatological dimension to this third category.

29 Begbie, “Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts.”
30 Viladesau, The Beauty of the Cross; The Triumph of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); “The Beauty of the Cross,” in Theological Aesthetics after Von Balthasar, eds. Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 135-51; “Theosis and Beauty,” Theology Today Vol. 65 (2008): 180-90. He writes: “In Christ our understanding of the transcendental quality of beauty is raised to a deeper and more inclusive level, one that embraces even what appears (from a merely inner-worldly perspective) to be irrational, disordered, lacking in attractiveness and goodness.” He explains: “though the other may not be beautiful, generous self-giving love for the needy other is perceived by the eyes of faith as a (morally, spiritually) beautiful act in the “theo-drama” in which we are involved, a drama created by God’s artistry.” Viladesau, “Theosis and Beauty”: 188. (I am not yet convinced, however, that the metaphysics Viladesau espouses in this and other writings is adequately focused and grounded to support this vision.)
31 Von Balthasar asks: “How could we...understand the ‘beauty’ of the Cross without the abysmal darkness into which the Crucified plunges?” Balthasar, Seeing the Form, p. 117. David Luy highlights the affirmation, “never dimmed” in Balthasar’s work from the outset of his theological aesthetics, “that the horrific event of the crucifixion, the agony of Jesus through his passion and death, represents at once the paradigmatic expression of the divine, and the apex of God’s glory shining in the world.” David Luy, “The Aesthetic Collision: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity and the Cross,” International Journal of Systematic Theology Vol. 13, Iss. 2 (2011): 154-69, 154.
32 See Begbie, Resounding Truth, pp. 176-82.
of the nations. This sculpted tree is constructed entirely from weapons reclaimed after Mozambique’s civil war. We recall Isaiah’s vision of peace: “They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” (Isa. 2:4)34

The Power of Sacrament

The appeal to “sacrament,” the “sacramental” and “sacramentality” abounds in the current theology and arts arena, especially in connection with the visual arts.35 To conceive the arts as in some sense sacramental appears to be a relatively recent move in intellectual history – something rarely acknowledged by those who like to make the same move today.36 In any case, today it has become extraordinarily popular and especially among the artistically inclined who have been reared in “low” Protestant churches and who suddenly finding themselves awakened to pre-Reformation, Roman Catholic and Orthodox sacramental sensibilities.

What motivates this enthusiasm to speak of the arts as “sacramental”? One factor seems to be an eagerness to recover a sense of the physicality of the arts – in particular, to validate the worth and integrity of the physical and its capacity to mediate the non-physical, against quasi-Gnostic tendencies in some theology to undervalue or even denigrate materiality. Another is that the supposed sacramentality of the arts gives us a way of conceiving God’s presence in culture at large – if art by its very nature is sacramental, it can act as a conduit of divine presence far beyond ecclesiastical boundaries.37

Metaphysical concerns can also be at work. Behind much talk of art and sacrament, modernity’s much-discussed “disenchantment” of the cosmos is presumed, the modern drive to reduce the world to a bare, godless mechanism. Today, as Roger Lundin remarks, “Question the wisdom of calling poetry a sacrament, and you will be accused of denying mystery and disenchanting the

37 This is a characteristic stress of the voluminous writing of David Brown, an ardent advocate of the “sacramental” potential of the arts. See note 35 above. According to Brown, music, for example, through its combination of the “ethereal and material” is a finite reality through which “God’s presence in our midst [can] once more be made known.” Brown, God and Grace of Body, pp. 220-22, 247.
world.” The movement known as “Radical Orthodoxy” comes to mind in this connection, with its commitment to a rehabilitated Christianized Platonism and to narrating modernity and postmodernity as a tale of poignant decline. In the late medieval period, Europe is said to have abandoned a “participatory” worldview such that created reality comes to be treated as an autonomous zone of inert, flat materiality. This de-sacralization (or “desacramentalizing”) of the cosmos inevitably leads by virtue of its own destructive logic to various manifestations of nihilism. A counter-ontology is proposed in which the material world is seen as “suspended” in the uncreated immaterial, “engraced” ab initio. These proposals owe a hefty debt to the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), with his call for a renaissance of a conception of the “supernatural” as always already present with and within “ordinary” creation. De Lubac has lately received fervent support from Hans Boersma of Regent College, Vancouver, who pleads that evangelicals, among others, embrace a “sacramental ontology” for the sake of an effective Christian witness in late/post-modern society.

For our purposes, we should note the way the arts are drawn into these sweeping theological vistas, to counter our culture’s drift into a nihilist void. One of Radical Orthodoxy’s original group, Philip Blond, maintains that the painter Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) offers a highly evocative sense of the form(s) inherent to the visible, physical world. Citing two of his works of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Blond tells us that

Even where the face of a human figure is left blank, the colors surrounding it edge around and mark out in the absence of a face the shape of what might fulfill such a request...In this sense, all of Malevich’s work was indeed iconic, a visible testament to the presence of the ideal in the real, and the belief that the artist could depict such a fact.

Blond insists that recognizing such presence calls for nothing less than a theological construal: “it is worldly form as God-given (as culminated and expressed in the union of word and flesh in Christ) that is revelatory, and nothing else...the world shows and exhibits its participation in universal theological forms that can and must be seen.”

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40 Substantial writing on de Lubac has appeared in recent years: see e.g. John Milbank, The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Rudolf Voderholzer and Michael J. Miller, Meet Henri de Lubac (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008); Bryan C. Holton, Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).


characterizes the forthright and impassioned studio director, curator, art historian and theorist, Daniel Siedell. Irritated especially by evangelical Protestantism’s proneness to retreat into like-minded ghettos, he pleads that his readers join him in the contemporary art gallery and strive to discern God’s presence there. Drawing an analogy between the “logic of the icon” in Eastern Orthodoxy and the way in which modern and contemporary art might be read theologically, he contends that because material objects can become bearers of sacramental presence, contemporary art can offer an “embodied transcendence,” a “material spirituality,” of a type consistent with the ancient Nicene traditions of the early Church.  

With regard to music, Albert Blackwell has drawn on a broad range of sources to demonstrate its “sacramental potential” – the term “sacramental” being applicable to “any finite reality through which the divine is perceived to be disclosed and communicated, and through which our human response to the divine assumes some measure of shape, form, and structure.” Blackwell delineates two broad traditions of sacramental encounter that have been applied to music: the “Pythagorean” and the “incarnational,” the former focusing on the intellectual apprehension through music of the world’s mathematical constitution, the latter on the sensual, bodily experience music affords.

I find myself deeply sympathetic to the concerns that make the notion of sacramentality so appealing to many at work in the theology and arts world. At the same time, awkward questions are bound to arise, and they are not eased by the fact that I have not yet found a sufficiently robust and theologically compelling case for extending the language of sacramentality to the practices and products of the arts. That is not to say a case could never be made, only that to my knowledge a good one has not yet appeared, especially with respect to non-visual and non-literary art.

If the Reformed tradition has a particular contribution here, it is its repeated concern to orient (or re-orient) our thinking about sacrament/sacramentality in rather more obviously scriptural directions than we find in much of the “art and sacrament” discourse presently in vogue. Specifically, we are pressed in the direction of what some call a “covenant ontology,” where created reality is resolutely interpreted as grounded in the Father’s love for the Son in the Spirit, which is to say in a manner made possible by, and consistent with what has been disclosed and accomplished in Jesus Christ. Many Reformed theologians have expounded this kind of perspective (with different accents) but with little evident impact so far in the theology and arts world. Much depends here on holding to what has been uniquely enacted and achieved in

Christ – himself the culminating of God’s covenant with Israel and the foretaste of the new creation to come – and on reading the created world and God’s commitment to this world resolutely through this prism.48

I confine myself to just three comments which issue from this, again with a particular eye to Reformed perspectives. The first concerns that heavily-laden word (a close friend of “sacrament”) – “presence.” If we have in view the covenanting God of Israel, dedicated unconditionally to the redemption of all things in and through his Son in the Spirit, then the concept of divine “presence” must be rescued from anything that suggests an inert “thereness,” or a deity of bland infinitude, a nameless “Other.” Ironically, there are potent resources within the arts for helping us to recover a fuller vision of presence – as I have tried to show elsewhere with respect to music.49 For the moment I point to two recent reflections on “presence” by Rowan Williams, who, although not writing from a self-consciously Reformed angle, gives pointed expression to the theological direction I am commending. In a journal on Christianity and the arts, he reflects on the conundrum that “the change associated with Jesus is incapable of

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48 Merely describing Christ as the “primordial sacrament,” while doubtless defensible, is hardly enough if we are to prevent Jesus from being seen merely as the supreme instance of a pre-conceived “sacramentality,” ontologically prior to, and epistemically accessible (by a simple act of perception) independently of him. Reformed theology will at this point press that Christology and union with Christ determined the central content and dynamic of “sacrament”. This is why much of what I am saying about “sacramental” could also apply to the term “incarnational.” “At times, Protestant advocates of the arts in particular have promoted the incarnation as a general concept of divine blessing of the world rather than as a doctrine of the specific redemptive activity that God has accomplished through the person and work of Jesus Christ,” Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, “Introduction,” in The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts, eds. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), p. 10.
representation”, yet “for the change to be communicable it must in some way be representable.” The key challenge here is: “how do you show transcendent difference in the representation of earthly events?” This comes to a head if we consider how we portray Jesus Christ. We cannot represent divinity as something simply added to humanity (“the human with inspirational extras”), nor merely by picturing humanity taken to some extreme. Somehow the artist needs to show how the world is “enlarged” through the coming of Christ, without creatureliness being distorted or overridden in the process. “How does presence alter things? That is what the artist tackling this most impossible of tasks is after.” And this can be achieved very subtly. Through irony, for example, the sheer oddity of the Gospel at work in the world can be shown. Williams alludes to a painting by Roger Wagner, “Menorah” (1993), in which Holocaust victims “are wandering in the neighbourhood of a distantly seen, conventionally depicted crucifixion, the background dominated by...immense towers exuding gas, arranged in the pattern of [a] ceremonial [Jewish] candlestick.” Our world becomes strange, different, “as a result of having this particular stranger, Jesus, introduced into it.” Presence, in other words, is presence for change: God makes things different, and our perception of things different, as part of his judgement and renewal of the world.

In another article Williams warns against imagining that “presence” can be discerned without transformation on the part of the discerner. He finds himself critical of what he calls “the aestheticizing of the notion of divine presence” – where the problem of God’s absence is seen as being that we cannot discern God and need to be educated in the skills that will allow us to perceive or experience the divine or the sacred. This is not by any means a waste of time...but to the extent that it sees the issue as something to do with the latent capacities of the ego and how they are to be fully activated, it carries some difficulties.

The crucial problem is that all too easily an independent, self-directing ego stands at the center of the story, needing to be taught to search for truth. This in turn suggests a passive deity: “the hiddenness of God becomes a sort of accident which could be prevented or surmounted if better conditions prevailed.”

Williams insists that “[d]ivine presence...does not stand still to be ‘discovered.’” Divine presence is the redemptive God at work: it is “the action that constitutes the human self as

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51 Williams, “Presence”: 3.
52 Williams, “Presence”: 3.
54 Williams, “Presence”: 3, 4.
56 Williams, “Divine Presence and Divine Action” (no page numbers – subsequent quotations will be referred to by paragraph [[]] number).
a responding self, as already ‘implicated.’” 59 This action is irreducibly threefold, shaped as it is by God’s own triunity. Williams outlines a subtle account of this momentum: apprehending God’s presence involves being caught up in the eternal responsiveness within God, through the Spirit, sharing in the Son’s self-giving response to the Father’s self-bestowal. 60 This brings with it disruption, a disturbance of the self.

Williams is perhaps at his most Reformed when he comments on the intellectual transformation this entails; there is a danger, he says, of not thinking through “what it means to believe – as classical Christian theology has maintained – not only that God is by definition active in every imaginable circumstance but also that God is more particularly active in the life of the mind.” 62

None of this rules out claims to discern divine presence in the world at large. But, Williams cautions,

where we recognise – as we undoubtedly have to – certain human experiences as moments of openness to the sacred or the holy, to a dimension in reality that is not exhausted by even the fullest accounts of working and function, we have to be wary of turning this into an encounter with something that is essentially just there to be looked at… The holy is what we, knowingly or not, inhabit: more exactly, it is what actively inhabits us as a form or shape of life, the unceasing exchange of life from self to other and back again. 63

60 “The Christian narrative and grammar of God is of an inseparably continuous agency, ‘bestowing’ itself in such a way that it makes itself other to itself; that otherness in turn answers the act of bestowal by returning itself wholly to its source, holding on to nothing but making its identity a gift; and in this reciprocal flow of life, a third level of agency is generated as the act performed by the first two together, not identical with either, nor with the bare fact of their juxtaposition… The central moment, if we can so speak of it, is one in which the unconditioned response to the movement of life into the other becomes generative of a further difference – in which, to use at last the familiar dramatic idioms of doctrine, the Son’s self-giving to the will of the Father releases the gift of the Spirit.” Williams, “Divine Presence and Divine Action,” ¶4.
63 Williams, “Divine Presence and Divine Action,” ¶9. Italics original. Williams concludes that “The role of the Church, then, is neither to go in eager search of experiences of the divine, hoping to produce some kind of evidence for its convictions about God, nor to deny any true awareness of God outside its own practice and discipline. It is to try and keep alive the connection between the disorienting moment of perceiving the holy and the comprehensive narrative and (we may as well use the word) metaphysic of trinitarian activity.” Williams, “Divine Presence and Divine Action,” ¶10.

One way of interpreting Williams here is to see him as wanting to distinguish between two types of contemplation – one which presumes a posture of intellectual distance between self and other such that the self’s mind remains sovereign and firmly in control (even if the language of “disinterestedness” is employed liberally); and another which presumes a radically dispossessive attitude on the part of the knower, resulting in a relation sustained not by the self but by what is known, an affectively charged relation entailing ongoing transformation. Williams is deeply sympathetic and supportive of the latter (as he has shown in many writings) but eschews the former. In this respect
A second comment on art and sacrament: much of the relevant writing is marked by a heavy reliance on certain binaries, especially that of visible and invisible (or the material and immaterial, real and ideal, finite and infinite) in ways that frame the supposed pathology of the human condition and our conception of created reality as a whole. (This is especially noticeable, for example, in the Philip Blond essay mentioned above.) Sometimes the dichotomy is located within the creaturely realm, sometimes between creature and Creator (and the two senses are often confused). To be oriented more scripturally, however, and more resolutely toward the Christological and covenantal, means that the critical ontological distinction is seen to be that between Creator and creation, God and all that is not God, a distinction which is logically prior to any fall or corruption. Concomitantly, the pivotal crisis is not about visibility, materiality, reality vs. ideality, or even finitude, but the moral rupture of God and creature, to which the arts are prone as much as any other human endeavor. The climax of the divine response is not merely an epiphany of perceptible (though veiled) divine presence but a materialized drama of reconciliation: the Son assumes human flesh, identifying with us in the depths of our calamity, journeying through crucifixion to resurrection on the third day. In this way the breach is healed and the covenant renewed. A little while ago, Reformed philosopher Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin offered a pointed critique of Radical Orthodoxy along these lines, centering on the arts. It repays careful reading.\textsuperscript{64}

From this perspective, a multitude of possibilities open up for the arts. To cite just one example, we will be far better equipped to address the positive potential of the arts in contexts of injustice – less inclined to seek divine presence in and of itself, and more likely to be open to the irruptive, novel and transformative possibilities of divine agency, as explored, for example, by Reformed South African, John De Gruchy.\textsuperscript{65}

My third comment: if we do wish to employ the conceptuality that surrounds “sacramentality” as a way of speaking of the potential theological efficacy of the arts, we could do a lot worse than

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\textsuperscript{64} Adrienne D. Chaplin, “The Invisible and the Sublime: From Participation to Reconciliation,” in Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant and Participation, eds. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), pp. 89-106. I have made similar comments about Siedell’s God in the Gallery in relation to Nicene theology, in Begbie, “On the Strange Place of Contemporary Art.” Hans Boersma observes that many evangelicals wish to construe the God-world relation as having “covenantal shape,” but his caricature of this view as “an agreed-on (covenantal) relationship between two completely separate beings” is unfortunate, to put it mildly. Boersma, Heavenly Participation, p. 24. Boersma appears to be confusing covenant and contract, as well as supposing that advocates of a covenant ontology are (generally?) guilty of some sort of deism and of assuming a univocity of being with regard to Creator and creature. Construing the God-world relation in terms of covenant, and centrally in terms of Christ himself, need not in any way weaken a robust vision of creation as being upheld, suffused with, charged with God’s active presence.

turn for assistance to Calvin’s understanding of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, his eucharistic theology. 66 It may have its limitations, but Calvin does at least have the considerable advantage of refusing to presume that the critical theological axis of the Lord’s Supper is about the mediation of the invisible in the visible (though of course this is included), or the inherent capacity of material things to convey divine presence, still less the addition of causal powers to material elements. Rather it turns on the ascended and human Christ’s transformative action among us, by way of, and through our actions with material things. 67 Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ, in which there is no ontological merger, is clearly pivotal here (as in the rest of his theology), along with his account of the Holy Spirit: through the Spirit, the entire eucharistic action becomes a vehicle through which the Church encounters and shares in the ascended reality of Jesus Christ, as a foretaste of the fullness of eschatological life to come. This does not entail a denigration of materiality – whether of the elements or our bodies – but it does open up a way of setting this materiality within the context of an essentially dynamic, Christological and Spirit-driven frame of reference. 68

Pausing for a moment to look back over our discussion of beauty and sacrament, it is notable that issues revolving around the doctrine of creation appear more than any others. It is here I believe that the Reformed tradition can make probably its most telling contributions to the theology and arts conversation today. Needless to say, there is diversity within the tradition here; I am

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66 See John Calvin, Institutioc, IV:14, 17. For sensitive discussions, see J. Canlis, Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), ch. 4; J. Todd Billings, Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. ch. 4; B. A. Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); George Hunsinger, The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us Keep the Feast (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 34-39; Thomas J. Davis, This is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), esp. chs. 3-8. Laura Smit has written a fascinating essay on Calvin’s eucharistic theology, arguing that, along with “[h]is understanding of God’s overflowing goodness” it can provide “the ground for a Neoplatonic metaphysic and aesthetic that is similar to, but also importantly different from, Radical Orthodoxy’s conclusions.” Laura Smit, “The Depth Behind Things”: Towards a Calvinist Sacramental Theology,” in Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation, eds. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), pp. 205-27, p. 206. While sympathetic to an application of Calvin’s insights on the Eucharist to other fields, I am not convinced it can lend support to the distinctive theology of creation that Smit is so keen to approve.

67 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Afterword,” in Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie (London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 221-32, p. 231. In this context, the notion of agency will require careful handling. I have found that many discussions of art as sacramental center around the question: “can music, painting (or whatever) mediate divine presence?” This too easily shifts the focus of attention away from personal agency, divine and human, to the inherent causal powers of a physical object, which comes to be thought of as a quasi-agent. With regard to sacramental theology, Wolterstorff helpfully distinguishes “sign-agent” conceptuality in which new and fresh causal powers are thought to be imparted to the material sign, and “God-agency” conceptuality in which God is the agent of change – in the case of the Eucharist, sealing or assuring us of his promises. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Sacrament as Action, not Presence,” in Christ: The Sacramental Word, eds. David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 103-22. The latter need not render the causal powers of the material object irrelevant or “empty,” but it does shift the center of agency to God and God’s transformative purposes.

68 John E. Colwell, a Baptist theologian, has recently supported making a distinction between “sacraments” (narrowly understood as specific ecclesial rites) and “sacramental,” which he wants to use to refer to a “dynamic” of grace-ful “mediated immediacy” which characterizes God’s own triune being and God’s relation to the world. John E. Colwell, Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005). It is the great merit of this book that Colwell defines his terms carefully so as to avoid what would otherwise be considerable confusion.
obviously being selective.\textsuperscript{69} The key matter, I suggest, is the extent to which we are prepared to pursue a Christological and pneumatological reading of the created world at large. The Reformed tradition has been zealous in upholding and guarding the Creator-creature differentiation, the absolute ontological distinction between Creator and created. When sensitively articulated, this has nothing to do with imagining a gulf between the two, even less with a diminution of the creature. Nor does it entail denying the possibility of communion between the creature and Creator: paradoxically, it is only by upholding the distinction that true fellowship is possible. The Christological orientation of the New Testament should be our guide here: God’s covenant purposes for creation have been instantiated in this person, in a historically achieved hypostatic union of Creator and creature, empowered and enabled by the Spirit. God’s act in Jesus Christ is the outworking of God’s eternal “decision” to reconcile humanity to himself, and as such is the ground of God’s act of creation. Creation out of nothing is therefore not a neutral “let there be” but the outworking of love, rooted in the eternal commitment of the Father to the Son, and of the Son to the Father in the Spirit. Divine transcendence is accordingly to be conceived in gracious and positive terms; God’s free otherness makes his covenant dedication to the world as other possible. Insofar as God is free from the world, God is free for it. Likewise, God’s engagement with creation is for the sake of the flourishing of the creature as created and finite, not its debasement, still less its absorption into divinity. And from this perspective, the world’s tragedy is shown to be at root a moral dislocation that requires a restoration of fellowship or communion.\textsuperscript{70} I am suggesting that it is within a theological environment of this sort that the notions of beauty and sacrament are most fruitfully set, and especially if we want to relate them effectively to the arts.

It needs to be conceded that the history of Reformed theology shows it is by no means uniformly strong on these matters. Karl Barth’s determination stands out above all, whatever questions may be asked of him. Keith Johnson’s acute summary of a key difference between von Balthasar (writing in 1951\textsuperscript{71}) and Barth is telling:

\begin{quote}
[V]on Balthasar failed to see the full implication of what Eberhard Jüngel calls Barth’s “decisive innovation” in his doctrine of creation: Barth’s decision to make the human Jesus of Nazareth the condition for the possibility of knowledge of human being as such.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{69} In my own view, the most fruitful and compelling vision for the doctrine of creation for late modernity along Reformed lines was offered by the late Colin Gunton in various writings. See e.g. Colin E. Gunton, \textit{Christ and Creation} (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1993); \textit{The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997); \textit{The Triune Creator}. Gunton has been criticized on many counts, probably most of all for his highly negative reading of Augustine. But whatever his weaknesses, he had an uncanny and unerring eye for the theological issues at stake in any field, and never more so, in my own view, than with regard to the doctrine of creation. His work in this area has yet to receive the attention it deserves.

\textsuperscript{70} There may well be appropriate ways of speaking of “participation” of humans in God, through Christ in the Spirit, and perhaps in a strongly qualified sense of creation as a whole “participating” through the Mediator in the life of God. Radical Orthodoxy is committed to the notion of participation as applying not only to a saving participation of the believer in Christ, but to a general metaphysics. It is not clear to me, however, that Radical Orthodoxy’s notion of the “suspension” of the material in the divine can do justice to a biblical, dynamic ontology of grace that upholds the irreducible Creator/creature distinction, or to an appropriate distinction between creation and redemption. For discussion, see Smith, \textit{Introducing Radical Orthodoxy}, pp. 74-77 and chapter 6; Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, chs. 8 and 9; Vanhoozer, \textit{Remythologizing Theology}, pp. 280-83.

What von Balthasar failed to realize is that this innovation enables Barth to posit that God’s eternal decision to reconcile humanity in the person of Jesus Christ is the presupposition of creation...For von Balthasar, the relationship between humanity and God is an intrinsic feature of humanity as such by virtue of God’s act of creation viewed in distinction from God’s act in Jesus Christ...Although Barth also believes that creation signifies that the human exists in relationship with God, it does so solely because creation as such cannot be defined in distinction from the covenant of grace.

And for Barth, Johnson continues, “the covenant is not a programme but a person: Jesus Christ.”

The Infirmities of Language

“Where words fail, music speaks.” The aphorism attributed to Hans Christian Andersen gives voice to a recurring sentiment in modern and late modern culture, that the non-verbal arts blossom where words fall short – in its stronger forms, that these arts afford access to a realm that lies beyond the reach of any verbal claims to truth or falsity, a realm language may gesture towards but can never directly mediate. For some this opens up a distinctly theological role for the arts. They are richly meaningful yet stubbornly resist being reduced to language: this surely suggests a prime place for the arts among those who sense acutely both the reality of God and God’s sheer inexpressibility. Where words fail God, the arts speak.

Undoubtedly, very often the backdrop to this intuition is an awareness of modernity’s inflated confidence in the powers of language, in our capacity to seize and order the world through speech and writing. In theology this has all too regularly led to what Nicholas Lash calls a “cataphatic cockiness,” a breezy assurance that our speech and writing can name and grasp the things of God with relative ease. Religious fundamentalisms typically expand their control base through implying that God is in some manner linguistically seizable. “Thus says the Lord.....” The tendency is symbolized by the hyper-Protestant pastor, ensconced in his book-lined office, crafting glittering orations for the pulpit, deeply grateful that most of his congregation have not reached his level of linguistic competence; or by the theologian, graced with the dazzling verbal

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72 Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 202, 205, 206. Italics original. After I delivered the lecture from which this paper emerged, sensing in me a certain sympathy with Karl Barth, a member of the audience asked: “Do you believe Barth would be the man to give a novice Christian artist the theology he or she needs?” I didn’t answer well at the time. Now I think I would reply as follows. No one theologian can give any artist the theology he or she requires; and many questions can, and should be asked of Barth’s (limited) account of the arts. Barth’s inestimable contribution comes not principally from the specifics of what he says about any particular facet of culture, but from the way he repeatedly orients his readers to the energizing center of the Christian Gospel, namely Jesus the Messiah as attested in Scripture, and the way he repeatedly makes us sense the wonder and limitless ramifications of all that has been opened up in Christ. No theologian of the last hundred years has done this more consistently, resolutely and joyfully. Insofar as every artist requires this constant life-giving orientation (and it is hardly an option), it is difficult to think of a modern theologian who will prove a more inspiring and fruitful companion.


dexterity to ensure a senior appointment but whom even her colleagues struggle to understand. The Reformed Churches are hardly innocent here, as Edwin Muir reminds us.

The word made flesh here is made word again
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.\textsuperscript{75}

Straining against this hubristic attempt at control-through-words lies a reverse current moving in the opposite direction, intensely sensitive to the limits of language, not least when it comes to the “Mystery” Muir identifies in his lament. Words are marred not only by finitude but by corruption – “bent,” as Muir puts it. All God-talk, it is said, is a kind of forced entry, a desecration of transcendence, a raid on sacred infinity, and to that extent will almost inevitably lead to some kind of violation of others in the name of the “God” we have supposedly attained and in whose name we too effortlessly utter. The widespread appeal today of various brands of so-called “negative theology” is perhaps hardly surprising.

It is just here that some call in the arts to assuage the anxiety. I have lost count of the number of times I have been told at conferences that the Church has been hidebound for too long by its fixation with language and conceptual abstractions, entwined with corrupting power ploys; that it is time to renounce the iconoclastic drive of (Reformed) Protestantism and recover a sense of the infinitely “unsayable” through a rehabilitation of the (non-verbal) arts. Although certain types of visual art are often appealed to here, the art that is probably favored most in modernity in the face of a widely felt embarrassment with language is music. This appeal finds its most sophisticated and potent expression in the early German Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Wordless music, long regarded by their forebears as inferior to music which is set to texts (because of language’s capacity for representative precision) now becomes exalted not only as the highest form of music, but as the highest form of art. J. N. Forkel claims in 1778 that music “begins...where other languages can no longer reach,”\textsuperscript{76} and Willhelm Heinse declares “Instrumental music...expresses such a particular spiritual life in man that it is untranslatable for every other language.”\textsuperscript{77} Music grants immediate access to that dimension of being-in-the-world that underlies and makes possible all linguistic, conceptual, cognitive and representational activity; indeed, music can mediate the infinite, surging, sacred spirit that courses through all things. The quasi-divine power of music is famously celebrated in a review of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony by E. T. A. Hoffmann in 1810, probably the most influential piece of music criticism ever written:

Music discloses to man an unknown realm, a world that has nothing in common with the external sensual world that surrounds him, a world in which he leaves behind him all

\textsuperscript{75} From “The Incarnate One” in Edwin Muir, One Foot in Eden (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 47. © Faber & Faber.

\textsuperscript{76} As quoted in Andrew Bowie, Music, Philosophy, and Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 54.

\textsuperscript{77} As quoted in Bowie, Music, Philosophy, and Modernity, p. 54.
In these circles, typically the ineffable spirit of the “unknown realm” is seen as coming to its most concentrated expression in the inner struggles and strivings of the human heart, supremely the heart of the composer, a sanctuary we are privileged to enter through his music. Carl Friedrich Zelter writes to the composer Joseph Haydn in 1804: “Your spirit has penetrated into the sanctity of divine wisdom; you have brought fire from heaven, and with it you warm and illuminate mortal hearts and lead them to the infinite.”

We might be tempted to dismiss all this as the quirky hyperbole of an historically remote corner of European modernity struggling with the challenges of disenchantment. But these ideas were to have massive influence in the nineteenth century, and it is not hard to find them today – not least in the Church. There are, for example, “contemporary worship” streams I have worked with that show an extraordinary confidence in music’s power to mediate God’s saving power directly, without words, and where the singer/song-writer/worship leader is revered in ways that bear more than a passing resemblance to Romantic depictions of the priest-like artist – photographed on album covers against the background of some vast sublimity of the natural world, or else lost in the silent contemplation of the heart (the haven to which we are invited to travel). As Roger Lundin has often pointed out (though with relatively little recognition), many evangelicals amidst the arts seem deeply attracted to sentiments that owe rather more to Romanticism than the New Testament.

A full response to these currents is impossible here, and I certainly have no wish to decry them wholesale. Again I offer only some brief comments. The first simply re-iterates a commonplace of classical Christianity, namely that human language has been incorporated directly into the momentum of God’s self-communication in such a way that it is irreplaceably intrinsic to that momentum. This finds its climactic focus in the incarnation – the Word becomes flesh, and our fallen language is integral to that flesh so assumed. Our speech, no less than any other dimension of our humanity, has, in this speaking person, the Word-made-Word-user, been purged and renewed, re-forged and re-shaped. As a result, through the Spirit, a fresh form of communally-embedded speech has been generated, and in due course inscribed as authoritative

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80 See e.g. Lundin, Believing Again, pp. 24-39.

81 It is telling that those at work at the theology-arts interface who advocate a recovery of “the sacramental” seem reluctant to talk about the sacramental role of Christian proclamation. Commenting on David Jones, Wolterstorff remarks: “It is characteristic of someone working within the medieval concept [of sacrament], as Jones does, to ignore the sacramental quality of proclamation entirely.” Wolterstorff, “Evangelicalism and the Arts”: 460. Or again, it is significant that those who speak most fervently about recovering a Eucharistic sensibility rarely acknowledge that among the Eucharist’s ‘physical elements and actions are words. “Contra Marion . . . the ‘real presence’ of the Eucharist depends not only on iconic items and gestures but also on the words of institution (‘This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.’) . . . The personalizing of the divine self-giving does not mean its de-verbalizing.” Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology, p. 103.
text. Christians are those baptized into a new community of speaking, a speaking that, through the Holy Spirit, shares by grace in the language-renewing event of Jesus Christ.

Obviously, all this would take far more space than I have to develop and defend adequately. But in a sense I do not need to, for a steady stream of highly sophisticated Reformed writing along these lines has appeared in recent decades: for example, from T. F. Torrance, Alan Torrance, James Smith, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Kevin Vanhoozer. There are important differences between these writers, but their common commitment to the “intrincisity” of human language to God’s redemptive ways with the world is never in doubt, nor their acute awareness of the baleful effects of modernity’s over-confidence in humankind’s linguistic powers. What is disappointing is that none of this material seems to have found its way into the Christianity and arts discussions. There, all too often theological language is treated as if it could be entirely abstracted from, and was only extrinsically related to God’s reconciling engagement with humanity in Jesus Christ (as if it were merely a humanly originated commentary on, or witness to this engagement), whereupon the (non-verbal) arts are appealed to as alternative communicative media – perhaps even wholly superior media, with the power to generate fresh norms of theological truth.

A second comment: just because language has been assumed into the reconciling purposes of this God, it can never be thought capable of encompassing, circumscribing or in any manner controlling God. A concern for divine freedom vis-à-vis language is, I think, a large part of what drives the suspicion or even fear of language among many Christians at work in the arts, perhaps most of all among evangelicals (and “post-evangelicals”) some of whom have been reared on what is undoubtedly a highly constrictive view of theological speech and writing, in which a certain kind of declarative proposition and a certain kind of representative view of language is assumed to be definitive of “meaningfulness.” In the midst of what feels like an over-secure, over-systematized, word-imprisoned Protestantism it is not surprising that many will run to the arts for refuge, for they appear to promise a much-needed semantic freedom, an allusiveness and openness that the discourses of doctrinal orthodoxy seem to disallow.

Part of the response to this will be along the lines of the comment I have just made, about language being intrinsic to the momentum of divine grace. But that left on its own will likely land in just the place many understandably want to avoid – an over-confidence in the grasp of language. We also need a recognition that the God who appropriates human language directly into his purposes is the God of gracious freedom, who exceeds all that can be spoken or thought, all that can be said or conceived. Today, a stress on the linguistic “uncontainability” of God is

84 James K. A. Smith, Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation (London: Routledge, 2002).
86 Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology.
usually associated with the post-structuralists, and with pre-modern theological traditions on which they regularly draw. But that the finite cannot contain the infinite has always been near to, or at the heart of the Reformed tradition. It is especially distinctive of its Christology (enshrined in the so-called “extra Calvinisticum” – the Son of God becomes human without abandoning heaven), and to a significant extent drives its anxieties about constructing visual images of God. Divine self-disclosure prohibits divine self-enclosure. And this applies to any language appropriated in the process. To be sure, Reformed theology has not always articulated divine freedom in ways that head off the danger of reducing God to an arbitrary will, a deity of abstract, absolute power (potentia absoluta). At its strongest, however, the tradition, in taking its bearing from God’s positive engagement with language, can celebrate God’s uncontainability in language, which is to say, the free, uncontainability of God’s covenant commitment.

Third, it is a commonplace of language theory that by its very nature language is embedded in, and relies upon a host of non-verbal means of interaction with the world (bodily movement and gestures, symbol-making, and so forth), and that these things cannot be dismissed as meaningless simply because they are not reducible to verbal articulation. It is in this context that the non-verbal arts’ relation to language, and theological language in particular, needs to be set. The struggle is to hold at one and the same time that the Church is called to be faithful to the discourse God has graciously appropriated and that other communicative media such as the non-verbal arts will possess their own distinctive capacities to mediate dimensions of the very realities of which this discourse speaks and in which this discourse is caught up. The arts are able to do their own kind of work in their own kind of way, articulating depths of the Word of the Gospel and our experience of it that are otherwise unheard or unfelt, while nonetheless being responsible and faithful to the normative texts of the faith. (This, we might interject, is what Calvin came to believe with regard to music in worship.) A major research agenda opens up here, as well as a major practical challenge to all who care about the arts in the Church. The New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has written: “If all theology, all sermons, had to be set to music, our teaching and preaching would not only be more mellifluous; it might also approximate more closely to God’s truth, the truth revealed in and as the Word made flesh, crucified and risen.”

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88 See Vandrunen, “Iconoclasm, Incarnation and Eschatology”: 133, and n. 10.

89 From a very different (Roman Catholic) perspective, Nicholas Lash deftly writes: “Why is it so difficult to speak sensibly of God? From the deist standpoint that defines and dominates the modern imagination, it seems obvious that the reason is that God is so far away from us . . . But suppose we come at it from a different angle, from a Christian angle; from, that is to say, a standpoint shaped by recognition of God’s uttered Word and outpoured Spirit. When some Romeo starts stammering, unable to find words that will do justice to his love, it is not because the beloved is unknown to him . . . it is because she has become too well known for glib description to be possible . . . God is not far from us. God’s self-giving constitutes our very being, intimates each element and movement of our heart. It is not those who know not God who find God difficult to talk about, but those who know God well.” Lash, *The Beginning and the End of “Religion.”* pp. 170-71. The italics of the last sentence are mine.


In my teaching in the United States and the United Kingdom over many years, I have often met students who long to find the one theologian who will provide all the answers to their struggles and quandaries, or the one tradition into which they can sink and be released from the frantic but paralyzing sense that they need to read everything. It would be foolish in the extreme to claim this of the Reformed tradition or of any Reformed theologian, as of course it would be of any movement or figure in theology. My claim in this essay is more modest, namely, that as the theology and arts conversation continues to unfold apace, resources from the Reformed world – so often buried beneath an understandable but exaggerated shame – have considerably more to offer than is often supposed, especially if we are seeking to delve more deeply into the plotlines and harmonies of a scripturally rooted and vibrant trinitarian faith.