

Reclaiming The Arts For His Glory

MUSIC, DANCE AND DRAMA CAN CROSS EVERY LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIER EFFORTLESSLY. IT'S TIME TO HARNESS THE POWER OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION FOR THE LORD.

More than 20 years ago, I sat down to write a dramatic musical treatment on the passion of Christ for my church choir to perform at Easter. While I was casting the vision for what would become the production The Man Called Jesus, a young man in the tenor section instantly shot up his hand for permission to speak.

"Mrs. Umidi, Mrs. Umidi!" he said. "God spoke to me and told me to tell you that someday hundreds of thousands of people would see your production!"

Unfortunately, like Sarah, I laughed. At the time, we were a church of only 500 people in a very small community. The idea seemed more than improbable; it seemed impossible. But I was hearing this message from my perspective, not God's.

In reality, not only was God revealing my future to me, He was also sending a very important message to the church: He wants the arts to be reconciled to Himself so they can be used to fulfill the Great Commission expressed in Matthew 28:19: "'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations'" (NKJV).

For our ministry, The Man Called Jesus International Productions Inc., we've taken Colossians 1:18-20 as our foundational Scripture passage: "[Christ] is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things, He may have the pre-eminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether

things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

Christ has come to have superiority and dominance over all things. This includes the most influential institutions of our civilization—the church, the family, education, government, law, commerce, media and the arts.

Although the arts are frequently validated by the church and utilized to draw a crowd for evangelistic outreaches or church-planting efforts, neither church leaders nor the majority of gifted artists fully appreciate that God wants to speak and make His voice known to people through creative, artistic expression. He wants pre-eminence in our expressions of art.

GOD, THE GREAT ARTIST

Old Testament prophets were often instructed by God to visually demonstrate—act out or dramatize—the word God gave them for the people. Ezekiel is one example. God told him, “‘Thus says the Lord God: “Pound your fists and stamp your feet, and say, ‘Alas, for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! For they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence’”’” (Ezek. 6:11).

What drama! What expressive movement! It was God’s voice in the form of gestures. God could have instructed the prophet to simply tell the people, but instead He asked that His message be acted out.

Generations of audiences have observed God’s creative, artistic expression. They’ve witnessed His voice in the form of drama (gestures); dance (choreographed and inspired movement); and worship (music and singing) through His prophets.

The following is a brief sampling of dramatic scenes from the Old Testament script for you to consider and imagine:

1. The Creation God's stage was the whole world, where He acted out his vision for creation, man and the vast kingdoms of this planet (see Gen. 1).
2. Israel Crossing the Red Sea A cast of thousands showed the world that God's power could save an entire nation (see Ex. 13).
3. The March of Triumph God's dramatic script called for choreographed movement, instruments and shouts of victory to bring down the walls of Jericho (see Josh. 6:1-20).
4. Bringing the Ark into Zion What pageantry accompanied David as he returned the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (see 1 Chr. 15).
5. King Solomon said "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9-10). God is the pre-eminent artist. He has always used artistic, creative means to reveal Himself and His voice to us.

TELLING THE GREATEST STORY

Jesus used dramatic storytelling devices called parables. He drew examples from nature, as well as the customs, cultural events and day-to-day life experiences of the people, in order to demonstrate to them the ways of His Father.

Christ Himself came to us in the form of a man so He could experience our humanity. Because of His humanity, mankind was able to see God's love for every tribe, tongue, people and nation (see John 3:16; Rev. 5:8-10). Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, God could demonstrate His ability to redeem mankind. God acted out His plan for us through His Son, Jesus.

During the medieval period, a majority of large European towns and cities created dramatic "Mystery Plays," which were played out from village to village on wagons. They portrayed the complete history of the Bible, from creation to the second coming of Christ. The heart of these dramas was the account of Christ's death and resurrection.

Nail makers made the nails and acted as the Roman soldiers who

drove them into the hands and feet of our Lord. Carpenters built the cross Jesus hung on. Weavers wove the cloth that was wrapped around His body, which was carried to the next village. There the resurrection was re-enacted out of the rock-hewn tomb the stonecutters cut.

Out of these plays came the tradition of creating the "Passion Play" as a dramatic event worldwide. It was a new paradigm, a breakthrough of the ages, and considered the start of the theatrical world of today.

Today, more than 1 million people have seen The Man Called Jesus, the Passion play production I wrote more than two decades ago. Most of these people have attended live stage performances, but others have experienced it through television and video productions.

The play has been translated into eight languages, and more are being added each year. It has been seen in as many different countries, performed by nationals, who use their own style of music, dance and customs.

In the process, we have trained hundreds of people to tell the story of Jesus to multiple thousands using dance, drama, music and artistic properties. The wonderful thing I have learned through all of it is that God wants pre-eminence in our artistic expression. After all, it is His story we are telling.

We must use every means we have to tell His story well. Because the arts transcend language and cultural barriers almost seamlessly, they are some of the most powerful tools we can implement to express the heart of God and His plan of salvation for the nations.

Read a companion devotional.

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The Play has been translated into several languages and produced in countries around the world, including Nepal, Russia, Israel, Cuba and Romania.