

Vision for Theology, the Arts, and Gospel Witness

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

As an educational institution, we believe in the power of the arts for enhancing our mission “to advance Christ’s Kingdom in every sphere of life by equipping Church leaders to think theologically, engage globally, and live biblically.” The arts of all kinds—music, visual art, literature, dance, film, theatre, architecture, and more—are a gift for deepening our engagement with God’s Word ([Mission Statement, Article 1](#)), enlivening teaching methods and environments (Article 2), attuning our imaginations to the ministry of God (Article 3), forming the whole person toward Christlikeness (Article 4), preparing students for effective cultural engagement and presence (Article 5), and strengthening our vision of God’s redemptive work in the past, present, and future (Article 6).

Our vision for theology, the arts, and gospel witness is informed by the whole biblical drama spanning from creation to new creation and revolving around the transformative work of God in Christ by the Spirit. As such, our vision for the role of the arts within our mission is guided by God’s formation of all things in perfect harmony (Genesis 1–2), the deformation of all things and failure to participate in God’s glory because of sin (Genesis 3; Romans 3:23), God’s gracious transformation of his people and reconciliation of all things in Christ by the Spirit (Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 1:7-10), and the re-formation of a new heavens and new earth when Jesus returns (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13). God’s mission is to make all things new (Revelation 21:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17), and the arts can bear witness to and participate in this mission by the grace of God.

Formation

God is the supreme Artist and Maker, creating humanity in his image to be makers and sub-creators. While all humanity participates in this creative vocation, some people have specific artistic gifts, and every form of creativity and artistry has the potential to reflect God’s glory. The arts in all their various genres and styles are a part of God’s abundant creation and a way of encountering and knowing God, as we see in the visual art of the Tabernacle, the architecture and music of the Temple, the poetry of the Psalms, the performance art of the prophets, the parables of Jesus, and the literary beauty of the Scriptures. In light of this creational perspective—

- We affirm the creative vocation of all humans and the specific calling to create art as a witness to the character and action of God.
- We affirm the potential of all artists, no matter their faith commitment, to glorify God through their artmaking by virtue of their image-bearing identity and God’s common grace.
- We affirm the value of engaging with the arts broadly conceived both within and outside of the Christian tradition.
- We affirm the inherent value of the arts and their ability to reveal the God who alone is worthy of worship.
- We affirm that the materiality and embodied nature of the arts is exceedingly good as an extension of God’s delight in the physical world he made.
- We affirm the goodness of the human body, established in creation and upheld in Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, and therefore the place of the naked human figure within artistic tradition and practice when treated with honor and respect.

Deformation

As a result of human sin, every part of God's creation was deformed and tainted, including human creativity and artistry. Instead of knowing and worshipping God through the arts, we are tempted to make and worship idols. Instead of glorifying God through our creativity, we desire to make a name for ourselves. Instead of moving us to love God and others, the arts can promote and perpetuate immorality, selfishness, oppression, classism, racism, elitism, and other forms of personal sin and systemic evil. In light of this deformational perspective—

- We affirm that no aspect of human creativity or artistry remains untouched by sin, and therefore our engagement with the arts must be characterized by prayer, humility, and communal discernment.
- We lament how the arts have at times been utilized to perpetuate classism, racism, elitism, and other oppressive habits and environments, and we commit to dismantling sinful frameworks, interacting with a variety of artistic forms and styles, engaging with global artists and traditions, and witnessing to the gospel of reconciliation through the arts.
- We lament when Christian institutions and churches either reject the arts due to their idolatrous potential or embrace contemporary artforms uncritically and uncreatively.
- We affirm the ability of the arts to help us grapple with the brokenness of the world and the gravity of sin, and we commit to avoiding the opposite errors of sentimentality and gratuitousness.
- We affirm the power of the arts to expose and reshape our thoughts and emotions while acknowledging that some art will elicit difficult emotions, memories, and experiences that require processing and healing. As such, we commit to treating sensitive subjects with discretion, providing adequate explanation, contextualization, and resources for follow-up and care should any artwork cause distress.
- We affirm the role of the Advisory Council for Theology, the Arts, and Gospel Witness to discern the fittingness, or lack thereof, of presenting or engaging with art containing sensitive themes such as nudity, violence, or racism.

Transformation

The mission of God is to transform and unite all things in Christ by the Spirit and to create a new global family to commune with him forever. As we come alive to our new identity through faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, we also receive a new capacity to appreciate the abundance of God's gifts, including the arts. Despite our ongoing struggle with sin, God's grace makes it possible to receive the arts as a gift for expressing embodied worship, deepening spiritual formation, reshaping emotions, grasping complex truth, cultivating keystone habits, nurturing community, and effectively contextualizing the gospel. In light of this transformational perspective—

- We affirm that the triune God alone can and will save the world, and that the arts serve a ministerial role in that divine mission.
- We affirm that God's transformative work extends to artistry and that what is deformed about the arts can be renewed even as human makers are made new in Christ.
- We affirm the integral role of the arts in the process of education, discipleship, and mission by virtue of the arts' ability to engage the whole person and the whole church with the whole

gospel. As such, we lament that the Church has often viewed the arts as playing a mere decorative or illustrative function.

- We affirm the educational value of the arts while also affirming that the arts should not be reduced to their instructional function. While an artwork can communicate a powerful message, that message often remains allusive and multivalent, and art offers much more than propositional content.
- We affirm the role of artistic portrayals of God, particularly the Word who became flesh, not as objects of worship as prohibited by the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6), but as aids for deepening our devotion to the God who is beyond our capacity to imagine.
- We affirm that both the arts and the gospel need to be contextualized, appreciating the ability of the arts to help contextualize the gospel and the ability of the gospel to help contextualize the arts. We recognize the contextual factors inherent in the process of making and receiving art and that healthy, formative interaction with the arts requires attentiveness to personal, institutional, cultural, ethnic, and ecclesial contexts, among others.

Re-formation

While God's mission of transformation in Christ by the Spirit is already a glorious reality in our lives, that transformation is not yet complete, and we groan along with all of creation for Jesus to return and make all things new. We walk this journey of faith in hope, knowing that God will be faithful to complete the good work that has begun. The arts are a fitting companion in this journey given their potential to witness to new creation, provide visions for what could and will be, and sustain our hope. In light of this re-formatioal perspective—

- We affirm that the arts help us imagine possibilities and provide visions beyond the boundaries of the present and what we currently deem possible or realistic.
- We affirm how the arts are a witness to new creation and the promise of God to re-form a new heavens and new earth.
- We affirm that arts enable us to express our groaning for full transformation and to sustain our joyful hope in the triune God whose promises are true.
- We affirm that the arts will be liberated from decay along with all of creation when Jesus returns, and we value the beauty of the arts as a signpost of what is to come.

In sum, when our engagement with the arts is informed by these biblical and theological perspectives, we can receive the arts in all their various genres and styles as a gift from God to enrich learning, deepen formation, express worship, broaden gospel witness, and glorify the triune God.