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Creational Graphic Design



by David M. Versluis

Foreword

Referencing the term *creational aesthetics*, Calvin Seerveld states, “That’s a defining mark of the biblically Reformational Christian philosophical stance: take creation seriously as God’s revelation, which despite the perversions we sinners bring into history, is still God’s world and is to be studied by us in the light of Scriptural revelation as a communion of saints redeemed by Jesus Christ.”¹ Borrowing Seerveld’s point, I believe that the study of creation can also apply to graphic design and thus the reason for titling this paper *Creational Graphic Design*. Since this creational emphasis of the Reformed tradition views society as a structure

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of community relationships,² Dordt College is an educational institution made up of a scholarly community of Christians. These Christians are engaged in the study of various disciplines, including graphic design, approached through the perspective of a biblical, covenantal framework that acknowledges the pattern of creation, sin, grace, and creation renewal. This paper will focus on being Christian graphic designers, which I, in agreement with Seerveld, understand to be “... Christian artists...distinguished *in their artistry* by the holy spirit of compassionate judgment proclaiming the Rule of Jesus Christ.”³ Seerveld’s definition is a good start, but more can be said. Specifically, this paper tries to answer the question “What does the Holy Spirit of compassionate judgment look like in graphic design?”

Introduction

To answer that question, we must look first at the Holy Spirit’s effect on individual lives. Because of God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we, as Christians, respond in gratitude by living lives of praise, obedience, worship, and *insightful* service to God. In other words, we are fruit-bearers for Christ (John 15). The Bible says that as people of God we are witnesses to God’s kingdom; we are, here and now, chosen witnesses of God’s work of reconciliation in His creation (Isaiah 43:10-12). Our witness is not only evangelistic talk but also engagement in and contribution to a pluralistic world. Our witness anticipates the complete fulfillment of Christ’s rule when he comes again in glory. As A.A. van Ruler writes in his devotional book *God’s Son and God’s World*, “When we learn

to view all things and ourselves as God's possession, our walk through the temporal and visible world becomes a liturgy, a service of praise and worship to God, and all of existence and our own lives within the things of the world are taken up as instruments of our praise."⁴ As Psalm 104:24 states, "How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

The tradition of graphic design was very important in the history of the Protestant Reformation.

Part of our response to God's Spirit, then, is understanding God's character through His creation. The beginning articles of the Belgic Confession, explain the benefits of studying the natural world with Scripture; together, they tell us many things about God.

This is one way I talk about graphic design to students at Dordt College. That is, I express how the Confession's Article 2 refers to creation as God's revelation: "like letters and beautiful books":

Article 2: The Means by Which We Know God

We know him by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20.

All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse.

Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.⁵

In graphic design, we attempt to appreciate

and express God's creational revelation. In fact, that expression is part of the history of graphic design. The tradition of graphic design was very important in the history of the Protestant Reformation. The principal author of the Belgic Confession, written in French in 1561, was Guido de Brès, a Reformed church preacher in the southern Low Countries (Belgium) who was put to death for heresy in 1566. The Confession's form and content indicate that de Brès was familiar with the Confession of the Huguenot (French Protestant) Reformed churches, published in the late 1550s and written mainly by John Calvin. Interestingly, de Brès, in the second article of the Belgic Confession, uses metaphors for God's revelation in creation: "[the creation] is before our eyes like a beautiful book and all creatures, great and small, are as letters." Apparently de Brès and Calvin were well aware of French graphic design and printed materials being produced at the time of the sixteenth century. The era is regarded as the golden age of French Renaissance printing technology. French typography (of Claude Garamond—perfecting Roman letterforms), graphic design (of Geoffroy Tory—geometric constructions of letters) and book design (of Oronce Finé and Simon de Colines—visual information) were considered to be the finest on the European continent. Many French graphic designers of this period were multi-talented people: Geoffroy Tory was a philosophy lecturer and poet, and Oronce Finé was a mathematics professor, artist, and author. In addition to typography, French graphic design of this period is noted for the elegant and *colorful* illustrations, for Books of Hours, depicting animals, birds, insects, aquatic life, flora, and fauna that adorn the capital initials and border margins of the page. These illustrations, some of which are stylized, express a Renaissance humanist interest in the natural world, yet this interest also correlates with biblical scholars rediscovering, reexamining, recovering the meaning of Scripture and appreciating the abundance of God's *good* creation.

However, by the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the European printing center moved from France (Paris, Lyons) to the Netherlands (Amsterdam), England, and Switzerland as a result of religious conflicts. One of the best French scholar printers and principal graphic designers

of the period, Robert Estienne (1503–1559), was renowned as a printer, author, and classical scholar for the intellectual insight of his editorial process. He was also acclaimed for typographic refinement and clarity of his original language Bibles, Christian texts, and printed biographies by history writer Paolo Giovio. Estienne was affected by the threat of persecution and the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation and was harassed and abused for being suspected a heretic by the Sorbonne (University of Paris) theology faculty for his Protestant views.⁶ As a result, by the early 1550s Estienne relocated his printing firm to Geneva, Switzerland, to be with John Calvin. There he reissued Calvin's *Institutes* in 1553 and again in 1559. The introduction to Calvin's *Institutes*, published by Westminster Press in 1960, says this about Estienne:

One of the greatest of Renaissance printers came to Geneva from Paris in 1550 and resumed there, in close association with the Geneva ministers, his lifework in the production of Bibles and religious texts that he had found it impossible to continue in France. This was Robert Estienne (Robertus Stephanus), a distinguished member of the great Estienne family of scholar printers to whom the New Learning and the Reformation owed a measureless debt. In February 1553, he brought out the finest edition of the *Institutio* that Calvin had yet seen, a folio volume 13-1/2 by 8-3/4 inches, almost faultlessly printed in handsome type. It contains 441 pages, ...⁷.

The point I make to students is that God's world, along with the elements of design, the visible language—letters/typography, technology, sensory artifacts, light, colors (optical and emotive), physical materials, textures, similarities, movement, contrasts, patterns, lines—are all the Lord's creatures, for which we are responsible. As colleague Dr. Charles Adams has said, "some of these creatures have been created originally by God and some have been developed by God's image bearers and unfolded in time."⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff says emphatically, "This world of colors and textures and shapes and sounds is good for us, good for us in many ways, good also in that it provides us with refreshing delight"⁹ (Prov. 8.30-31). We are a physical part of God's creation; we, along with all other created things, are creatures of God, created to serve and glorify Him. As the psalmist writes,

Your word, O Lord, is eternal;
It stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations;
You established the earth, and it endures.
Your laws endure to this day,
For all things serve you. (Psalm 119.89–91)

Creational graphic design, education and practice

Recognizing Christ's Lordship over all creation means learning to be open to the multiplicity of that creation in order to serve His kingdom more fully. In our age of specialization, a broader vision of Christ's kingdom and our vocation in it should be an essential part of a coherent core curriculum—and it is at Dordt College. In Dordt's graphic design program, students learn the craft and skills of design in the context of creative discipline and compassionate, redemptive care for God's creation as faithful followers of Jesus.

The occupational result of a coherent Christian education is expressed by potential employers who admire and are seeking the attitude and work ethic of students in graphic design:

What we as employers are searching for are people who can do as well as think. This isn't to say that we're looking for glossy stylists either: we want designers who create thoughtful, meaningful designs: designs that pay attention to details, and have emotion and craft in them, as well as reason and cleverness. The world desperately needs those designers.¹¹

As we see, employers need designers who can think as well as do, but biblically-based Christian education should not be judged only as pragmatically useful. God is pleased when we value, study, and learn more about His creation. Whether one designs for business corporations, humanitarian agencies, advocacy groups, or Christian missions, etc.—from a Reformed perspective not one of these areas is nobler than the other—all of it can be holy service.

Also, because of God's creation-structures, design—whether by a Christian or non-Christian designer—is the conscious effort to create meaningful order. However, all good designers need the insight to recognize that the appropriateness of any design solution depends on the clarity of the intended meaning and purpose. Traditionally, the kind of action by which a design fulfills its

purpose is its function.¹² But the interesting thing about design is that there can be more than one right solution. For instance, Zöe Ryan, citing Rick Poyner, writes that the influential London graphic design firm of the 1960s, Fletcher/Forbes/Gill, maintained this thesis: “that one visual problem has an infinite number of solutions; that many of them are valid; that solutions ought to derive from the subject matter; that the designer should have therefore no preconceived graphic style.”¹³ The current British graphic design group, the acclaimed Graphic Thought Facility (GTF), still maintains this high regard for content as leading to design solutions.

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In addition to creating meaningful order, design also reveals the values of local communities, such as monetary worth. For example, an incredible amount of equity created by today’s corporate identity and branding systems in the marketplace is produced by graphic designers. More importantly, design can reveal ecological, aesthetic, ethical, technical (economic and sustainable), and social value. In fact, design can serve the need for creational well-being and social welfare in general. One adage says that graphic design can be about three things: “messages of value, messages about value, and messages of no value.”¹⁴ Christian graphic design

can be a witness to God’s active presence here and now and to our hope for fulfillment of Christ’s kingdom. Because of that witness, graphic design from a Christian perspective need not succumb to competitive pressure to deceitfully prove anything, to be manipulative, or to coerce. Christian graphic design can, however, be convincing, compelling, and sensitive communication. In summary, what designer and author George Nelson says about design education applies to Christian communal education, influenced by common grace:

No design can exist in isolation. It is always related, sometimes in very complex ways, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes. What we call a good design is one which achieves integrity—that is, unity or wholeness—in balanced relation to its environment. The reason good design is hard to come by is that its creation demands a high degree of emotional and intellectual maturity in the designer, and such people are not found too often. Earlier generations solved this problem by using many hands and minds over periods of centuries, as in the case of the axe, or the teacup. The “designer” then was not an individual, but an entire social process of trial, selection, and rejection. Today he is still that, though in a somewhat different sense, and we tend to overestimate his significance as an individual.¹⁵

Concerned about values, some design professionals have tried to use their design capital to do more than create “cool” artifacts and follow the money in a saturated affluent marketplace. One example of this effort was presented at the 2007 Christians in the Visual Arts (CIVA) biennial conference, where architectural designer Dr. Earl Tai, associate chair at Parsons New School for Design, spoke about the *Transformation of the Designed/Built Space*.

Tai stated that designers need to ask, “how is design currently meeting the needs of the world?” and suggested that it can take on the principal questions of our era. Actually, there is nothing really new about this concept, since the modernist designers of the mid-twentieth century felt that way as well. The difference, Tai says, “is allowing artists to let God use them and their work for transformation.” According to Tai, “this leads beyond a ‘functional’ view of art and design into a ‘redemptive’ view of art and design.”¹⁶ Tai

presented the work of three architects as examples of transformational designers working today. One, Sergio Palleroni, will be discussed later.

As Tai suggests, motives for design differ. Some designers and graphic designers sincerely want to solve problems and make the world a better place. If they can grow their design business at the same time, all the better; for there is nothing wrong with receiving money for work rendered fairly while designing aesthetically pleasing artifacts that serve a genuine purpose or need. Many designers are trying to understand the transformational potential of design. At Dordt College, we ask students what the presence of God looks like in design and what He is calling us to do with our design resources. How will we reveal the presence of Christ in our work in tangible ways? How will we speak life into our culture as designers and extend His kingdom presence in the world?

Ellen Lupton, design educator at Maryland Institute College of Art, helps provide an answer. She expresses a consensus among design practitioners and educators when she defines design as “an art of situations.” She goes on to say, “Designers respond to a need, a problem, and a circumstance that arises in the world. The best work is produced in relation to interesting situations.”¹⁷

I appreciate Lupton’s statement that design is responding “to a need, a problem”—this tends to resonate with Christians who have a Reformed identity and are serious about acting as stewards, trying to restore what’s broken in God’s world or make the world a better place. Because design should be transformational and respond to circumstances, it is multifaceted (graphic, product, environmental, architecture, information, etc.), and teaching graphic design involves maneuvering through a complex field and using computer technology responsibly.

One misnomer is that graphic design is simply advertising. It can be that but is not entirely. Graphic design can also be the design of many non-commercial interfaces conveying important public messages, from signage to election-ballot design.

How, then, does a Christian graphic designer measure success? When asking art and graphic design students at Dordt “What is success?” I have found their responses, taken as a whole,

to be similar to those of the design students of Ellen Lupton when asked the same question: “I’m successful when I have reached, achieved, accomplished, earned, etc.” Lupton then moves the discussion toward greater responsibility:

But then what? The salary of an entry-level graphic designer will be similar to that of a teacher, tax collector or candlestick maker... Many people are drawn to design because it is an artistic field whose career path is more reliable than the fine arts. Artists know they are headed into unknown economic territory; they expect to use diverse forms of employment to support their practice. Painters or sculptors might define their initial success differently from designers. The most important thing for them may be to participate in exhibitions—getting their work noticed and talked about, being part of a scene and participating in a community of other artists.

Graphic design students, however, tend to be more conservative. When I ask them to talk about what makes design different from the fine arts, they gravitate towards the role of the client. Designers serve clients, or so the logic goes, whereas artists serve themselves. Designers would like to do work “just for themselves,” students sometimes say, but designers need clients to survive.

Although it is true that designers generally rely on clients, pleasing them is not the ultimate purpose of our work. What designer’s share with our clients is a public, an audience. Our clients wouldn’t need us at all if we weren’t helping them reach that public. Our broader responsibility is to the ultimate users of our work. Doctors need hospitals and insurance companies to do their business, but patients are the ones they really serve. Designers make things that are out there in the world, being seen, read, understood and acted on by other human beings.¹⁸

Design applications are meant to serve the public in various positive ways—that service is part of the design motivation. However, design services are often dictated by the clients’ commissioning work and meant to satisfy their needs. Sometimes these needs are selfish; at other times they are of genuine benefit to the public. Developing the analytical skills to determine what needs are worthy or unworthy is important for the designer. Students and design practitioners must cultivate an understanding of both the appropriateness

of visual imagery and the idea the image is communicating. As Christian graphic designers, we can take to heart the work of common grace, break through the humdrum, and come face to face with excellent or praiseworthy things, such as the values of righteousness, justice, and peace. As Paul writes in Philippians 4.8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Certainly a praiseworthy thing is the remarkable achievement of reading or readability. A good graphic designer can honor the reader by being cognizant of the reading process, which is a process

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understanding something
about the process of
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as understanding form
in the study of fine art
and as understanding
computer technology
in the study of graphic
design.*

of visually recognizing and comprehending letters, context, and meaning. That is, reading begins the process of recognizing letter forms (small patterns), words, larger patterns of text structures, text arrangements, and a writer’s style.¹⁹ For instance, in many of my assigned graphic design projects in which the objective is comprehension of material, I tend to use color, style, size, scale, space, or type style to visually emphasize intentional patterns from surrounding letters or words. This practice not only has practical import for many printed and electronic materials but also highlights the significance of play in the design process. These intellectual tools and craft form the basics of the

graphic design curriculum.

In graphic design, understanding something about the process of reading is as important as understanding form in the study of fine art and as understanding computer technology in the study of graphic design. University of Northern Iowa graphic design professor Roy Behrens, in his lecture *How Form Functions*, features the “tools of thought” of pattern analysis/recognition found in rhymes, songs, and poems as instructive for graphic design. As an example, Behrens indicates text relationships in a nursery rhyme with typestyle and color by juxtaposing similar and dissimilar words containing repetitive letters and ending with a silent e pattern, such as “hey **diddle diddle**,” “**fiddle**,” “**liddle**.”²⁰ Behrens is making the point that graphic design education needs to cultivate the skills of highlighting and manipulating patterns. To further convey the point, Behrens quotes science educator Robert Scott Root-Bernstein:

Any educational system that fails to teach students how to play with and integrate the tools of thought is producing intellectually handicapped students.... Until we understand how people form and recognize patterns, use metaphors, make analogies, abstract, develop aesthetic sensibility, playact, play, manipulate, model, think kinesthetically—and how to correlate those tools of thought through transformational thinking—we will never succeed in understanding how inventive people invent, or how to train others to emulate them.²¹

Binary Designers?

To prepare for the complex issues involved in design, Dordt College students interested in graphic design major in art with a graphic design emphasis. This arrangement means that in addition to taking dedicated graphic design courses, students also take required studio fine art courses and a business marketing course, as well as other studio art and art history electives, along with a rigorous liberal arts core curriculum. This course of study can lead to a struggle between graphic art and fine art. Often a graphic design student will say, “I like graphic design, but what I really like is studio art (painting, drawing, photography, ceramics, or sculpture)—fine art allows me to be self-expressive.” When juniors and seniors develop their portfolios, some students seem to apologize

and ask, “Can I include fine art with graphic design in my portfolio?” “Are clients interested?” “Yes,” I respond, and I further add that although art and design are different, they are very much related. The choice between the two is actually a false dilemma because of so much common ground.

Why do students sense a tension between two art sub-cultures? The perception of fine art as more noble than design (graphic design) is a Romantic notion going back to the Renaissance, a notion that has found its way to today’s North American college campuses—Christian colleges included. Does this attitude come from the academic liberal arts tradition? Where do the lines of art and design cross? Again, Calvin Seerveld starts to provide an answer with his working definition of art: “a

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well-crafted artifact or act distinguished by an imaginative quality whose nature is to allude to more meaning than what is visible/audible/written/sensed”²²

How does Seerveld’s art definition work in design? Actually, graphic design, web design, and interactive design can be considered artifacts, or acts of communication distinguished by an imaginative quality that is visible/audible/ written/sensed. The question is, “How does the nature of design allude to more meaning than what meets the senses?”

This question considers that a common area of art and design is the nuance, mood, and meaning

of a thing, qualities that suggest intellect and self-expression—the presence of the designer or artist expressed in the artifact. Internationally acclaimed designer Rick Valicenti (Chicago) discusses his work this way:

[M]y personal work, which happens right alongside my professional work, helps to inform all of my commissions. Hence, all the work of this office begins to reveal a real human presence, which is less formulaic, is more like fine art and is expressive. Design, art, self-expression, my being, and my self-perception determine my behavior. If I can use my artifacts, the things that I make, as evidence of who I am and realizing that, my artifacts can actually reflect my sense of joy, curiosity, and optimism, this can be authentic and effective communication on behalf of a client.²³

Valicenti adds the significance of the designer, which should be of great interest for art and design students:

Your presence can’t help but be reflected in your work, for instance. If we limit our thought then the experiences we have are limited as a result. If we enter design with interest, odds are what comes out of that process of making and thinking about design will be interesting. If we enter design with greed, what’s going to come out is greed. If we enter with disrespect, disrespect comes out and the same can be true if we enter a process with respect—then the artifact is respectful. If we enter with an artful spirit, then what comes out is something quite artful and imaginative. But sadly, if we enter the design process with formula, what might come out is formula and that’s not a good thing especially when we can put it on press and millions of copies get done; or put it onto the web and anyone who wants can go there. And if they encounter formula disguised as communication—I should say, communication contaminated with formula—it’s not a good thing to send any impersonal messages from one person to another anywhere in the world.

I believe that the next destination for design to aspire to is one that transcends style—where communication really does reach out. Perhaps with design being so much in service to business and so much of a commodified practice, in many respects it has lost sight of a kind of design that really does communicate, that really does

behave in compelling fashion. In order to do that the missing ingredient might just be the presence of the communicator in the act of communication. ...²⁴

Most art students feel an affinity with Valicenti's expressionistic/emotional approach because most art education programs (Christian and non-Christian) promote self-expression. By contrast, other designers, such as the modernist Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers, have questioned this self-expressive approach to design as self-indulgent. According to Eric Gibson, "Albers distrusted expressionism, believing it to be egocentric and geared mostly toward effects rather than insight."²⁵ However, while Albers makes a good point, I appreciate Valicenti's emotive approach because I know that his body of work is filled with creative and playful insight. Valicenti's work is also indicative of serving a public through a rigorous, disciplined, and self-critical design process, which should be a strong component of any art and design training.

It is possible that graphic design, like art, can express, as Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "the ultimate concerns (in case they have them) of their makers."²⁶ I believe this is what Valicenti is saying as well. With this in mind, we might compare the perspectives of Valicenti and Albers with the strong emotional content of the biblical Psalms. This is what John Calvin wrote about emotional content in the preface to his 1557 *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*:

I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;" for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. ... It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure. In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book....²⁷

Another element of the art and design

dilemma is that of agent versus aesthete. In the weblog *Design Observer* designer Michael Beruit (New York) wrote "The World in Two Footnotes: Are you an Agent of Neutrality? Or are you an Aesthete of Style?" Here, Beruit reacts to an article in *Eye* magazine (vol 14, number 53, Autumn 2004) titled "The Steamroller of Branding," by Nick Bell, in which Bell describes two types of designers as reflective of design philosophy over the last several decades.

According to Bell one group of graphic designers are *the agents of neutrality*, who

1. Are Neo-modernists designers who distrust personal expression in design and tend to view content as best expressed through a design format that remains objectively neutral.
2. See themselves as purveyors of highly attractive design that is objective, coherent and crafted with the modernist aesthetic style of clarity and precision.
3. Are apt to appreciate guidelines and view constraints as parameters of creative opportunity.
4. Believe that the same objective format will suffice for all forms of content regardless of what message is being conveyed.
5. Are likely to have an apolitical attitude and feel they are not responsible for content nor is it for them to question the content—this allows for servicing all types of clients because nothing is sacred.

Bell calls the second group of graphic designers *the aesthetes of style*, who

1. See themselves more as fine artists devoted to the formal aspects of design and desire to express a strong creative and personal style.
2. Want to produce highly attractive design and are not terribly interested in the message nor is there a great concern to balance form and content.
3. See the production process as a means to an end and are motivated to incorporate glossy printing effects and production techniques that disregard ecological or sustainable production methods.
4. Believe that the most creative and attractive format will suffice for all forms of content regardless of what message is being conveyed.

5. Are likely to have an apolitical attitude and feel they are not responsible for content but they will raise questions about content only if it runs against producing something attractive—this allows for servicing all types of clients because nothing is sacred.²⁸

Bell seems to exaggerate the differences to emphasize his point, but he also suggests that the two types of designers are related. I find the ensuing discussion to be potentially rich ground for Reformational discourse. In the same article, Michael Bierut explains the solution to the binaries of objectivity and creativity:

In two footnotes, Bell has neatly nailed the choice that many designers feel they face. They can choose to become the passive, “objective” voice of their clients, or they can be creative fountainheads, beholden to no one but their own imaginations. These two types of designers are widely viewed as polar opposites and mutually antagonistic: *the Aesthetes* sneer at *the Agents* for selling out to big business; *the Agents* dismiss *the Aesthetes* for their self-indulgent immaturity.

This divide has been observed and debated for years, if not decades. But Bell’s skill is the way he slyly delineates the similarities, not the differences. In his account, both types of designers are “willfully apolitical and, tellingly, uninterested in the content of the work they undertake....” As we’ve seen in *Design Observer* in the past, designers (and perhaps all of us) resist binary classifications. Yet surely we would all have to concede that Bell’s group portrait as diptych has more than a little truth in it.

However, the choice is a false one. Bell has a prescription: “It’s quite simple, it’s been said before and so many times that it has become a cliché. And that is to design from the inside outwards.” He is talking specifically about designing for cultural institutions, but the advice is universal: “The practice of corporate identity design [and here I would add graphic design in general] must be inextricably tied to the content it is supposedly serving; make content the issue and resist making design the issue.”

I have never met a designer who would deny the importance of content. Yet “making content the issue” takes real humility and self-effacement, qualities that are sometimes in short supply in the ego-driven world of creative production. Designers are more often tempted to serve more urgently demanding gods: their clients, on the

one hand, and their inner muses, on the other. What the world demands, however, is something more. Call it content, call it substance, and call it meaning: it’s the too-often-forgotten heart of what we do. It is the way out of the binary world that Nick Bell describes so well. It is the third choice. Choose content.²⁹

An interesting response to Bierut’s solution (content) reflects the concern of many graphic design educators over the last decade, namely, the heavy educational focus on technology training. Less emphasis on critical thinking has resulted in unprepared students entering the design field. Josef Reyes, who advocates a return to the liberal arts tradition for graphic design education, posted the following:

A number of designers are terrific in constructing form but deficient when it comes to engaging with content. Which is ironic considering that it is content that underpins the relevance of our work to the world at large.... The deficit is best mitigated when attacked on the student level.... Mr. Beirut’s post once again brings to light the need for a more rigorous liberal arts curriculum in graphic design education.... Let’s train students to become designers who are thoughtful and sensitive to the content they work with. We need designers who understand how language works: how language is used to either elucidate or deceive. We need designers who demonstrate exceptional comprehension: designers who are able to flesh out the meaning from the morass. We need designers who question everything: designers who not only ask “how?” but also “why?” In short: what our industry needs, I suspect, are more designers who carry an understanding of their place in the world and an awareness of their responsibility to the people they communicate to. All of this is just restating the obvious, really, but the fact of the matter is that there are that many designers who are oblivious to the obvious.³⁰

At Dordt College, we have developed a curriculum for the graphic design program that tries to balance insights mentioned by Beirut and Reyes: “to design from the inside outwards.” Art, design, and a core curriculum make for a solid program. Integral to this program is work that glorifies God rather than ourselves. Sometimes, however, students and designers who lack discipline, ability, maturity, and sensitivity gravitate toward

either being *the agents of neutrality* or serving as *the aesthetes of style*. Students often turn to being “special effect” stylists and mannerists rather than being thoughtful designers of content. Also, some clients will demand that their commissions be designed as either neutral or stylistic. However, the best graphic designers have always responded to content by giving it compelling form and have gained their clients’ respect as a result. As Roy Behrens said, “Specific techniques and styles of art are faddish, and of little or no importance to me, while the form of a work is enduring. To quote an old blues song: ‘It ain’t what you do, it’s how what you do it.’”³¹ Also, as Paul says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12.2). Christian design education must provide a pedagogy that allows students to respond

Christian design education must provide a pedagogy that allows students to respond authentically to content while recognizing that the craft of graphic design involves the synthesis of art, communication, and technology.

authentically to content while recognizing that the craft of graphic design involves the synthesis of art, communication, and technology. One result can be compassionate design.

What does compassionate graphic design look like?

In the early 1980s, while teaching at Trinity

Christian College, I started to use Calvin Seerveld’s understanding of Christian culture to support my art, design, and teaching philosophy. What I appreciate about Seerveld’s philosophical insights is that he leaves room for art and design to reflect back on themselves. He allows the elements and media of art to be meaningful and celebratory. In this way, art and design not only serve an aesthetic philosophy but allow one to benefit and delight in the artifact itself. Seerveld suggests that art is God’s gift to humans that can help us look at all facets of life—beautiful and ugly. Particularly helpful from a design standpoint is Seerveld’s assertion that “artistry is a subtle quality which permeates the whole object or event with an engaging metaphorical coagulation of nuances. An artwork is designed to be a loosely symbolific gift of oblique knowledge.”³² In addition, some of my views about creational graphic design are based on Seerveld’s essay “Modern Art and the Birth of Culture,” as found in his book *Rainbows for the Fallen World*. In the essay, Seerveld describes Christian culture: “the lordship of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible leads the way and marks the act or product with the holy spirit of compassionate judgment.”³³

Seerveld becomes more incisive when he gives these examples:

We have got to realize more vividly that truly Christian conversation (= conversation marked by compassionate judgment honoring Jesus Christ’s Rule in its phrasings and very inflection) deepens interpersonal relationships with excitement and joy, while secularized talk brings coldness, numbness, and squalor (cf. Psalm 1, Proverbs 15:1-4). Christian journalism (= reportage in word and picture, marked by compassionate judgment honoring Jesus Christ’s Rule in its very communicating) would spill an incredible blessing of truth on top of all the posturing lies found in (godless) secular “factuality” (cf. Matthew 5:21-30).³⁴

These examples are actually very close to what I would say about graphic design, but I’d like to restate it this way: Christian graphic design (i.e., constructions in images and words marked by the holy spirit of compassionate judgment, proclaiming Jesus Christ’s rule in their very information and communicating) would craft and send compelling messages to people about what is meaningful and true. While graphic design can be a construction,

the statement above suggests that graphic design should not be thought of as a completely human construction. Jeremy Begbie, in challenging current music theory, says what I also think is relevant in graphic design, when he describes “the unquestioned assumption of much music theory today: that music should be understood entirely as a human construction, disallowing any attempt to see it as also grounded in realities that humans do not construct. A Christian vision of creation holds together both our embeddedness in the physical world and our shaping of that world.”³⁵

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To pursue more thoughtfully Seerveld’s definition of Christian culture as a thing (meaning-realities) that honors the compassionate rule of Jesus Christ, we must understand the biblical meaning of compassion. First, we should consider Philippians 2.1-3:

So if in Christ there is anything that will move you, any incentive in love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any warmth or sympathy—I appeal to you, make my joy complete by being of a single mind, one in love, one in heart and one in mind. Nothing is to be done out of jealousy or vanity;

instead, out of humility of mind everyone should give preference to others, everyone pursuing not selfish interests but those of others. Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus....(*The New Jerusalem Bible*)

Next, we might consider the conclusion of the fine book *Compassion* (1982), where authors Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen also write an excellent summary of God’s compassion:

The great news we have received is that God is a compassionate God. In Jesus Christ the obedient servant, who did not cling to his divinity but emptied himself and became as we are, God has revealed the fullness of his compassion. He is Immanuel, God-with-us. The great call we have heard is to live a compassionate life. In the community formed in displacement and leading to a new way of being together, we can become disciples—living manifestations of God’s presence in this world. The great task we have been given is to walk the compassionate way. Through the discipline of patience, practiced in prayer and action, the life of discipleship becomes real and fruitful.

As long as we live on this earth, our lives as Christians must be marked by compassion. But we must not conclude these reflections on compassion without observing that the compassionate life is not our final goal. In fact, we can only live the compassionate life to the fullest when we know that it points beyond itself. We know that he who emptied and humbled himself has been raised high and has been given a name above all other names, and we know too that he left us to prepare a place for us where suffering will be overcome and compassion no longer necessary. There is a new heaven and a new earth for which we hope with patient expectation. This is the vision presented in the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, “You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be

his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.” (Revelation 21.1-4)

This is the vision that guides us. This vision makes us share one another’s burdens, carry our crosses together, and unite for a better world. This vision takes the despair out of death and the morbidity out of suffering, and opens new horizons. This vision also gives us the energy to manifest its first realization in the midst of the complexities of life. This vision is indeed of a future world. But it is no utopia. The future has already begun and is revealed each time strangers are welcomed, the naked are clothed, the sick and prisoners are visited, and oppression is overcome. Through these grateful actions, the first glimpses of a new heaven and a new earth can be seen, as described in Matthew 25:

In the new city, God will live among us, but each time two or three gather in the name of Jesus he is already in our midst. In the new city, all tears will be wiped away, but each time people eat bread and drink wine in his memory, smiles appear on strained faces. In the new city, the whole creation will be made new, but each time prison walls are broken down, poverty is dispelled, and wounds are carefully attended, the old earth is already giving way to the new. Through compassionate action, the old is not just old anymore and pain not just pain any longer. Although we are still waiting in expectation, the first signs of the new earth and the new heaven, which have been promised to us and for which we hope, are already visible in the community of faith, where the compassionate God reveals himself. This is the foundation of our faith, the basis of our hope, and the source of our love.³⁶

The city of God (i.e., the Kingdom of God [Revelation 21, 22]), described in the preceding excerpt, is not a Genesis paradise but a holy city out of which flows the river of life.

This holy city alludes to our experience of place and a material environment full of diverse artifacts—from engineering to art and graphic design—made by many people. The description suggests the integrality of the built environment

with the tree of life, which bears twelve crops of fruit and medicinal leaves for healing the nations. As a foretaste of the holy city, our current city planning, at its best, can develop well-balanced environments of architecture and artifacts, all designed to make life better as blessings to all inhabitants—social and environmental. Blessings also include industries that sustain jobs, service economies, sustainable systems, management of population densities, sustainable agriculture, and methods of cohabiting with nature.

By contrast, current city development is not perfect and sometimes, by default, creates problems such as urban sprawl and inner-city dislocation. By common grace, creative designers can be the miracle workers, finding holy-spirited solutions to problems resulting from such things as new urban development and weather-related catastrophes. Christian graphic design students and design practitioners need to ask this question: “How does my work help grow the kingdom of God?” In response, we can begin this work by cultivating a creative attitude in the community of Jesus Christ. As Wolterstorff eloquently puts it,

The task in history of the people of God, the church, the followers of Jesus Christ, is, in the first place, to witness to God’s work of renewal to the coming of His Kingdom.... Its task is, secondly, to work to bring about renewal by serving all people everywhere in all dimensions of their existence, working for the abolition of evil and joylessness and for the incursion into human life of righteousness and shalom. Thirdly, it is called to give evidence in its own existence of the new life, the *true*, authentic life—to give evidence in its own existence of what a political structure without oppression would look like, to give evidence in its own existence of what scholarship devoid of jealous competition would look like, to give evidence of what a human community that transcends while yet incorporating national diversity would be like, to give evidence in its own existence of what an art that unites rather than divides and of what surroundings of aesthetic joy rather than aesthetic squalor would be like, to give evidence in its own existence of how God is rightly worshipped. And then lastly it is called to urge all men everywhere to repent and believe and join this people of God in the world.³⁷

In response to Wolterstorff’s point “what

surroundings of aesthetic joy rather than aesthetic squalor would be like,” I’d like to briefly discuss the term *commodity*. For many years, designer Rick Valicenti has observed that graphic design has become commoditized. Valicenti is referring to industry’s perceptions that the main purpose or value of graphic design is to help sell products and that raw materials should be bought and sold at the lowest price possible. The term *commodity* in this context, obviously, has negative connotations among designers who resist seeing the importance of their work and art devalued or reduced to mundane commercial products.

In contrast, I, as a Christian graphic designer, posit the Reformed view—that we think of art and design as an act of transformation and God-glorifying stewardship. This means, among other things, that we begin to view the word *commodity* differently. The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines commodity as “something (product or service) that people need and value and find useful” and, I would add, ecologically sustainable. Christian graphic design students, just like many other design school graduates, will very likely continue designing marketing materials used to sell products or services.

As they do so, Christian students, more than ever, need the ability to analyze how commodities (products or services) influence and shape graphic design—they need to develop a Christian perspective on how design and commodities can honor the compassionate rule of Jesus Christ. One way, according to Minneapolis architect Charlie Lazor, is to value commodity as art and design that create human emotional responses such as delight and hospitality.³⁸ Delight in this perspective could be thought of as the effect of delightful harmony and a normative design principle. Other normative principles for graphic design include responsible technology and service, openness and communication, stewardship, justice, mutual caring, respect, community spirit, and trust.³⁹ These principles should be our design brief, criterion, and incentive as Christian graphic designers.

Along the same line, the essential theme in the McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen book *Compassion*, is the importance of Christians working in community as the best way to be compassionate in this broken world. The authors write,

We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supporting, praying community, we quickly lose faith. This is because faith in God’s compassionate presence can never be separated from experiencing God’s presence in the community to which we belong.⁴⁰

In *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, Seerveld has developed five helpful imperatives for artists, imperatives that highlight the artist acting creatively within a community. Imperative number four directs the artist or designer not to go it alone but rather to “Integrate yourself as a band of Christian artists with Christian taskforces in other cultural areas in order to reach out as a people hood of God to the public at large.”⁴¹ The following case study is indicative of a design project that reaches out as grace and reconciliation to a community.

In June of 2008, I attended the installation of “Design for the Other 90%,” an outdoor exhibit at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. One of the featured projects was the Katrina Furniture Project, in which graphic design was integral to the whole project and played a significant promotional role. The exhibit was produced and directed by the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City and was first exhibited



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In 2008, *The Walker Art Center* held a summer celebration of “green stuff.” The main feature was the traveling exhibition *Design for the other 90%*, which displayed items that allow the world’s poor to purify water, make bricks, heat and cook with the sun. Built in the Sculpture Garden, the free public exhibit could be viewed within a collection of Global Village Shelters created by Ferrara Design, Inc. and manufactured by Weyerhaeuser Company, using atriple-wall laminated, corrugated, cardboard material.

in 2007 before traveling to Minneapolis. The following information is taken from the exhibition catalog, titled *Design for the Other 90%*, written by Cynthia E. Smith, who served as the exhibition curator. She describes the project this way:

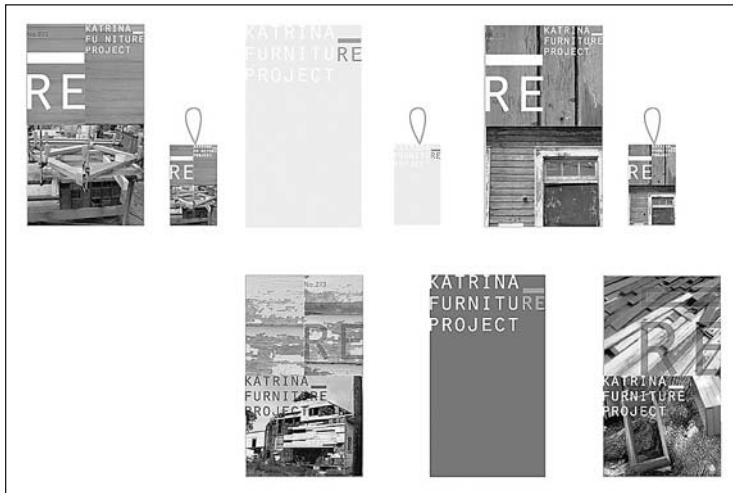
The Katrina Furniture Project, formed in response to Hurricane Katrina, creates neighborhood furniture-making workshop facilities using the debris left by the storm and helps build the economic and social capacity of neighborhoods in New Orleans who faced/experienced severe economic and social challenges even before Katrina. The workshops train community members in making furniture and the fundamentals of business, and function as a neighborhood-based place of work and resource center while residents rebuild their homes. Workshops will make and sell church pews—to replace those lost to the more than ninety churches ruined by the storm—as well as tables and stools, all from recycled wood.⁴²

Notice Smith’s description of the workshop and project initiative as do-it-yourself. The principal designer was Sergio Palleroni, an architecture professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He, along with his team of architecture students at the

University, did initial research and development. The team then designed the furniture, made prototypes and patterns, created manufacturing standards, and developed cost-effective production techniques and methods for worker training. In addition, Palleroni’s team collaborated with students and faculty from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California. This team helped develop the product marketing initiative—including research, pricing, and sales distribution—and designed an identity and branding system.

The Katrina Furniture Project is a fine example of *redemptive*, transformational design, created mainly by college students. The following description by Smith highlights how graphic design contributed significantly to the project. The graphic design project titled *YouOrleans* was implemented in 2006-2007 and initiated a program based on the identifier “Re” and its associations. Here are Smith’s words:

YouOrleans is an identity system developed by a team of students, alumni, and instructors from Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California formed to brand the Katrina Furniture Project. The identity graphically represents the resilient and ever-optimistic citizens of New Orleans as well as the craftspeople at the Katrina Furniture Project, who are using their talent and determination to affect recovery and reclaim their lives. In collaboration with Art Center’s *Designmatters* initiative, a United Nations–designated non-governmental organization (NGO) which acts as an educational laboratory for best practices and social engagement, the project based its design solution on the typographic identifier of “Re”—as in Recovery, Revitalization, Reformation, Reuse, Redevelop, and Redeem—embodied in the furniture.⁴³



Katrina Furniture Project: a collaboration: These are hang-tag, front-side designs that are part of a larger marketing system for furniture sales. The reverse side would explain the whole reclaimed furniture story. Photograph is used with permission from Sergio Palleroni, founder of BaSiC Initiative, and Nikolaus Hafermaas, Designmatters, Art Center College of Design. Palleroni’s group conceived and designed the furniture in partnership with Green Project. And Hafermaas’ team developed the YouOrleans identity/brand system and marketing plan that included packaging, collateral graphic design, and retail signage.

The principal designers were the Graphic Design Department, Art Center College of Design, in collaboration with the Designmatters initiative.

The Katrina Furniture

Project is a fine example of God's generous grace to designers motivated mainly by compassion—working sensitively in community without being autocratic while allowing members of the community the dignity of helping themselves. Graphic design students at Dordt have also developed various community projects. (To view selected student designs, use this link: <http://homepages.dordt.edu/versluis/>)

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the book *Compassion* has enhanced my interest in allowing graphic design to express the biblical correlation of compassion, justice, and shalom and deepened my concern for a flourishing creation and the proper Christian cultural response. Dordt's graphic design program has exemplified a compassionate attitude in concrete ways through projects that serve God and his image bearers. This attitude has import for teaching graphic design, since design plays such a huge role in the promotional efforts of artifacts and commodities, from architecture to almost all industrial products.

An example of responsible design can also be found in the work of Dutch product-designer Tord Boontje, work that is unconventional but appealing. Boontje, since 1998, is known for his do-it-yourself (DIY), humanizing *Rough and Ready* furniture collection made from scrap pieces of wood from the lumberyard. Citing Zöe Ryan, Boontje has summed up his approach as follows: "I find it hard to relate to the prevalent plastic slickness and preciousness. With this furniture I want to develop my ideas about objects we live with, ideas about a utilitarian approach towards the environment we live in."⁴⁴ Disconcerted, Boontje says that society has lost the ability to make things and all we do is consume.⁴⁵

One response to the abnormal effects of consumption is the current sign and trend that conscientious businesses, progressive organizations, and designers are creating a culture of responsibility and fairness by considering design for the other 90% of the world's population, who have meager resources. As Paul R. Polak writes in his essay titled *Design for the Other Ninety Percent*,

Today, you could ask the executives of Netafim, the world's biggest drip-irrigation company, why

more than ninety-five percent of its products go to the richest five percent of the world's farmers, and they would probably reply, "Because that's where the money is." But think about this: If a hundred million small farmers in the world each bought a quarter-acre drip system for \$50—a total investment on their part of \$5 billion—it would amount to more than ten times the current annual global sales of drip-irrigation equipment. These millions of small farmers could put ten million additional hectares under drip irrigation and increase current global acreage under drip irrigation by a factor of five.⁴⁶

The Katrina Furniture Project is a fine example of God's generous grace given to designers motivated mainly by compassion—working sensitively in community without being autocratic while allowing members of the community the dignity of helping themselves.

Social entrepreneurial intention and transformational thinking are needed on a larger scale to design products that improve the lives of all people, whether it be a high-end ergonomic office chair or an improved sanitation system in an underdeveloped country.

Graphic design needs transformation. Indeed, some signs point to transformation initiated by both Christian and non-Christian designers. Christian graphic designers can be instrumental in this transformation by first cultivating the mind of Christ, i.e., compassionately working as creational

stewards for the thriving of every creature, culture, and society. This must be our response to God as Christian designers and educators of design.

Endnotes

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First, for those who want to be Christian artists, that is, musicians, painters, poets, novelists, graphic designers, dramatists, cinematographers, distinguished in their *artistry* by the holy spirit of compassionate judgment proclaiming the Rule of Jesus Christ:

 1. Become filled with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.
 2. Conceive art as work and undergo its training like a trade.
 3. Distill a fruitful christian art historical tradition in your own blood and pioneer its contribution in our day.
 4. Integrate yourself as a band of christian artists with christian taskforces in other cultural areas in order to reach out as a peoplehood of God to the public at large.
 5. Persevere in unfolding art historically, with a generations-long patience and hope.
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