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## Becoming Artist Christians

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## Becoming Artist Christians

### Abstract

"I encourage [my students] to express themselves in their art, as a multi-dimensional image bearer of Christ."

Posting about how to "do art" as a Christian from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/becoming-artist-christians/>

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

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# Becoming Artist Christians

Vaughn Donahue

April 12, 2022

## A Changing Perspective

The Bogaard Theatre no longer exists. For decades it sat, tucked away in the Rowenhorst Student Center at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. There it played host to all the events too small or too controversial to be held across the street in Christ Chapel. In the evenings it was home to theatre rehearsals and one act play festivals, film screenings and dorm meetings. But it was also home to the Theatre Production Ensemble on Tuesdays at 3:30 PM. This time was sacrosanct for theatre majors and scholarship holders, of which I was the latter.

As a freshman, taking my seat in that theatre for the first time in 2003, I hadn't a clue what to expect. This was my first experience with something that, at the time, I would have called "Christian theatre." The students and faculty who surrounded me, at the time, I also would have referred to as "Christian artists." But it was in the moments that followed that my perspective on faith integration in the arts began to shift gradually to what it is today.

Silencing the room of students just by her presence, my new theatre professor, Karen Bohm Barker, stood in front of us all. She welcomed back the upperclassmen and welcomed in the new freshman class. She talked about the work we would be doing in the coming months, both on and off the stage. I don't recall all that was said or how it was phrased, but I do know that in this moment she used the term "artist Christians" to describe all of us in that room. I remember thinking it sounded like a funny and unnecessarily different way to say "Christian artists." But that was far from the case—there is a profound difference. And while in that moment I didn't grasp the concept fully, it would be in the following years that I would come to understand exactly what being an artist Christian meant, and how it could be so different from being a Christian artist.

## A Job Well Done

We would all agree that doing one's job *well* is an important part of a successful career. And being a follower of Jesus can and should have an impact on that job. But if I need a doctor, I want a *good* doctor first and foremost. I don't necessarily seek out a Christian doctor. I seek out a doctor who practices good medicine and trusts science. I don't want a doctor who puts his faith before good medical practice while I'm on the operating table. Moreover, being a follower of Christ does not make someone a good doctor in the first place. Someone might be a

textbook example of a good Christian, but they might also be a terrible doctor. Choosing a doctor based on their faith is ultimately irresponsible.

If my vehicle is broken and I need a mechanic, I want a *good* mechanic. I want a fair mechanic who knows how to fix my vehicle properly. In those moments, my mechanic's faith is secondary to his professional knowhow.

I want a plumber to know how to stop a leak. I want a judge to know the law. I want a contractor to know building codes and safety protocols. How Jesus fits into their lives in those moments is not typically my primary concern.

What I came to realize over years of both learning and practicing art and design is that the same can be true of us. The art we make isn't necessarily "Christian art." Our content is not necessarily faith based. Our faith surely impacts what we do and how we do it, and there may be spiritual nuance embedded in our work—but if I'm working to design a brand for a small business, I should be working to serve my *client* rather than to infuse my faith into the work itself. And if I'm creating an artwork solely to express myself, I should be true to that and not pigeon-hole it with an agenda behind my work.

In the same way that I don't need to look at the results of a doctor's surgical procedure and understand that it was done by a Christian doctor, I similarly don't need to look at a piece of art and know that it was created by a Christian. Yet there seems to be an expectation for artists to create work that directly and explicitly glorifies God and the Kingdom in a way that the viewing audience can easily perceive. Why?

Perhaps it is because there is no functional end-product in the fine arts. There is no fixed leak or stitched wound. There is nothing to sell or put a price on. As Americans in a capitalist society, the idea of something existing without explicit purpose can be confusing. A viewing audience may wish to assign a purpose to a piece of theatre or a painting to make it make sense. In some Christian circles, that might be insisting that art be evangelical for it to be worthy of existence in the first place. And yes, I'm painting with broad strokes here (pun intended).

But if we believe that all of Creation belongs to God, and the complexities of our human experience are sometimes muddy and difficult to make sense of, then artistic expression can and should give due time to all of it. Artistic expression and interpretation are different for everyone, and an artwork will have a different impact on each person who experiences it as either creator or observer. It need not hit you over the head with a pre-packaged message.

This is a freeing idea for an artist Christian.

## **Working Christianly**

Let's go back to the example of the doctor. While faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ should not impact whether a doctor performs the appropriate surgery on a patient in need, there is an argument to be made for *doctoring Christianly*.

Do you see where this is going?

A doctor who identifies and lives as a Christian will inevitably see crossover between their faith and their work. How a doctor interacts with patients is perhaps where that faith comes through. Working with an air of humility and servanthood would be befitting of a Christian in the medical field. Understanding that your job is to care for those who are suffering can be greatly impacted by an understanding of God's common grace. And so long as a practitioner is not substituting medical aid for prayer, then this is what it means to doctor Christianly.

This goes for all fields of work and study. A good contractor can contract Christianly. A good judge can judge Christianly. And a good plumber can plumb Christianly.

An artist can create Christianly. A designer can design Christianly. And this flips the concept upside down for the artist who feels both internal and external pressure to create Christian-themed work.

What I started learning back in that theatre in 2003 is that it's not necessarily about what you do. It's about how and why you do it in the first place. That's why we flip the words.

## **In My Own Classroom**

Fast-forward nearly two decades and I find myself now standing in front of a classroom. I am working every day to do my part in making a new generation of designers and artists who are, in fact, also artist Christians.

I see myself in these students. I am reminded of my own mindset as I entered college—that if I am a Christian making art, I should be making art that is explicitly and undeniable Christian.

So I begin, just as my professor did on day one, expressing my desire for them to become artist Christians who create work that represents them as a whole person. I encourage them to express themselves in their art, as a multi-dimensional image bearer of Christ. These students experience fear, doubt, joy, anger, peace, grief, excitement, love, and pain as anyone does, and they have the opportunity through their work to express that. I want to help them create work that is accessible to a broader audience, regardless of where they are in their own faith journey.

For most of these students, this is the first they are hearing of this concept of an artist Christian. It takes time to fully grasp it. It took me nearly two decades since the first time I sat in that theatre.

As Christians, in all we do, we should do it Christianly. We create, labor, comfort, parent, play, teach, learn, laugh, and grieve—and when we do it Christianly, we open ourselves up to new truths and a freedom of expression.

The Bogaard Theatre no longer exists, but the lessons learned in that unconventional classroom live on and into my own classroom today.