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Calvinism and Art (3)

Nick Van Til

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Mr. Van Til received his A.B. from Calvin College. Subsequent to military service in World War II he spent a semester at Westminster Theological Seminary in the study of Apologetics. Thereafter he received M.A. degrees from the University of Michigan in both history and philosophy and followed further graduate studies in philosophy at Michigan State University. Mr. Van Til was a charter member of the Dordt faculty and has recently retired.

In my first writing in this series entitled "Calvinism and Art" (I) I exposed some of the weaknesses in Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lecture, "Calvinism and Art."* I there pointed out that Kuyper's thought reflected much residual Platonism and Hegelianism. That residue we found to be inconsistent with his Christian presuppositions.

In the second article, "Calvinism and Art" (II) I discussed some of the basic ideas on art and aesthetics found in the writings of Calvin Seerveld of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. As it turns out, I am not the only one who finds Seerveld's choice of "allusiveness" as the core of aesthetic quality still somewhat elusive.¹ That is not to minimize Seerveld's work but I would say that he serves most usefully as seer and not as systematizer.

In this my concluding article, I want to look at those ideas in the writings of Nicholas Wolterstorff, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, which have a bearing on the general subject, "Calvinism and Art." Wolterstorff has systematically presented those ideas in the first of two 1980 publications on art, *Art In Action*.² In what may be called a companion volume, *The Works and Worlds of Art*,³ Wolterstorff elaborates on some basic concepts introduced in his first work. For example, there are long sections on the concept of action, works, worlds, and the projection of worlds with works. With the discursive fine tuning which is characteristic of the analytical approach to philosophy in which he was schooled, Wolterstorff explores all possible meanings and permutations of

meaning which can be attached to the concepts he discusses, many of which need not concern us here. For *The Works and Worlds of Art* is not a layman's book. And even among professionals, I dare say, though some will find it tantalizing, others will find it tedious.

The Purpose of Art

From the outset Wolterstorff's approach reflects an almost Deweyan penchant for the practical. He opens his discussion by repudiating the view of many past philosophers that art has as its purpose a kind of "uselessness," or as Kant had suggested, a "purposeless purposiveness." Wolterstorff holds that basically art is not produced merely for aesthetic contemplation. He states:

In this essay I want to argue, on the contrary, that works of art are objects and instruments of action. They are all inextricably embedded in the fabric of human intention.⁴

One of the proofs that art must not be associated exclusively with gallery viewing where it is encased for aesthetic contemplation is that it is universal. Its very ubiquity would force the conclusion that it serves a multitude of purposes depending on time, place, and need. All cultures, even the most primitive, use art in various ways. Most do not have the sophistication and economic stratification which allows them to harbor an elite class which enjoys art as it is stowed away for viewing in galleries.

If gallery viewing is only a fringe purpose, what then is art for? What underlies this universal yen for its production and presence in all cultures? What is *the* purpose of art? Wolterstorff replies:

One of my fundamental theses is that this question, so often posed, must be rejected rather than answered. The question assumes that there is such a

thing as *the* purpose of art. That assumption is false. There is no purpose which art serves, nor any which it is intended to serve. Art plays and is meant to play an enormous diversity of roles in human life.⁵

Here Wolterstorff introduces a straw man, for when one asks, "What is the purpose of art?" at least as a layman, one rarely means "What is *the* purpose of art?" as if it has one exclusive use. Most then are not seeking the answer in one direction as, for example, "The purpose of art is aesthetic contemplation." So there really is no need to disallow the question, "What is the purpose of art?"

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However, few would disagree with Wolterstorff's attempt to liberate art from its confinement in museums and galleries. That does not mean, as he indicates presently, that he would disapprove of visiting an art collection solely for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation.

But as to the main purpose of art, Wolterstorff cautions us:

Seidom do we have before our mind's eye the whole broad sweep of the purpose of art.⁶

He adds:

The world is filled with works of art never intended for perceptual contemplation.

Why then do we all so regularly take for granted that works of art *are* in-

tended for contemplation? What induces us to ignore the obvious? . . . You and I are participants in what I shall call our society's *institution of high art*.⁷

To confine our participation in art activity to our *institution of high art* is to Wolterstorff's mind a kind of artificial limitation of art which frustrates its many and varied uses and its possibilities for the enrichment of our lives. In fact, he writes:

Underlying the artist's creative activity will characteristically be a certain intended public use. And he gives his work the properties he does in part because he makes it for that use. If he had made it for a different use he would have made it different. Of course, he fully expects the public will also use his work in different ways he never intended.⁸

While in our day it may be that the artist intends his work for aesthetic contemplation in our *institution of high art*, Wolterstorff says it was not always so and should not remain so:

Around the time of the Renaissance a profound and fateful alteration, localized in the West, began to occur in the consciousness of mankind.⁹

Men became fascinated with innovation, and art of the West became problem oriented. This too had its effects, as Wolterstorff notes:

The result [was] a striking interiorization of the community of artists.¹⁰

And so with art works set apart and no longer for public use, Wolterstorff sees this effect:

The great artist is one who sets himself problems which are strikingly

new, and problems which prove fertile in the variety of solutions they allow of and the number of new problems they suggest.¹¹

Even so,

The work of the high-art artist may be an expression and affirmation of the convictions of some religious community—Rouault, Messiaen, Penderecki, Eliot, are examples. But that is fundamentally irrelevant to his acceptance and position as artist. What counts is simply his contribution to the community of fellow artists. In that way the institution of high art, for all its residual mysticism, is a profoundly secular institution—with the result that the artist who identifies himself deeply with some religious community will constantly have the experience of being a divided self living in two worlds. The institution of high art is a jealous god!¹²

The secularists from the institution of high art in their pursuit of continuous innovation veer off into anti-art and repudiate the aesthetic. Wolterstorff offers Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* as an example. It is an ordinary commercially produced urinal hung on a gallery wall.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is an example of *anti-art*—an object presented to us not that we should find it satisfying to contemplate but rather that we should find it interesting *that it is presented* as if for contemplation, and for the reasons that it is.¹³

John Hughes in his television series on art suggested that we are not obliged to consider *One Hundred and Twenty Bricks* arranged in that number on the floor of a museum of modern art as an aesthetic object or an object of art. We are obliged to consider what the artist was trying to impose on us.

The Christian Perspective

The conflict between religious commitment and problem solving as a consuming interest for the secular artist leads to the consideration of "Art in a Christian Perspective." Under that heading Wolterstorff looks at the possibility of a Christian aesthetic. He asserts:

Those in our century who have tried to develop a Christian aesthetic have almost invariably taken for granted that art is for contemplation. In that way they have betrayed their embeddedness within our institution of high art. I know of only one exception, Gerardus van der Leeuw in his book *Sacred and Profane Beauty*.¹⁴

At this point I have to wonder why Wolterstorff chose to ignore the work of Calvin Seerveld in his attempt to work out a Christian aesthetic, for Seerveld sees aesthetic quality in such diverse events as the skittering of a falling leaf and the motions involved in a judo contest. My wonder is particularly appropriate since Wolterstorff's category is not those who have succeeded in working out a Christian aesthetic but those who are trying.

I also disagree with Wolterstorff as to what is the general Protestant view regarding what constitutes religion. After telling us that man's vocation rises uniquely out of his position of responsibility towards his Creator and man's end is for that reason also, shalom and joy, which includes the joy of aesthetic contemplation,¹⁵ Wolterstorff writes:

Man, he [i.e., the Protestant, N.V.T] says, is a *religious creature*. His being so belongs to the very structure of his being and is unique to him among earthlings. He is incurably religious. . . . Always [his religious tendency] finds realization. It can be turned to different *directions*, with the result

that different religions emerge. But man can no more choose not to have a religion than he can choose not to have a religious tendency. All that is open to him is the choice of *which* religion to have. Only therein lies his freedom.¹⁶

While I think the foregoing interpretation is correct regarding man's religious nature, I think it is wrong to claim that this is the generally held Protestant view. The general Protestant view as to the relation of religion and public education would indicate that most Protestants believe that one can be irreligious and/or non-religious in many parts or in all of one's life. In fact, in the Supreme Court prayer decision, only Justice Potter Stewart, lately retired, saw that if Christianity leaves our schools no religious vacuum occurs but the religion of secular humanism fills in.

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After defining religion as "that on which a person fixes as his ultimate concern,"¹⁷ Wolterstorff maintains that there are people who do not involve themselves with anything that for them constitutes an ultimate concern. He writes:

Is it not rather the case that many live their lives with a *multiplicity* of concerns, shifting about from time to

time, with no one concern ever being ultimate. . . . Their life displays a fractured multiplicity of concerns. And what they would do if such a conflict arose, they do not know.¹⁸

I believe that the attitude just described more accurately presents the consensus of Protestant opinion than that which Wolterstorff proposed. But Wolterstorff goes on to insist that the Bible does not teach that man is incurably religious. He asserts:

What especially makes it seem heretical to oppose the consensus is the belief of many that this allegedly ineradicable and irresistible religious tendency in all men is a basic *biblical* teaching. I think there is no such biblical teaching. The Bible speaks about the true worshippers of the true God, and describes their unity-in-variety. But it never attempts to locate some ineradicable religious tendency which, though it can be turned in different directions, can never be resisted.¹⁹

Wolterstorff then argues his point by a discussion of Romans, chapter one, and then concludes:

In speaking of worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, Paul is not making some generalization about the invariant structure of human nature.

One would have to say that whether or not the argument is substantial depends on the definition. By taking the Tillichian definition of religion as a fix on an ultimate concern, Wolterstorff was able to adduce proof for his argument by citing cases of indifference as to ultimates. But the Bible defines religion as a personal relationship with the triune God made possible through the Word made flesh. Then one's attitude for or against counts as one's religion. Indif-

ference is then the same as a contrary attitude so all men have to be reckoned as religious.

In a sense that part of Wolterstorff's discussion here in which he attempts to refute the idea that man is universally religious is a kind of aside, coming as it does under the larger heading "The Artist As Responsible Servant." He already established that man is unique as a creature in that he is created "responsible." We must then ask, "How are the possibility of indifference and the presence of responsibility related to the work of the artist?"

Seerveld worked out of the conviction that all of life is religious. This is the approach which Wolterstorff took as the general Protestant approach when actually it is limited to a part of those who profess the Reformed faith, that is, those who have come strongly under the influence of Abraham Kuyper. Working out of his Kuyperian conviction, Seerveld, at least in his earlier writings, insisted one can see the specifically religious tendencies of the artist in every work. I argued that because of the abstract nature of some of the art media it is impossible to discern precisely an artist's religious bent by random reference to particular works.

By reason of what he argued concerning the character of the religious involvement of man, we would expect Wolterstorff also to disagree with Seerveld. And he does. Wolterstorff says we cannot expect to find the artist's religious attitudes intentionally expressed in his art at all times. But there is more to it than the religious argument. There are some aspects of expressing and revealing associated with works of art over which the artist has no conscious control.²¹

What the Protestant view rightly and forcefully calls to our attention is the presence of a world behind each work of art, of which the work is an expression. . . . Nonetheless, distortion will result if we take as the basic framework of our approach to

art, this phenomenon of the works being an expression of the world behind it. Works of art are instruments and objects of action, actions on the part of the artist and actions on the part of the public.²²

What Wolterstorff's discussion brings to us in sum is the conclusion that because of its complicated "embeddedness" in a culture and because expression and revelation as it pertains to a work of art can be unintentional, it is impossible to relate all meanings to the artist. Moreover, it is necessary to consider public use, involvement, and reaction. In fact, one should really throttle the urge to put the finger on the artist's meanings. It may be the trap by which we are caught up with distortions.

Yet, may we not plausibly hold, that the expression of feeling in a work of art which is not the artist's personal feeling, and the revealings which unintentionally reveal, plus the public use and reaction, are religiously saturated. This is so even when some of the nuances of a piece do not lend themselves to specific categorization.

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In his discussion of "The Givens With Which The Artist Works" Wolterstorff has

an extended discussion of "fittingness" with several references to the work of C. E. Good, particularly as it relates to "Cross Cultural Generality of Visual Verbal Synesthetic Tendencies."²³ The discussion generally and Good's work specifically point to the conclusion that there is a kind of universal law of fittingness between the physical symbols which are accessible to an artist and the feeling response which they create. For example, rough lines and dissonant music create feelings of uneasiness while undulating lines and consonant music dispose one to repose.

Fittingly, Wolterstorff uses these findings concerning fittingness to caution us that we should be careful not to let our artistic symbols contradict their intended use. This caution should be religiously observed when associating art and liturgy. On the other hand, we should not try to reduce fittingness to minute calculations concerning the relationship between symbol and convictions or feelings. Wolterstorff observes that

. . . attempts to say what the connection is, particularly in the case of abstract, nonrepresentational art, have produced deep perplexity and pervasive obscurity. Once we see, though, that there can be *fittingness* between works of art and human conviction, we have the key in hand to unlock the door.²⁴

Wolterstorff then furnishes an example of that kind of unlocking by suggesting that the integration of indoor and outdoor living which is characteristic of the residential architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright is indicative of his naturalistic humanism. But I believe an equivocal interpretation is possible. Without biographical data one might view one or another of Wright's works and conclude that here is a Christian architect trying to liberate man from the imprisonment of his industrially imposed habitat in order to restore for him a more edenic environment.

A more fitting example of the relation between conviction and construction can be found in the Bauhaus influence under the leadership of Mies vander Rohe as it came from the influence of post World War II European socialism. As a result Americans were also encased, as it were, in crates of glass and steel with an eye to group life with no room for individual expression. Men were to function as ants in their socialized ant hill. The result was disastrous as was proved by the fact that a St. Louis low-income housing project had to be blasted to the ground as the only cure for its failure.

But then Wolterstorff said there *can* be fittingness and there most often is, though it can not always be assessed unequivocally. Maybe there is a kind of creation law of fittingness which artists ignore to their own peril and to the confusion of those who would trace out their meanings.

Aesthetic Quality

Seerveld, taking his cue from his Dooyeweerdian predispositions, engaged in an extended search for the "nuclear moment" of the aesthetic modality, the aesthetic aspect of human experience. Wolterstorff is under no such compulsion. He explains aesthetic quality in different terms, somewhat more pedestrian perhaps. He asks:

Can those aspects of things which for *someone* or *other* are aesthetic merits in those things be grouped together into a very few general types of merits? . . . I think the correct answer . . . is Yes.²⁵

What are those aspects? They are unity, internal richness and fittingness intensity. Can we equate aesthetic excellence with beauty? No, because there are works of art which display aesthetic excellence but are not beautiful. Rembrandt's *The Carcass of Beef* is a classic example. Similarly, Jackson Pollock's *Number 6* [Examples mine, NVT].

Some, on first viewing, are puzzled because *Number 6* does not lend itself to iconographic recognition. But it surely has unity, internal richness, and fittingness intensity. Wolterstorff's triple requirement as to the qualities which provide aesthetic excellence seem to be serviceable and apt and somewhat less elusive than Seerveld's "allusiveness."

Aesthetic Excellence

Early in his discussion Wolterstorff said that man is "uniquely unique."²⁶ This is so because, of all creatures, he is the only one who is *responsible*. But what is man's responsibility towards aesthetic excellence? Many seem to assume that they can hold a "take it or leave it" attitude, as the saying has it.

The answer has already been given—in our discussion of joy in *shalom*. Aesthetic delight is a component within and a species of that joy which belongs to the shalom God has ordained as the goal of human existence and which here already, in this broken and fallen world is ours, is to be sought and experienced.²⁷

Not only does that put the artist under obligation, but Christians everywhere who ignore the aesthetic aspect of their life and surroundings are really engaged in self-deprivation.

If, as Wolterstorff maintains, a work of art has many uses so that aesthetic excellence can be a secondary concern, do we still have a driving responsibility towards aesthetic excellence? Wolterstorff answers by making reference to our liturgical use of hymns:

Can we say, then, that if a hymn is to prove good and satisfying to use for praising God, it must in general be aesthetically good? . . .

I think the answer is Yes. . . . Ugly or vapid liturgical music, no matter

how effectively it may serve its dominant purpose, is not *good* liturgical music.²⁸

That principle can be applied to all our creature efforts. We should pursue aesthetic excellence in all our creative activity.

Most people find it difficult to deal with abstractions. This is evident by the fact that they do not understand abstract art. As I have said elsewhere, it is the function of art to let us feel and understand where we cannot grasp meanings by propositional statements. That function makes it suitable for some of the uses which Wolterstorff suggests, such as to confirm, console, illuminate, and inspire, among others.

Limitation of space demands that I bring my discussion to a close. Obviously, I have passed over many interesting parts of Wolterstorff's work. For example, he deals with the relationship between aesthetic excellence and morality. Under the heading of "ontology" he raises the interesting question as to where the reality of a musical work is located. What is the truth status of a piece of fiction? Whose "point of view" is expressed in a novel?

Wolterstorff wrote a great deal about the purpose of art but less about its function. I would distinguish between the two. He says art tends to concretize ideas that are important to the community. Seerveld spoke of "symbolic objectification." Wolterstorff says the artist attempts to "realize" ideas, i.e., give them a sensuous reality, by giving them visual or audible representation. Most

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We are indebted to Wolterstorff for illuminating many of the aspects of the works and worlds of art through his extended and careful analysis. *Art In Action* may be a good place to start the expansion of your understanding of art. *The Works and Worlds of Art* may furnish more stretch than most can cope with as amateurs.

Notes

¹David A. Hoekema, "Elusive About Allusive," *Reformed Journal*, September, 1981.

²Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art In Action* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 240 pages.

³Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 372 pages.

⁴Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 3

⁵Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 4

⁶Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 10.

⁷Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 11.

⁸Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 16.

⁹Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 59.

¹⁰Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 59.

¹¹Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 61.

¹²Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 61.

¹³Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 62.

¹⁴Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 67.

¹⁵Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 82.

¹⁶Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 85.

¹⁷Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 86.

¹⁸Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 86.

¹⁹Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 87.

²⁰Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 88.

²¹Wolterstorff has an illuminating discussion of the meaning of "Expression and Revelation" as it pertains to art in an Appendix, p. 215.

²²Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 89.

²³J. C. Snider and C. E. Osgood, eds., *Semantic Differential Technique* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

²⁴Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 118.

²⁵Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 164.

²⁶Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 72.

²⁷Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 169.

²⁸Wolterstorff, *Art In Action*, p. 170.