
Pro Rege

Volume 10 | Number 1

Article 4

September 1981

Calvinism and Art (2)

Nick Van Til
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1981) "Calvinism and Art (2)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 10: No. 1, 13 - 20.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol10/iss1/4

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Calvinism and Art (2)

Nick Van Til
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy



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 a *Pro Rege* article entitled "Calvinism and Art" (I) I criticized Abraham Kuyper's "Calvinism and Art," one of the *Stone Lectures* of 1898 which he delivered at Princeton University. That lecture by Kuyper was the standard fare on aesthetics in the Christian Reformed academic community until the middle of this century. Then came a change. A group of young men, proteges of Evan Runner, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, went to the Free University in Amsterdam to get at the source of Runner's Reformational thought, the system of Herman Dooyeweerd and D.H. Th. Vollenhoven.

With newly acquired doctorates from the "Free" most of these men found places in Christian Reformed academia and began to market a new academic package called

"Reformational Scholarship."¹ They felt that the traditionally Reformed insights and interpretations were marred by rationalism and scholasticism. Those insights had to give way to a more dynamic thrust formulated from a mixture of the ideas of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven with some ingredients from Karl Barth and G.C. Berkouwer.

Runner's proteges came back from Amsterdam as men in a hurry. They resolved to do battle with the old Reformed forms and formulae.² At times it seemed like they were running in all directions at once. Some of their critics had the feeling that there was some quixotic tilting against windmills. But whether by coincidence or by design, collectively they had prepared themselves academically in a variety of fields so

they were prepared to apply the Reformational approach to a wide range of academic disciplines and life concerns.

Among the men coming from Amsterdam was Calvin Seerveld, one of the gentler spirits. It was fitting that he chose art and aesthetics as the area upon which to expend his Reformational energies. After a brief stay at Belhaven College in Mississippi Seerveld returned north to become one of the original faculty of Trinity Christian College at Palos Heights in Chicago. From this base of operation Seerveld began his effort to reform attitudes towards art and aesthetic theory. He was able to intensify this effort when he was invited to become the Senior Scholar in Aesthetics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto in 1972.

Some of Seerveld's earliest ideas on art and aesthetic theory were set down for the 1962 Unionville Study Conference under the sponsorship of what was then called the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, later Association for Advanced Christian Studies. Those lectures appeared in print as part of the 1963 Christian Perspectives Series under the title, *A Christian Critique of Art*. I now turn to a consideration of some of the ideas found there.

One of the perennial problems which any student or apologist for art and aesthetic theory faces is community apathy, whether that community is the public at large or the Christian and the Reformed community. Therefore, Seerveld took up that problem first. He insisted that pietistic disinterest in art as this-worldly is not an option for Christians with a Reformed perspective.

Should one then, perhaps, be satisfied with the half-a-loaf which one gets from a synthesis with pagan thought after the fashion of the Thomists? Seerveld called on Kuyper to answer:

No, said Kuyper and the whole genius of the Reformation because the half-a-loaf blinds one to the vision, blocks one from being willing to grasp and to form art, philosophy, sociology, a

university, peculiarly *op Christelijken grondslag* (on a Christian fundament), with Biblically Christian starting roots for it to thrive on, scandalously searching it out by faith. And only this last sacrifice is worthy of our Lord, the sacrifice of complete, utterly childlike obedience.³

Furthermore, Seerveld adds:

If there is anything the Christian community needs it is leaders, scholars, trained artists and writers who, because they virtually live out of the hand of our heavenly Father daily, stay close to the uneducated followers and untrained traders doing the same, living out of the Scriptures.⁴

So far so good with Kuyper, but a basic problem in the Reformed community remained because it had possessed the Kuyperian "Christelijke grondslag" for more than a half century but had built very little on the "fundament." Seerveld committed himself to work on a Reformational superstructure with unremitting zeal and dedication. At Unionville he offered some initial and tentative conclusions.

In discussing art and aesthetic theory as a "face-off," one has to confront "The Complication of Common Grace." Seerveld does that forthwith and concludes:

Unfortunately too, Abraham Kuyper wobbles enough on Common Grace to furnish proof texts and ammunition for any who would special plead into the Reformed tradition a syntheticizing Romanist answer.⁵

What is missing in the "syntheticizing" approach?

That the earth is the Lord's and everything filling it is His" (Psalm 24:1) is a recognition missing in unchristian art, an insight twisted in post-Christian

secular art, and a commitment that cannot be satisfactorily appended, circumscribed or applied like varnish to an object conceived without it, because the Lord is a jealous God. It is a regrettable mistake to think that because our gracious God's cosmomic theatre allows all men to act coherently that this absolves the Christian community from their special calling to praise God themselves wholly, unreservedly, in the bonds-bursting power of the Holy Spirit.⁶

If synthesis threatens the production of distinctively Christian art, what is the solution? Avoidance? By no means. We do not defend our faith merely at the church door as suggested by the Puritan divine, William Ames. "Because art is worship, it is itself a battlefield." This follows from the Kuyperian claim that all of life is religious. Thus the whole of the Christian life must be a continuous act of worship.

At the 1977 Wheaton Philosophy Conference where Seerveld was one of the lecturers a respondent disputed the claim that art is worship and life is worship on the basis of the fact that worship is a self-conscious act. No one can be constantly and self-consciously attentive to his attitude towards God; therefore, life and with it art cannot be constant worship. Seerveld did not accept that kind of reasoning as inimical to his premise.

Psychological quibbles aside, the question remains. How does one go about showing the effects of special grace in one's life through one's art? I think Seerveld went astray in the Unionville lecture both as to the deficiencies which he finds in "unchristian" art and in the way in which he expected art to reflect one's Christianity.⁷ At Unionville he maintained:

But what is lacking in Mozart's music is any shaft of Isaiah 53; there is no Romans 8 to Mozart, there is *prema-*

ture triumph of Grace in Mozart's music, the acosmic blind spot in Barth's theology which glosses over the real destructive power of sin that must be suffered and fought by men in our times aeon, even in its delights.⁸ (Mozart was Barth's favorite composer; maybe that is why Seerveld ties him to Barth. N.R.V.T.)

If there is this obvious deficiency in Mozart then it is fair to ask, "How does one go about rectifying the deficiency?" Do we introduce a sonata by some dissonant Schoenberg sound before we move to the flowing lyrical passages? To my mind, to expect music as pure tone to be expressly evangelical is to expect music to be what it cannot be. Music is not in that class of symbols which can make that kind of exact reference.

"Because art is worship, it is itself a battlefield." This follows from the Kuyperian claim that all of life is religious. Thus the whole of the Christian life must be a continuous act of worship.

Seerveld goes on to suggest that the *Marseillaise* of Rouget de Lisle is a hell-bent call to revolution, standing in marked contrast to *Joy to the World* as a song of salvation. I would insist by contrast that as for the music itself, the *Marseillaise* is a much better vehicle for the conveyance of heartfelt conviction than the lilting syncopated tune of *Joy to the World*. I hold that music as music can carry a rather wide variety of feelings according to various purposes. This becomes evident when we look at its use by various composers. Handel lifted two tunes for female soloists in the *Messiah* from their earlier use in secular works. J.S. Bach took the "Ossana" of his B

minor Mass from an earlier work where it had been used to honor a German prince.

If one is looking for the evangel or God-praising expression in all of Christian art then one may be tempted, *mutans mutandis*, to find expressions of apostasy in all non-Christian art. I think Seerveld fell into that trap in his evaluation of Picasso's *Guernica*. He wrote:

The sinfulness of *Guernica* is not that it is ugly—modern war is never beautiful is it?—sinful is its God-damning spirit, its coherently symbolized message that these helpless people do not deserve this misery so who does whoever is in charge think he is, a sacred bull? who but a beast could let such inhumanity go on?"

That interpretation would surely have surprised Picasso. For him the bull, the horse, and the toreador symbolize the location of *Guernica* in Spain. The picture is revulsive protest against man's inhumanity to man on the occasion of the bombing of this little town in Northern Spain by General Franco as he was testing Hitler's planes in anticipation of their use for war.

By a kind of reverse twist Seerveld attempted to make Rembrandt the artist who, with a Calvinistic emphasis, vividly symbolized the spirit of the Protestant Reformation. But I think that Seerveld loads Rembrandt with more Calvinism than the latter possessed. To find in the eyes of Rembrandt's *De Stallmeesters* "a keen assured sense of vocation" is to Christianize their single-minded devotion to money-making in a way that history will not tolerate. Again looking at the opposite side of the coin, depending on whose biography one reads, one can allege that J.S. Bach's music conveyed more Christianity than his own convictions would demand.

In the October 10, 1969, *Banner* Seerveld perpetuated his mistake as to the distinguishability of common grace and special grace in the arts by asserting that the

works of Henk Krijger and Georges Rouault have an obvious Christian message. However, most of those who view the works of Krijger and Rouault without any knowledge of their intentions fail to find the Christian message. That was also my experience in viewing a major display of the works of each of those two men some years ago. It is my conclusion that many works of art are much like money given to charitable causes. Once a twenty dollar bill leaves the hand of the donor it is indistinguishable from any other and the character of the act depends on the intention of the donor. This is not to say that in total a man's works do not reflect his intention, but only God knows the heart.

In his 1962 *Critique* Seerveld also addresses the problem of defining art. At that time his definition read, "Art is the symbolical objectification of certain meaning aspects of a thing, subject to the law of coherence." In his choice of "symbolical" Seerveld, perhaps reflects some influence of Susanne Langer who took art to a symbolization of feeling. The words "meaning aspect" and "law of coherence" beyond doubt reflect Seerveld's association with the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd. A clue to that influence already appeared in my quote from Seerveld's *Critique* where the word "cosmonomic" was used.

To my mind, "symbolical" serves well to characterize a work of art. Though art is not devoid of ideas it is most often used to convey feeling. If one could convey feeling by simply making declarative statements, the works of the artist would be superfluous. Pascal suggested with respect to religious convictions that the heart has reasons which the head cannot know. Similarly, I think we experience feelings which can only be symbolized through the various media of the arts.

No doubt it could be alleged that to specify "objectification" is unnecessary because all art takes the form of objects. Though not tangible, that must be said of music as well. But then there were men like Benedetto Croce who thought of artistic ex-

pression as primarily and exclusively inner, formative, and spiritual, not dependent on physical things. The development of the technique necessary to bring about objectification was only incidental for Croce.

While agreeing with Kuyper in his emphasis on the religious nature of all of life, Seerveld rightfully parts company with Kuyper on the nature of the essence of art. Unable to extricate himself from the influence of Plato, Kuyper tried to hypostatize beauty into an eternal entity and make it the *sine qua non* of art.¹⁰ Seerveld repudiates beauty as a requisite for art under the heading, "The Curse of Beauty." Seerveld also discards the classic approach to inspiration. Kuyper had erred too with respect to his estimate of inspiration suggesting that the artist gets in touch with the Infinite where Beauty finds itself fully realized.

It may be that Seerveld swings too far in an opposite direction when he maintains:

Christian art does not try to build a heaven on earth ahead of time: Christian art will plumb especially the meaning of sin (instead of staying as far away from it as possible), will express the holy passion of the artist anticipating the completion of what is already fulfilled (neither homeless nor entirely at home in our present world), and will be rigorously trained and most open to a straight forward, rugged, translucent style (instead of striving for a transcendent perfection).¹¹

Again, I think that Seerveld is right in repudiating the ideas of Kuyper, which show the influence of Plato and Hegel. Art must symbolize some meaning aspect of reality. (On my suggestion, Seerveld substituted "reality" for "thing" in his definition to avoid limiting symbolization of art to the tangible.) For all that, art need not be partial to the depicting of sin and its results anymore than that it should gloss over evil too optimistically. Creation, the fall, and

redemption are the context of human life. Each may invite the artist's attention at various times.

In this connection I am reminded of the reaction to a Dordt chapel service which made use of symbolic dance. It alluded to the creation and the fall. It ended with the participants in two groups vainly trying to re-establish harmonious association. One viewer expressed disappointment. She wanted the healing power of salvation to be symbolized as well. But, obviously, every painting need not be triptych nor need all music come in three movements. We may have to wait for the resolution. Yet Seerveld has a point. Some parts of the Reformed community, to say nothing of the Christian community generally, tend to make victories too easy, and to celebrate early raptures.

The qualifying phrase at the end of Seerveld's definition of art, "subject to the laws of coherence," reflects his cosmomic thinking as influenced by Dooyeweerd. Coherence implies that there are creation norms which the artists must respect. There is law for "symbolical embodiment" as there is for all other human activity. Seerveld explains:

To posit that symbolical objectification must be coherent is to affirm that it must betray an internal symbolical consistency, thematic convergence possibly, it must make aesthetic sense, have significant metaphorical constituency. . . . If you have coherent symbolical objectification of meaning, you have art: if not, you do not have art.¹²

But then he cautions:

We Christians must take care not to blunder into confusing unpleasant art with non-art because of a too narrow definition of what art is; and that may mean we need to push back and re-examine acutely our usual assumption that everything is basically

rational, humanly comprehensively rational—and I do not mean to imply irrationality as an alternative. Also, the fact that the history of art shows a myriad of styles, all kinds of ways to coherently symbolically objectify meanings, should lead us to inquire for a Christian, critically contemporary style.¹³

At first it appears self-evident that a work of art ought to meet the test of coherence in order to qualify as art. But, like the difficulty in recognizing Christian art wherever the intention is Christian, so the difficulty in applying the rule of coherence. How does one judge when there is the coherence present which prevents the lapse into non-art? How far can an artist go before he is beyond the ken of coherence? And who is the competent judge? In a Public Broadcasting Network presentation of some recent paintings of Willem De Kooning, some viewers could find no coherence at all.

The fact that there are difficulties in applying the test of coherence does not *ipso facto* invalidate the demand for it. As Seerveld points out, realism, in the popular sense of the term, does not have a corner on coherence. And I think those who wanted art to transcend reality demanded coherence but they wanted it to leave behind its context, the created order of reality.

Seerveld has lectured widely and published articles here and there, some technical, some general. Last year (1980) he published a volume entitled *Rainbows For The Fallen World*. One of the essays in this volume, his inaugural address at the Institute for Christian Studies (1972) and his lecture at the 1977 Wheaton Philosophy Conference, I believe, contain the core of Seerveld's thinking on aesthetic theory. Several points of interest are raised in those studies.

As a sometime disciple of Herman Dooyeweerd, Seerveld likes the neat arrangement of Dooyeweerd's modality structure. And with Dooyeweerd he feels obliged to find the "nuclear moment," that

is, the essence of each modality. What then is the identifying quality of the aesthetic modality? Having abandoned beauty which had been the age-old choice, Seerveld also refuses to accept the concept of harmony which was Dooyeweerd's choice. Harmony is too broad, he says. One can find it in other modalities as well. So Seerveld sets out on his further quest with the devotion of a Sir Lancelot in search of the Holy Grail. With no illusions concerning the elusiveness of the subject, he finally chose allusiveness as the essence of aesthetic quality.¹⁴

How does one judge when there is the coherence present which prevents the lapse into non-art? How far can an artist go before he is beyond the ken of coherence? And who is the competent judge?

The choice of allusiveness serves Seerveld well because it is consistent with his general definition of art. A work of art is a specific thing but its meaning is carried by the way it alludes to feelings or ideas which are not the object itself. Literate people rarely miss the meaning of a straightforward declarative sentence but the allusiveness of works of art may quite readily prevent an unequivocal understanding of meaning. The signs we use for our language sometimes have ambiguous meanings, but the symbols of art are almost always ambiguous. Allusions may be evanescent, and evasive as well. That evasiveness again reminds me of the De Kooning broadcast. De Kooning expressed surprise that people did not find his paintings of females funny according to his intentions.

Seerveld would have us understand that allusiveness as the essence of aesthetic

quality is not limited to objects of art. It pervades all of life if we but have the eye, the ear, and the feeling to find it. The province and the understanding of what is aesthetic quality should be broadened. Seerveld suggests:

Instead of an offering or two in the philosophy department depending on the hobby of someone to teach it, . . . aesthetics [should] serve in its theory of art domain as a necessary interdisciplinary coordinator of comparative literature department, art studio and history of art, and the physical education program. . . . aesthetics [should] develop as a modal science dealing with the aesthetic aspect of reality as systematic, theoretical, philosophical analysis of certain aesthetic phenomena of taste, play, humor, surprises, celebrations, fancy, stylefulness, leisure time, recreational entertainment, hobbies.¹⁵

According to Seerveld's way of thinking and defining, not only is all of life religious but also all of life is aesthetic, if one is sensitized to appreciate it. So convinced, Seerveld has set for himself the worthy task of helping us to broaden our appreciations and our perception of aesthetic quality in order to enrich our lives. He spoke of certain men who have served as "consciousness brokers toward the public" with respect to their particular movement in art. For himself, Seerveld has set the task of being the "consciousness broker" for aesthetic quality for the Reformed community in North America. Since his move to Toronto to the Institute for Christian Studies, he has been able to devote himself solely to the study of art and aesthetic theory with sabbaticals and frequent trips to Europe to browse among the rich store of its art objects. This first hand acquaintance with the world of art he now brings to his chosen task.

Obviously, one cannot in one short article take account of the range of Seerveld's

work. He has done special studies of some movements in art and has paid particular attention to criticism in terms of the secular mind reflected in modern art. His *Rainbows* is a collection of lectures which would be better heard than read as there has been a deficiency in editing with the result that at least twenty-five errors occur in the first one hundred pages of copy. Seerveld also continues his habit of coining works, for example, "imaginativity" and "painterly," which the Oxford Dictionary does not recognize. The fusion of two schools of thought becomes "syntheticizing" instead of "synthesizing." To me the former refers to the process of creating substitute or ersatz materials while the latter is the one Seerveld had in mind when referring to the fusing of rationalistic and Christian thought.

Some affirmations:

(1) I want to heartily applaud Seerveld's effort in fostering an understanding of and an appreciation for the aesthetic aspect of our experience. We should appreciate Seerveld's insights by which he would enlighten and lighten our Christian life.

(2) I find Seerveld's revision of his 1962 definition of art useful. "Art is the symbolical objectification of certain meaning realities subject to the law of allusiveness." Particularly, in calling attention to the symbolical nature of art, the definition tends to belie the tendency to demand that art show recognizable similarity to some sense object. This should set us on the threshold of wider appreciations.

(3) Allusiveness as the essence of aesthetic quality fits in well with Seerveld's definition of art and the idea of symbol. There may be some problem if we take the dictionary definition of "allude" as indirect reference. Some works seem to be for themselves with no pointing elsewhere.

Some remaining difficulties.

(1) I have great difficulty with Seerveld's attempt to get out of the "common grace" thicket and the hazards of "syntheticizing" by demanding that Christian, special grace art, show "bonds-bursting

power of the Holy Spirit" or that it be "marked by compassionate judgment honoring Jesus Christ's rule in its very sensible corpus."¹⁶ I don't know how the artist is going to make that show up in the more abstract forms such as painting and, particularly, music, meaning music as tone. I believe there are types of music. For example, praise music can be used to glorify man or to glorify God. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* exemplifies the former type.

(2) Complementary to the above difficulty is the demand that art be normed by the Bible or that it reach the goal of "positing the full norm of goodness which our Father in heaven has given us to believe as the way of cultural life."¹⁸ How do we get at those norms? The Bible makes no statements on art or man's crafting activity generally. And how do we make the fulfillment of those norms recognizable in our work?

(3) The two difficulties above lead to the problem of recognition. I think Seerveld has been too facile in labeling works of art. He has somewhat arbitrarily eliminated iconography from the categories of acceptable present day works of art. And he has chosen works like those of Henk Krijger and Georges Rouault as models exemplifying the expression of Christian themes. The problem is that without biographical data as a guide, one cannot find any Christian intention in the works of these men. I came away from a Krijger exhibition with the impression that there were strong Freudian overtones in his works. Many find that style grotesque—viewers who no longer have Norman Rockwell as their norm.

(4) Finally, it seems to me that at times Seerveld gives with one hand and takes away with the other. On the one hand he often does a superb job of getting his lay audience enthused about supporting the fine arts and fulfilling that aspect of the cultural mandate. Then without intermission or adjustment time he demands e.g., that they appreciate and see social significance in Rouault's *Two Nudes*. This will turn the earlier sympathetic attitudes into defensive

ones and frustrates the good work to which Seerveld has dedicated himself. I don't think we have to cater to prudishness but it is generally true that nudging gets better results than bludgeoning. But I should add that when one pioneers one is bound to confront some hazards. We commend Seerveld for his ventures towards new frontiers where there are broader horizons.

Notes

¹For example, in the July/August, 1980, issue of *Perspective*, Newsletter of the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, Albert Wolters in an article entitled "Reformational Scholarship in North America" proceeds on the assumption that no reformational scholarship took place except under the guidance of Professor Evan Runner and his proteges.

²Compare writings in *Out of Concern for the Church*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970) and *Will All The Kings Men*, (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972). Particularly Calvin Seerveld in the former, pp. 45 ff.

³Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art*, (Hamilton, Ontario: Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, 1963) p. 16. Kuyper's words, ". . . wat we nodig hebben, is een bouw der geheele wetenschap op Christelijken grondslag. Wat we behoeven is een plant der wetenschap, tierend op Christelijken wortel." p. 17.

⁴Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 17.

⁵Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 24.

⁶Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 26.

⁷I brought this same subject under discussion before in a June, 1977, *Pro Rege* article entitled "Understanding Art." In the present writing I may be repetitious in part.

⁸Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 56.

⁹Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 46.

¹⁰Compare my discussion of Kuyper's "Calvinism and Art" from his *Stone Lectures* in the June, 1980, *Pro Rege*, pp. 10-20.

¹¹Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 57.

¹²Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 45.

¹³Seerveld, *Critique*, p. 46.

¹⁴Calvin Seerveld, "The Import of a Distinction Between 'Aesthetic' and 'Artistic' for Christian Aesthetic Theory." Lecture at the 1977 Wheaton Philosophy Conference. Available on cassette from station WETN, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

¹⁵Calvin Seerveld, "Modal Aesthetic Theory: Preliminary Questions With An Opening Hypothesis," in *Rainbows For The Fallen World*, (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980) p. 126.

¹⁶Seerveld, *Rainbows*, p. 132.

¹⁷Seerveld, *Rainbows*, p. 182.

¹⁸Seerveld, *Rainbows*, p. 181.