

Missional Creativity: Communicating God's Mission through the Creative Process

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The Bible opens with these words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” At the start of the biblical witness, we learn that God is the creator, and that creativity is inherent to the nature of God. Created in God’s image (Genesis 1:28), human beings are also called to the exercise of creativity. Humans do not create *ex nihilo* but are called to take the raw materials of the earth, including physical materials as well intellectual resources of the world, and refashion these in innovative and creative ways. In this regard, Nicolas Berdyaev notes that these materials are “borrowed from the world created by God” (Berdyaev 2009, 127).

This doesn’t mean that the human act of creation isn’t significant in its own right. Dorothy Sayers offers this example: “Though we cannot create matter, we continually, by rearrangement, create new and unique entities. A million buttons, stamped out by machine, though they may be exactly alike, are not the *same* button; with each separate act of making, an entity has appeared in the world that was not there before” (Sayers 1941, loc. 380-386).

Sayers pushes the boundaries of creativity in ways that both recognize the uniqueness of human creativity and embrace the ordinary (“stamping out buttons”), inviting the reader to deeper reflection on the scope and significance of the creative process. Further, when considered in light of God’s mission in the world, the call to create takes on a new level of spiritual and missional importance. This essay will seek to expand our understanding about the importance and practice of creativity in the life and calling of the believer, communicating the reality of God’s mission in and through the creative process.

Foundations of Missio Dei, Calling, and Creativity

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) encompasses the wide scope of God's work in and for the world. God is, in God's very nature, a missional God. Not only do the writers of Scripture bear witness to God's continual acts of reaching out to creation, of redeeming and reconciling humanity, and of re-creating the world, their very lives and calling are shaped by this reality. This reality, of a God whose very nature and work are characterized by mission, continues to shape the life and calling of the believer today. We ourselves are witnesses to God's ongoing work. As the believer's life and calling are formed and reformed by God's mission, he or she communicates the realities of God's mission in both word and action.

Additionally, it is important to consider the wide scope of God's mission and work in the world. Our understanding of God's mission is shaped by the Biblical text, in which we see God's work not only in redemption, but also in the care for creation, along with the work of justice, human care, and flourishing. The implications of this are far-reaching, including how it informs the believer's calling. In recognizing the fullness of God's mission, it brings spiritual importance and significance to the ordinary work and calling of the believer, as the work itself bears witness to and communicates the reality of God's mission. For example, looking back to Dorothy Sayers' example, we might ask regarding the work of the one in the factory producing buttons, in what ways are these buttons being used to clothe humanity as a witness to God's mission of human care?

The mission of God brings shape and direction to the calling of the believer. The life lived as witness to God's mission not only embodies the truth of God's work in the world but does so in a way that is authentic to the individual uniquely created in God's image. Parker Palmer, speaking about his granddaughter, says this: "[She] did not arrive in the world as *this* kind of person rather than *that*, or *that*, or *that*. She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created" (Palmer 2000, 38). In this light, a believer's gifts, talents, skills, and creativity bring uniqueness and authenticity to his or her calling in the world.

Creativity is not only part of the identity of the one made in God's image but is also woven into his or her everyday experience. Rapid changes in the economy, especially in response to Covid-19, have heightened the urgency of developing creative practices. While there are countless resources helping people develop and foster their creativity,

there are comparatively few discussions of creativity from a theological perspective, and none, if any, which connect it directly to the mission of God. For example, two contemporary resources which seek to connect faith and work, Timothy Keller's *Every Good Endeavor*, and Quinn and Strickland's *Every Waking Hour*, make few connections to the creative process.

My essay will interact with the work of four theologians who offer a more fully developed theology of creativity, who in addition to the aforementioned Dorothy Sayers and Nicolas Berdyaev, includes two contemporary authors, Stewart Devenish, in his chapter on the "Faithful Imagination" as part of the book *Creativity and Spirituality*, and Makoto Fujimura in his book *Art and Faith*. While none of these authors discuss the *missio Dei* directly, their work as it relates to creativity offers important insights which can be contextualized in light of the mission of God. Their insights will guide us in making vital connections between creativity, calling, and the communication of God's mission in the world. Additionally, through interviews and a focus group, my essay will seek to apply these connections to the real-world life, ministry, and work of the believer.

A Missional Approach to Creativity

Creativity is a gift from God ("Every good and perfect gift is from above" James 1:17 NIV) bestowed from the Creator into the created, so that through the creative process, the created may image the Creator in the world. The *missio Dei* encompasses God's work in the world; creative expression is an act of participation in that work. Berdyaev writes that "man is not the source of his gifts . . . he has received them from God and therefore feels that he is in God's hands and is an instrument of God's work in the world" (2009, 127). Participation in the creative process is important for the life shaped by God's mission and God's work and is itself an answer to God's call. Berdyaev further makes the connection between the gift of creativity and the call of God: "God has granted man the creative gift, the talent, the genius and also the world in and through which the creative activity is to be carried out. God calls man to perform the creative act and realize his vocation, and He is expecting an answer to His call" (2009, 128).

Further, the creative response to God's call is free. The creative life shaped by God's mission is free to live out the reality of God's mission in new, creative, and innovative ways. Berdyaev goes so far as to say that without freedom: "There can be no creative activity. Freedom not determined by anything answers God's call to creative work, but

in doing so it makes use of the gift or genius received from God and of the materials present in the created world” (Berdyayev 2009, 128). In other words, the believer whose life is shaped by the *missio Dei* can exercise his or her creativity in a variety of contexts and through a variety of means which are authentic to his or her identity as one created in God’s image, and which further God’s mission in the world.

Our understanding of creativity and its connection to *missio Dei* is strengthened through a discussion of the creative imagination. It is first helpful to consider that there is nothing unique about the way a believer imagines or takes part in the creative process: “What characterizes the Christian imagination from all other types of imagination is not so much that Christians adopt a different technique of imagining but that they draw from a distinct meaning-making paradigm that gives distinctive shape and direction to its range of imaginative possibilities” (Devenish 2017, 29). In other words, the believer’s imagination is shaped by a paradigm which has its own distinct apparatus of meaning, “what John Calvin called *sensus divinitatis* (the sense of God)” (2017, 29). Sensing God, to utilize Calvin’s language, is not some abstract exercise, but when considered in light of the *missio Dei*, takes on the reality of a God who is continually reaching out, redeeming, caring for and reconciling humanity and all of creation. In other words, the believer’s imagination is shaped by the *missio Dei*.

This gives both shape and direction to the creative process for the believer. Creativity is not a directionless exercise, but a distinctively spiritual one, given life and direction by the mission of God. Devenish uses two helpful terms to talk about the spiritual paradigm through which the believer understands the world: “A *homeworld* is a habituated web of meaning that constitutes the place where a community or people normally reside . . . a *lifeworld* functions as a pre-given, perpetual web of meaning that undergirds and supports a person’s or people’s existence, based on a presupposed and subconscious way of being in the world” (2017, 27). Utilizing this terminology, Devenish writes that the “Christian homeworld is a world that is ‘upheld’ by the sense of God. It presupposes a world whose ontological foundations are grounded in the transcendent being of God himself” (2017, 29). *Missio Dei* theology invites us to take this a step further. Not only is the Christian homeworld grounded in God’s being, but it also finds its life in God’s continued creative and recreative work in the world.

In this way, “the creativity of the faithful imagination is much more directed and purposeful” (Devenish, 2017, 33). The believer creatively imagines and works towards a better world, a world shaped by the reality of the *missio Dei*, a place where heaven and

earth connect (“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Matt 6:10 KJV). Devenish uses the language of participation to describe this connection: “Redeemed humanity has access to the resources of heaven while living here on earth. Christians are able to participate in the life of heaven through prayer, the sacraments, and engagement in mission, justice and compassion” (2017, 30). A believer’s calling shaped by the *missio Dei* is a calling to participate in God’s work. In this way, “participation in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4 NIV) is not only connected with the being of God but is participation in the work of God in the world whose very nature is characterized by mission.

Devenish utilizes a helpful theological term, cosmicization, which can further build the heaven-earth connection as a paradigm for understanding the calling of the believer to participate in the mission of God through the creative imagination. Regarding cosmicization, he writes that “simply put, the religious community makes a habit of replicating what they know to exist in heaven by revelation, as the central axis of their human lifeworld on earth” (2017, 34). Devenish suggests that the “design of the tabernacle” stands as a Biblical image of cosmicization (2017, 34). Interestingly, Exodus 31:1-11 describes the creative talents of the artisans and designers of the tabernacle as gifts from the Spirit of God: “And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs” (Exodus 31:3-4, NIV). Not only does the tabernacle’s design point to God’s dwelling place among people, but the very creative process used in its design was the work of God’s Spirit, connecting the creative process to God’s presence and mission on the earth.

Devenish suggests that cosmicization helps bring focus to the believer’s creative imagination, where “Christian creativity is not a ‘free-form’ hyperexpressivism that lacks a central integrating model” (2017, 34). Rather “authentic Christian expression . . . is based on the principle of cosmicization, where the structures, attitudes, and defining principles that function in the heavenly temple where God dwells in his triune nature provide the structures, attitudes, and defining principles that guide the citizens of heaven on earth in establishing the earthly version of the kingdom of God” (2017, 34). I would argue that as understood through the *missio Dei*, God’s triune nature is not only understood through the lens of God’s own fellowship as Trinity within the heavenly realm but recognizes that part of God’s very nature is the continued work of the missional God as Trinity in and for the world. In this way, God’s very nature connects heaven and earth. The believer’s creative vision shaped by the *missio Dei* doesn’t

establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, per se, but participates in the “structures, attitudes, and defining principles” of the work of the triune God whose mission on earth is being carried out.

We might further consider how the mission of the triune God shapes a believer’s creative imagination. Devenish writes that “the faithful imagination operates in those people whose inner eye is focused on Christ as the originator of all being and all beauty” (2017, 32). Scripture has much to say about the nature and the work of Christ, including Christ as creator (“for in Him all things were created” Col 1:16 NIV). As creator, Christ is indeed the origin of everything that is good and beautiful about creation. Makoto Fujimura, in his book *Art and Faith*, considers the redemptive and restorative work of Christ as it relates to the creative process. In a chapter centered on the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, he writes that “Christ came not to ‘fix’ us, not just to restore, but to make us a new creation. Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary means he died to take our place in receiving the death we deserve . . . Christ’s ‘substitutional atonement’ will restore Creation and us into the right order of God” (Fujimura 2020, 45).

The work of New Creation shapes a path towards sacred creativity rooted in God’s ongoing work: “The sacred role of creativity and a theology that is cast toward, and through, the New Creation in us can provide a path toward restoring imagination, as based in the sanctified realm of the Holy Spirit and as made possible by Christ’s sacrifice and the Holy Spirit’s gift as an invitation to co-create into the future of God” (Fujimura 2020, 21). For the believer whose life is shaped by God’s mission, the act of creativity is given life by the work of the Holy Spirit, communicating the reality of God’s mission in new and fresh ways. Fujimura argues that the work of the Holy Spirit gives life to the believer’s creativity (he utilizes the term “making” for the ongoing creative work of the believer): “Making necessarily depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our creativity; the Holy Spirit–filled life of abundance (Galatians 5) leads us into the recovery of ourselves as makers in the image of the Creator” (2020, 52).

Fujimura recognizes that there is indeed a newness to the life made new in Christ, a life shaped by the new things God is doing in the world. This requires an intuition which is given direction by the Spirit of God: “Our creative intuition, fused with the work of the Spirit of God, can become the deepest seat of knowledge, from which our making can flow” (2020, 15). This gives space and freedom for the believer as he or she communicates the realities of New Creation and of the ongoing mission of God in fresh and innovative ways through the creative process.

Creativity which is shaped by the life and mission of the Spirit of God is also free, a connection which warrants further development. Berdyaev writes that “true creativeness is always in the Holy Spirit, for only in the Spirit can there be that union of grace and freedom which we find in creativeness” (1955, 131). This freedom is given higher purpose through the work of the Spirit, and its ongoing connection to God’s mission and work. Yet, Berdyaev also raises the important consideration that the free creative process involves a level of imperfection and risk: “Creativeness is bound up with imperfection, and perfection may be unfavourable to it. This is the moral paradox with regard to creativeness” (1955, 131). This is certainly intuitive. Any creative or new ideas, whether it be the creation of a picture, a song, or a new evangelism initiative, has the possibility and likelihood of a number of failures in the process until the finished work or project is completed. Berdyaev is suggesting that this failure and risk is not a problem of the creative process to be fixed but is necessary to it. Freedom of necessity involves risk and failure. But it is precisely through the process of mistakes, learning, failure, and risk that the creative process produces its most beautiful expressions of God’s mission and work.

Fujimura makes the interesting theological connection to the wounds of Christ: “The resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. Through these sacred wounds a new world is born; through the revealing of the wounds still imbedded in the new body of Christ, our faith is given” (2020, 45). Through Christ’s wounds, the most beautiful expression of God’s love for the world was and continues to be visibly demonstrated. Likewise, the apparent “brokenness” of the human creative process comes with it the promise of something new and greater.

The creative imagination shaped by God’s mission has its focus on something new, what Fujimura terms a “New Newness”: “Resurrection reality surpasses our own future redemption, but it presents the possibility of our present capacity to create *kainos*, New Newness, for heaven to invade the earth” (2020, 140). Devenish describes the creative imagination shaped by the kingdom as without limitation: “Despite the fact that our physical, earthly lives are characterized by prescribed limits—mortality, knowledge, strength, entropy, and goodness—those who are engaged in the practice of the spiritual life have no such awareness of limitation . . . the spiritual life [is] a life that is essentially without limits” (2017, 31). The creative imagination shaped by the mission of God has in its purview the full scope of New Creation, for which there are no limitations.

It is important to consider, in this light, that the movement of the creative imagination into New Newness can also lead one to a point of frustration, especially if the enacted reality does not meet the reality of the creative imagination. Berdyaev describes what is sometimes the stark reality of this process: “The aim of creative inspiration is to bring forth new forms of life, but the results are the cold products of civilization, cultural values, books, pictures, institutions, good works. Good works mean the cooling down of the creative fire of love in the human heart just as a philosophical book means the cooling down of the creative fire of knowledge in the human spirit” (1955, 129). He goes on to write that “the inner creative act in its fiery impetus ought to leave the heaviness of the world behind and ‘overcome the world.’ But in its external realization the creative act is subject to the power ‘of the world’ and is fettered by it” (1955, 129).

This is a very practical consideration offered by Berdyaev. It can be seen in the creative vision of a pastor for example, being refashioned in light of real life factors by the church’s elders. Or it can be seen in the tension between the visionaries and the managers in a business. From a theological perspective, it demonstrates the tension between the eschatological vision of the New Creation, and the present reality of the world. And yet, despite this frustration, the calling shaped by God’s mission to imagine a creative vision of New Creation is not in vain. God’s mission is much bigger than any of our individual participation, and creative vision by necessity supersedes human limitations to imagine and see the ongoing work of God. The creative work that is actualized is not in vain either, even if it is a limited expression of a limitless mission of God and a limitless vision of New Creation. It may be a seed, a starting point, but when done in light of God’s mission, the creative process will bear fruit for the Kingdom.

We can also consider the creative process itself as a window into the trinitarian mission of God. Dorothy Sayers offers a theologically rich, yet practical window into the creative process. Quoting the character St. Michael from her play *The Zeal of Thy House*, Sayers writes:

For every work . . . of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly. First . . . there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father. Second, there is the Creative Energy [or Activity] begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word. Third, there is the Creative Power, the

meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit. And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity (1941, loc. 471-578).

Sayers suggests a close connection between the creative process, and God's being and work as Trinity. As the believer engages in her giftedness and the process of creativity, she images the being and work of the triune God. This illustration of the creative process has practical implications for the believer who seeks to communicate the reality of God's mission through participation in God's work of New Creation. Consider, as an example, the process of writing a song for worship. This is not to exclude ways of making which are not explicitly Christian or those outside of the traditional creative arts, as the calling of participation in God's mission encompasses all of life, but simply to offer an illustration. One might imagine what the finished song would look and sound like, how its musical elements would flow together into a whole. There would also be consideration of the process involved in writing and creating the song, the work, the mistakes, the failure and successes that move it towards the finished artwork. Finally, the songwriter might consider how it might, through its melody and words, communicate the beauty and reality of the New Creation, and communicate the truth of God's mission, bringing meaning and renewal to both its writer and those who participate in its singing and melody. The application of this process can go as far as the creative imagination itself will take us.

This essay has considered an in-depth analysis of creativity from a missional and theological perspective, particularly centered on the mission of God. The creative process, as lived out by the one whose life and calling are shaped by God's mission, communicates the reality of the New Creation, and God's ongoing work in the world. What might this look like in the practical life and ministry of the believer? This essay will conclude with three practical examples, considered in light of two interviews and a small focus group. It will look at creativity from the perspective of an evangelical mission organization focused on evangelism, a retiree in his life and work, and through the creative art of photography, as seen through the eyes of a group of high school seniors.

Creativity: New Avenues for Evangelism Ministry

I had the opportunity to speak with Mark Appleton, Director of Internet Evangelism at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Our interview took place on February 24, 2021. The goal of our conversation was to better understand the role creativity plays in the work of evangelism through a digital platform. Through our discussion, what emerged is that creativity played a key role in opening up the space for the message of the gospel to be effectively communicated. The core message of the gospel remains the same, but the means of communicating it, including a form of “digital contextualization,” must be responsive to current needs.

In Mark’s work, he takes an “all in” approach to finding creative ways to communicate the gospel message, referencing part of BGEA’s mission statement to “use every effective means possible.” Elaborating on this idea, Mark says that “I think creativity is important in gospel mission to utilize different strategies that are available to communicate the gospel.” He notes further that “creativity is not just doing things the same way but creating new methods that will connect to people in new ways so that the gospel goes forth.” Here we see an interplay between the “new” and the “old.” While the gospel message is timeless, God has endowed us with the creativity to communicate this message in new and fresh ways.

Creativity must also be responsive to contextual concerns. There is likely no larger recent contextual challenge than Covid-19. In response to the question, *how have you reimagined ministry in response to Covid-19*, Mark says:

For internet evangelism, we were a little bit unique in that we are already positioned in a place where everyone was suddenly driven to. For 8 years, we had already been trying to leverage digital technology to connect to people and introduce them to the gospel. That particular ministry was suddenly just needed more. What changed there was the opportunity to appeal to that particular burden of culture. The strategy didn’t change in that respect.

Where other work environments and ministries had to change and adapt to continue operating, Mark’s team had to adapt to an immediate increase in demand (around 20-25% increase in online traffic). The number of volunteers in their ministry surged from 1000 to 1500 in a short period of time. This opened up a great opportunity for people to serve during a time of crisis: “We didn’t do any extra recruiting campaigns.

Literally, surges of people started expressing interest. I think it was because there weren't other outlets to serve. And people who had missional hearts who wanted to reach out, their typical outreach was their mission trips and different things were shut down."

For BGEA as a whole, "an organization that was built on gathering people in stadiums and presenting the gospel, certainly some shifts had to go on there," Mark noted. One of the ways BGEA responded was through the creation of a 24-hour prayer line. Mark describes it this way: "The organization spun up a 24-hour prayer line very quickly last year that received thousands of calls throughout the year, so that was another pivot. Not necessarily new technology, but we couldn't do what we typically do, so rather than do nothing, let's come up with a way to still reach people." Again, we see the way that creativity comes with a commitment to communicate the same gospel message in new and fresh ways in response to current needs.

Mark also spoke about the importance of contextualizing the content in his ministry. He says that "creativity is not just doing things the same way but creating new methods that will connect to people in new ways so that the gospel goes forth." He further explains how "visual creativity and creativity in messaging is important for gospel proclamation as well, because people have different interests, so we want to draw people to the gospel who have different interests, and different things that appeal to them." This demonstrates the important role that creativity plays in contextualization and effective gospel communication.

Elaborating further, Mark describes the role of contextualization in a specific initiative his team leads: "We have an outreach in Arabic that reaches into the Middle East. We've built up a Facebook page there that's [reaching] Muslim background Arabic speakers in a particular country in the Middle East." Creative contextualization plays an important part in this ministry. Mark reflects that "it's hard when you put up Christian content online to not have all the Christians flock to the content. When we're trying to do evangelism, we actually wanted a space where Muslims were comfortable coming." While the content was Christian, Mark's team did not want only Christians engaging with it: "We wanted [to connect] with Muslims. [We had to] very carefully craft the content to appeal to curious and seeking Muslims. [This included] different videos and visuals that were made regionally in the context of the region, by people in the region, so it didn't seem like another western group doing something in the Middle East."

The initiative was successful, with “almost 300,000 followers in just a few years.” One specific strategy utilized was “marketing personas,” which Mark describes as “creating a picture of the person we’re trying to reach and having that person in mind—what would they think about, care about, and want to talk about, and creating content that would engage them and lead them to spiritual conversations about the gospel.” Ultimately, the goal is for people to reach out for personal conversations, as “all of the posts invite people to engage, message, and talk to one of our trained coaches.” This has been successful, leading to hundreds of weekly conversations. This speaks to the importance, especially within digital platforms, of creativity which leads to personal, human to human connections.

Finally, Mark talked about the importance of God’s sovereignty, and the limitations of our own creative efforts: “It’s a false hope to think that I can just work hard enough to make the kingdom of God come about.” There is a tension between working with urgency, and also experiencing peace and contentment “knowing that it doesn’t depend on us.” God’s mission will go forward, and while we have an important part to play, we rest in knowing that God’s work doesn’t ultimately depend on us.

My interview with Mark Appleton highlighted the importance of creativity in gospel and evangelism ministry. The creative work begins with a commitment to reaching people with the message of the gospel in relevant and personal ways. It continues with the freedom to explore the creative process in new ways, within the context of doing whatever it takes to proclaim the gospel message. Finally, we remember that we can rest in the knowledge that God’s mission will continue to go forward.

“God’s Creative Expression”: Interview with Dr. Kevin Smith

I also had an opportunity to speak with Dr. Kevin Smith about his reflections on creativity from a theological perspective, as well as how creativity shapes his own experience as a semi-retired person. Our conversation took place on March 11, 2021. Kevin Smith holds a doctorate in theology, and his thesis focused in the area of biblical hermeneutics. Two things stood out from our discussion. The first was the creative adaptation Kevin maneuvered through in his life and work as a result of Covid-19. Additionally, there is a theological thread which runs through Kevin’s reflections and experience which ties creativity to our own unique expression.

When the country went on lockdown due to Covid-19, Kevin was a long-term substitute teaching at Carmel Christian School in Charlotte. Right in the middle of his

assignment, “[the job at Carmel suddenly] ended. Because of the immediate movement to online, the teacher I was subbing for, she picked that right up from home.” Suddenly without work, “we had to make a lot of adjustments, and the Lord eventually after a period of time, opened a door for me at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.” He also found new opportunities to preach on the weekend (“something I thoroughly enjoy”). “In God’s leading and His patient timing, the Lord has opened good doors.” Kevin was able to creatively adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, while trusting in God’s timing. While creativity is sometimes freely exercised in the context of stability and a life at peace, Kevin’s story reminds us that other times, creativity is just as essential in situations where life and vocation are in flux.

Within the context of his work at BGEA, Kevin has found many opportunities to exercise creativity. Interestingly, Kevin works part time in the same division as Mark Appleton. Kevin describes the work that he does this way: “Part of what I do is researching these new testimonies, and it’s been an incredible blessing to develop a way to find them then represent them to the departments who can share those in a wide way for the edifying of the body.” Additionally, his department helps facilitate BGEA’s “online, free discipleship courses. As part of those courses, volunteer coaches interact with those who take those courses when they would like guidance and help. In those interactions, we gain the testimonies that are coming in.” Through the rapid life-changes brought about by Covid-19, Kevin was able to find an opportunity at BGEA that he may never have pursued otherwise, and within that role, has been able to creatively discover and communicate people’s testimonies and stories for the furtherance of the gospel.

Additionally, there was a common thread which ran through our discussions, and also has helped to shape Kevin’s calling and experience. When asked if creativity is part of a Christian’s calling, Kevin notes that “we as believers in Jesus Christ, those who have been raised to life in Christ, we are his own special creative work of grace; it’s the very framework of who we are in Christ: God’s creative expression.” He reflects further that “their own unique personality and all that they are [is] integrated automatically into that creative design.” He suggests that the simple writing of a letter “would be a unique expression. I couldn’t reproduce it. Nobody else could. That would be your unique way of reaching into another life.”

Kevin also reflects on how someone can discover this unique creative expression. A key passage for him is I Corinthians 12, which includes “the gifts of the Spirit and the sovereign placement by the Spirit of people within the body to edify it.” He believes this

discovery of spiritual gifts often happens within “organic working of a local church, with someone who has the gift of teaching, knowledge, helps, or mercy. As they are in this actual living connection with people in whom those gifts are being evidenced, I think God will often use that to stir within that individual’s heart, ‘hey, I think I can do that.’” Kevin further emphasizes the importance of relationships in the process of discovering creative gifts: “We’re in that living bond with someone, knowing that we have that creative input. Without that people can get discouraged in a hurry.” Here, Kevin emphasizes the importance of community in discovering one’s creative gifts.

Kevin also makes the important point that gifts and talents are not just those utilized or discovered in the local church context. Regarding the use of gifts within the “church scattered,” Kevin reflects that “the Lord . . . is going to be ahead of us there. We don’t put a separation between the secular and the sacred. If God is calling me and He’s gifting me, some expression of that ability can be just as effective in a vocational job as it would be within an office in the body of Christ.” He goes on to tell the story of his brother-in-law whose creative gifts are in the area of engineering and mechanics. Kevin says that “[my brother-in-law] went [to Guatemala] with his wife to be a part of an outreach ministry of a home for very needy children.” Within this ministry, his creative gifts of engineering have opened up doors for sharing life and faith with others: “It’s been fascinating to see how, though he’s not a teacher per se in the official sense of the word, yet he has disciplined so many within the context of the construction projects at the children’s home where they are, and the ministry. It’s wonderful to see how the Holy Spirit had just the place for him, in the very medium of his gifts and talents.” I would add that not only did his creative gift of engineering open up opportunities for discipleship, but the gift itself has been used as a conduit to take part in God’s care for the world through the art of engineering and construction.

I asked Kevin where he finds his own unique expression. He says that “lifelong, it’s been opening the Scriptures in a pulpit setting in both teaching and preaching. It’s where my heart has always been. And it’s where I’m the most comfortable.” He has found many opportunities to share God’s Word with congregations on Sundays, and, in particular, notes that “one of my favorite things is to work in, help, and encourage smaller ministries.” Kevin’s experience demonstrates the importance of finding that unique creative expression which brings one joy in and through their work and calling as participants in God’s mission.

Finally, I asked Kevin what the biggest challenge is in his life and work to which he replied: “With God’s help, allowing myself to be imaginative, to not be afraid to be

expressive in the way that God has given me.” Here, Kevin expresses his desire to exercise his “sacred imagination” in a way that is unique to him. What holds us back from imagining? Kevin believes that “we are also tempted to mimic others, to feel that others are successful and impactful, and [to think], if I don’t do it their way, I’m not going to be used, I won’t be effective. But then the Lord will calm my heart and say ‘Kevin, I made you, you. And if I’ll just let myself be imaginative, then a lot of good things can happen.’” This is a lesson that he passes on to his students, and others: “I try to encourage students to [remember that] God has you to be a very special means of His expression. And let Him do that and be imaginative. Don’t be afraid.”

My conversation with Kevin Smith points to two key realities about the creative process. First, our creative expression is often needed in response to both small and life altering changes, and that this exercise of creativity can often open new doors we may not have thought possible. Additionally, our understanding of creativity is shaped by our identity as God’s “unique expression of grace.” Discovering our own uniqueness is key to developing and using the creative process as part of our own unique calling shaped by God’s mission, allowing each of us to uniquely communicate God’s character and mission in our life and calling.

Photography, Creativity, and the Mission of God

Photography is a rather new creative art in the history of the world, digital photography even newer. In this way, photography truly encompasses and has a unique ability to communicate a “New Newness.” Photography communicates the beauty and flourishing, as well as the hurt and brokenness of the human and non-human created world. I, myself, have been drawn to this unique creative art.

The school where I teach, Walnut Grove Christian School, hosts a yearlong senior photography class. As I teach Bible to this particular group of students, I conducted a small focus group of five students who are part of the photography class. The conversation took place on Tuesday, March 9, 2021. The goal was to better understand how these students both understand and practice the creative art of photography, and how they connect it to their faith. These conversations also offered unique insights into creativity as an expression of God’s mission.

My first observation from our focus group was the attention to time and detail students offered regarding both the process of photography and the creative art itself. For example, Liam says, “I took a picture of this green tree, [and used the] settings to

get a nice background.” Liam also mentioned that portraits are his favorite photography type because it “allows you to capture more colors at a wider angle.” Liam captures the importance of process, including color and camera settings, in crafting the best photograph possible.

As a whole, the students seemed to find attention to time and detail to be the most difficult aspect of photography as well. When asked what they find most challenging, Abigail mentioned “patience,” Carson mentioned “taking the picture,” while others mentioned “waiting for the right moment” (Liam) and “taking the picture” (Carson). All of these responses point to the reality that photography specifically and the creative process more broadly requires time, patience, and attention. It is also a reminder of the time, and attention to detail *the* Creator placed into the world and of God’s continued patient creative work of New Creation.

In their discussions about photography, the students also demonstrated a commonsense appreciation for beauty. When asked what they enjoy most about photography, Addison and Liam mentioned “[capturing] beautiful moments” and “[capturing] pretty colors.” When asked why “animals” was his favorite type of photography, Carson said simply, “because they’re pretty.” Along similar lines, Abigail described her favorite photography as “any picture with a sunset or sunrise” because “it’s pretty.” Again, demonstrating his attention to detail, Liam said that “when the sun was setting in that tree, it showed me how beautiful God’s creation can be.” This simple attention to artistry calls the believer to pause, reflect and appreciate the beauty and goodness of God’s creation as communicated through the creative process of photography.

Throughout our conversation, the students reflected on how the creative art of photography communicates God’s being, character, and presence. Carson reflected that photography “shows the brilliance of God’s nature” and helps him connect to God by “[capturing] a glimpse of God’s creation.” Others felt that photography connected them to God through “[seeing] the presence of God” (Abigail) and “capturing God’s creation” (Mia). In this way, the creative art of photography communicates the imminence of God, that the eternal God would be present with humanity in and through the beauty of God’s own creation.

Two students also reflected on how photography connects to God’s character. Abigail noted that photography demonstrates God’s “beauty.” For Carson, photography reflects “God’s power.” When asked to elaborate, Carson says, “[God’s power to create

demonstrates] the way He can do that, and that we can't just create something out of nothing." Abigail's response emphasizes again the connection between the creative arts and an appreciation for the beauty of God's character. Carson's response reiterates an important theological point, that the way God's creates ("out of nothing") is fundamentally different from the way human creativity operates (taking the materials that God has already created and refashioning them).

Two students talked about photography as a means to capture memories. Abigail said, "you can look back at memories through pictures" and Elana discussed "capturing [a picture] through the lens that you're seeing. After you capture it, it becomes a memory." Memory is an important concept in Scripture ("I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago" Ps 77:11 NIV), especially remembering God's blessings and work in our lives. As discussed by these students, the creative art of photography has the unique ability to "capture" God's blessings of family, relationships, and experiences visually.

Throughout our discussions, this group of students also demonstrated a distinctly missional or outward purpose to the creative art of photography. Addison noted that through photography, "you can share God's creation." The students mentioned several ways photography can accomplish this. Abigail noted how photography can highlight human diversity: "Through different cultures, you can see how God made everyone different." Photography can also draw attention to an important person. Addison mentioned her favorite photograph being one of Kobe Bryant because "it shows his significance." For Liam, photography is "a way to bring joy to people's lives." Referencing his earlier discussion about the sun set in the tree demonstrating the beauty of God's creation, Liam noted that "it can help improve a person's mood. If they're feeling down, it can help a person feel happy." Addison also suggested an evangelistic purpose in that photography can be used to "record people's testimonies." For Carson, modern technology ("social media") offers enhanced means to share photography. All of their responses point to an outward or missional trajectory to the creative art of photography, all as part of God's mission. Whether sharing the beauty of God's creation or sharing a testimony, photography is uniquely positioned to communicate the truth of God's continued mission in and for the world.

Finally, the students offered a caution about photography, which speaks to the limitation of human creativity. Isaac, who is not particularly drawn to photography, stated that "I don't like [photography] because we don't need to do it." Addison

commented that “God created this whole world for us to see; but photography is man-made, so it’s not technically God’s world.” Additionally, Abigail said this: “Taking pictures can take you away from living in the moment. If you see a monkey swinging from a vine, you might miss it because you’re trying to get the perfect picture, and you might not enjoy living in the moment and seeing that happen. You might miss the monkey.” These reflections rightly point out that photography is not a substitute for the in-person reality and experience of God’s creation. In other words, while our creativity can capture God’s world in some sense, it cannot capture the fullness of God’s creative work.

As a creative art, photography has a unique ability to communicate the reality of God’s nature, character, and mission. The photographs themselves capture the beauty and power of God’s nature as demonstrated in creation. They also demonstrate the human art of visually characterizing God’s creation in unique ways. Photography can also be a missional art in that it can be used as an encouragement to others and a way to visually exclaim the greatness of God.

Conclusion

Concluding his book on creativity, Fujimura offers this calling to believers: “May we steward well what the Creator King has given us and accept God’s invitation to sanctify our imagination and creativity, even as we labor hard on this side of eternity” (2020, 150). The call to creativity is shaped by and shapes who we are, “our unique expression,” as Kevin Smith puts it. It is also shaped by God’s continued work and mission of New Creation in the world; in other words, the creative process is drawn into the mission of God. In exercising creativity, the believer communicates not only the nature and character of God, but of God’s continued mission and work in and for the world.

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