

**Visual Art, the Artist and Worship in the Reformed
Tradition:
A Theological Study**

submitted by

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Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee.

Signature.....Date.....

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Abstract

The Reformed tradition, following Zwingli and especially Calvin, excluded images from the churches. Calvin rejected the sacred images of his day as idolatrous on the grounds that they were treated as making God present, that the necessary distinction between God and God's material creation was not maintained, and because an image, which rightly was to be mimetic of visible reality, could not truthfully depict God. Calvin approved the Renaissance notion of visual art as mimetic and he understood that artists' abilities were gifts of God and were to be used rightly. He also had a very keenly developed visual aesthetic sense in relation to nature as the "mirror" of God's glory. However, the strong human tendency towards idolatry before images, he believed, meant that it was not expedient to place any pictures in the churches.

Reinterpretation of key biblical passages, particularly the first and second commandments (Calvin's numbering), together with changes in the understanding of what constitutes visual art, of the relationships between words and visual images, and of the processes of interpretation and reception not only of texts but of all perceived reality, lead to a re-thinking of the issues.

The biblical narrative with its theological insights can be interpreted into a visual language and used by the church as complementary to, but never replacing, biblical preaching and teaching in words. Attention to the visual aesthetic dimensions of the worship space is important to allow for this space to function as an invitation and call to worship. Its form, colour, light and adorning may give aesthetic delight, which leads to praise and thanksgiving, or it may provoke other response which helps people prepare to offer worship to God. The world and its people depicted in visual art/image may inform the praying of the church and the visual representation of the church (the saints) may provide congregations with an awareness of the breadth of the church at worship in heaven and on earth.

In the present diversity of views about visual art and the work of the artist there is freedom for the artist to re-think the question of vocation and artists may find new opportunities for understanding and exercising their vocation not only in secular art establishments and the community but also in relation to the worship of the church.

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Preface

This project has had a long period of germination in the context of my theological and liturgical work as a minister of the Word in the Uniting Church in Australia, within local congregations and at synod and national levels, together with the re-emergence of my visual art practice, chiefly painting and print making. It was nourished by a growing knowledge of the traditions of visual art in European church and society, increasing ecumenical awareness and an interest in the ways that art was being employed to serve the church's mission and worship in Asia, particularly in the Christian Protestant Church in Bali, Indonesia, and through the Asian Christian Art Association. Artist Emeritus of that association, the late Frank Wesley, also gave many insights.

My first attempt to combine theological writing and visual art was an investigation of the feminine in the Bible, both the stories of women and feminine imagery, for which I made a series of prints relating to stories of biblical women. I had begun to explore the possibility of expressing biblical insights and the biblical narrative in visual form. Occasionally when I had suitable works available I would place them for people to see in conjunction with the preaching, such as a "Creation and Fall" series. At that time the Nambour Uniting Church building had been renovated, reversed and extended so that a dark worship space became one filled with light and took on new aesthetically pleasing form. I found in myself a reaction of delight which led to thanksgiving and praise of God. The congregation's patchwork group asked me to design for them a work for the church foyer. A wall hanging in stained glass patchwork style, *Ichthus* (1m by 3m), was made. Thus the question emerged of the theological validity of these works of visual art as complementary to preaching and the importance of the visual aesthetic forms of the worship space and all that was seen during worship. A further issue was the desire expressed by some people for imagery that reflected not a European but an Australian light, Australian colours and landscape. Contact with Rev. Rod Pattenden, minister and artist, the Sydney based Institute for Theology and the Arts, and Eastside Arts of the Paddington Uniting Church, enabled me to see new possibilities.

Questions of visual art and worship for churches in the Reformed tradition have to deal with the history of that tradition and its suspicion of images in the churches by tackling the theological issues. As the project took shape in my mind, I discovered the report of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches first consultation on worship, 1994, in which brief recognition was given to the need to pursue questions of using visual art and symbol in worship. When visiting Geneva in 1999, I was able to meet Dr. Lukas Vischer and ask about the progress of this question. This resulted in my participation in the next consultation on worship in 2001. During that 1999 Swiss visit I was able to use the introduction to Jérôme Cottin given to me by a fellow university student from undergraduate days, now a pastor in the French Reformed Church, and thus to meet with Cottin in person. Cottin's doctoral thesis had been published as *Le regard et la Parole: Une théologie protestante de l'image*. As Jérôme Cottin and I talked, it became clear that our interests and many theological positions converged and I was the grateful recipient of copies of all that he had written and published. Once I had become a full time student in 2001 after the WARC consultation, I had time to translate *Le regard et la Parole*, and thus discovered a major theological work pursuing many of my questions within a Reformed theological framework. The project could simply have become for me a study of Cottin's theological proposals, bringing them to light in English.

However, I had already decided that my way of proceeding was to examine Calvin's position, to provide counter theological arguments and then to explore the implications for worship, while asking the key question of what possibilities existed for artists to exercise something of their vocation in relation to the worship of the church. Thus, while *Le regard et la Parole* has become the single most important reference for my project together with other writings of Cottin, the different focus of interest has resulted in my working with a range of other background theories and many works in English which were not part of Cottin's bibliography. Cottin's theological and semiotic thinking has focussed upon the image as an object to be looked at and, at the level of signification, to be read and thought about. Certainly, when he has moved to his pneumatological section, the hermeneutical role of the Holy Spirit has become central and the continuing reception of the tradition implied. With my greater interest in the person who interprets and my use of the background theories of reception aesthetics, this thesis has a different emphasis and focus.

The shape of this thesis, with its three centres of interest (which are theological, liturgical and visual aesthetical) and their inter-relatedness, has required a broader treatment, with a cross disciplinary approach, than would have been required had the question been pursued as a study solely within the discipline of either historical and systematic theology, or homiletics and liturgy, or visual art and aesthetics. Each section could be developed at far greater depth into a study in its own right.

Chapter Four, the central chapter, of necessity makes only brief reference to several major doctrines of the Christian faith within an acknowledged trinitarian framework, doctrines flowing from the self-revelation of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, made known in human history, time and space, in relation to the questions of a visual aesthetic and visual art. The chapter aims to suggest fruitful aspects of these doctrines for the visual aesthetics of worship and the opportunities and limits of the use of visual art within a Reformed framework. These directions, to which the chapter points, could easily become complete, separate studies in themselves.

In the opening and concluding chapters, the examples of dissatisfaction with Reformed worship and the case study with a group of people from one congregation using qualitative (rather than quantitative) research methodology, are employed to ground the theory in the lives and experience of worshipping Christians, some being artists, others people with a highly developed aesthetic sense.

An issue for me was the question of appropriate language and style for this writing. My preference is to use the first person singular, certainly not the impersonal “one” or the passive sentence construction. The thinking expressed is my thinking for which I must take responsibility. However, I have adopted the use of the first person plural. Such use in academic writing suggests that the work is not meant to be simply private, individual opinion, but is for a wider community of thought and evaluation. The writer, by using “we,” also conveys the hope that the reader can accompany the writer in this journey of thought.

The project would not have claimed sufficient of my time and attention had it not become, in a formal way, research for a Ph.D. Neither would I have found the disciplined time to concentrate on it without retiring from parish ministry. I have

expressed my thanks to many people who have shared this journey with me in the acknowledgments section above.

Geraldine Wheeler,

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