

# An Evangelical Commitment to the Arts

By Dallas Willard

Speaker 1:

Dear God, help us as we know this art emphasis week just give us understanding about the arts and what the role of the Arts is in our lives. God just thank you for the many different kinds of talents that you've given us in the arts. There's such a wide variety and the many miracles of sight and sound and voice of colors and light the movement. I just thank you for all of these God. And I just pray that you would help us to use these to glorify you. I just pray that you would be with us now. Give us strength and wisdom. Help us to do what you would have us do. We just commit this chapel time to you. And this whole week. Thank you for all that you've given us in Christ's name amen.

Speaker 2:

Literature is part of the arts. And while I was looking for a poem that I could read to you that would express something about the arts. There have been a number of people. Who. Have. Tried to struggle with what it means to be an artist and to try to express what a transcendent God is about. Through the images that art has given us and one of those people one of the best of those people is the writer Maria Rocha. And I'd like to read a short poem goes by quick so. But it's it's called you neighbor God. "You neighbor God. Sometimes in the night I rouse you with

loud knocking. I do so only because I seldom hear you breathe and know. You are alone. And should you need a drink. No one is there to reach it to you. Groping in the dark always I hearken give a small sign. I'm quite near. Between us there is but a narrow wall and by sheer chance for would take merely a call from your lips or from mine to break it down. And that. Without a sound the wall is builded of your images. They stand before you hiding you like names. And when the light within me blazes high that in my most soul I know you by. The radiance is squandered on their frames. And then my senses which too soon grow lame exiled from you must go their homeless ways."

Speaker 3:

Thank You Daniel, and also Celeste for praying. It's a great joy for me to introduce Dr. Dallas Willard. He's professor and past director of the School of Philosophy at the University of Southern California. His education includes Tennessee temple and then Baylor for the baccalaureate degree in philosophy. Then he received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. He's been at the University of Southern California for over 20 years. His primary research interests focus on the nature of human knowledge and evaluation. He's done a major book on logic titled. Logic and the objectivity of knowledge. Other books include in search of divine guidance which is one of the best that I've read on discovering God's will. Published in nineteen eighty four. And then last year the spirit of the disciplines published by Harper and Row. Dr. Willard teaches and lectures on a wide range of topics but especially on the various dimensions of moral aesthetic and religious experience.

He has published numerous translations of philosophical writings from German into English as well as many essays in the journals of professional philosophy. Dr. Willard is a dedicated Christian ordained Southern Baptist minister and almost every weekend is out preaching and teaching. He is happily married his wife Jane who is a marriage and family counselor. They have two children John and Rebecca. For several years I, as soon as I became acquainted with Dr. Willard I tried to get him on the board of trustees at Viola. He had so many other obligations but uh the hound of Biola was persistent and last year Dr. Willard joined the board of trustees and has been such a valued member even in that short time. So good to have you here Dr. Willard. And he'll be addressing us on the subject of a new call for evangelical commitment to the arts. Dr. Dallas Willard. [Applause]

Dallas Willard:

It is a real pleasure to be here and be a part of this week. And they call in the philosopher normally either at the beginning or the end. To tell you what it's all going to be about are tell you what it was all about. I'm glad to be here and have a chance to chat with you briefly concerning the topic of a new call of evangelical commitment to the arts. Would you allow me to begin with a couple of scriptures? One a very unfamiliar scripture. Generally I think about an artist in the Old Testament and this fellow is the first person in the Bible who is described as being filled with the spirit of God. And if I were to ask you his name I doubt that many of you could get it but if you look at Exodus 31 we'll read just a few verses there and then turn to a passage in Philippians. This has to do with the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Lord spoke unto Moses saying see I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the

tribe of Judah and I have filled him with the spirit of God in wisdom and in understanding and knowledge and in all manner of workmanship and here's why he filled him with the spirit of God to devise cunning works to work in gold and silver and in brass and in cutting of stones to set them in carving of timber. I don't know if you thought of being filled with the spirit to carve timber and to work in all manner of workmanship.

Then if you would look with me at a much more familiar passage in Philippians the fourth chapter finally brethren (eighth verse) whatsoever things are true whatsoever things are honest whatsoever things are just whatsoever things are pure whatsoever things are lovely. Whatsoever things are of good report or the New American Standard says in the margin attractive if there be any virtue and if there be any praise think on these things think on these things. This verse I think frequently seems a little strange in the context because it goes from what we might regard as an excessively spiritual bit of admonition be careful for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known and to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. And then you come on to the finally and there is something of a problem I think in many people's minds not only among evangelical Christians but certainly among them as to what the connection is. I want to suggest to you that the connection is exactly what the word finally suggests.

The connection is that the spiritual life finds its completion in dwelling upon all of those things which are good not just the moral things but the beautiful things the lovely things the attractive things and I want to say to you that until the evangelical church realizes that the Gospel which they preach is a gospel that includes the arts it has not yet understood the message which Jesus came to bring. He came to reclaim all of life and one of the things which I am most

concerned to say to you I cannot make you believe it of course. And that's all well and good but one of the things I am most concerned to say to you is that you must not think of art as a little frill a little whipped cream on the cake of life which is easily dispensable and doesn't belong among the main courses. The steak and potatoes. Art is the substance of life. We do not understand or know of any form of human existence that does not engage in art. You cannot find a tribe of people you will be very hard put to find an individual anywhere which does not engage in artistic activity. And I believe that it is a part of the image that God has left into us or in us.

And I want to take a few minutes now to talk in deplorably abstract terms about what this is. So let me just say first of all if you look at your folder in terms of extension we have some words here. What is art music drama literature art? There of course when we use art in the specific as distinct from the generic sense. Art refers normally to painting something you do with brush and canvas or pencil and paper possibly then you have film. About which Leonardo da Vinci knew nothing and then you have dance. Aha. Good. Thank you thank you thank you I needed that support. I was so pleased to see that here. [Laughter] No demonstrations at this point please. [Laughter] And then poetry. These are cases of what we call art in the generic sense. But one of the problems with just giving such a list as that is that it seems to refer art to special moments and special places. And that's unfortunate because it leaves most of us out. And the truth of the matter is the aesthetic in life includes all of us. For example you have each of you chosen the manner in which you wear your hair the clothing that you wear some of which I see to be wondrously decorated and all of that is a part of the artistic drive in man and woman. Let me give you a general conception.

OK I'm not going to define art. Most of you who know about these matters know that to define art is to immediately embroil yourself in a no win battle. And so I'm not going to do that

but I want to give you a description of artistic activity which I hope that you are going to hold in mind as you go through this week and I hope it will help you understand the crucial sense in which art is for every person and not just for a select few people who happen to be among those who paint works or create works which get retained in someone's repertoire or someone's museum. So will you listen now to this deplorably abstract statement? But it's the best I can do. In artistic activity, Man creates a material object. Man creates a material object maybe a musical score. The performer also is a creator because they create a material object and this lovely young lady who sang the Schubert a moment ago you heard the sounds and those sounds are a material object. When Schubert many many years ago wrote those marks down on that piece of paper when you choreograph a dance or when you perform a dance when you make a sculpture or you go to work on a canvas with some paint you're working with material objects and this is if you wish the incarnationalist aspect of art.

All art involves a physical medium whether it's the words of a poem or the motions of hands in a dance. It's a physical medium. So all artistic activity involves the creation of an object. Now here comes the heavy part which is for the immediate enrichment of human experience. It is for the immediate enrichment of human experience. That is to say it is not to bring about some end. It is not to put food on the table though when the food is put on the table where all of us delighted it if it has some aesthetic qualities to it right. And in fact if it doesn't have some or if it has the wrong ones we may find our appetite lessened. But the aim of art is for the immediate not the instrumental but the immediate enrichment of experience either through representation. For example when we hear the words of the poem there is an indispensable element of representation when we have an eagle painted up here to represent. I take it our athletic teams are something that is an element of representation but that representation is not the representation of an eagle

and therefore that representation becomes not just a representation but a symbol. And the second manner of expression or type of experience that we are concerned with is through symbolism representation or symbolism or interaction with the qualitative structures of the medium itself. Interaction with the qualitative structures of the medium itself and you've had just an experience of that this morning as our young lady sang many of you I know from watching you because I watched you and I've sat where you said you didn't understand the words therefore there was no representation in it. President Cooke explained a little bit of it but you didn't understand the words.

There was very little symbolism but I know that your heart swelled with joy at certain points just from the richness of the voice that came through. The beauty of the immediate quality, the way it grips us and moves us one of the problems that we have in many of our evangelical circles is that they don't understand us. They think that the only art is representational art or art which is symbolic and that's very unfortunate because you see one of the main levels of aesthetic enjoyment lies precisely in the direct enjoyment of the medium and of the experience of the medium itself. So the artistic activity is one in which man creates an object which is for the immediate enrichment of human experience either through representation or symbolism or interaction with a qualitative structure of the medium itself with color with light with sound the motion also with concept and with story. Why is art important? I want to put it to you just as simply as I can. Art is important because it provides us with a better vision of reality. It enables us to see more deeply and with a fuller comprehension that reality which God in His creation looked at with joy and said that's really good that's real good. You know that's what he said when he got done it was good it was beautiful. It was a wonderful thing to behold.

Now we are not able to occupy the God's eye view and therefore we need help. In order to see reality. We need help in order to understand it we need not only things like glasses and binoculars and microscopes and telescopes we need not only scientific theories and laboratory experiments in order to see reality we above all need art to help us see reality. And one of the most rewarding ways to study the history of art is to go through it and look at the different realities which are being communicated. When you look at the various artists in painting or in music if you just take in the 19th and 20th century and compare the differences you will see that a very different aspect of reality is being communicated sometimes that reality is a part of the medium a Bach fugue for example does wonders for sound and the possibilities of inversion and interchange of parts and very rhythmic in very very set patterns and it's astonishing what richness comes out.

But then sometimes music as in the music of Wagner or Tchaikovsky or coming on down to Mahler or Stravinsky all of these people are conveying a different picture of the human experience in the present and all art provides us with this deeper vision into the nature of reality. Why is that important? That is important because unless we understand and draw into our service the services of our love and praise of God all of the resources which he has given us for that purpose we cannot fulfill the Great Commandment. You remember that in Mark 12:30 Jesus tells us that the first and great commandment is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength and the question is how do you do that. And the answer is you have to really learn and grow in order to do it. You don't do it just by effort but you do it by understanding how do you love God with your mind? By giving your mind to the understanding of all that he is and of all that he has created and it is in his creation that we as human beings come to see him for what he is.

Once Christ has come and has lifted the veil so that we understand the creation not just as the work of a marvelously great and fantastically clever mind but as the expression of a heart of love which wishes not only to overflow the trinity in his own creation as we see it around us but also to build a community of love and adoration in which this commandment would simply be an expression not of a duty but of a joyous enterprise in which people are given up to loving God with all their heart with all their soul with all their mind with all their strength and the fundamental basis for a new call for Evangelical commitment to the arts can be stated now very simply it is that without bringing the kingdom of God to bear upon the arts and the arts to bear upon the kingdom of God the great commandment cannot be fulfilled. There is no conflict between art and devotion. There is a supplementary relation which you see when you study the lives of the great Christians and often with the great artists.

I wish I had time to talk more at length about how art works. But let me just say that one of the things that we often see in art that sometimes upsets us is what looks like distortion and confusion. The first people for example who looked at the Impressionist paintings or listened to Stravinsky's music were outraged because they couldn't somehow order the material that was being presented to them. But we have to understand that the way art helps us to know God's reality is by changing the picture that reality cannot be exhausted by a simple straightforward view. If you have never seen a garden that looked like something in a painting by Monet or Monet it maybe it's because you have never seen Monet or a Monet and if you see them then you may be able to see gardens that look just like that. And that's the basis of Oscar Wilde's clever remark that nature imitates art. Few people had seen landscapes like Turner painted until Turner painted them and then they found them everywhere they turned around, you see. And it is the task of the artist whether in dance or painting or whatever to help us see what is there. Well

unfortunately that leaves the road open for perversion in art. And if I had time to develop the value aspects of this reality that I want to say the arts help us to see certainly the part which God looked at and said it was good I would be able to talk in more convincing details. I think about this matter of perversion but there is such a thing as perversion in art. And we see it in our day to day the modern world in so many of the art forms have taken the instrumentalities that are indeed provided by God and have used them to present a false view of reality. Normally it is a view of extreme cynicism, anger, hatred, disgust, and we have in our country today the use of the law to license sensuousness as art.

Not everything that is painted on a canvas is art because it is painted on a canvas. I don't mean there is no such distinction as between good art and bad art. There is some stuff that is on canvases isn't even bad art. It's not art at all. There is a perversion of the uses of art and we see what happens when this is carried to its final lengths. In that haunting last verse in the first chapter of Romans where Paul is speaking about those who know the judgment of God that they which commit such things are worthy of death. Not only do the same but have pleasure in them that do them. And that is the extreme of perversion of the artistic ability of mankind and our television is full of that today. Our films contain a great deal of it, our literature. There is much out there where in effect men have taken the institutions and the abilities of art and have turned them against God that can be done in science. May I say that can be done in religion that can be done in any area of life? And it is not irredeemable.

It is up to us to understand the importance of these things to understand not only how are Progresses as it goes through many different forms and thereby enables us to grasp better the good creation of God and the goodness of God himself but also to understand the perversions which are bound to occur when men separate the artistic abilities which have been given them

from the true understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the kingdom of God. Let me ask you to just think now in closing a moment about how you relate to art. Would you think about you in this connection? Are you an artist? Do you enjoy art? Is art a quiet place of strength and rest for you as you turn your mind your heart your soul and your strength towards God. It can be all of those things. And may I tell you that that is exactly what Paul had in mind when he exhorted us to cap our lives, having entered into the full experience of Christ Our Redeemer learned what it is like not to be anxious to trust him to live in prayer constantly to cap that life by letting our minds dwell upon all that all that is good including those things that are lovely and gracious and those things that are attractive so that we might really know what it is to worship God in the beauty of holiness. Thank you.

Speaker 5:

Thank you very much Dr. Willard. Shall we pray? Most Gracious God our Father in heaven give us we pray a maturing understanding of how great Thou art the God of creation the God of creativity. We pray for a maturing understanding of the meaning of being human meaning of being created in the image of the Almighty God give us we pray a maturing a growing understanding of the reality of the consequences of being among the redeemed enable us to grow as we think dwell our minds upon those things which are of good report those things which are pure those things which are lovely. We thank thee for this hour this morning and pray for thy guiding blessing upon us as we go about the tasks of the week and further portions of this special week set apart for emphasis upon the arts and as we go about our day by day tasks for we pray in the name of Christ our savior, amen. Thank you.