The Art of Seeing[1]

Richard L. Kidd

This paper examines an instinctive tendency in many Baptist communities to resist non-verbal forms of communication, both in their approach to public worship and in their practice of mission. It suggests that, without compromise to their roots, Baptists today could greatly benefit from embracing 'the arts' in general, and the 'non-verbal arts' in particular, as authentic tools for theological reflection and effective proclamation of the Christian gospel. Greater use of creative imagination and non-verbal communication, thereby engaging the entire range of human senses, could also enable Baptist communities better to fulfil their historic emphasis on discerning and responding to the mind of Christ. The paper develops its argument in conversation with a variety of voices from the wider church.

Keywords

Art; the arts; icon; vision; communication; insight; imagination; discernment; mission

Introduction

This is not the first time that I have brought the words 'art' and 'seeing' together in a working title.[2] In this paper, my aim is to show that what I call 'the art of seeing' offers a creative challenge to Baptist Christians, as they continue to re-evaluate their distinctive identity in changing times.

The Changing Context of Baptist Communities

Baptist communities first took shape alongside a number of dissenting prophetic Christian movements in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; and the peculiar context of that time was undoubtedly a major factor in determining their emergent identity. Although that context is now

[1] This paper shares its title with a keynote presentation which I made at a conference entitled 'Arts and Mission', jointly sponsored by the European Baptist Federation and the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam. The conference was held at Bromma, Stockholm, Sweden, from 5-8 June 2019. Building on creative conversations stimulated by the Stockholm conference, I here rehearse some of the elements in that address, making further connections to develop my engagement with the conference theme.

[2] Richard Kidd and Graham Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing: Visual Resources for a Journey of Faith*, Regent's Study Guides 11 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, and Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2003). A landmark publication drawing attention to the importance of 'seeing' was John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972).

long past, some original Baptist characteristics have remained important throughout the intervening centuries. In recent time, Baptists have been well-known for their keen desire to engage in Christian mission. The question that Baptists must now face, therefore, is how best, without compromise to their roots, to communicate the gospel in ways that are credible and compelling for the present generation. In particular, the question must be asked whether a long-standing commitment to predominantly verbal methods of communication still serves them well in what many social commentators would now describe as predominantly 'visual cultures', a trend that gained momentum almost everywhere with the rapid development of digital technologies in the late twentieth century.[3]

An uneasy tension between 'the arts' and church practice in many of today's Baptist communities was the central theme of the 2019 'Arts and Mission' conference in Stockholm. During the conference, a recurring theme was voiced by participants from Baptist communities from almost everywhere in Europe; namely, that it is now essential for Baptists to embrace 'the arts' with much greater conviction, if they are to be true to their missionary calling. The overarching message from the conference was that 'the arts', especially the non-verbal arts, need to be given a much higher profile if today's Baptists are effectively to communicate their understanding of the gospel in the contexts of the modern world.

To help Baptists rise to this challenge, it might be helpful to consider more fully why Baptists have put so much emphasis on verbal communication, and also to consider why there has been so much suspicion around the use of non-verbal forms in public worship and private devotion. These are some of the questions explored in this paper.

'The Art of Seeing'

How, then, am I using the phrase 'the art of seeing' in this paper, and how might it usefully inform my argument? I am using the word 'art' in at least two different ways. Most obviously, I am simply drawing attention to art as the work of art-practitioners: painters, musicians, sculptors, poets, film-makers, and so on. Many of these creative arts were represented amongst the artists who gathered for the Stockholm conference. My own special interest is in painters, and I shall be arguing that painting is a uniquely important medium for communicating gospel truth.

'Art', however, also suggests something that stands in contrast to 'science', and that will be significant in this paper too. I am keen to show that there is so much more to 'seeing' than will ever be uncovered by

[3] See: Malcolm Barnard, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

approaching 'seeing' from a merely scientific perspective. In saying this, I in no way want to be dismissive of science as an equally honourable path into human knowledge. My own scientific training leaves me with a keen interest in many of the sciences that inform our understanding of human sight. I am fascinated by the physiology of the eye, the role of rods and cones in alerting us to tone and colour, the workings of neural pathways connecting the eye and the brain and, of course, the structure of the brain itself that so amazingly enables us to make meaning out of the complex electrical activity it registers and stores.[4]

I am in no doubt, however, that 'seeing' has a significance for human communication and self-understanding far in excess of anything that scientific scrutiny alone can detect or analyse. The idea that a merely empirical analysis of Claude Monet's 'Water Lilies' will ever yield everything we might want to say concerning the potential impact of a visit to the Orangerie in Paris is simply absurd.[5] I admit to being fascinated by much recent analysis of the painterly techniques that someone like Monet employed in laying his oils on the canvas; and that knowledge has undoubtedly enhanced my pleasure when I now look at his paintings. I am indebted, for example, to the art historian James Elkins, who has written a detailed account that evidences the sheer complexity of Monet's working practice:

> The study of gestures reveals a Monet that I would not have suspected: to make paintings the way he made them, it is necessary to work roughly, with unexpected violence and then with sudden gentleness, and to keep turning the body against itself, so it never does quite what it wants to do – so it never falls into the routine of oval marks, all pelting down in one direction. The gestures tell the story of a certain dissatisfaction, and itchy chafing of the body against itself, of a hand that is impatient and out of control.[6]

This is a description not only of the complexity but also the profound subtlety required to achieve successful artistic communication – and I shall return to the idea of 'itchy chafing' later. Elkins' careful 'scientific' analysis does not, however, even begin to explain the totality of the potentially life-changing influence that Monet's finished works can have on those who are privileged to see them. The 'science of seeing' is undoubtedly valuable; but so is the 'art of seeing', without which the full potential of human 'visionary' possibilities will always remain incomplete.

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[4] An influential contribution to a growing understanding of all these themes appeared in Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau, eds., *Colour: Art and Science*, The Darwin College Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[5] The Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris houses a stunning display of Monet's *Nymphéas* ('Water Lilies') canvases, curated in collaboration with the artist in 1922.

[6] James Elkins, *What Painting is* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 17.

It is the ‘excess’, the ‘more than’, surfacing through ‘the art of seeing’, that is so significant for art’s potential contribution to human communication. This ‘more than’ is not unlike the ‘excess’ that theologians find necessary in accounting for their Christian understandings of God. It does not surprise me at all, then, that people in today’s Western cultures, living in societies where scientific evidence and scientific reasoning are given such high priority, now find themselves almost incapable of activating the cognitive strategies necessary to engage with ideas of God. Given that so many Christian apologists, Baptists included, now prioritise models of analytical reasoning that are almost indistinguishable from the dominant scientific paradigm, it is also not at all surprising to find that they experience some serious barriers to effective mission.

Baptists and the Visual Arts

I do not find it hard to understand, and in large measure to sympathise with, the way that many Baptists have found themselves struggling with the idea that visual and other non-verbal forms of communication might be significant for their quest to discern and interpret the mind of God. When prophetic communities were fragile, as Baptists were both in England and The Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, struggling to secure a secure identity in contexts where powerful factions jealously guarded the *status quo*, it is not surprising that sharp lines were drawn, distancing themselves from those they felt called to challenge. Sadly, however, as is so often the case, amongst the collateral damage ‘the baby is thrown out with the bathwater’.

The reality is that many Baptists, not only in shaping an original identity but also throughout their history, have found themselves needing to work at self-definition over against religious authorities that have put a very strong emphasis on visual artefacts: paintings, sculptures, architectural wonders, and religious ‘icons’ of various kinds.[7] Although there were often other important issues of identity at stake, for example matters of religious freedom and social justice, Baptists and others have often found themselves shedding all manner of practices associated with the authorities they challenge. In matters of religion, the visual arts are commonly found amongst the earliest victims. Baptists have often, almost intuitively, identified themselves with a broadly iconoclastic[8] approach to art and

[7] I have in mind the struggle for survival experienced by many Baptist communities in the former USSR. Often they struggled not only under the powers of government, but also under the power of Orthodox Churches.
[8] I am using ‘iconoclastic’ as a catch-all to describe extremely negative attitudes towards images of many kinds; it literally means the breaking of images, of which there is a long Christian history.

religious truth. Whilst there have been notable exceptions, Baptists have typically shown only limited interest in religious paintings, sculptures, or innovative architecture.[9] My question is whether such iconoclasm is necessarily a permanent feature of Baptist identity.[10]

The Stockholm Conference on Arts and Mission raised these issues in a variety of contemporary guises. Participants spoke of their art-practitioner colleagues leaving Baptist churches in significant numbers, having found themselves unable to carve out sufficient opportunities to use their creative skills without compromise to their artistic integrity. Many spoke of an experience of being driven to the margins, typically putting this down to suspicions amongst church leaders that artistic imagination and creativity constitute an unacceptable challenge to their authority as guardians of a received tradition.

The success of the Stockholm Conference, however, indicates that there are creative artists who remain very much committed to participation in the life of Baptist communities. The conference gathered a wide range of Baptist artists who are still working to convince their sisters and brothers that they have important gifts and insights to offer into the communities to which they belong. This, I suggest, is nowhere more important than in the very Baptist communities that manifest this fear, that creative imagination is somehow at odds with an historic Baptist commitment to verbal proclamation and the written words of the Bible. In my own view, their response is based on entirely false presuppositions. There is, in fact, a strong case to suggest that the arts could actually revitalise Baptists' and others' engagement with the Bible, enabling us to hear (and see) more, not less, of God's 'word' speaking into our time. In particular, it is in the practice of mission that our artists have an important contribution to make. Using their skills in non-verbal communication, they are uniquely placed to bridge some of the deep divides that currently inhibit our effective proclamation of the Christian gospel.

Across much of the Western world an unnecessary rift has appeared between the sacred and the so-called secular. The dominant scientific mindset has taken ownership of materiality, as if the 'stuff' that we see, hear, and touch has no relevance when it comes to spiritual concerns; and tragically, many Christians have bought into a similar entrenched dualism. Much religious fundamentalism, with its own highly mechanistic use of language and logic, relies heavily on the same rationalistic strategies as the

[9] One notable exception was the development of icon painting in the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia.
[10] There have already been notable moments of change in Baptist identity that could act as precedents for the proposals in this paper. Music, for example, was originally excluded from Baptist life, until at the end of the seventeenth century Benjamin Keach recommended the singing of hymns. Similarly, for a very long time Baptists resisted the display of the cross (today an almost universal Christian image) on places of worship. One report suggests that the first use of the cross on a Baptist Church was at Mare Street, Hackney, as recently as just after the Second World War.

scientific fundamentalism that actually rules the day. This is, of course, quite extraordinary – given the pride of place that Christians have always attached to their convictions concerning a Christian doctrine of Incarnation, and their particular understanding of the way that materiality and spirituality come together in Jesus, God's Christ. I shall return to these convictions later; for now, I simply express my own considered view that today it is essential that 'the arts' speak into both scientific and religious communities alike. Baptist communities, I suggest, can only benefit as they come to trust their own artists more fully as bearers of insight and discernment, the kind of discernment essential to their core commitment to discern the mind of Christ.

The Phenomenon of Iconoclasm

Iconoclasm, of course, has a long and well-documented history.[11] It was not long into the Christian era before significant resistance to the use of visual images began to take hold. It came to a head in the eighth century following an edict by Leo III in 730CE forbidding the veneration of religious images. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787CE supposedly brought an end to the dispute, defending the making and veneration of icons, but the issue was by no means resolved. Instead, iconoclasm has surfaced time and again throughout subsequent history, not least in association with the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

The issues have been many and varied, but they cluster around a number of recurrent themes. Many Christians have found themselves simply unable to reconcile what they see as definitive rulings in some Old Testament scriptures, concerned with the making of images, with any Christian accommodation to non-verbal forms. They find no annulment of such rulings in the New Testament or any later authoritative writings. There has also been lasting controversy over the use of the word 'veneration', which became normative for Orthodox worshippers and theologians in connection with painted icons. Iconoclasts have heard the term veneration as synonymous with worship, iconophiles[12] insisting that veneration is radically different, in no way subverting exclusive use of the word worship with reference to God. Both of these issues have and still do arise in various Baptist communities

[11] An important collection of articles addressing the ongoing issue of iconoclasm – embracing Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant perspectives – was gathered by the World Council of Churches in Gennadios Limouris, compiler, *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, Faith and Order Paper 147 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990). More recently, a succinct account of iconoclast debates from an Orthodox perspective forms part of the opening chapter in Aidan Hart, *Beauty Spirit Matter: Icons in the Modern World* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2014), pp. 7-32; and an account of the rise of iconoclasm through the eyes of an American Presbyterian can be found in William Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 25-51.

[12] 'Iconophile' is a less-used term, coined to contrast with iconoclast and to identify a 'lover of images'.

around the world.

The strongest focus for the iconophile case, which here I am taking to include openness to all non-verbal forms and not simply traditional Orthodox icons, rests on an interpretation of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation. A key text has been I John 1.1-4, which reads:

> We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.[13]

In this text, iconophiles find a strong case for speaking of Jesus Christ, in the flesh, as an 'icon' of God.[14] This text testifies that in the person of Jesus the truth of God became seeable, audible, touchable and, we might reasonably presume, accessible to the entire range of human senses. The iconophile argument then develops like this: if this was possible, even if only once, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, for God to make Godself known in material form, then there is no intrinsic reason to presume that God cannot choose to do something similar whenever and wherever God chooses. In other words, there is no *a priori* case for arguing that material images, based on things we see and touch, will necessarily deceive us in our search for God.

Iconoclasts, however, are uncomfortable with the leap that is necessary to generalise from the specificity of God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus, to similar self-disclosures in other material forms. I John 1.1-4 certainly seems to support the view that divinity and materiality are not intrinsically alienated one from the other ('… he abhors not the Virgin's womb'[15], as the old Christmas hymn puts it). My own view, however, is that a belief in Incarnation also rightly inspires confidence that God can and does actually make Godself known in and through other material forms, as the Second Council of Nicaea appeared to decree. There still remains, of course, a second not insignificant leap to be made; namely, to believe that humans are adequately equipped to recognise and interpret such images when they encounter them.

These leaps, and the presuppositions associated with them, have received much attention across the centuries, and significantly so in Roman

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[13] I John 1.1-4 (NRSV).

[14] There are a number of other much quoted New Testament texts in which the word 'image' is actually explicit, most significantly Colossians 1.15-20.

[15] The popular Christmas hymn *O come, all ye faithful* includes the line, 'Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb'. By any measure, this is an odd way of speaking, but I hear it as saying something about the 'natural' compatibility of divinity and humanity in Jesus.

Catholic and Orthodox traditions from the mid-twentieth century onwards.[16] Protestant theologians have rarely been in the forefront, but I think it is fair to say that across a wide ecumenical spectrum, certainly in the UK, there has been an enormous relaxation with respect to the use of visual images in public worship and personal spiritual disciplines. In my own lifetime, many Baptists have found it possible to re-explore the bathwater and to discover numerous babies that were accidentally jettisoned.[17]

The 'more than' of Seeing

This brings me back to my specific focus on 'the art of seeing'. There is, as I have claimed, so much more to 'seeing' than first meets the eye. I have commented elsewhere that, whilst most of us are naturally well-practised in 'looking at', it does not necessarily follow that we actually succeed in much significant 'seeing'.[18] Human eyes have always been bombarded by visual images; and many of these images have been around since the time of our earliest ancestors, most commonly images composed of natural forms. Today, however, the images that more typically impact our visual life are the direct product of artful human activity (ambiguity intended). I have in mind everything that humans have designed and manufactured: buildings, machines, fine art paintings and sculptures, electronic devices, and all the products we now associate with the virtual world. Many of these images demand seeing skills largely unpractised by earlier human generations, and demand new kinds of careful and critical attention. These critical skills might usefully be gathered under an umbrella term – visual hermeneutics. This would comprise artistic and scientific interpretive skills, both now essential to navigate safely through the visual minefield. It is all too easy to stray from a balanced approach. On the one hand, if we undervalue 'the art of seeing', we might miss the 'more than' visual delight in a late Van Gogh painting. On the other hand, if we denigrate 'the science of seeing', especially its

[16] In Roman Catholic communities, the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar has been especially noteworthy. His monumental work *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, 7 volumes (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1982) became a launchpad for many other authors. His writings shed new light on 'beauty' as the long-neglected partner in the Platonic triad: truth, goodness, and beauty. Two respected interpreters of Orthodoxy to non-Orthodox readers are Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky. See Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: an Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) and Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel, 2 volumes (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

[17] In the course of my forty-year ministry as a British Baptist Minister I have witnessed many areas where previously held suspicions have been relaxed. I have witnessed a much freer use of banners, pictures, candles, and other artefacts in public worship. I have also seen much greater openness to engage with previously unexplored spiritualities and theologies; many Baptists in the UK now make regular retreats and draw on traditions of contemplative prayer, once regarded as the domain of Roman Catholic communities. Others now find spiritual value in giving attention to Orthodox icons that would previously have attracted only negative responses.

[18] Kidd and Sparkes, *God and the Art of Seeing*, p. xi.

analytical skills, we might find ourselves dangerously exposed to the dangers now everywhere encoded in digital images.

It was, I am sure, no accident that our ancestors landed on the word 'seer' ('see-er') to describe someone with unusual skills for detecting the 'more than' in human experience of the world, a capacity for seeing that somehow reaches beneath the surface of what we normally associate with a merely empirical approach to visual life. Other relevant terms expressing similar or related human capacities include 'insight'[19] and 'discernment'.[20] There is a profoundly human – I would say, deeply spiritual – potential in 'the art of seeing' that enables humans to get in touch with levels of insight and discernment without parallel in their importance for fully developed human identity and community. The art of seeing, I suggest, invites us to take the elusive nature of human 'subjectivity' as seriously as it takes the 'objectivity' of our bodily existence. The seer's gifts of 'insight' and 'discernment' enable us to reach beneath and beyond the important, but ultimately only preliminary, level of empirical interpretation and understanding of human experience.

As I suggested in an earlier paragraph, the surface level is not without great importance, especially in a digital age. We now have a world in which the creation and analysis of digital visual images are fundamental to our social structures, our political decision-making and our personal security. There is no going back on the technologies that have come to shape almost every aspect of modern living and, correspondingly, new layers of Christian responsibility have emerged, demanding that we take part in their careful management and control. As committed believers, however, it is essential that Christians remain confident that there is so much more to 'seeing' than mere data analysis will ever be able to yield. There are also intuitive, but often overlooked, dimensions of insight, discernment, and imaginative understanding that are crucial not only for our protection but also for our creative fulfilment.

In traditions clearly visible in the writings of the great Hebrew prophets, the art of seeing has always been very much at the core of what it means to live abundantly in God's world. The enormous challenge in our time is to give a good account of such seeing and its prophetic implications,

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[19] Insight is a term much used in a variety of spiritual writings and contexts. I am especially struck, however, by the monumental work of Bernard Lonergan that takes the same word as its title (Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (London: Longmans Green, 1957)). What I find most striking is the way that Lonergan is able to explore the significance of the concept of insight, not merely in spiritual contexts, but across the whole gamut of human epistemological endeavour. Insight, according to Lonergan, is a *sine qua non* for almost all the important developments in human understanding of the universe within which we are situated.

[20] Discernment is a term widely used when describing spiritual disciplines. It lies at the heart of the practices that today gather under the heading 'Ignatian Spirituality', now widely affirmed by Baptists around the world.

especially to companions in the Western world, trapped by their deep suspicions about anything that cannot readily be measured and quantified within the everyday canons of empirical science. I am under no illusion that my argument runs counter to a strong tide in much that has become normative wisdom in the intellectual environment of the Western world and its learning institutions. The paradigms of positivism and empiricism that became so potent in the first half of the twentieth century still provide the dominant strategies for testing human knowledge, and this makes credible religious apologetics a seriously difficult task. It is now necessary to surmount enormous hurdles of prejudice concerning what is and what is not thought to be acceptable evidence, even before the real work of apologetics can begin. We simply have to accept that tackling this hurdle is a necessary preface to making our case as Christian believers. There is no way around what for many today is an enormous credibility gap, even before they begin to process the larger possibilities in Christian believing.

What disappoints me most is that many who have themselves successfully negotiated some kind of 'leap' into a community of faith, now appear to have pulled up the drawbridge behind them. They go on their way, content to handle the precious artefacts of faith as if they had never embraced the 'more than' that first enabled them to reach beyond the limitations of a predominantly empirical mindset. Too often spiritual wisdom and insight is treated as if it were just another datum of scientific experiment, and religious truth is reduced to propositions that can be handled by analytical logic alone. This, I suggest, fails to do justice to the disciplines of human knowledge that are essential for faith communities and scientific communities alike. In my experience, the best science knows that science is more like an art than overly mechanistic approaches imply;[21] the best art draws widely on insight into the human condition culled from the work of the sciences;[22] and the best theologies, Baptist theologies included, celebrate the extraordinary richness of the entire human intellectual endeavour, connecting this abundance with our own peculiar insight into the mystery of God.

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[21] Examples include: Michael Polanyi, whose book *Personal Knowledge*, new edition (London: Routledge, 1989) convincingly demonstrated the irreducible subjectivity in all that is typically portrayed as the objectivity of modern science; John Polkinhorne, now well-known as the Professor of Theoretical Physics turned Anglican Priest, even in his early work *Particle Play: Account of the Ultimate Constituents of Matter* (London: W H Freeman & Co, 1979) made much of the role of beauty in arriving at scientific judgements.

[22] Some of the Baptist artists who gathered in Stockholm work with complex digital techniques to produce high quality video materials. I also have in mind, however, that pioneers of what we still today call modern art, including Georges-Pierre Seurat and Vincent van Gogh, were seasoned researchers into the emergent science of colour.

An Epistemological Challenge

How then are we to break through the *impasse* that has been generated by a global stand-off between those who prioritise an 'either-or' between scientific and religious views of the world? It should already be clear that I myself do not see this as a sufficient cause for inevitable conflict, and I am in no doubt that missionary practitioners, concerned to gain a good hearing for the gospel, need to build cognitive bridges across this otherwise damaging divide. My argument here is that artists are frequently found in the vanguard of those who can help us break down these unhelpful and unnecessary barriers, using their skills of creative imagination to tap more deeply into a larger understanding of the human world. Drawing on their rich practice of attentive seeing, artists can bring analysis and imagination back together into a lost original unity, one which will benefit both believers and non-believers, as we seek to live together with the complexity of the world we have made. We must not, however, underestimate the scale of the contemporary epistemological challenge to Christian apologetics.

Let me try again to focus on what it is that specifically catches my eye in the non-verbal arts, and how they can help us to address these issues. At the heart of the matter is the way that the non-verbal arts typically offer an 'open' invitation to enlarge human knowledge and appreciation of the world, in ways that exclusively analytical and verbal strategies can entirely miss. Like many in my generation, too much of my own education was modelled on decidedly 'closed' didactic models. It was possible to achieve a significant level of apparent success by doing little more than writing down what I heard, learning it by heart, and writing it down again when it came to a formal examination. How remote that is from the real potential for intellectual formation, in which educators delight to see learners developing ideas of their own, ideas that take both teachers and learners together to new levels of understanding. My conviction as a theological educator has long been that growth in the knowledge of God necessarily demands 'openness' of this kind, and this is where non-verbal forms come into their own.

As an example of the potency of non-verbal learning, I recall sitting on the floor of the Academia Gallery in Florence (yes, it was possible to do that in the late 1960s without attracting the attention of security guards) and drinking in the wonder of Michelangelo's statue of David. No one told me what to see or to write; no one suggested where my mind should focus. In the event, it ran wild, ranging far and wide, etching marks on my growing mind that would repeatedly open new journeys and uncover fresh areas of discovery for the rest of my life. True, it was helpful that I knew a bit about Michelangelo, something about Florentine art, and a little about the use of marble in making sculptures of such refined texture and brilliance; but my mind did not stop with any of these things. Rather, I began to think more

widely about the importance of the way a work of art is curated (the David is on a pedestal in a brilliantly lit rotunda), about the importance of size in figurative sculpture (this David is certainly larger than life), about the jaw-dropping beauty of the human body if only it is given that kind of attention to detail, about the uncanny power of a work of art to change me and enable me to see the world in a new way, and so on. It was, I suggest, a significant moment on my own spiritual journeying, a moment when the 'more than' of seeing broke like a wave over my life. When I compare that encounter to the aridity of so many of the crudely crafted verbal propositions that are deemed to encapsulate the totality of reality, viewed both religiously and scientifically, I find myself dismayed by what we have done with the potential richness of the world.

I would like to think that I have already made it clear that I am as open to the visionary insights offered through the work of the greatest scientists as I am to the sculptural genius of Michelangelo. What depresses me is the reductionism, paraded as science, that too often consigns us to such intellectual poverty in the Western world. It seems to me that reductionism has shown its head almost everywhere in modern religious movements – especially since the European Enlightenment, and even more especially in the West. It is not just fundamentalists who seem to embrace some kind of reductionist-scientific approach to their religion, religion reducible to propositions, but actually large numbers of religious institutions now appear to rely on an overly mechanical grasp of the truth of God and the mystery of God's creative activity. I have long sided with those who are deeply suspicious about the value of 'credal statements' as a basis for energising the real vitality of religious thought and action. This was one of several factors that originally attracted me to Baptist movements, many of which, from their earliest days, were quite passionate about their resistance to the use of Creeds.[23] These same Baptist movements were also passionate about religious freedom. I want to bring these two passions together, and to suggest that the freedom of thought appropriate to living religion is more like my experience sitting in the presence of Michelangelo's David than it is to reciting a supposedly authoritative definition of God, probably crafted more in the process of challenging others, typically labelled heretic, than in trying to articulate the subtleties of theological truth.

[23] Baptists have, however, made much of 'Confessions of Faith', amongst which the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession is frequently noted in works on Baptist identity. In their Confessions of Faith, '… Baptists have sought in the past to explain their beliefs to those outside their own fellowship and to provide a tool for teaching those inside it'. (Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), p. 45.) This, I suggest, is very different from the way in which many of the early Christian Creeds have been used to define clear boundaries to Christian believing as such, over-against those outsiders thought to be beyond the Christian fold.

The universe and the human beings that inhabit it are too often described by sentences that include the phrase 'nothing more than …'. This is, I suggest, quite literally depressing, pressing down on the imaginative potential of the human spirit, leaving us seriously diminished and sold short on hope for ourselves and our world. Surely this is the point at which a prophetic word from those who have been moved by an encounter with God must rise to the challenge. My argument has been that attention to the art of seeing offers precisely the kind of resource that can prick the bubble of such arid approaches to truth – be they scientific, religious, or anything else that humans are tempted to vest with unjustified authority. Visual encounters can be catalytic in energising the very changes necessary to re-awaken the Western world to credible understandings of God, and Baptist communities cannot afford to dismiss them lightly.

Where Next?

Fortunately, there is no shortage of trustworthy voices from the wider Christian church to encourage us as we now re-consider the importance of non-verbal arts in our own Baptist communities. In his book *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, Rowan Williams points to some of the key areas where the mystery of God and forms of human communication intersect. As his title suggests, Williams has no desire to replace verbal forms; rather he points us towards 'an edge' where the verbal and the non-verbal meet. Approaching the edge, poetry increases in importance and visual forms rapidly come into view. It is here that Williams would have us find what I have been calling the 'more than' of human knowledge. In his own words, around the edge we find:

> … the creative use of language beyond description as a dimension of the attempt to reflect the excess of significance in what we encounter – what has been described as the way in which the things of the world 'give more than they have'. The work of the artist, in speech and in gesture, is thus not an eccentricity in the human world, but an intensifying of what human beings as such characteristically do. 'The "fine arts" are only valid when they see themselves as intensifying this art which is proper to humanity as such', to quote John Milbank. As writers such as David Jones insist, sign-making is pervasive in human discourse: signals or gestures evoke connections that are not obvious and need time to tease out; we cannot leave our superficially clear and definitive perceptions alone, it seems, but elaborate and reconfigure, looking constantly for new relations that make new and enlarged sense of what we perceive.[24]

That last sentence strongly echoes James Elkins' description of Monet at work with oil on canvas. Using disciplined creativity artists can release a

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[24] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), Kindle location 2517.

'more than' that complements the endeavours of wordsmiths nearing the edge of words. In church contexts, this is mirrored when artists complement the work of preachers and teachers as they wrestle to communicate the mystery of God.

Like Rowan Williams, Iain McGilchrist, a contemporary psychiatrist, also helps us to understand where the verbal and non-verbal meet. In McGilchrist's highly acclaimed work, *The Master and His Emissary*, 'master' refers to what is often described as 'right hemisphere' brain function, typically associated with creativity and intuitive reason; and 'emissary' refers to the 'left hemisphere', typically associated with logic and analytical reason. In summary, McGilchrist argues that most Western cultures now prioritise the left hemisphere, with its emphasis on words and logic, largely over-riding the authority of the right hemisphere with its ability to handle visual images and other non-verbal forms. The right hemisphere, the original 'master', has been usurped by the left hemisphere, in reality only its 'emissary'. We desperately need to re-discover both left and right hemispheres in their more original creative tension. If we persist, McGilchrist writes, in giving almost exclusive priority to the left brain, our demise will be like that of those philosophers of whom he writes:

> Philosophers spend a good deal of time inspecting and analysing processes that are usually – and perhaps must remain – implicit, unconscious, intuitive; in other words, examining the life of the right hemisphere from the standpoint of the left. It is perhaps then not surprising that the glue begins to disintegrate, and there is a nasty cracking noise as the otherwise normally robust sense of the self comes apart, possibly revealing more about the merits (or otherwise) of the process, than the self under scrutiny.[25]

McGilchrist's philosophers are like Christian apologists who try to do theology without proper acknowledgement of the right hemisphere and its primarily non-verbal methods of communication. In church contexts, this is mirrored by those who fail to acknowledge the rightful contribution of non-verbal arts.

Another contemporary writer who engages with these themes is Maggie Ross, an Anglican solitary with a strong emphasis on silence. She uses the word 'liminality' as a preferred term for describing something like what Rowan Williams called 'the edge'. Like Williams, Ross does not discourage proper attention to words as crucial for the journey of faith, but she expects words almost inevitably to lead us further, beyond themselves, often through poetry, ever nearer towards non-verbal forms. In the language of Iain McGilchrist, she too advocates right brain priority, arguing that left-brain methodologies can never match those of the right brain and their

[25] Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Kindle location 2471.

capacity for deep insight. Given the reality we inherit, the best we can do today is to lean in as close as we can to the liminal boundary. She writes:

> If we can get beyond our manipulative thinking to focus on not focusing, we open ourselves to insight and change; we access a vast, spacious, generous, silent, thinking mind that seems to have knowledge we have never self-consciously learned; that makes unexpected connections; that has its own ethics; and that not only gives us insights but can tell us when an insight is correct.[26]

For Ross, as a contemplative, an even better goal is silence, being the inevitable destination when the verbal and the non-verbal reach out together for the liminal edge. It is there, she claims, that we maximise access to what she calls ‘deep mind’, the ‘more than’ of insight, discernment, and knowledge with their self-authenticating hallmarks of grace. Returning again to church contexts, this is mirrored when we push to the limit the art of seeing in our search to know and interpret the mind of Christ.

I find myself returning to the term that Orthodox theologians frequently use when speaking about painted icons, ‘windows on eternity’. Windows are not simply an end in themselves; it is the images that pass through them that really count. Likewise, the art of seeing is best understood as one more means to an end, an attentive possibility that clears the way for a ‘more than’ we might otherwise miss. Neither the verbal contortions of preachers nor the non-verbal ‘itchy chafing’ of an artist like Monet can ever guarantee access to what Ross is calling ‘deep mind’; they are just windows through which God’s ‘more than’ can graciously make itself known.

Finally, let me highlight what I have come to see as the particular importance of humility in every effort to extend human knowledge and to effect good communication. As I understand it, the best scientists know that there is always something irremovably provisional about all their theories.[27] The best artists invite us to accompany them on a shared journey, and delight if we, their viewers, discover depths of meaning that they themselves had never intended or seen. My own view is that Christian preachers, teachers, and missioners can only benefit from immersion in a similar kind of humility. God’s authentic ‘word’ into our communities will always take us by surprise. It is always a gift of grace, loaded with a ‘more than’ that we could never merely conjure or fabricate.

My appeal to Baptist communities, and especially to their leaders, is that we must learn to make space for both verbal and non-verbal

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[26] Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide*, Volume 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2017), Kindle location 114.

[27] I am struck by the emphasis on humility in the writings of Roger Penrose, widely recognised as one of the leading mathematical physicists of the twentieth century. In *The Road to Reality: a Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (London: Vintage, 2005), he returns time and again to the ultimate provisionality of all innovative scientific work.

communication in our common search to hear and interpret the mind of Christ. 'The art of seeing', I suggest, is one possible route into a creative conversation that has the potential greatly to enrich our life together.

Revd Dr Richard L. Kidd is a retired Baptist minister accredited by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, who has served for more than forty years as a Baptist pastor, theological educator, and college principal.