



*SCRIBBLING
IN THE SAND*

Christ and Creativity

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FOREWORD BY
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Chapter One



SCRIBBLING IN THE SAND

*I*t was art and it was theater at the same time, but it was more. It was what he did not say that spoke most powerfully to the mob that morning. It was a cup of cold water for a thirsty adulteress and an ice-cold drenching in the face to a group of angry Pharisees.

To this day we have not the slightest idea what it was Jesus twice scribbled in the sand. By and large the commentaries have asked the wrong question through the ages. They labor over the content, over what he might have written. They ask *what* without ever realizing that the real question is *why*. It was not the content that mattered but why he did it. Unexpected. Irritating. Creative.

They were furious, of course—as much with Jesus as with the woman. (For all we know, they may have set her up to be caught.) They dragged her into the temple court, interrupting who knows what luminous lesson Jesus was in the middle of.

You know the story. “What do you say?” they asked him, with

the false adoration he had become used to over time.

But he didn't say anything. Not a syllable. Instead Jesus crouched on his haunches and "wrote down" (*kata*, "down," *graphein*, "to write") something with his finger in the sacred sand of the temple.

The scribes and Pharisees could not bear his thoughtful silence and so kept prodding him with questions.

Finally Jesus broke the awful silence. Standing straight up once more, leaving his scribbling, he spoke, giving in ten simple words a summary of the wisdom and compassion that gave the perfect shape to his life (and can do the same to ours). "Whoever is without sin, let him cast the first stone."

Then he was at it again. The One who had traced the galaxies with that same finger, hunched over like a schoolboy, his tongue perhaps protruding from the corner of his mouth, writing once more those words we would give a treasure to know but never will.

A SPACE IN TIME

What Jesus did that morning created a space in time that allowed the angry mob first to cool down, then to hear his word, and finally to think about it, be convicted by it and respond—or not. It made time stand still. It was original. It was unexpected. It was a response to the noise and confusion and busyness all around him, yet it was not in the least tainted by the noise. Instead, Jesus' action created a frame around the silence—the kind of silence in which God speaks to the heart. In short, it was a supreme act of creativity. It was art.

The form and even the content apparently are not what

mattered, not as much as the fact that, for one moment, the noise stopped and the attention was focused elsewhere. And in that moment everyone around learned that their world was not the only world that existed. And so they were liberated. And that, too, is art.

Our encyclopedic books, our magnificent paintings, our grand symphonies, all the art ever done in his name since that day cannot hope to be more, and should not be allowed to be less, than Jesus' scribbling that morning in the sand. If what we create, write, dance or sing can open up such a space in time through which God may speak, imagine the possibilities! Painting might become a window through which a confused world looks and sees the sane order of God's creation. Music could become an orchestrated echo of the Voice the tired ears of humankind have longed for ages to hear. This is art through which God is seen and heard, in which he is incarnate, is "fleshed out" in paint and ink, in stone, in creative movement. From the flat, gray point of view of the fallen world they are only scratches and scribbles in the sand, but in the light of eternity they become the occasion for divine revelation. What more could we ever hope for, and once we've seen this new possibility, how could we ever settle for less?



Scribbling in the Sand

*Amidst a mob of madmen, she stood frightened and alone
As hate-filled voices hissed at Him that she should now be stoned
But in the air around Him hung a vast and wordless love
Who knows what luminous lesson He was in the middle of
At first He faced the fury of their self-righteous scorn
But then He stooped and at once became the calm eye of the storm
It was His wordless answer to their dark and cruel demand
A lifetime in a moment, as He scribbled in the sand
It was silence. It was music
It was art. It was absurd
He stooped and shouted volumes
Without saying a single word
The same finger of the strong hand
That had written ten commands
For now was simply scribbling in the sand
Within the space of space and time He'd scribbled in the sand
They came to hear and see as much as they could understand
Now bound by cords of kindness they couldn't cast a single stone
And Jesus and the woman found that they were all alone
Could that same Finger come and trace my soul's sacred sand*

*And make some unexpected space where I could understand
That my own condemnation pierced and broke that gentle Hand
That scratched the words I'll never know
Written in the sand*



Tall and clear-eyed, Jennifer stepped into my borrowed office. “Can I ask you a question?” she asked. “I really wanted to take your class on creativity, but I read in the syllabus that we’ll be required to make a class presentation.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s the most wonderful time we will have in class.”

At this I noticed her hands nervously beginning to shake. I later learned that Jennifer had taken private cello lessons for years yet had never once performed for an audience. She was too afraid, she said: “Stage fright.”

In the weeks that followed, together with perhaps twenty other students, we worked through the life of the Jesus she so dearly loved and longed to please. We looked at his life, his creativity. We strained to listen to his call on each of our lives, to see and feel the shape of it. It was about him, not aesthetics, not philosophy, not theory.

When the final class project night came, she waited until almost the last to give her presentation, a solo cello piece. I was nervous for her as she took her place before the class. I admired her courage. Responding to God’s call sometimes means doing the last thing in the

world we want to do. But she was doing this no longer for herself, but for him.

The music was glorious. She was lost in the process and so were we. It was a wordless time of worship for the class. It was a space in time. There were tears in her eyes and mine. She had not learned a lot of facts or information. She had spent time gazing into the face of Creativity itself. She had become lost in the process . . . and found. She is now the first chair in the cello section of her local symphony—perhaps often no less fearful, but undoubtedly aware of the call of God on her life.

I put Jennifer's story here because what happened in her heart and life I pray might happen in yours and mine. This is the best way I know of explaining what this book is about—to tell you stories.

LIFE IS A STORY

This book is not a synthesis of the ideas of others. That was what I wanted it to be at first. I had spent much time reading through the literature on creativity and the imagination, primarily focusing on the thoughtful writings of Calvin Seerveld and my dear friend Harold Best. These faithful brothers represent a lifetime of pondering the issues involved. As I read them, a sense of continuous gratitude overflowed in me for all their creative efforts. I had hoped to synthesize their major themes into one grandiose vision of my own.

After some months of frustrated effort, by grace I realized that to write such a book was not only beyond my abilities, it was not what I was being called to do. Thanks be to God that that realization came when it did.

Neither is this book a “how-to,” “cheer you on to creativity” type of book. Many of the secular books on the topic are just that—full of techniques, some of which are truly helpful, many of which are a complete waste of time. But I cannot reduce this mystery into a few simple steps. There are some truths around the boundary of it that we can know, but the depths are beyond us. We can meditate on it and pray about it but never dissect, systematize or synthesize it. This is the vision I want to share with you, a Christ-centered vision of the creative process as a road to him.

This project has weighed heavily on my heart for some years now. I’ve wasted much time complaining about the lack of both faith and creativity in the industrial world of contemporary religious music. Yet I have contributed little to the discussion but my own negativity. So in one sense this book is sort of an apology, and it is an attempt to focus the discussion on Christ. What I have to offer, indeed all any Christian has to offer, is a window into the weakness of my own frustrated efforts.

So that is what I purpose to do: share with you, out of the tremendous wealth of my fragileness and brokenness, the story of how Jesus Christ met me, walked with me, strengthened me and gave me new songs to sing! At the cul-de-sac of my counterfeit eloquence I encountered true and profound beauty in the humility, servanthood and radical obedience of Jesus, the One I repeatedly confront on the creative quest. This has been a road upon which he meets and walks with me, though like those on the Emmaus road I often fail to recognize him until he breaks the bread of his presence with me.

Our discussion will begin with a brief overview of creativity in the Bible and some of the first faithful men and women who responded to that creative call. Next we will listen to the words of an ancient hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) and discover the incarnate shape of Christ-centered creativity. Finally I hope to apply some of these ideas to your life and mine, to our devotional lives and to our place in the community of faith.

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