

## Dear Walt,

It sounds like your cartooning business is going well. Who would have thought that a movie with a princess and seven little people would be such a big hit!

I appreciated your question, “Can we mix art and ministry?” I share your concerns about the lack of creativity in ministry settings. I think art and disciplinemaking can be a great marriage. Since I often filter life and ministry through rock and roll, let me answer your question by a tour back into rock nostalgia.

In 1967’s “summer of love,” the Beatles released an album that changed rock and roll. It began with the look. *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band’s* eye-popping cover made the album jump out of the record racks. The band was dressed in satin marching-band outfits in front of a cardboard-cutout audience of historical figures.

Then came the music. Using the 1960’s limited studio technology, The Beatles transformed the traditional three-chord structure of rock and roll so that each song became a doorway to creativity. There were melodies from India, multi-tracked calliope music, and cutting-edge guitar solos. Rock and roll had never sounded like this before!

Next came the acclaim. Nearly every poll of the most influential rock albums ranks *Sgt. Pepper* as number one. What does *Sgt. Pepper* have to do with disciplinemaking? Absolutely nothing... and everything. Let me explain.

When they formed in the early 1960s, The Beatles “covered” songs by such artists as The Shirelles, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly. Covering a song meant practicing it until the record could be copied note by note. Lennon and McCartney’s songwriting careers began with copying familiar music. But then something happened. Not content with repeating what had already been done, the band began to experiment. New sounds and musical forms emerged.

Artists are not content with duplication. Walt, here’s the punch line for us in ministry.

Churches everywhere are on a quest for the holy grail of success, looking for the “turn key” curriculum to change congregations. Successful churches create franchises where programs are duplicated from one church to another. Like the early Beatles, churches “cover” another’s ministry success.

In *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Hirsh and Frost write, “It sometimes seems as if there is some form or ‘template’ at work in evangelical churches all over the world, regardless of language and culture.” Ministry can seem more like an assembly-line process than an expression of God-given creativity for local needs, culture, and challenges.

Here’s some more history, Walt. Artists evolved from “artisans,” craftsmen in the Greek culture who mechanically turned out one pot or painting after another. The change occurred when craftsmen attached meaning and value, rather than duplication, to their work. The interior life of values and meaning trumped the exterior life of duplication. The spirit of the artist was born.

As Christians, I believe we’re called to an artistic lifestyle. Why? Whatever we do, we’re to “work at it with all of our heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23). Whether we’re plumbers, postal workers, or pastors, we can imprint meaning and personality on our work. Work is transformed from a menial task to effort guided by Spirit-led values and meaning, giving us the opportunity to stamp the image of the Creator upon what we do. The interior life becomes as important as the exterior labor. When this happens, we embrace the spirit of artistry.

Let’s take this a step further, Walt. In Ephesians 2:10, the Apostle Paul wrote that we’re “his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Ephesians 2:10). The Greek word translated “workmanship” is *poiema*, from which we derive our English word “poem.” The Jerusalem Bible translates this phrase as His “work of art.”

Through the new birth, God makes poems for His glory. Just as one snowflake is exquisitely different from another, so one church or one believer, is uniquely different from others. When we franchise success, we sacrifice this spirit of artistry for expediency, formulas, and technique.

Valuing expediency and technique can lead us to the assumption that packaging curriculums or programs is the key to ministry success. God shook up this assumption early in my Navigator career.

My first group of Navstaff trainees were three competent guys drawn from successful careers. With my curriculum packaged and tucked into an official-looking notebook, I began the training process. Keeping each man to the same schedule and assignments, I expected success. The process soon stalled. The curriculum failed to produce the desired changes. “Why didn’t they want to learn?” I asked myself. Then the click of a light bulb went off in my head.

My “one size fits all” training did not work because each man was different. Jim required responsibility and challenge, not instruction, to grow. John was a student who flourished through study. Dan wanted to be my friend and thrived by “hanging out” with me. I had to learn how to read the poetry of each man’s heart. These men taught me that ministry is an art-form rather than a formula or a curriculum to complete.

How do we practically serve as artists in disciplinemaking? Let’s continue to talk about this in future letters, Walt. Here’s one last thought about The Beatles.

Without realizing it, The Beatles reflected the One whose image was stamped on their souls. Their musical journey from duplication to innovation marked them as people with eternity embedded, though faintly, in their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). However, eternity is more than pop music. You see, Walt, God’s the ultimate artist, giving birth to new works of art every time someone experiences the first and second birth.

Looking to the One Creator,

*Bill*

