

Dear Walt,

I just down-loaded your band's CD on my iPod. I love your music. The latest stuff is really provocative. You forced me to examine my assumptions on some political issues. It reminded me that "art is a calculated trap for meditation."

Good art can sometimes be ugly. I'm uncomfortable with provocative works. They challenge my imagination and prick my conscience. Good provocative art is like the ministry of God's word--penetrating and judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 5:12).

Some would consider art's primary end to be provocative. The poet Shelley wrote, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The great writer Solzhenitsyn echoes this sentiment, writing, "Authentic renewal can only emerge out of the imaginative visions of the artist." Consider this comment by the Christian statesman, Abraham Kuyper, "The renewal of culture depends more on imagination than on politics."

Good art prods and provokes us to look at life through a different lens. Our consciences are pricked and thinking is changed. Artful ministry should do the same.

When I finished studying the book of Amos recently, I concluded that the mark of a righteous nation is how it treats its poor and disadvantaged. Consider these challenges from the prophet:

*You trample on the poor
and force him to give you grain.
Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine. . .
Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts . . .
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream (Amos 5:11, 15, 24).*

Amos preached and worked for justice to "roll on like a river." Artists and prophets aren't the only ones who've embraced this mission. One man in late-eighteenth century England rode the wild waves of justice.

William Wilburforce was a gifted and privileged young man of money and position. But something changed when he met the Savior in his mid-twenties. Writing in his journal, Wilburforce plotted a new life for himself, "God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners."

As a Member of Parliament, Wilburforce set out to dismantle a centuries-old institution that spanned civilizations, the abhorrent practice of slavery.

Stirred by slavery's gross injustice, he charted a course of social change, trusting God for a river of righteousness.

Wilburforce gathered a coalition of people, one that extended beyond professing Christians. He didn't force a belief system but recruited people to a vision of justice. Along the way, he employed artists to build his case.

One partner was the great poet of his age, William Cowper. Cowper composed poetry that deliberately inflamed the public's imagination. The potter, Josiah Wedgwood, created a poignant antislavery cameo that was reproduced on brooches, cuff links, and in sealing wax on letters.



It popularized the message of abolition throughout Britain and set the precedent for the logos, campaign buttons, and bumper stickers of our age.

Perhaps the most provocative piece of art was a simple poster. Printed by the thousands, this enlarged picture of a ship's interior depicted how slaves should be positioned to maximize their numbers, increasing a cargo's profit. The tiny figures on the page are humans, and the smaller ones are children. "To look at the image is to crawl to the edge of the abyss and to stare, agape, at the horror." This poster of slavery's reality was reproduced endlessly and posted everywhere, shocking a public to slavery's horror.

Wilburforce and his colleagues tirelessly brought the motion for abolition before the British Parliament for nineteen years. Finally, in 1807,

the motion passed, bringing an end to Britain's slave trade. One historian writes, "The unwavering, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of [Wilburforce] against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations." A campaign of artists and Christians helped "justice roll on like a river" and changed a nation.

We may not participate in as grand of a crusade as Wilburforce's, Walt, but we can ask the artful question, "What if?" What if we helped people we're ministering to ask themselves, "What does 'doing justice' (Micah 6:8) look like in our daily lives?" "What would 'pure religion' (James 1:21) look like in our community or in our churches?"

I know this is edgy stuff. At some point, Walt, we must put some feet to bringing our Lord's prayer to life, "Thy will be done, *on earth* as it is *in heaven*." Wilburforce and his companions traveled a wild ride down God's river of righteousness and justice. What would it look like if we chose to join them? Artful ministry must have a social conscience.

Until next time, Walt.

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