



## **Arts and crafts –**

### ***The broad picture***

Growing up in a Reformed family, I was exposed to the preaching from a very early age. Mind you, it took me quite a while to figure out why the minister needed so much time to explain such a small part of the Bible. Once — it must have been springtime — I tried preaching to my dolls. It did not take me very long at all to tell them that the angel rolled the stone away so Jesus was able to get out of the grave. This incident increased my respect for ministers tremendously. How do they do it? As my listening and concentration skills improved over time, I picked up a very important clue. Preachers use examples. More significantly, I was able to understand these metaphors, even if the rest of the sermon escaped me in its entirety.

One such imagery was the comparison of God's plan for this world to an intricately designed piece of embroidery. As the Lord's needle slides up and down through the canvas, a beautiful picture starts to take shape, consisting of dazzling colour combinations and displaying a stunning composition. From the Lord's point of view, each stitch makes perfect sense in every respect. Unfortunately humans look only to the bottom of the fabric in this dispensation. They see the backside, with little disfiguring strands of back-stitched leftover thread. But though people's view of God's work is completely obscured, we can rest assured that His picture is skillfully crafted.

My mother had taught me how to embroider at a very early age. Seeing I was a little stubborn and excessively eager, I did not always listen very well to her instructions. Consequently the backside of my canvas looked a whole lot more disorderly and erratic than hers (not to mention our respective good sides). As a matter of fact, the reverse of my mother's work did not look bad at all. If you studied it very long, you actually started to discover patterns of colour and design.

Since my youth, I have heard the embroidery metaphor several times, which provided me with ample opportunity to contemplate my childhood observation of a reasonably organized backside. This led me to the discovery of a new dimension to this familiar illustration of God's providence. Seeing that the Lord is doing a perfect job, much better even than my mother, we must be able to discern His patterns and directions when we look very closely at those parts of the picture we can see. The little that is revealed to us now, hints clearly at what is still disclosed to us.

Isn't it amazing that a homey needlework skill can give rise to such a profound and multilayered metaphor? Or should that not be so astonishing? These ministers were not the first ones to take imagery from the world of the arts and crafts and apply it to the Lord's work of creation and recreation. One such imagery evolved directly from the way the first human being was created. The Lord took clay and skillfully shaped it into the beautiful form of a man. Very often the Lord alludes to this original, creative work. When He illustrates to His nation how man is like a vessel in the potter's hands, he implies a reference to the way Adam was formed. The Lord can mould people into pleasing shapes. But He can also discard them like misshapen vessels, when they don't turn out as He had ordained, or when they lose the function for which they were intended. See Jeremiah 18 and 19.

The Bible makes use of another creative metaphor. It employs the combined techniques of knitting and weaving to describe the most wonderful way the Lord has lovingly and single-handedly fashioned each person as a unique individual. Inherent in this image is the confidence that the Lord knows and understands us completely, seeing we are His own handiwork. For many of us, Psalm 139 will come to mind at this moment. Job also uses this comparison, in chapter 10. The minister

in our opening example was in good company when he depicted the Lord's majestic activities of shaping the church's history in terms of designing and producing an intricate piece of needlework.

It is not only remarkable that these images of the arts and crafts are used to vividly illustrate the Lord's work of creation; it also reveals something about the nature of such human activities as weaving and pottery making. There is a connection between the two. The Lord has created the world in such a way that his creatures actually display a delegated capacity to create as well. This secondary creative process continues all around us. Every spring again the trees blossom; these beautiful delicate flowers will become nourishing fruits over the small course of one season. Birds build nests and beavers construct dams. It cannot surprise us that these types of biological facts are easier observed than satisfactorily explained. They fall largely outside the scope of human understanding on account of their creative nature. Also the human capacity to design and to execute mental pictures is built into the creation, with the added dimension that humans do not work with instinct, but with initiative, intuition and intelligence. People take an active role in the creative processes that the Lord has designed into His creation.

Sometimes the Lord uses people's creative abilities in a very dramatic way. By sending His Spirit, He can directly inspire a person to execute His specific intentions. A detailed example of this is described in Exodus 31.

*"The Lord said to Moses, 'See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every craft. And behold I have appointed with him Oholiab... And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting...'"*

What an incredible pleasure that must have been, to feel confidently guided by the Spirit Himself in using one's creative gifts for the service of the Lord. Imagine the intense satisfaction and thankfulness these people must have experienced, when their eyes examined an intricately woven curtain or beautifully carved altar. They had been instrumental in creating a perfect work.

Though we cannot share this claim to creative perfection, we can experience the joyous satisfaction that accompanies creative activity. This positive emotion is not reserved for great artists who gain world renown. We all taste it, when we arrange certain ingredients in a sensible and agreeable way. Young parents feel it after decorating and furnishing the baby room. A caring and imaginative cook recognizes it upon completion of a special meal. We can even notice it after cleaning out the garage. We have creatively organized things in an original, pleasing and practical fashion.

Human creativity is always contagious, in two ways. First of all, it stimulates a person to further creativity. We become more creative as we go along. We may set out to sew a new curtain for the dining room. As we ply the fabric through our sewing machine, we see visions of a coordinated table cloth, or some matching pillows in the adjacent den. Before long we conjure up the image of some wooden, nicely painted decorative flower pots. For this we readily seek the cooperation of husband. And here we come to the second aspect of contagious creativity: we stimulate others into creative activity. Husband takes on the job of cutting up some wood and assembling it into attractive (and unique) pots. By now he is on a roll, too. He decides to make a tray, in matching design and colours. More than likely the children become involved as well. The whole family shares in the pleasant gratification of producing something beautiful.

The gift of creativity brings with it the obligation to use and develop it. This is a welcome relief for those who feel guilty when they spend the better part of a day embroidering two pheasants in front of a rustic fence. It also implies that it would not be right to keep our skills to ourselves. We would do well to teach our specific techniques to others, especially our children. It would be very beneficial if all the students in our Reformed schools could be systematically exposed to a variety of crafts. No mind is more eager and pliable than a child's, though a youngster's fingers have to

gain in dexterity. We have enriched our core curriculum with many types of sports activities. Crafts should not stay behind. We do a disservice to our children if we neglect their creative development.

Our church buildings ought to reflect how we use our creative gifts to the honour of our Creator. With Christian sensitivity and in harmony with the second commandment we will do our utmost to make our places of meeting attractive. Creator, creature and creativity go together. This does not mean that the foyer must become a fair-like exposition of quilts and children's drawings. Each item to be placed in church must be carefully planned, and in one way or other illustrate the uniqueness of this house of worship. It may not detract from worship, but must enhance an atmosphere of piety, awe and reverence.

Our Creator has lovingly knitted and woven His children in their mother's womb. In turn they will gladly dedicate the products of their creativity to His honour. As handiwork of our Maker, we owe our handiwork to Him.

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