

# Centering the Arts in Christ

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How fortunate we are to sing “Our Savior’s Love” this morning. Two former members of the faculty, Crawford Gates and Edward Hart, collaborated in its creation. And how wonderful it is to be taught and edified by this superb Men’s Choir. To be reminded of the love and mission of Jesus Christ so vividly through music is truly a blessing. The music performed as we entered this facility quietly prepared our minds and hearts to receive this blessing. I am grateful for music and for all of the arts, for they give meaning and richness to life.

## A Unique Institution

We are privileged to be associated with Brigham Young University. It was no idle dream that brought Brigham Young Academy into existence 125 years ago. Its founders had a clear vision of its destiny. We are here today because of their courage and sacrifice.

This year the College of Fine Arts and Communications is celebrating another important event: the 75th anniversary of the founding of the College of Fine Arts. The Department of Communications was added to the college about 35 years later. In a number of ways, and on varied occasions, we are honoring those who established a foundation for the arts and communications at BYU. As a special tribute

to those faithful founders, I have chosen to speak about centering the arts in Christ.

It is a rare blessing to be associated with an institution that honors the central role of Jesus Christ in this world’s destiny. It was faith in Christ that motivated the founders of this institution. And that same faith guided those who established the arts as a core element of our curriculum. They followed the Light that leads all mankind toward things that are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13). Most were also responding to the quiet invitation of the Holy Ghost to center the arts in Christ. In Mormon’s words:

*I judge these things of [them] because of [their] peaceable walk with the children of men.*

*For I remember the word of God which saith by their works ye shall know them; for if their works be good, then they are good also. [Moroni 7:4–5]*

## Our Challenge

I offer my profound gratitude to all those faithful, sensitive women and men who loved

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beauty and truth enough to sacrifice their lives in service at this institution.

It is now our challenge to strengthen and extend their artistic work into the 21st century and beyond. Will we be willing to place Christ at the center of our work?

During the ministry of Jesus in Palestine, there were many who “believed on him; but . . . did not confess him, . . . for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:42–43). The same challenge exists today. Do we believe in Christ but fail to follow Him because we love the praise of men more than the praise of God? Or are we willing to follow Him but uncertain about what that means? “Behold I am the light,” He assured the Nephite faithful. “I have set an example for you” (3 Nephi 18:16). What was that example?

- Christ loved and obeyed His Father (see Matthew 26:39; John 5:19, 30).
- He understood who He really was (see John 10:7–15; 13:3).
- Jesus prayed often and studied the scriptures (see Matthew 14:23; Luke 4:4; 24:27).
- He taught His followers about the Holy Ghost and urged them to seek and heed the Spirit’s guidance (see John 14:16–26).
- He invited His followers to consecrate their lives to the work of God through serving others (see Matthew 19:16–26).
- Our Savior encouraged all to repent and to freely forgive others (see Matthew 5–7; 18:21–22; Luke 15:11–32).
- Christ challenged His followers to reach their full potential (see Matthew 13:10–13).
- He openly expressed love, compassion, understanding, and appreciation (see Matthew 9:36; 20:34; 26:6–13).
- He gave His life so others could return to His Father’s presence (see John 3:16–17; John 17; 2 Nephi 2:8; Mormon 9:13).
- Jesus ministered personally, getting to know people by walking and working among them (see Matthew 4:23–24; 3 Nephi 18:31).

- He did not condescend to others, even though He was the only perfect mortal (see Luke 19:2–9; John 4:6–42).
- Our Redeemer respected individual agency, taught true principles, encouraged self-governance, and provided an opportunity to account for personal thoughts and actions (see Matthew 10).
- He condemned sin without condemning the sinner and ministered to both the repentant and the unrepentant alike (see John 8:3–11).
- Jesus lifted the downtrodden and gave hope to the discouraged (see John 16:33; 3 Nephi 1:10–13).
- He blessed the sick and cared for the poor (see 3 Nephi 17:7–25; Mark 2 and 5).

If we desire to center the arts in Christ, we will follow His example. He asked the Nephite disciples, “What manner of men ought ye to be?” And He answered His own question ever so simply: “Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). More precisely, He said, “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). He invites us to be like Him! Not just to believe in Him, but to be like Him—to acquire, in process of time, His righteous attributes.

If we seek to center the arts in Christ, will our artistic endeavors differ from those of others? If so, in what ways will they differ? How might our efforts also parallel the work of others? For what purposes should followers of Christ use the arts? Must they be willing to depart from some of the world’s artistic traditions? If so, will that limit their creative energies or liberate them? Such is the nature of the questions that confront those who would follow Christ.

### **What Are the Arts?**

What are the arts, really? Are they subjects, professions, cultural artifacts, or events to attend? Yes, but that is not what

they really are. The arts embody a unique learning process that awakens the very core of one's being to life's meaning and beauty. Through the arts we can learn to see, hear, move, and feel with greater sensitivity and understanding. They provide both substance and stimulus for learning the creative process and nurture our capacity to explore the infinite. The arts enable us to communicate important realities that can be shared in no other way. Elder Boyd K. Packer has affirmed that "because of what [artists] do, we are able to feel and learn very quickly . . . some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly" (Boyd K. Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord," *Ensign*, August 1976, 61).

We separate the arts, perhaps to better understand them. But learning processes called music, drama, painting, sculpture, dance, poetry, literature, or film are really parts of a greater whole. They encompass an approach to learning and knowing that is unique. The arts must be an essential core component of a balanced education.

The arts are also a marvelous manifestation of "the light of Christ," for

*the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings;*

*Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—*

*The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things. [D&C 88:7, 11–13]*

The creative flame that ignites artistic creation has its origin in "the light which is in all things." Christ is the source of the power that is within us whereby we exercise "free will, and bring to pass much righteousness" (D&C 58:27–28). His light gives life to our creative potential. His love impels us to creative action. Art itself appears because there is a spark of the divine nature in God's children.

Those who remove themselves from the Light of Christ through pride or disobedience may use the "form" of art to express themselves, but "they deny the power thereof" (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Technical skill becomes the substance of their work because they are unable to receive the power that would give it life and meaning. In contrast, those who seek to follow Christ are free to receive the enlightenment and pure joy that flows through art centered in Him. We are "that [we] might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). Art centered in Christ immerses us in joy!

### **There Are Two Ways**

There is a difference between art that comes through the Light of Christ and art that comes from the devil and those "who subject themselves unto him" (Moroni 7:17). That difference is not difficult to define. But the devil's enticements can be convincing, even to those who should know better. Christ has warned us

*that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world.*

*And also Satan hath sought to deceive you, that he might overthrow you. . . .*

*Behold, . . . there are hypocrites among you, who have deceived some, which has given the adversary power. [D&C 50:2–3, 7]*

"Wherefore, take heed," the prophet Mormon adds, "that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil" (Moroni 7:14).

Ezekiel charged us to "teach . . . the difference between the holy and profane, and cause [people] to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23). It may be instructive to review a few of the contrasts between art that has Christ at the center and forms of art created by deceivers or hypocrites.

*Art That Is Centered in Christ*

1. “Inviteth and enticeth to do good continually, . . . to love God, and to serve him” (Moroni 7:13).
2. Persuades us “to believe in Christ” (Moroni 7:16).
3. Seeks the welfare of Zion through service motivated by the pure love of Christ (see 2 Nephi 26:29–31).
4. Plants joy in the hearts of those who are seeking to be like Christ (see 2 Nephi 2:25).
5. Is virtuous and full of charity toward all men (see D&C 121:45).
6. Radiates light and is filled with hope (see Moroni 7:48).
7. Is born of meekness and lowliness of heart. The pure love of Christ is its driving force (see Moroni 7:44–47; 8:25–26).
8. Invites “the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love” (Moroni 8:26).
9. Is created by those who, through faith in Christ, “shall have the power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in [Him]” (Moroni 7:33).
10. Is miraculous in its manifestation of beauty and love.
11. Those who create it desire to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny [themselves] of all ungodliness; . . . and love God with all [their] might, mind and strength . . . , that by his grace [they] may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32).
12. Is manifest according to the power of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 32:2–5).

*Forms of Art Created by the Great Deceiver*

1. “Inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually” (Moroni 7:12).
2. Persuades us “to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God” (Moroni 7:17).
3. Sets the artist up as a light to the world for the purpose of getting “gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 26:29).

4. Offends the sensibilities of those who are seeking to be perfected in Christ (see Matthew 16:23).
5. Is profane, corrupt, vulgar, violent, and blasphemous (see Ephesians 4:22, 29; Moses 8:28–30).
6. Is dark and hopeless (see D&C 10:20–21).
7. Is born of pride and selfishness. Money is its driving force (see 2 Nephi 26:29, 31).
8. Is strong in “perversion; and [those who create it] delight in everything save that which is good. . . . They are without principle, and past feeling” (Moroni 9:19–20).
9. Is created by those who walk “in [their] own way, and after the image of [their] own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16).
10. Is made to appear wonderful, even though it embodies darkness and sin.
11. Those who create it “do withdraw [themselves] from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in [them] to guide [them] in wisdom’s paths. [They] cometh out in open rebellion against God; . . . listeth to obey the evil spirit, and becometh an enemy to all righteousness; therefore, the Lord has no place in [them], for he dwelleth not in unholy temples” (Mosiah 2:36–37).
12. Is manifest according to the power of the devil (see Jacob 7:4).

Such are the contrasts that exist between the work of Christ and the work of the deceiver and his followers. There is no middle ground. There is also a simple test. Art that is centered in Christ invites the Holy Ghost to be present during its creation and, again, as it is experienced by others in performance, exhibition, or publication. Satan’s counterfeit has no such power (see Moses 1:12–21).

**“The Difference Between God and the Devil”**

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has provided additional insight:

*Our model—our first priority—is Jesus Christ. We must testify of him and teach one another how we can apply his teachings and his example in our lives.*

*Brigham Young gave us some practical advice on how to do this. “The difference between God and the Devil,” he said, “is that God creates and organizes, while the whole study of the Devil is to destroy” (Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 69). . . .*

*Remember, our Savior, Jesus Christ, always builds us up and never tears us down. We should apply the power of that example in the ways we use our time, including our recreation and diversions. Consider the themes of the books, magazines, movies, television, and music we make popular by our patronage. . . .*

*The powerful idea in this example is that whatever builds people up serves the cause of the Master, and whatever tears people down serves the cause of the adversary. [Dallin H. Oaks, “Powerful Ideas,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 26–27]*

### **A Personal Remembrance**

Allow me to share a personal experience that may help illustrate the power and purpose of artistic experience centered in Christ. Many years ago, unable to sleep because of pressing problems, I sought the boredom of late-night television as a substitute for “counting sheep.” Alone in the family room, I tuned to an educational channel just as a rather curious dance production was beginning. It was the story of the prodigal son retold through the music and choreography of Israeli collaborators and performed by an Israeli dance company. I expected this to be the perfect way to fall asleep. How wrong I was!

As the familiar story unfolded through movement and music, the simplicity and power of the production increasingly moved me. Every expression and movement had meaning. The camera’s ever-changing focus absolutely held me spellbound. The music touched my heart and filled it with wonder. The movements of the dancers, now trans-

formed into actors, opened the eyes of my understanding. I observed that the Holy Ghost had an overpowering presence in my being. As the story reached the point of the son’s return to his father, the son crawled to his father’s feet, writhing in the agony of true repentance. At just the right moment, his father lovingly lifted him into his arms and held him in an attitude of total forgiveness. In an instant I felt and understood the reality of the Atonement with such intensity that I wept in both joy and sorrow. It was a powerful and precious experience in my life, an experience made possible through artists who had responded to the Light of Christ in this collaborative creative endeavor.

### **The Song of the Righteous**

The Lord has counseled us to “pray always, and [He] will pour out [His] Spirit upon [us]” (D&C 19:38). He has also affirmed that He delights “in the song of the heart [and that] the song of the righteous is a prayer unto [Him that] shall be answered with a blessing upon [our] heads” (D&C 25:12). We should recognize that because heartfelt singing is similar to heartfelt prayer, the blessing promised the righteous singer is the presence of His Spirit. Singing, whether with the voice or through the aid of a musical instrument, can provide a conduit to spiritual enrichment for those who are seeking with real intent to purify their lives. This promised blessing characterizes the blessing available to the righteous through the arts.

With that idea in mind, let’s sing another hymn together. As we do so, sing from and with your heart. Forget about what others around you may think and immerse yourself completely in the text and music. Approach this hymn as you might approach prayer, and allow me to lead you in a somewhat flexible manner. Let’s sing verses one, two, and five of “Come, Follow Me” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 116).

Those who immersed themselves completely in that hymn just received a wonderful

blessing! Heartfelt singing, whether it is done while you are alone or when surrounded by others, can provide a welcome conduit to peace and true joy.

### **Toward Zion**

The Lord revealed a number of things about our day to Nephi. One of them was the following promise: “Blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 13:37). If we were to labor with all our heart, might, mind, and strength to center the arts in Christ, would we help to bring forth Zion? And would we then enjoy the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost more abundantly? I believe we would. But we must be clear in our understanding. “Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom; otherwise [the Lord] cannot receive her unto [Himself]” (D&C 105:5). We must be willing to give up the idols of the world, abide by the principles that characterize celestial life, and follow Christ.

The Lord has admonished us to “keep [His] commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion” (D&C 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6). “For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness; . . . Zion must arise and put on her beautiful garments” (D&C 82:14). What a wonderful opportunity we have to place the arts in service to the cause of Zion. Is this not real? Is this not the very purpose of the arts? As we participate together in Christ-centered artistic experiences, we will be increasingly bound together in singleness of purpose and a love for that which is good. We will become “of one heart and one mind” (Moses 7:18). Is this not Zion?

But there is a price that must be paid. The arts require diligence, sacrifice, and commitment. We have an example in the scriptures of one who imagined a marvelous outcome when he “took no thought save it was to ask” (D&C 9:7). He failed. We must do more. According to

President Spencer W. Kimball, “We must take thought. We must make effort. We must be patient. We must be professional. We must be spiritual” (Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” *Speeches of the Year, 1975* [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976], 253). And Elder Packer reminds us that our motives must also be considered: “There is a test you might apply if you are among the gifted. Ask yourself this question: When I am free to do what I really want to do, what will it be?” (Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit,” 63). Will those who seek to serve the cause of Zion work in accordance with “the Spirit of truth or some other way? . . . If it be by some other way,” we have been warned, “it is not of God” (D&C 50:17–18).

### **Many Ways to Contribute**

There are many kinds of artistic work that can contribute to the building of Zion. We must not constrict or limit our vision in this matter. And there will perhaps always be conflicting issues of personal taste and artistic understanding. Elder Packer offers a point of view that is very insightful and helpful:

*I think [Jesus] would rejoice at the playing of militant martial music as men marched to defend a righteous cause. I think that He would think there are times when illustrations should be vigorous, with bold and exciting colors. I think He would chuckle with approval when at times of recreation the music is comical or melodramatic or exciting. Or at times when a carnival air is in order that decorations be bright and flashy, even garish.*

*I think at times of entertainment He would think it quite in order for poetry that would make one laugh or cry—perhaps both at once. I think that He would think it would be in righteous order on many occasions to perform with great dignity symphonies and operas and ballets. I think that He would think that soloists should develop an extensive repertoire, each number to be performed at a time and in a place that is appropriate. . . .*

*But I am sure He would be offended at immodesty and irreverence in music, in art, in poetry, in writing, in sculpture, in dance, or in drama.*  
[Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit," 65]

What shall we do then? How can we know what is appropriate and useful to the cause of Zion? Nephi gave us an answer that is as precise as it is challenging:

*I suppose that ye ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye have entered in by the way. . . .*

*Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak [and, I might appropriately interject, "create" or "perform"] with the tongue of angels? And . . . how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?*

*Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ.*

*Wherefore, . . . feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do. . . .*

*. . . If ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.*

*Behold, this is the doctrine of Christ.*  
[2 Nephi 32:1–6]

Finally, Elder Packer has extended a challenge that applies to many of us here today:

*Go to, then, you who are gifted; cultivate your gift. Develop it in any of the arts and in every worthy example of them. If you have the ability and the desire, seek a career or employ your talent as an avocation or cultivate it as a hobby. But in all ways bless others with it. Set a standard of excellence. Employ it in the secular*

*sense to every worthy advantage, but never use it profanely. Never express your gift unworthily.*  
[Packer, "The Arts and the Spirit," 65]

I wish to conclude this message with the words of the prophet Moroni. He was a man centered in Christ who understood perfectly the necessity of our conversion and transformation. Join with me in pondering his words and the process they describe:

*Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.*

*And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.*  
[Moroni 10:32–33]

I pray that we will not deny ourselves access to the power of Christ as we seek learning and edification through the arts. Rather, I hope for the day when all we do will be centered in Christ, that we might then enjoy the spiritual abundance He has promised those who are obedient and faithful.

I am grateful for the love of our Father in Heaven and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, and for the peace and creative energy They extend to us through the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost. I testify of Their presence and concern for each of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.