

# Poetics as Protest

*Reformation Sunday*

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*Ken Kovacs*

## Scripture

### **Ephesians 2:1-10**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

## Sermon

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Save by grace through faith, not works. Grace vs. works. That’s the classic tension of the Protestant Reformation of the church. Grace alone. *Sola gratia*. Not works. Legend has it, when Martin Luther (1483-1546) was asked by the Diet of Worms in 1521 to recant his claims about grace and faith, he said, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen!” (Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders, Gott helfe mir! Amen!)

The richness of God’s mercy and love revealed to us in Christ was, is, not the result of human effort or works or striving or performance. There’s nothing transactional about salvation. Salvation, this new life in Christ, cannot be earned; it can only be received—and even the capacity to receive is a demonstration of God’s gracious Spirit alive within us. It’s all about grace. As Protestants, specifically *Reformed* Christians, we know this.

But the question I would like to place before us is: Why are we saved? In other words, why are we being saved? What is grace and faith and salvation in service *to*? That is, toward what end or purpose are we saved? The answer is right there in the text. Perhaps we don’t see it or give it the weight it deserves because, for centuries, Protestants have spent so much time

focusing on Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved...not the result of works," turning these verses into our theological battle cry. We tend, therefore, to miss the next verse. "For we," meaning those in Christ, "are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph. 2:10). This stunning verse further enfleshes Ephesians 2:8-9 and then moves us forward.

Our salvation is the result of God's work. "For we are *what God has made us*." Or "We are God's work." And I think it's important for us to zero in on this verse because Paul uses an extremely important, even beautiful Greek word in here: *poiēma*. In the Greek Old Testament, both the verb and noun forms are used widely, referring to the work of an artisan, to general types of human commerce, as well as the creative work of God. [1] *Poiēma* is the source of the English word "poem." *Poiēma* is related to the verb *poieo*, meaning "to do, to make." The Greek word *poiesis* refers to the act of making, producing, and composing something.

And so, Ephesians 2:10 can be translated this way: "For we are God's work of art..." or "We the result of God's handiwork..." Or, even better, "We are God's *poem*..." This is what Paul wants the Ephesians to know; this is what how Paul wants the Ephesians to view themselves. They are poems being crafted by a gracious poet-God. And Paul implies that this work is ongoing; we are, even now, if only we had the eyes to see, are works of art, created by God, poems, works of beauty handcrafted by God for the sake and salvation of the world. We could then say or think of salvation—being saved and on the way to being saved—as *poiesis*. God is making, producing, composing. God is crafting something beautiful with us, in us for us and for us for the world. God is doing all this through us. We are invited, by grace, to realize this, to shift the way we view ourselves, invited to receive it, open ourselves to it, yield to this truth. *Poiesis* is about opening ourselves up to what God is doing in and through us, not the result of human effort or will.

For the Ancient Greeks, *poiesis* had a particular understanding, which Paul probably knew about. *Poiesis* had nothing to do with the exercise of the human will, it was not about human effort, but it had everything to do with how we come to realize the truth, the production of the truth. Ancient Greeks believed that the truth was discovered when that which is blocking it was unveiled and pulled away, and we're allowed to see what's really there. That's what truth is. *Poiesis* had to do with an unveiling, a moving into truth—again, truth, in Greek thought, means unveiling—it had to do with the opening of a world and discovering what's before one's eyes, which would encourage people to act or do something. *Poiesis* was understood as the act of bringing something from concealment into the full light and radiation of a created work. [2] *Poiesis*, poetics, the poetic-act, is all about letting be, it's about opening up, it's about bringing forth, it's allowing something to come into being without force, without willpower, without striving, or as Paul would say, without works. Theologically, it's about being open to what God is lovingly working to realize through us and with us and through the church, letting be and opening up to what God is yearning to bring into being, a way of love and mercy, which is the work of God. And what matters most is for us to see ourselves as people, as Paul wrote, who are being shaped by the "immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness toward us in Christ

Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). It's this grace that is crafting us into poems, beautiful poems, works of art, works of art that renew the image of God that sits within us, we who are "created in Christ Jesus for good works." This is the new creation that Paul talked about throughout his letters (2 Cor. 5:17). And we are invited to walk with God in this work, which is our way of life, says Paul. To be part of God's work—which brings me back to the Reformation.

In essence, the protest of the sixteenth-century church was about reform, and reform was in service to renewal, the renewal of the church so that it can more effectively embody the "good works" of God in the world, so that the church could really be the church. The reformers came to see that the church, therefore, must continually be open to the ongoing reform and renewal of itself that *God* is doing of the church. This is what Paul Tillich (1886-1965) called the Protestant Principle – the ongoing reform and renewal of the church, never ending. The reform and renewal of the church *by God*, who is working, creating, forming through us, what we could call God's *poesis*. God's work of poetry.

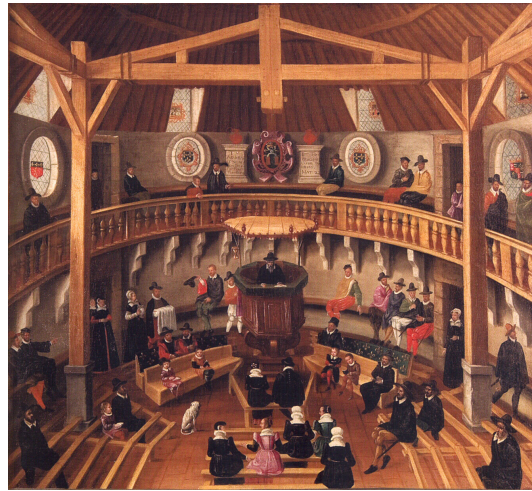
Now, what I'm offering here today...I'm not aware of any reformer, Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli, or any of reformer, ever talking about *poesis*. Perhaps that was the case, but I haven't found it. I haven't come across any of the reformers talking about the poetics of reform. But that's essentially what they were doing. It seems to me this is precisely what they were pointing to. Now, I know, we celebrate Reformation Sunday today. We all know that the Protestant Reformation was a long time ago. Many people might say, who cares? Perhaps the Protestant Era, many say, is over. Denominations are slowly dying. But this doesn't mean that the church is dying or that God is dead (as some suspect). The Protestant spirit that brought about the reform of the church will bring about the reform of the church until there's no longer a need for a church.

The Reformation reminded us about the centrality of grace. I wonder in our age—and perhaps this is Ken speaking and that I should step out of the pulpit to say what comes next—perhaps it's time for the church to move to the next verse, to focus on *poesis*, to focus on Ephesians 2:10, instead of Ephesians 2:8,9. I don't mean we need to sit around and reading and listing poems—although that's not a bad idea. Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), the great artist, who had a deep and abiding trust in Christ, who considered becoming a minister, referred to God as "a greater artist than all other artists." [3] What if we lived from a fuller, deeper understanding that we are saved and are being saved as the creative work of God, who in love is working like an artist to craft our lives, to sculpt our lives, to write our lives, to compose our lives, lives coming fully alive, lives that image and re-image, the glory and grace and goodness of God, lives God is not making something beautiful with.

When we see God as an artist who is still creating and recreating us and the church—and to trust that we share in the creative life of God—*poesis, itself, becomes protest, poesis as protest*—in other words, a protest against everything in this world that tries to hinder, obstruct, and reject the work of God in us and in the world. God's creative work is then placed in sharp relief against everything else that striving right now to undo it. God's work of *poesis* becomes a protest against everything in our lives that works against "letting-be," whether in the depths of

our psyches, in our relationships, in the brokenness and suffering of the world, our alienation from God, one another, and ourselves, even the environment, everything that seeks to destroy and dehumanize and disfigure the image of God within us and how we live as God's people. God's *poesis*—when we sit knowing that we are part of God's *poesis*, we then become agents of protest against everything in this world that's seeking to undo it. For God's *poesis* is about the work of justice, and wholeness, and renewal, and peace—everything that is in service to life. Perhaps Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was right when he said, "I believe beauty will save the world"—and I would add, the beautiful work of God will and is saving the world. [4]

It seems to me that we need to confess the truth of God's *poesis*, to allow it to ground us and root us in these violent, challenging times, and to trust in it and stake our claim on God's *poesis*, and to defiantly say like Martin Luther, Here I stand. Here I stand. On this claim. God's *poesis*. I can do no other. So help me God. Amen.



## Sources

- [1] Stephen Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012). See 1 Sam. 8:8; Judg 13:12; 1 Chr 29:3; Eccl 2:4; 8:9, 14, 17; Is. 29:16; Ps. 63:10.
- [2] Derek H. Whitehead, "Poiesis and Art-Making: A Way of Letting-Be," *Contemporary Aesthetics* (Volume 1, 2003). Giorgio Agamben, "Poiesis and Praxis," *The Man Without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1999). Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (London: Harper & Row, 1975).
- [3] Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (Boston: New York Graphic Society Books/ Little, Brown and Co., 1978), B8, III, 496. Cited in Don Postema, *Space for God: The Study and Practice of Prayer and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Bible Way, 1983), 16-17: "...a greater artist than all other artists...[who]made neither statues nor pictures nor books; but loudly proclaimed that he made...living men, immortals."
- [4] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot* (1869).