



## **Spark and Echo: Bringing Together the Spiritual and the Material**

The Reformation was divided on the extent to which the physical and the material could and should express the spiritual. In John 4:24, Jesus tells the woman at the well that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” Some Christians hold that because the creation is not the creator, we should avoid attempting to use any physical means to suggest any manifestation of God. We pay attention to Paul’s caution in Rom. 1:18-25 to distinguish Creator and creation. Yet in the exchange between Jesus and the woman, Jesus uses the well and its water to assist the woman in her encounter with Spirit and Truth.

Luther was convinced that the church ought to use material means to convey spiritual truths. He located this view first and foremost in God’s chief revelation of himself to us: the incarnation. (Luther promoted the celebration of Christmas for this reason.) This incarnational theology teaches that the spiritual is not above the material and the material is not above the spiritual, “for from God and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36).

By this view, then, the arts serve a distinct function in Christian teaching, witness, in-reach, and outreach. To this end, a continuing project called Spark and Echo is bringing the spirit and truth of God’s word to the New York arts scene. Says Ryan Pendall’s review in Christianity Today, “The goal of Spark and Echo is simple and provocative: to illuminate every verse of the Bible using visual art, music, poetry, dance, theatre, film, and literature.” Here is the project’s aim as stated on their web site:

Spark and Echo Arts is creating the world's largest multi-disciplinary illuminated Bible with a piece of visual, performing or literary art covering every passage of the Bible. We commission artists from diverse backgrounds and showcase their works online and at live events in NYC and beyond.

The two links below will take you to the review article and to the Spark and Echo web site.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/thisisourcity/newyork/bringing-scripture-to-life-in-new-yorks-arts-scene.html?paging=off>

<http://www.sparkandecho.org/>

Spark and Echo may serve as an intersection point for instructional content and this Biblical and Reformation theme of the spiritual and the material. Consider such topics and questions as these:

1. Apart from the nativity texts in Matthew and Luke, perhaps the most cited incarnation content is John 1. Re-read John’s composition here with attention to his interplay between the spiritual and the material.

2. The Spark and Echo project is open to artistic contributors whether they are Christians or not. Consider the pros and cons of this “open access” policy.
3. An art program will, of course, include a component in aesthetics. And every philosophy of art includes some hermeneutic theory, whether explicit or not. Should the art program with an allegiance to a Biblical outlook also include instruction in Biblical hermeneutics and interpretation?

4. Luther spoke and wrote extensively on the nature of Christ. He is generally acknowledged as the strongest thinker on this theme since Augustine. Consider, for example, the quotation below and whether Spark and Echo’s illumination of every verse of the Bible makes a good fit with Luther’s idea.

Scripture begins very gently by leading us first to Christ as a man and afterwards to the Lord of all creation and finally to God. Thus, I come in easily and learn to know God. Philosophy and the wise men of this world, however, want to begin at the top and have become fools in the process. [Luther is probably referring to 1 Cor. 1:18ff here.] One must begin at the bottom and afterward rise up. (WA 10, 297)

5. From the review article: “Spark and Echo Arts has partnered with civic organizations such as the Metropolitan Water Alliance.... ‘We thought, let's try to partner with them and integrate the Bible and the arts naturally into public life in New York City,’ explains Roberts. ‘We reached out and they were very receptive,’ says Zempel. ‘A big part of our mission is to bring the Bible into the regular culture around us. Partnerships are a good way to do that,’ says Roberts.”

Biblical literacy in our culture is declining. Do the arts have a distinct opportunity to sustain a presence for the Bible in a secular age? Or does such an effort run the danger of reducing God’s word merely to the subjective and affective?

6. \_\_\_\_\_