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## Chapter 1

# To Create Is Divine

*Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.*

**J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”**

How would you depict God in a work of art?

That’s the provocative question I found myself asking on a recent trip to Rome. Standing with my daughter underneath Michelangelo’s world-famous work in the Sistine Chapel, we couldn’t help but be taken in by the most recognized image in the entire building: *The Creation of Adam*. Situated near the center of the ceiling, the fresco shows God reaching His finger toward Adam to create humanity.

In the painting—probably the most iconic depiction of God in the world—God is a powerfully built, elderly European man

with sinewy arms, long gray hair, and a beard. Adam is naked, reclining, and seems to be only halfheartedly reaching back to God. Michelangelo had wrapped his Greek ideas about physical beauty, symmetry, and the body into his portrayal of the image of God, as well as his ideas about humanity's relationship to God.

Was he right?

## Created to Create

There's an element of the image of God we almost never talk about. It's strange we leave it out, because it's the very first thing we learn about God. In grad school theology courses I explored God's attributes, what He is like—He is rational, holy, relational, and so on. But almost never did my studies hit this fundamental property of God: He is *creative*.

Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Looking solely at the words in this sentence, what is the one thing we read about the nature of God?

Simple. God *creates*.

The only thing we can know with grammatical certainty about the image of God from this verse, then, is that it necessarily involves creativity.

God is immensely creative. We all know that too many colors in a painting or living room can be dissonant, but when I walk in the mountains, forests, and deserts of Central Oregon, where I live, I am astounded at how God is able to bring hundreds of colors into beautiful, consonant harmony. From the alpine lakes to the patches of colored wildflowers in spring, nothing in the landscape ever seems to clash or fail in the beauty of God's nature. Have you ever marveled at how God has made thousands of colors sing together without clashing? It's hard for us to add three or four colors to an outfit before it starts to clash, let alone the myriad hues we see in mountain meadows.

The same impression hits me when I look to the sky. Incredible sunsets are delightful, and their timing always seems perfect. They are alive in the moment and deeply inspiring. It shows the touch of the Master Artist, who paints in real time.

The late Francis Schaeffer saw this property of God in a rather obscure place. In his book *Art and the Bible* he talks about the specifications that God gave for priestly garments: "Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe" (Exod. 28:33). Schaeffer used this verse to make the argument that God, who could have told them to make the pomegranates red (the color of dye their skins were

# When we study creativity or act creatively, **WE LEARN ABOUT GOD.**

used for in the ancient world), ordered that they be a blend of yarn that would give a lifelike and representative feel. Put another way, it was a form of impressionistic art. God doesn't color like a child. His creativity manifests beautifully in everything He does.

When we study creativity or act creatively, we learn about God.

As those made in God's image, we bear the hints of His creativity within us. Put another way, we will never exemplify God's image in us to the fullest without exercising creativity. I like to say that when we're being creative, it's as if we're taking the image of God in us out for a walk. Creativity is one way we manifest and exercise the image of God.

When we hold a child in our arms, pursue justice for our oppressed neighbor, or cry out in prayer and worship, we know that we are relating to our Creator in a profound way. Similarly,

creativity can connect us with our Creator, opening the future in surprising ways.

But more than just having the capacity to be creative, we also have a *responsibility* to be creative. One of the first things God asked Adam to do—shortly before the creation of Eve—was to tend and care for a garden (Genesis 2:15). Later, God asked Adam to name the animals (2:19–20). God was certainly capable of both tasks, but He seems to be encouraging and nurturing human creativity even in the midst of creating the foundations of the world.

When people say, “I don’t have a creative bone in my body,” not only is it untrue, it’s denying the image of God in us. While artistic ability is a talent a select few possess (and/or cultivate with time and hard work), creative capacity is something *all of us* are born with. Put another way, artists are skilled with unique talents, but creativity is part of what makes us human. Madeleine L’Engle, the famed author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and many other novels, says it well:

*But unless we are creators we are not fully alive. What do I mean by creators? Not only artists, whose acts of creation are the obvious ones of working with paint or clay or words. Creativity is a way of living life, no matter our vocation or how we earn our living. Creativity is not limited to the arts, or having some kind of important career.<sup>1</sup>*

So while we're not all Michelangelo, we're all creators nonetheless. Fulfilling our mandate to create can take many different forms.

Let me illustrate with a story from the church where I pastor, Antioch. As a church we've always celebrated creativity—its integral role in our souls as beings made in God's image, the ability for *everyone* to share in the creative process, etc.—and we wanted to help the community celebrate it, too. So we invited people to showcase their creativity on Art Sunday. From cooking to floral arrangements to photography to poetry to woodworking, we were blown away—not only by how much amazing art came forward, but how creative *everyone* seemed to be. Teachers, mortgage brokers, bankers, computer technicians—the list goes on—all contributed something to Art Sunday.

It changed my conception of art. The amazingly wide base of creativity displayed that day broadened my narrow conception of what it means to be creative.

Art is to creativity as science is to knowledge. We might not all be scientists, but we all live within the realm of rationality and knowledge. Likewise, we might not all be artists, but we all live in a creatively charged world. I might not paint with a brush, but I make plans on the weekend, make my own variation on recipes, and name my own pets. I may not sell my creations, but I do live them.



Too often we tell ourselves that only artists are creative, but creativity is a gift we have all been given. *Everyone* made in the image of God participates in this reality. Despite the wide belief that some people have more creative genes than others, psychologist Robert Epstein, PhD, a visiting scholar at the University of California, states, “There’s not really any evidence one person is *inherently* more creative than another” (emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup> Artistic ability is a talent some possess, but creativity is a human trait.

Think about what you create:

- Ideas
- Products
- Memories
- Recipes
- Sculptures
- Football plays in a pickup game
- Organizations
- Floral arrangements
- Prayer groups
- Vacation plans
- Kickstarter campaigns
- Bucket lists
- Ways to encourage others
- Adventures
- Friendships

Community  
Online posts  
Jokes  
Ways to show love  
Ways to organize  
And ways of doing thousands of other things.

Much of what you do in life, you create. You probably don't need convincing of that. But here's what I want to suggest: Though we often use creativity, we only partially understand it, and we rarely *intentionalize* it.

What do I mean by *intentionalize*? I mean making the effort to take our creativity for a walk—and on uncharted routes. God expects us to be creative, just as He expects us to be loving and patient, and so on.

If we don't intentionally use and develop our creativity, there will be certain problems we can never solve. Certain projects

**ARTISTIC ABILITY**  
is a talent some possess.

**CREATIVITY**  
is a human trait.

we can never undertake. Certain relationships we will never enjoy. Creativity opens up new horizons in our relationship with God, with our families and communities, and even with the world.

Creativity is a game changer.

## Creators vs. Copiers

Some proudly use the word “copy” as a kind of bravado of honesty and transparency. In this vein, Picasso is attributed with saying, “Good artists copy, great artists steal,” and Einstein with, “The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.” Or as Voltaire more mildly put it, “Originality is nothing but judicious imitation. The most original writers borrowed one from another.”<sup>3</sup>

I think we all understand and can appreciate this sense of the word *copy*. After all, only God creates *completely* from scratch.<sup>4</sup> The adage for us is this: If it works, borrow it. If it doesn't, ignore it.

It's an honest admission that we all have been shaped by a thousand hands, and much of our creative energy takes inspiration from what we have seen, experienced, and appreciated. I recently heard Cornel West say it like this: “Nobody steps into the Hall of Fame alone.”<sup>5</sup>

The sense of *copy* I'm using is neither the playful one nor the authentic one just described.

Rather, I'm talking about "copying" as a mindset that refuses to consider new ideas and new relationships. This kind of copying is a habit of never thinking outside the box, never adapting to rapid change, never being willing to fail. This kind of copying simply takes what is known and safe and repeats it *ad infinitum*.

Creators, on the other hand, do borrow much . . . but for the purpose of making things new. The Renaissance artists of Florence borrowed from Greek myths, humanism, and Roman architecture, but always with the mindset of *transforming*—not merely copying—what had come before.

That's God's call to us as well: don't just be copiers, but creators. We've all been given things from which to borrow: family histories, jobs, talents and skills, interests and hobbies—even our race and gender, the country we live in, our language, schooling, and stage of life. Out of this raw material God invites us to create, to move forward into the fullest expression of God's creative image in us. We are being asked to reject copying in order to create, extend, and breathe life into what is meant to flourish.

So we find things that work. We study our heroes and learn about best practices. But we maintain a mindset of creativity and always look to transform rather than merely replicate.

## We Breathe Life

Creativity is about responding to God's image and call—and *through that response, exerting a creative influence and leadership the world is desperate to follow.*

Genesis 1:2 says, “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep.” God chose to create within that environment, so we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves in the midst of formless, void things. And we shouldn't be unsure about what we need to do.

Have you ever counseled a friend? Taught a child to search for animals in the clouds above? Cultivated a garden? Named a dog?

*All of those things are creative acts, reflecting the creative image of our Creator.*

We breathe life into our families when we come up with creative ways of making memories. We breathe life into our industry when we come up with a different way of doing business. We breathe life into our churches when we discover new ways of expressing our two-thousand-year-old beliefs and doctrines.

Creativity is meant to be life-giving, because it is part of God's image in us.

For further study at [KenWyttsma.com](https://www.kenwyttsma.com) 

1. A List of Quotes on Art, Beauty, and Creativity
2. 4 Books Everyone Should Read on Creativity and Why
3. Interview with Charles Lee on *Good Idea. Now What?*

### Questions for Group, Team, or Individual Reflection

1. Have you been affirmed in your creativity, or have you been stifled? How?
2. If you were to participate in an Art Sunday, what could you contribute? Think beyond just your first idea or two.
3. What are the raw materials in your life that you have to work with?