

# Placemaking and Artistic Vocation in the Post-Pandemic Church and World

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## ABSTRACT

Interrogating the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, this essay suggests that it would be a mistake to assume placed community has disappeared and that an important task of the post-pandemic church will be to develop a renewed sense of place. By developing the contours of a theology of placemaking, the author argues that art and the artist are central to the ecclesial tasks of reconciliation and redemption in a broken but beautiful world.

## Introduction: The State of Things

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the church has had to confront the influence that physical place continues to have upon its identity, practices, and mission. With the move to online worship and discipleship that occurred in the spring of 2020, our collective understanding of what it meant to “belong” to a congregation and church community dynamically changed in both positive and negative ways. It became less of a burden to attend church with children, for instance, but also easier to remove oneself from the accountability of physical encounters on a weekly basis. Virtual church increased the chance, especially in evangelical congregations, to become further focused on the sermon, and therefore one could be encouraged to “go anywhere” to get a better one. Worship, already marked by the value of choice, could increasingly become a reflection of what individuals wanted out of worship music or biblical teaching rather than about one’s bodily relation to a particular place or physical community. In many cases, this resulted in a larger exit of members from churches characterized by theological mismatch, cultural and political tensions, or denominational controversies that

came to a head during such time.<sup>1</sup>

It would be false to insinuate that placed community life disappeared during the pandemic, though. In fact, many people were able to find a deeper sense of connection with individuals through weekly video calls, and many experienced less social pressure (and, relatedly, more of a desire) to attend weekly gatherings, all of which increased one's feeling of belonging in a congregation. Indeed, the impact of the pandemic on one's sense of place was not monolithic or homogenous. No matter what the individual response to changed physical encounters during the pandemic, though, we can recognize that it called for deeper reflection and self-conscious imagining of oneself in relation to a community and place in new and often-disruptive ways.

For these reasons, an important task of the post-pandemic church will be to develop a renewed sense of place within itself and to integrate that sense of place as part of its mission for the wider culture. As we begin to see how our former ways of living have failed us, as we reflect on the divided landscape of place that came into focus during the pandemic, and as we begin to make new places for community gathering in both physical and virtual environments, our vision for shared space and entangled life together must be a primary point of theological attention. The places we make in the world will reflect a vision for what it means to live as people of the resurrection, and they will mark out patterns and behaviors of belonging that either invite joining together in the Holy Spirit or enforce divisions therein. As our old patterns of behavior for community engagement were questioned or disrupted, Christians are gifted with the opportunity to go about a renewed and redeemed practice of placemaking in the world today.

It is my goal here to develop the contours of a theology of placemaking for the church, with special attention to the role that artists might play in helping construct new senses of place and belonging. These questions of placemaking and the arts, I argue, will invite us to better navigate the particular needs of our post-pandemic lives and the new realities of church engagement in contemporary society that emerged in the pandemic's wake.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, one might point to the larger "deconstruction" movement happening within the evangelical church, political tensions in denominations which came to a head during the Trump era, or the controversies in the Southern Baptist Convention which elicited an exit from both members and member organizations.

Here, I offer some foundations for thinking on issues which only serve as the beginning of such work, but which may help open a space for understanding the critical role that both aesthetics and placemaking play in the way we understand ongoing ecclesial mission in a broken but beautiful world.

### **A Theological Case for Placemaking as Christian Vocation**

Before developing a constructive framework for understanding the work of the artist in the church, it will be helpful to outline the broad contours of a theology which takes placemaking seriously as a central way of understanding Christian vocation and which meets the needs of a church grappling with placed belonging in a post-pandemic world. The language of place and placemaking offers a unique lens through which to address the questions of who we are and how we are called to live in the world. Placemaking, as I use the term here, includes all those practices and ways of seeing the world expressed in relation to our physical places. So placemaking can mean physical construction—the way we build our churches for instance—but also includes how we build communities of belonging in and outside those structures. This framework for understanding placemaking takes seriously the role that physical place has in our embodied interactions with one another, including the ways that our construction of self-conscious identity and practices within those places take shape.<sup>2</sup>

While the disciplines of city-planning, philosophy, and humanistic geography all say something about placemaking in human experience,<sup>3</sup> if we allow our understanding to be shaped further by a view of Christian vocation as grounded in the doctrine of work elaborated in many Reformation-

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2 For background on some of these ways of understanding place and placemaking, see Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), along with the following resources on phenomenological and relational views of place and our work/ life/community within it: Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993) and John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

3 See for instance, Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: Wiley, 1995), 191; Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

informed traditions, then placemaking must also become a core part of understanding Christian vocational identity. Being called, in other words, to work broadly and creatively in *all* the places of the world and situating this calling further within a doctrine of the reconciling work of Christ in Creation, Christian identity is thus reconceived as a call to various forms of placemaking work in the world.<sup>4</sup> In this article I elaborate on some key doctrinal features of constructing this theological vision for placemaking as it applies to the post-pandemic church.

### **The Image of God and Christian Placemaking**

A Christian understanding of both the value of place itself and our work within it are a central focus on the Genesis creation stories.<sup>5</sup> In Genesis 1, God creates a world of places and their inhabitants, ordering the earth through His own creative work of placemaking. Later in Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden is the first place given to humans as gift, and the story functions as a microcosm for understanding the particular and universal presence of God in all of creation.<sup>6</sup> The accompanying theological anthropology established in the Creation accounts and centralized around the divine design-

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4 While he doesn't use the term placemaking, Lesslie Newbigin explores the missional work of the church for the places of the world in a way that informs my own constructive account. See for instance, Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978) along with the theological summary of Newbigin's work in Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

5 On dual authorship of the Genesis narratives, see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM, 1956). Terrence Fretheim argues that despite their different authorship, the accounts should be read together, a view I take here. While it not necessary to hold to his exact view regarding redaction of the accounts by the author, I suggest that the accounts are best read in theological unity and as a cohesive theological text. See Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005). For a similar view, see Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

6 The Garden of Eden is often understood as the first Temple, with Adam's tasks as the *imago dei* corresponding to the priestly task. See for instance, John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) and G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004).

nation of humans as “the image of God” (Gen. 1:26-28) scaffolds a larger theological understanding of human work in the community of Creation. As divine-image bearers and co-creators,<sup>7</sup> humans are called to see the places of the world as God sees them and from this vision exercise responsible action in the world.<sup>8</sup>

If the Genesis narratives offer a serious vision of “place” as God-ordained and God-given, then placemaking might also be one of the more significant ways to envision what it means to live into our calling as creative image-bearers of God in the world. In Genesis 1:26-28, the *imago dei* is connected both textually and theologically with a divinely appointed task—with the dominion of the landscape and the calling to procreate.<sup>9</sup> The Genesis 2 calling to “till and keep” the garden and name its animals (2:15,19-20) further elaborates what this “dominion” may look like. Called to be co-creators with God, the first image-bearers (the soil-bound *adamah*) are called to engage lovingly and creatively with the place divinely given (indeed Adam’s task in understood as at once agricultural, poetic, and priestly).<sup>10</sup> Creational relationships of all sorts are built through ordered and creative acts of placemaking grounded in humans’ vision of the good landscape. In this regard, views of the image of God which focus on creativity, order, relationality, difference, or mission, in some sense all have to do with an underlying theology of place at the heart of the *imago dei*.<sup>11</sup> In other words, we are creatures called into

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7 Trevor Hart reflects on this co-creator (or his preferred term, following J.R.R. Tolkien, “sub-creator”) role in Trevor A. Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity, and Artistry* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

8 Ellen F. Davis suggests a parallel between this relational seeing of God and humanity in *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44-47.

9 See Michael Welker’s helpful discussion of these tasks in light of the doctrine of *creatio continua* in Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999.)

10 “Tilling and keeping” is in Westermann’s view indicative of the nature of all human work. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 221. I discuss this in more depth in Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts*, chapter 2. It is important to note here, though, that dominion does not mean mastery over the rest of creation, but a responsible and loving relationship to that creation which exercises care and attention.

11 For an introductory summary of these views on the *imago dei*, see Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), ch. 5.

embodied relationship and shared difference with one another and with the world of places. Humans are called to have dominion over creation, yes, but this responsible dominion is only understood and enacted properly within a holistic vision of place and its accompanying relationships. John Inge describes this as a “relational view” of place and argues that the whole of scripture describes this God-people-place relationship.<sup>12</sup> Healthy relationships with one another and with God depend upon healthy relationships to the land beneath our feet—to the places that God has called us into as responsible placemakers.<sup>13</sup>

This creational vision of placemaking work receives decisive focus when further understood in Christological terms. Christ Himself is the image of God called into the work of reconciliation for all of creation’s places (Col. 1). Understanding Christ’s work in creation as a form of placemaking is helpful here. In the incarnation, Jesus undergoes both displacement and placement. He leaves heaven and comes into our earthly place to do the work of joining divine and human space. Our ecclesiological identity and mission are clarified within this Christological identity and mission, our own placemaking practice being framed as a vocation to participate in Christ’s reconciling work in *all*.<sup>14</sup> Jennifer McBride describes the work of the church as becoming like Christ and shows how this vocational identity is achieved centrally through confession and repentance, through taking on the sins of the world as Christ himself does in his image-bearing work, and so working toward reconciliation in our places and communities. What this must mean, then, for churches of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and indeed for the church of the post-COVID-19 era, is that they re-imagine and confess their “sins of place,”<sup>15</sup> while at the same time, embody the sacrificial and conciliatory work of Christ in

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12 John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 46-47.

13 In this sense the *imago dei* must be situated within the wider theological anthropology of scripture—within Israel’s calling to responsibly occupy and steward land and animal resources, their calling to serve the poor, the image of Christ as a model for Christian calling to servanthood, and even the church’s participation in Christ’s work of redemption brought “to the ends of the earth.”

14 Importantly, this may involve becoming both more deeply placed *and* undergoing various forms of displacement for the sake of the displaced.

15 I use this term broadly here to describe the various ways that we have dealt *unlovingly* with our places and their communities, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

their places. The church's vocation of placemaking, as Christ himself shows, is a vocational calling to embodied, loving, confessional, and repentant work in all the places of the world.

### **The Problem of Sin for Christian Placemaking**

This confessional and repentant attitude is integral to understanding Christian placemaking work, especially given that theologies of place often fail to adequately account for the problem of sin. In theologians' efforts to establish the holiness, beauty, and goodness of our embodiment in physical place, we often forget to recognize the damage to both our vision and practices of placemaking sustained by sin.<sup>16</sup> A key feature of the state of sin in which we live is that humans operate with distorted vision.<sup>17</sup> The image of God in us remains intact, but our image-making abilities, the imagination which drives our practices in the world, is bent. Our vision of place is marred by sin, and so our placemaking practices are broken within this disordered sight. Very often, we fail to see the world as God sees it, and because of this distorted vision, we fail to treat places and people as the gifts that they undoubtedly are. Our placemaking practices, then, must account for this blindness.

A theology of placemaking as Christian vocation, therefore, benefits greatly from the insights of Lauren Winner on damaged practices. In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Winner provides an insightful account of the ways that Christian practices carry inherent damages within them, and in so doing tempers claims about the redemptive function of practices for the Christian life. In her study of Christian practices such as prayer and Eucharist, Winner argues that because of sin, the practices themselves operate

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16 For instance, none of the major theologies of place give any lengthy report of the role of sin on our sense of place or placemaking practices. See John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, IN: Baker Academic, 2011).

17 One might appeal to Augustinian notions of original sin to understand this damage to our ways of seeing (imagination), but even within more action-based views of sin that reject Augustinian notions we might appeal to the ways that our imagination and way of seeing the world are inhibited and bent by the social frameworks in which we abide. Both views of sin account for such damage to vision and so undergird the theological argument that follows. On varying accounts of original sin from an Anabaptist framework, see [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Original\\_Sin](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Original_Sin).

with damage that is proper to them. The Eucharist, for instance, becomes a site of damaged vision in ways that are magnified precisely because of the form of that practice.<sup>18</sup> This does not negate the redemptive and sacramental power of the Eucharist but softens our claims that it will *always* result in redeemed behavior. Our theology of Christian placemaking must take this dynamic into account, understanding the ways that placemaking carries inherent damages by sin which operate in accordance with the very form of that practice. It is not enough, then, to simply offer a theology of placemaking as Christian vocation which focuses on the ways that those practices can express the image or presence of God in place, nor can we sustain a completely optimistic view of the way that our placemaking practices perform redemptively in our environments. Even when attempted with the best of intentions, sin distorts the way we see places and people, and therefore, it is often the case that we fail to understand the true impacts of our actions.<sup>19</sup>

This theology of sin as “distorted vision” allows us to complicate our picture of placemaking and perhaps unearth a way of understanding placed encounters, which does not gloss over the ways in which our encultured encounters tend to go wrong. This definition of sin aligns with the ways that feminist theologians picture the problem of sin. Kathryn Tanner understands sin as blindness, while Winner herself describes sin as a failure of perception.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars focus on the relational rupture present due to sin,<sup>21</sup> though this rupture might also be traced back to a failure to see the true nature of the person or place of damaged relationship. This “failure of the imagination” as Wendell Berry observes, impacts our ability to see places and their inhabitants for what they are, and therefore renders our placemak-

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18 Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 46-56.

19 For instance, whiteness is a key example here of clouded vision. Racial and gender segregation often come out of a strong sense of place, but that sense of place is undoubtedly clouded by sin.

20 Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 46; Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 9.

21 See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 242; Darlene Fozard Weaver, “Sin and the Subversion of Ethics: Why the Discourse on Sin is Good for Theological Anthropology,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, edited by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 100.

ing work there inevitably broken, or at the very least, incomplete.<sup>22</sup> While sin is not the last word, it remains an important aspect of understanding our placemaking work in the church today, in a world that reflects the many broken and bumbling ways in which we attempt to navigate our places and communities, sometimes with direct ill intention but most often with the subtleties of indifference or forgetfulness that mark our bent imagination. “Most merciful God... we confess that we sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done, and what we have left undone.”

The placemaking work of the post-pandemic church must directly account for various “sins of place” of both church and culture<sup>23</sup> as we reimagine the future of our places together. If Berry sees the failure of the imagination as central to our mismanagement of place, then his alternative is to see the world with affection, which is also a form of particularizing.<sup>24</sup> To live with affection is to see the ways in which people and places embody the goodness and blessedness of God’s creative vision, and in response, to treat them in ways befitting of such a status. Berry does not necessarily offer the systematic framework for understanding how this particularizing affection might be understood in relation to the sinful imagination. But a theological account of the work of the Holy Spirit perhaps offers such insight and helps move us toward a more hopeful picture of the reconciling work of Christian placemaking.

### **The Spirit’s Vision for Christian Placemaking**

Fleming Rutledge describes the ways that our “eyes are opened” to sin only after the work of divine grace.<sup>25</sup> We cannot properly know or understand

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22 Berry references “a failure of imagination” multiple times throughout his essays, but see for example, Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), 86.

23 See for instance, Greg Jarrell, *Our Trespasses: White Churches and the Taking of American Neighborhoods* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024.)

24 Wendell Berry, “It All Turns on Affection,” in *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012). On the particularizing work of the imagination, see Wendell Berry, “Imagination in Place,” in *Imagination in Place* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 12-13.

25 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 170.

our sin except by the operation of the Spirit of Christ in us to take away the blinders of sin's power and to see the world and ourselves as they truly are. Two things deserve attention here. The first is the metaphor of sight she uses to understand the knowledge of sin and the movement from sin to grace. We were blind, and now we can see. The second is the order of operations—we come to know and understand our sin *after* the operation of divine grace. We cannot, then, go about the work of confession or neighborly affection without the grace of Christ offered up on the cross or the work of the Holy Spirit to move us in all manners according to His grace. Our freedom is further bound to the work of the Spirit who reveals the work already accomplished by Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. As Willie Jennings notes in his commentary on the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit in this sense “overshadows.”<sup>26</sup> Our work of love operates in accordance with this divine work of grace to participate in joining together those communities of difference within the kingdom of God. Our work of love—of affection in Berry's words—is, in other words, the work of the Spirit. This affection, though, resists objectification. “This is love,” Jennings writes, “that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world and drive a question into their lives: *Where* is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?”<sup>27</sup>

This question of “where” is especially powerful here. It carries within it the ways that our love of place, cast within a social imaginary marred by sin, must open itself up to the *displacing* power of the Spirit who opens and retrains our vision, making possible forms of affection which join together rather than divide. As Jennings notes, our affections in place often give rise to exclusionary patterns of belonging, nationalistic perspectives, and false visions of the ways in which God's image is displayed in the world of places. For the church to practice love of neighbor, our affections must be reformed through the eyes of the Spirit *for* and *in* the places of the world.

This call draws us back again to the incarnational work of Christ—to the God who becomes at once displaced and reimplaced for the sake of the

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<sup>26</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Jennings, *Acts*, 32, my emphasis.

world.<sup>28</sup> Our God is one who draws us into relationship not only through the beauty of embodied interaction in our places, but also models the sacrificial and often necessarily (dis)placing nature of that bodily work. The Word leaves His home in heaven to tabernacle among us (Jn. 1). Central to that inhabitation of the flesh, Mary as the first Christian models this call in her sacrificial imitation, displacing her own bodily needs (and indeed her social standing as well) to the needs of the baby in her womb, the infant in her arms, the toddler in her life in place. As Jesus later goes about his adult ministry, he gives up social standing and power for the sake of the displaced and the dispossessed. And in the way of the cross, the placemaking work of Christ comes to full embodiment, the God who undergoes the ultimate displacement on the cross—death—in order to make right our relationships in place for the world to come.<sup>29</sup> This Christology gives shape to the pneumatological work that follows, to the Spirit's alighting on the heads of the disciples, drawing them together in the language of their places while also leading them to disperse to the ends of the earth. Ecclesiological vocation and mission, seen through both an incarnational and pneumatological lens, then, must take place and displacement seriously as the church seeks to understand its particularizing work of placemaking.

If Christ's image-bearing work characterizes ecclesiological mission, then it is the Spirit who brings our vocation into full realization. In the Spirit, we realize...we see...we perceive rightly our vocation and identity in God's creation, and so relate to God and one another in the manner in which we are called. Steve Guthrie describes this as the "re-humanizing Spirit,"<sup>30</sup> and writes:

The Spirit is poured out on God's people so that by the Spirit they may become truly and fully human, recreated in the Image of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. . . The work of the Spirit is to restore, rather

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28 I use the term "reimplacement" in this essay in keeping with Craig Bartholomew's understanding of scripture as a story of "place-displacement-(re)implacement." See Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 31.

29 Within traditions that focus on the descent into hell, or the harrowing of hell, this might exemplify a further displacement for the sake of the reimplaced.

30 Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), xvi.

than extinguish, our humanity. . . It is by the Holy Spirit that we are joined to the perfect humanity of Christ and remade in his image.<sup>31</sup>

To return to the question of sin and our distorted vision of one another in place, we might say that as the Spirit recreates us in the image of Christ's perfect humanity, our damaged vision is in some manner restored. In Jesus, we can see with the eyes of divine love and attend to the particular beauty of all God's living creatures and places. The Spirit joins us to the humanity of Christ and so joins us to one another, offering a restored vision for belonging in Christ's creation.

This joining is impossible except in the places we inhabit. This embodied particularity of humanity is the image of God called to do placemaking work in the world. Jesus showed us this path in his incarnation and will do so again in the second coming: "See, the home of God is among mortals" (Rev. 21:3). God's presence tabernacles in the garden-city of the New Jerusalem, making a place for us to experience divine-human communion in its eschatological fullness. Until that time, we make our home with one other in imitation of Christ's self-giving love and affection for the world, being joined in the work of the Spirit to make all places new.

### **The Relationship between Placemaking and Aesthetics**

Within this brief exercise, one will notice the role of vision, sight, and imagination in formulating a theological account of placemaking. Placemaking is, at its heart, an aesthetic endeavor, a reality which poses both problem and possibility. Our aesthetic sensibilities are also corrupted by sin and are often molded into ungenerous images of what it means to be beautiful and good. When our placemaking practices operate within these unreflective aesthetic patterns, they too become vehicles for corrosive desire, marked by demonic panoramas of imagining and acting that are counter to the resurrection space of the Christian life.

One key example of this that came into focus in the pandemic/post-pandemic church is the way we understand racial imaginaries operating

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<sup>31</sup> Guthrie, *Creator Spirit*, xvi, xvii.

within ecclesial and public space. Willie Jennings offers perhaps the most comprehensive account of such dynamics, arguing that the church cannot be disentangled from its aesthetic encounters with blackness and its spatial organization of the world centered on whiteness.<sup>32</sup> The emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests in North America the summer of 2020 shows the exercise of such dynamics in culture. In my own experience, the impacts of these protests filtered into the ecclesial space in interesting and sometimes controversial ways. Local churches had to decide whether they would allow the politics of the moment to impact seeing the reality of racial division that was happening in their communities. In all this, churches and parishes had to decide what kind of placemaking work they were called to do, along with how and whether to address their own complicity in the wider social problem. While it is not the goal of this article to answer this particular question, we should note that its answer will be one that operates from within an aesthetic sensibility tied to space and place. In other words, the church cannot resolve its role in ongoing racial divisions in the world without reflecting on its theological aesthetics and its attendant placemaking practices, which inevitably drive its participation in and construction of community relationships.

Because our sense of place and wider habitus are marked by the realities of a Western colonial imagination, as Jennings describes it, and by the wider patterns of sin in the world, we must take time to re-evaluate the ways that our *sight* is reflected in our *sites* of community relation. And because our ways of seeing will repeatedly require re-training or re-formation, the role of artists in the renewal of our perceptions of one another and the construction and making of place comes into striking focus.

### **The Artist as Placemaker: Considering Artistic Vocation in the Post-Pandemic Church**

If we agree that the church must begin to re-evaluate the ways that it forms sites of belonging and embodied community, given the current culture we find ourselves in, then we should rely not on old patterns of mission and discipleship but create new ones. As artists make a space for developing new

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<sup>32</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

ways of seeing the world, the arts provide just such a context for Christian placemaking to occur. We will look at a few areas where this is most relevant for the post-pandemic church through the theological lenses established above.

### **Inhabiting Creation: Art, Embodiment, and the Image of God**

As we emerge from the pandemic to find our patterns of placemaking altered, the church must re-adjust the ways it goes about creating holistic spaces for gathering as well as reaffirming the role of the body in place. Both the body and its location in space will need a transfiguring vision as we move forward. Our ways of being and belonging together require a new outlook broken open by Christ's incarnational involvement in His creation, and the arts align with this vision in a variety of significant ways.

First, the ways we value the body must be seriously reconsidered as we seek to re-engage in post-pandemic placemaking. We are not simply souls behind screens; our bodies are indispensable for the ways we go about worshipping God and forming communion with one another.<sup>33</sup> The body is a necessary part of the liturgical experience, a reality heightened and made more visible through our encounters with the arts.<sup>34</sup>

On a practical level, the arts require embodied interaction in place to be best experienced. They re-attune us to the demands of our bodily senses and the physical frameworks we inhabit. The strings of a quartet sound sweeter in the acoustic space of the church. The texture of paint and wood is better seen without the mediator of a screen. The movement of the body in dance is felt more keenly when one sees and hears the way a dancer's body cuts through the air. The arts invite us into new relationships with our own body and the bodies of others, asking us to reconsider the ways our bodies become

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33 W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of our Physical Bodies in Worship* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

34 Hannah Lyn Venable, "The Weight of Bodily Presence in Art and Liturgy," in *Religions* 12 (2021): 164.

the site for divine encounter and expression of the image of God.<sup>35</sup>

Second, the arts performed and placed within the space of the church provide at least one reason and ground for re-entry: there is something *here* that can't be experienced elsewhere. The arts become an invitation to physical community for regular churchgoers and visitors alike, performing the role of placemaker so that others may imagine ways to creatively engage with their environments and inhabit spaces in new ways. As physical church attendance dropped in the post-pandemic era, the arts might be one way to call folks back to physical belonging with one another, inviting bodies back into the place of the church and re-engaging them in physical encounters which ignite new ways of imagining worship and community life together. Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, California, for example, enables a variety of artists and art media to enhance their liturgical experience and sense of place, inviting congregational participation and engagement with issues of the wider community to make spaces of embodied belonging.<sup>36</sup> Or Sojourn Arts, a ministry of Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky, hosts exhibits for the community which invite visitors into a different type of liturgical space and invests in the aesthetic discipleship of the community. In early 2023, they hosted the exhibit "Urban Stations" by Steve Prince, which reflects a new perspective on the church's involvement in society by setting the stations of the cross within a contemporary context of injustice. Calling attention to the sacrificial work of Christ for bodies which continue to struggle in the violence of the contemporary world, Prince draws us into a renewed vision of the cruciform work of Christ's body in the world of places. Prince says of the project: "It is my hope that this project will resonate as a symbol of how the body works together to meditate and pray over the issues embed-

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35 While, on the one hand, we certainly can encounter new ways of seeing and presence through "virtual" experience of an artwork, and on the other hand, a physical encounter with the artwork does not necessitate our being present to it or one another, a physical encounter with the artwork does at least hold the possibility of making presence known in a greater way than if one experienced it simply through a mediated means. See Venable, "The Weight of Bodily Presence in Art and Liturgy," 5.

36 Grace Cathedral, "Outreach and Community: Art and Exhibits," accessed June 1, 2024, <https://gracecathedral.org/art-exhibits/>.

ded within ourselves and our community—thus inspiring a call to action.”<sup>37</sup> Imbued with the rich symbolism and attention to the body that is characteristic of Prince’s work, the stations draw audiences into a liturgical meditation on the ways the church might better model the cruciform image of God in our embodied work in the world, particularly as it relates to physical bodies which are the object of various forms of injustice.

Operating on this basic level to enhance our embodied experience of physical place, while simultaneously calling attention to the church’s ongoing mission to the world, the arts become sites for reflexive and active place-making to occur, both in and outside the church walls. As they encourage us to take account of the ways our embodied interactions in place reflect our calling as the image of God, they remain central to the way the post-pandemic church should re-evaluate its sense of place and seek to re-engage physical life together.

### **Navigating Social Sins: Art, Confession, and Prophetic Vision**

A theology of place, I argued, must also account for the role of sin in our lives, which distorts our ability to see the world through the eyes of God. This is a reality which applies not only to personal practices but also to social and structural sins on a wider scale. Our personal vision is distorted, but our ways of seeing are also socially constructed. The social imaginaries with which we see are always themselves distorted by sin.<sup>38</sup> The problem runs deeper than our own wells of practice, and so must our forms of confession.

Our places are thus made in ways that reflect these social sins, forming sites of ongoing breakage between communities with one another and their places. Indeed, our *sense* of place must account for our *sins* of place, those socially enacted and often unselfconsciously practiced ways of being in the world that push against the work of the hospitable Spirit of God to unite creation in the beauty of His presence. The COVID-19 pandemic opened a unique setting in culture to identify and confess some of these sins: racial

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37 Sojourn Arts, “Urban Stations by Steve Prince,” accessed June 1, 2024, <http://www.sojourn-arts.com/urban-stations-by-steve-prince/yp4hd7zc6uckouyavdq45su9psuioim>

38 This term is taken from Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

inequities, patriarchal spaces of violence, and socioeconomic injustice, to name a few.<sup>39</sup>

Confession is a powerful and often forgotten tool of the church to engage with the world. As referenced in our framework for understanding placemaking, Jennifer McBride constructs a theology of public witness based on Bonhoeffer's theology of the confessional church, arguing that the church must communally accept and confess guilt for its own sins and for those of wider society. The church exists as the cruciform body of Christ on earth, and this reality distinguishes it not as a moral superior, but rather as that body which suffers for the sake of all, a body which exists for and belongs to the world as "vicarious representative."<sup>40</sup> Confession is the practice which "breaks through sin" and thus becomes the practice in which the church embodies Christ's concrete redemption.<sup>41</sup> This confession is not just acceptance of personal guilt, but rather focuses on "the corporate and complexly intertwined actions that found and shape our local communities, nation, and global world."<sup>42</sup> The church is not innocent, of course, and has been complicit in many of the great social evils of the world. It must, therefore, confess its own sins of place. But also, as the redeemed body of Christ, the body which has experienced the revelation of God in the world, it has a further responsibility—to take on guilt which is not always its own doing, but which nonetheless troubles the waters of community life in place. A major part of the church's placemaking work in the wake of the global pandemic may then be to address the failures, shifts, and sins which have occurred, and which call us into new perspectives on what it means to be the church for the world.

What if the artist could help the church identify and confess some of these sins, not simply for its own sake but as a collective and prophetic work of culture-making? The work of the artist as the confessor of social sin situates the arts as central to a new form of ecclesial mission, involving itself in joining the church to the world, of joining our bodies and spaces to one

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39 For instance, take into account the protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and the ongoing impacts of the media attention to sexual misconduct among major Christian leaders.

40 Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127.

41 McBride, *The Church for the World*, 131.

42 McBride, *The Church for the World*, 130.

another in the power of the prophetic Spirit.<sup>43</sup> As confessor of social sins, the artist acts as the biblical prophets, who often took on sin in order to expose it—marrying unclean women, eating unclean food, or performing otherwise socially determined sins.<sup>44</sup> In the biblical prophets’ performance, they take on the sin of the people in order to expose it and work toward its healing. In this way they pre-figure the work of Christ who Himself took on our sin, or became sin for us, in order to perform the work of reconciliation between God and all of creation (2 Cor. 5). The artist who mirrors their artistic vocation to Christ in this way will embody this prophetic vision. The artist who confesses social sin makes a space for the church to do the work of Christ. In the prophetic and confessional practice of artists, we can be invited to see the sins of racism, of environmental consumption and destruction, of patriarchal oppression, of socioeconomic division, and of the North American values of comfort and consumption which exert influence on our everyday practices in place.

For the church to avoid becoming a sanctuary for false moral segregation, and if it is, rather, to live into the cruciform work of Christ in the world who suffers for his creation so that it may experience restored vision, the prophetic artist must become a central figure in ecclesial communities of placed practice. This is not an invitation to elevate the artist above the rest, but for the rest to step into the vocation of the prophetic artist, who sees darkly but who attempts to see nonetheless, consistently pressing into the work of re-training our vision to see the world anew.

Kelly Latimore uses iconography to recast our vision of social sins for which the church may repent. Setting images of the Flint water crisis, migrant families at the border, or Christ breaking rifles within the visual tradition of iconography, Latimore raises questions about the church’s role in responding to cultural and social sins. Latimore recasts the image of the icon, a traditional window into heaven, by depicting the sins of our generation, along with their prophetic response. A woman with a halo gives a man bottled water in *The Good Neighbor*, 2022, which depicts the Flint water crisis. A brown-skinned Jesus breaks a rifle over his knee in *Christ Breaks the*

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43 Jennings speaks of joining as central and the prophetic power of the arts in “The Aesthetic Struggle and Ecclesial Vision.”

44 See Hosea 1; Ezekiel 4.

Rifle, 2022. These images ask the viewer not only to see the ways that Christ is present within the sinful world, but also to convict the viewer of their own complicity in these social evils. God's presence shows up, but as in *The Good Neighbor*, it does so through the woman who goes into the brokenness of the situation. Those of us in the church who wish to offer up "thoughts and prayers" but fail to confess our own inaction and reticence to suffer for the sake of the world, fail to conform to the cruciform image of Christ. The artist breaks through our blindness to these realities in some small way, and in so doing, makes a place for the church to acknowledge, confess, and act in response to the sins of place which continue to destroy God's creation.

The embodied practices of some art forms also have the power to draw communities of difference together to explore the legacy of social sins borne by particular communities, and with which we as a wider culture continue to struggle. One significant example is the 2014 collaborative quilting project of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana and Community Mennonite Church in Markham, Illinois.<sup>45</sup> The churches, one predominantly white and the other more racially diverse, came together to create a quilt that explored legacies of racism and hopeful practices for the future. Each community made quilt blocks related to histories of African culture, slavery, land removal, and civil rights. The churches then came together to piece the blocks together and participate in a series of workshops and a prayer walk. The project served not only as an embodied community building event but also a collaborative prayer and practice for the future of dealing with racial division in the church and world. Drawing on the rich legacies of quilt-making in both Mennonite and African American culture, the project was a true mix of cultural and communal inputs to reflect on both sins grounded in past senses of place and a collaborative place-based approach to community belonging and healing for the future. While this project predated the COVID-19 pandemic, how might this process help us imagine confronting the racial divisions and displacements that were brought to attention in more recent years? The project and others like it serve to show the ways that community making and joining in a process like quilt making can help illumine the ways that the Holy Spirit continues to piece together belonging through

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45 Anabaptist World, "Quilting Cultures," accessed June 1, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/quilt-tells-the-story-of-african-americans/>.

intentional and aesthetic ecclesial placemaking practice.<sup>46</sup>

### **Redeeming Sites of Belonging: Art and the (Dis)placing Vision of the Holy Spirit**

If the artist is to become central to the ecclesial task of placemaking, then we must also allow room to confront the *displacing* work of the artist who, working in accordance with the Spirit, asks us to redraw the lines of community belonging and engagement for the sake of the other. The work of placemaking is not always about staying put in geographically or socially constructed spaces, the lines of which have often been drawn in ways that suffocate Christ's redemptive work from being experienced in communities and which exclude rather than join together in the unity of the Spirit. There are the physical manifestations of our sinful imagination all around us—legacies of redlining, division of communities with highways and other physical boundaries, political gerrymandering, suburban flight from urban spaces, socioeconomic apartheid and border-creation which affects education or healthcare—all of which show up in the ecclesial space as well.<sup>47</sup> We cannot simply be content to occupy our places as they are, to stay put within comfortable structures of our own or others' making, while other members of the community suffer. So often, churches who might be interested in the work of placemaking only exacerbate the problem, creating spaces of belonging for their own often racially or economically homogeneous communities without ever being fully joined to the places and people around them. In this case, churches in positions of geographical or social power must be open to the Spirit's task of displacement, a Spirit who uproots ways of being in the world that are aligned with the power of death while offering new life.<sup>48</sup>

The artist can offer alternative ways of engaging these larger social structures in place such that these structures might be questioned and uprooted to make way for deeper modes of imagining and belonging in the world. The arts become new structures through which to evaluate liturgies, practices,

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46 For a theological reflection on quilting and craft practices as a form of placemaking, see ch. 3 of *Placemaking and the Arts*.

47 See Jarrell, *Our Trespasses* for the legacies of some of these in the placed life of the church.

48 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 264.

geographical boundaries, and so on, therefore beginning the new work of placemaking for a church which acknowledges and confesses its own complicity in sinful practices.

If the church seeks to cultivate new sites of belonging and patterns of placemaking for the wider world, the arts can provide a paradigmatic way of understanding how this might occur. The artist draws us into the work of reimagining the boundaries of places, inviting us to the edges and ecotones, the spaces of mixing and joining. Makoto Fujimura describes the work of the artist as the work of *mearcstapas*, the boundary-dweller, who works at the edges of culture to prophetically call attention to the world.<sup>49</sup> Theologians and scholars such as Brian Bantum, Willie Jennings, Emilie Townes, and Michele Saracino highlight the work of mixing, joining, horizon, or difference as the place where the Spirit works to help us encounter the hospitable presence of God.<sup>50</sup> The church, in other words, should be in the business of de-centering, turning its ministry to the edges and boundaries of society in order to reframe the way it sees power, control, and mastery of the landscape and culture. Artists like Steve Prince do this work by drawing our attention to communities of race, gender, or class that remain at the boundaries of society's care. They invite the church into placemaking work in areas of society which have been marked by social sins bigger than our own creation. Claremont United Methodist Church in Claremont, California creates nativity scenes that displace the ways we traditionally imagine the biblical story by setting the scene in relation to current social issues. In December of 2020, the church put Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in front of a Black Lives Matter mural, Mary raising her hands in protest with the people represented behind her. They hold signs reading, "I can't breathe" and "Jesus wept." The art exhibit calls our attention to the ways that the Holy Family, displaced in the social conditions of their time, has something serious to say to issues of

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49 Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2017), 58.

50 Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulato: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Emilie Townes, "Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, edited by Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 89; Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

displacement, exclusion, and belonging in today's world. They also ask us to displace our own expectations about who belongs and how to do the work of hospitable joining enabled by the Spirit of God. As the pandemic opened up a cultural space to question these realities anew, churches might do better to cultivate this type of questioning in their particular places in order to invite the ongoing work of the (dis)placing Spirit as we navigate new social realities and expectations.

In 2020, a number of religious leaders and churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma sought this type of cultural learning by commissioning artists to make a series of Black Lives Matters murals painted in four church parking lots in the wake of the pandemic and BLM protests.<sup>51</sup> Mostly white congregations sought not only to make an affirming message about the goals of the Black Lives Matter campaign, but to also engage in active renegotiation of white cultural norms and expectations, seeking out anti-racism work for their congregations which became signified in the aesthetic renegotiation of the ecclesial outdoor space. The public facing nature of these murals marked the ways that the congregations themselves must deal with their own sense of community identity as it related to whiteness and racial injustice, but also framed that mission as public engagement for the common good.

We must choose to learn from the hard labors of artists if we are to do the necessary work of placemaking in a world divided by political, racial, socioeconomic, educational, and geographical lines which seek to keep us apart. In our hearts we know better than to allow this sort of division, and as the artist draws us into the work of love, we might expand our desires and affections to include that which we have previously seen as "other."<sup>52</sup> This is the place of the Spirit, who calls us out of our previous sites and sight and offers the clarifying Light for our darkened eyes to see anew.

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51 Tyler Butler, "Black Lives Matter': Tulsa religious leaders paint murals in church parking lots," *KTUL ABC* 8, Sept. 16, 2020, <https://ktul.com/news/local/black-lives-matter-murals-painted-on-parking-lots>.

52 On art as a work of love, see Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2006).

**Conclusion: Artist, Church, and World**

I argue that as we enter a new phase of life in the post-pandemic church, we should be empowered to re-evaluate and re-negotiate our ways of being in place. Scripture enjoins us to cultivate a placed imagination in partnership with the Spirit-filled work of Christ in the world. We are called to see Creation in its beauty and particularity, offering ourselves to it and making spaces for all God's creatures to dwell in hospitable and loving relationship. We are marked by this vocation of placemaking, not simply to affirm the goodness of God's world, but to work in Christ-centered and Spirit-led partnership in its reconciliation and redemption. The church, as the body of Christ in the world, offers itself up in confessional, repentant, and often sacrificial placemaking work, creating new spaces of belonging as the Spirit draws us into the particularities of our emergent places. As the arts reframe ways of understanding our own embodiment in places, the sins we have enacted there, and the boundaries of our own making, they also form a necessary partner in discipling renewed Christian imagination and practice. May we then go about our placemaking work with new eyes to see both the problems and possibilities of placed life together, listening for the work of the Spirit to transform and redeem our vision for Christ-like belonging together in the contemporary world. And may we be empowered to invites artists into this ecclesial mission and vocation, living into our work as creative placemakers made in the image of a creative, placemaking God.

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