



The Creative God Creates¹

Ted Ward

Louis Armstrong is dead. The great Satchmo died last month.

The current issue of *Christianity Today* carries a short, intriguing editorial.

The extraordinary musical talent of the late Louie Armstrong was best expressed in a context evangelicals by and large have been unable to appreciate. We owe a tribute and perhaps even an apology. Jazz is still widely regarded as inappropriate for worship. But the same objections can be stated against rock music which is currently making substantial inroads into evangelical music. The church could have asked him to play an anthem or to triple tongue, a Gospel song. Unfortunately, neither would have done justice to his ability.

The enigma of creativity and American Christianity is that we are more expert at rejecting than we are at creating. I received my first education in the arts. And as a person in the arts and then in social science, I became particularly interested in that particular intersection of social science and arts called human creativity.

Not many years ago there was a flurry of interest in creative processes. Paul Torrance² and several others were engaged in important research examining what makes humans creative, and taking a look at the educative processes that stimulate and environmental factors that inhibit creativity.

We are willing to concede that the human might be imaginative; creativity, however, should be a term reserved for God himself. The argument went like this: When people do something that they call creative what they really do is rearrange that which already exists and put it into some new configuration. In contrast, when God creates, he creates from nothing, and as proof, Genesis 1:1 is offered. This of course is a dilemma for a Christian social scientist who finds that the theology of creativity gets in the way of understanding research on creativity. Taking a closer look I realized that God also used rearrangement and still we call it creativity. In fact he formed Adam out of “rearranged” dust, and formed Eve out of “rearranged” sparerib.

Indeed God’s crowning achievement in creation is not the stars but the creature of the 6th day; and when God did this crowning achievement, it was done by rearrangement.

Creative rearrangements always involved producing more than just combining as a sum of several parts—the whole of anything is always *more* than just the sum of its parts. When God rearranged and called it Man, he breathed in life. When humans create, they breathe in beauty or function. We need to be reminded that men and women are created in the image of God and that all men and women are capable of creative acts. We need to be reminded especially that regenerated men and women are capable of participation with God himself in the continuing process of creation. The real issue in

¹ Ted Ward. The Creative God Creates. Chapel Address, Wheaton College. August 11, 1971.

² [For information about Paul Torrance see <https://coe.uga.edu/directory/units/torrance-center>.]

theology was how did God create. From this particular issue comes the hundred-year war on Darwinism.

The new issue today is, does God create, and is God creating? I offer as a thesis that creation is not only an accomplishment, but a continuing process. When humans conceptualize creation as a dynamic rather than static process, they begin to look for creation in things being done. They look at creativity as doing, and then begin to see something of the real creativity of God at work even in the universe. They begin to understand some of the cycling of nature, and marvel at the fact that morning always has a special beauty; and in spring they similarly reflect on the ongoing processes through which God has revealed himself. At the scientific level, however, they also become able to grasp significantly that which astronomical science today is just barely uncovering: The galaxies themselves in the universe are still in the process of creation. There are apparently no more satisfactory solutions to certain enigmas in astronomy than to understand that God is still at the work of creation in the observable universe beyond our seeing. As a social scientist I find God at work in another marvelous way that I believe to be more marvelous in all respects than in whatever it is we discover through a microscope or telescope. We find God at work developing people. Each human being is a new creation of God and God creates new works in him.

The 40th chapter of Isaiah has two particular parts we tend to read detached from one another, and now I'd like to read them together. If we begin at verse 26 of this chapter and move consecutively through to verse 31, we find that the prophet here begins with stars and ends up with people as he reviews God's creative processes:

Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these. He who brings them out by number and calls them by name. He is strong in power, not one is missing or lacks anything. Have you not known, have you not heard the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the end of the earth does not faint or grow weary. There is no searching of his understanding. But those who wait for the Lord, who expect, who look for him and hope in him shall change and renew their strength and power. They shall lift up their wings and mount up as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint or become tired.

The unleashing of God's power and creative processes in human beings always involve change. This is especially important today because we must be—perhaps unlike those before us—squared away on the scriptural view of co-creation with God. The world today needs the creativity of God himself if solutions are to be found for today's frustrations. Only in continuing creation is their hope that God's creative acts do continue. God refers to creative works in bringing women and men to himself, like we find in Isaiah 43: "Even everyone who is called by my name whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, whom I have made." Likewise in Ephesians we find "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before him that we should walk in them, living the good life which he prearranged and made ready for us to live."

Indeed we are created in Christ Jesus; thus the creative acts of God are going forward now and in processes in which you and I have a role. God wants to be creating in and through each of us, and as the Psalmist prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Today there is a tremendous need for creative alternatives for renewal for the creation of that which can replace outmoded traditions and formalisms. It is not at all creative to destroy. Desperation about the unchangeable has led some into anarchy. It is very creative to build alternatives, and it is our role to build alternatives with God.

Within the church I find something especially ironic. There are five specific references in the Bible's own hymnal speaking to the need for new songs—one reference is found in Isaiah, two references in Revelation. In Scripture we read that our God and his mercy is new every morning. We are surrounded by cries for renewal, newness, and change in worship. Yet things new within the church—especially related to music—recur through history repeatedly as a battleground in each unfolding era in the church's development. Our whole society is in turmoil; educational establishments in particular face severe challenges. They are tested and tried, and seem unable to withstand. Many agencies of both government and church—that is, the old-line establishments—are weakening. You must pay attention to the writings of the likes of Charles Silberman, John Holt, Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich because these men are speaking the truth. Society in general has been found bankrupt in various establishments. Those who must destroy find easy marks, and those who would recreate are in short supply.

At a recent consultation of the World Council of Churches at Burgen dealing with the world's frustrations over failures of education, Congressman William Ford of Michigan made this statement: "The churches are standing at a place where some historian is going to later ask why when they had a chance to move into the vacuum and do something about quality education for all people they didn't do anything?"

There's the orthodox response to Congressman Ford. The Congressman speaks of education, but the challenge to the church is even broader. Such open challenges constitute a major opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ. Since Vatican II the scholarly segment of the Roman Catholic Church has been feverishly hitting the books in an effort to rediscover the essential basis of the church. Many are arriving at Luther's conclusion. I tell you that it is an electrifying experience to be engaged with Methodist, Episcopal, and others of all denominational strength in dialog, working together on the issue of motive and purpose in world mission. It is quite amazing to find major support for an unpopular evangelical contention—the contention that biblical precepts constitute the roles and functions of the church in mission—coming from Jesuit scholars sitting beside you at the table. Indeed it is electrifying.

Just what is the place of the church of Jesus Christ? What is our answer to the demands for alternatives? Where are all our creative leaders? There is a great stimulus to creativity deriving on the first hand, acceptance of the reality of our status as a minority. Read Francis Schaeffer, and couple that with the recognition that the secular world awaits our suggestions. We are being watched. The sod of the earth is needed as never before. When can we announce with Jeremiah, "How long will you waver and hesitate to return, O backsliding daughter, for the Lord has created a new thing in the land of Israel." The context of these verses in Jeremiah 31 reminds us that God is capable of working his will in ways we would even want to warn him against!

We are in the after side of the communication revolution. Few understand it, but the fact stands. The need for timely creativity has never been more acute. We have what the struggling world wants. Our God is timeless; he is the God of timelessness and newness. It is no accident that God asks for a new song. Whether we accept it or not, we Christians are truly in the business of nuance and change. Ours is to challenge the status quo, not to defend it.

There are some major inhibitions to creative processes and I derive these from some of the research on creative processes and transform them for your consideration. There are inhibitors to the creative processes in humanity, as we'll see in the following nine points:

- (1) Judgmental behavior. Perhaps this is why Jesus warned that we “judge not lest we be judged.”
- (2) Dichotomizing and labeling or what we might call being satisfied with half-think, believing that we have engaged an idea simply because we have been able to label it.
- (3) Stagnation. The avoidance of new ideas. What an irony! The very fulfillment of God’s plan for creation is to be a new heaven and a new earth. I’m sure some Christians would prefer not to go.
- (4) Resistance to change. Paul reminds us that we are being changed. Don’t resist!
- (5) Worship of tradition. Romans 1:25 warns us against worship of the creation more than of the creator.
- (6 and 7) Fear of failure and fear of error. For these there is no answer except the explicit real trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to preserve against failure and to preserve against error. I find this in Paul—a boldness that derives only from trust that God’s leading cannot be thwarted if one is at least paying attention.
- (8) Insistence on perfection. What a handicap it is not to produce until one can produce the perfect work. If that is the case, then no one will achieve anything!
- (9) Life withdrawn from involvement from the world. In this regard I note the specific warnings for the latter days that are curiously found in 1 Timothy, focused on the error of forbidding and abstaining from the good things of creation, that is, those good things that were prepared for use and enjoyment by humankind. These are the things God created to be gratefully shared with those who believe and know the truth. (See 1 Timothy 4:4, 5 “For everything that was created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected. If it is received with gratitude for it, for it is sanctified by means of the Word of God and prayer” This must be our standard.

God continues to create. He creates with his redeemed creatures. We have a part in his creative act. Is your historical view of creation static? God invites you to participate in the ongoing processes of creation that glorify his Son.