

S C A P E G O A T *S* T U D I O

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ART WARS

Sacred vs. Expressive in Lutheran Liturgical Art

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by Jonathan Mayer*



“ For over a thousand generations, the Jedi Knights were the guardians of peace and justice in the Old Republic. Before the dark times... before the Empire. ”

— Obi Wan Kenobi
Star Wars: A New Hope



“ Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of the covenant of the Lord is under a tent. ”

— King David
1 Chronicles 17:1

PRINCIPLES *of* LUTHERAN WORSHIP

“ *Form ever follows function.* ”

— Louis Sullivan

What is the function of worship?

PRINCIPLES *of* LUTHERAN WORSHIP

The Bible talks about worship in two distinct ways:

- Outward ceremonies performed in God's house with other believers: *corporate + sacramental*
- Actions performed toward God in faith, as a part of sanctification: *personal + sacrificial*

PRINCIPLES *of* LUTHERAN WORSHIP

Proof Passages

*Oh come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving;
Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
For the Lord is a great God,
And a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the deep places of the earth;
The heights of the hills are His also.
The sea is his, for He made it;
And his hands formed the dry land.
Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture,
And the sheep of His hand.*

— Psalm 95:1-7

Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices—holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship.

— Romans 12:1



ART *in* SERVICE *of* WORSHIP

3 premises of Luther's treatment on music

1. Music as God's creation and his good gift to man
2. Music as proclamation and praise
3. Music as a sign of continuity with the whole Church

ART *in* SERVICE *of* WORSHIP

3 premises of Luther's treatment on music

1. ART as God's creation and his good gift to man
2. ART as proclamation and praise
3. ART as a sign of continuity with the whole Church

1. ART *as* GOD'S CREATION



- Arguments over "Pythagoras or Jubal" were moot.
- Art and music are part of God's good creation.
- Therefore, man is not their inventor, but only a steward.

ART *as* GOD'S CREATION

- Early in his career, Luther held that the arts were “trivial” and “external” matters.
- Karlstadt, Zwingli, Calvin, et al, sparked an iconoclasm that caused Luther to reverse his position.
- If the arts are truly a gift of God, then Satan will do his best to suppress and destroy them.
- Apathy towards God's gifts accomplishes Satan's goal just as effectively as iconoclasm.

ART *as* GOD'S CREATION



“Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them.”

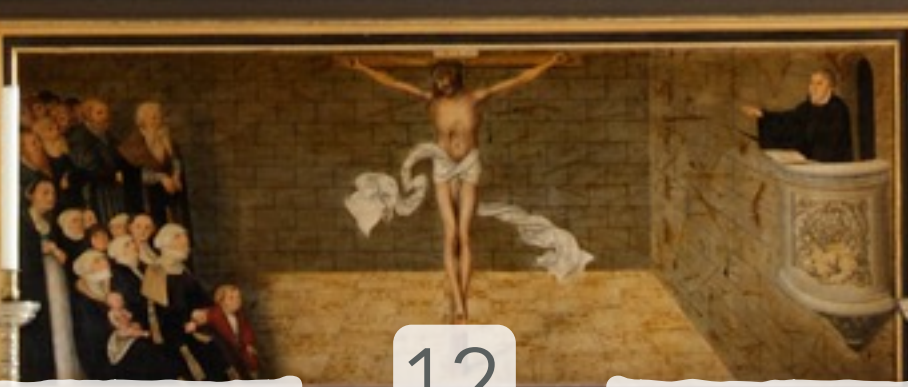
— Martin Luther
Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal

Cranach Altarpiece, 1547
Stadtkirche, Wittenberg

Einem andern Grund kann niemand legen
außer dem, der gelegt ist, welcher ist
JESUS CHRISTUS



A.D.
1547



A.D.
1928

2. PROCLAMATION *and* PRAISE

If we are stewards, how should this gift be employed?

“*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.* — Romans 12:6a

- Music lends itself naturally to the proclamation of the gospel *and* praise.
- The visual arts lack the explicit clarity of speech.
- But, like parables, they can be effective tools for proclaiming the gospel.



“Behold the Lamb
of God, that takes
away the sin
of the world.

— John 1:29

3. ART *as* LIVING TRADITION

What role does tradition play in liturgical art?

“To reject the gift of tradition was, for Luther, to go it alone and to be cut off from the mutual edification of the whole company of saints. ... To accept that gift of tradition was, for Luther, to be linked with Christians of other times and places and to be reminded in a unique way that the church of his day was indeed part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic company of saints.”

— Carl Schalk

Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise

ART *as* LIVING TRADITION



“ We should not discard or alter what cannot be discarded or altered on clear Scriptural authority. God is wonderful in his works. What he does not will, he clearly witnesses to in Scripture. What is not so witnessed to there, we can accept as his work. We are guiltless and he will not mislead us. ”

— Martin Luther
Concerning Rebaptism



Annunciation, 1518
St. Lorenz, Nuremberg

ART *as* LIVING TRADITION

As Lutherans, we maintain that...

- liturgical art should retain a connection to the culture and work of the Christian Church of ages past;
- wherever possible, our art should proclaim the gospel, as it has in ages past;
- new contributions to the tradition of art in the Church are desirable and necessary.

EMPIRE *of* MODERNISM





The HALLMARKS *of* MODERNISM

- The product of Enlightenment thought
- Values radical originality, avant-garde
- Intolerant of tradition & imitation; *iconoclastic*
- Views art solely as an *expressive* human endeavor
- Form follows function, or “Art for art’s sake”

The HALLMARKS *of* MODERNISM



“ We know what has happened to an activity like religion, which could not avail itself of Kantian, immanent, criticism in order to justify itself. At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple... ”

— Clement Greenberg
“Modernist Painting” 1965

The HALLMARKS *of* MODERNISM



“...and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.”

— Clement Greenberg
“Modernist Painting” 1965

The HALLMARKS *of* MODERNISM

What are the theological implications?

- Art is viewed as a creation of man, not a gift of God.
- A higher critical approach is inherently agnostic.
- Any attempt at spirituality leans toward *transcendent* and away from *incarnate*.
- Modernist art is inherently introspective.
- The expression of man subverts the gospel.

ART *for* ART'S SAKE



“ Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or life, we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. ”

— Barnett Newman
“The Sublime is Now” 1948

WHAT *is being* EXPRESSED?



Isenheim Altarpiece, 1516
Unterlinden Museum, Colmar

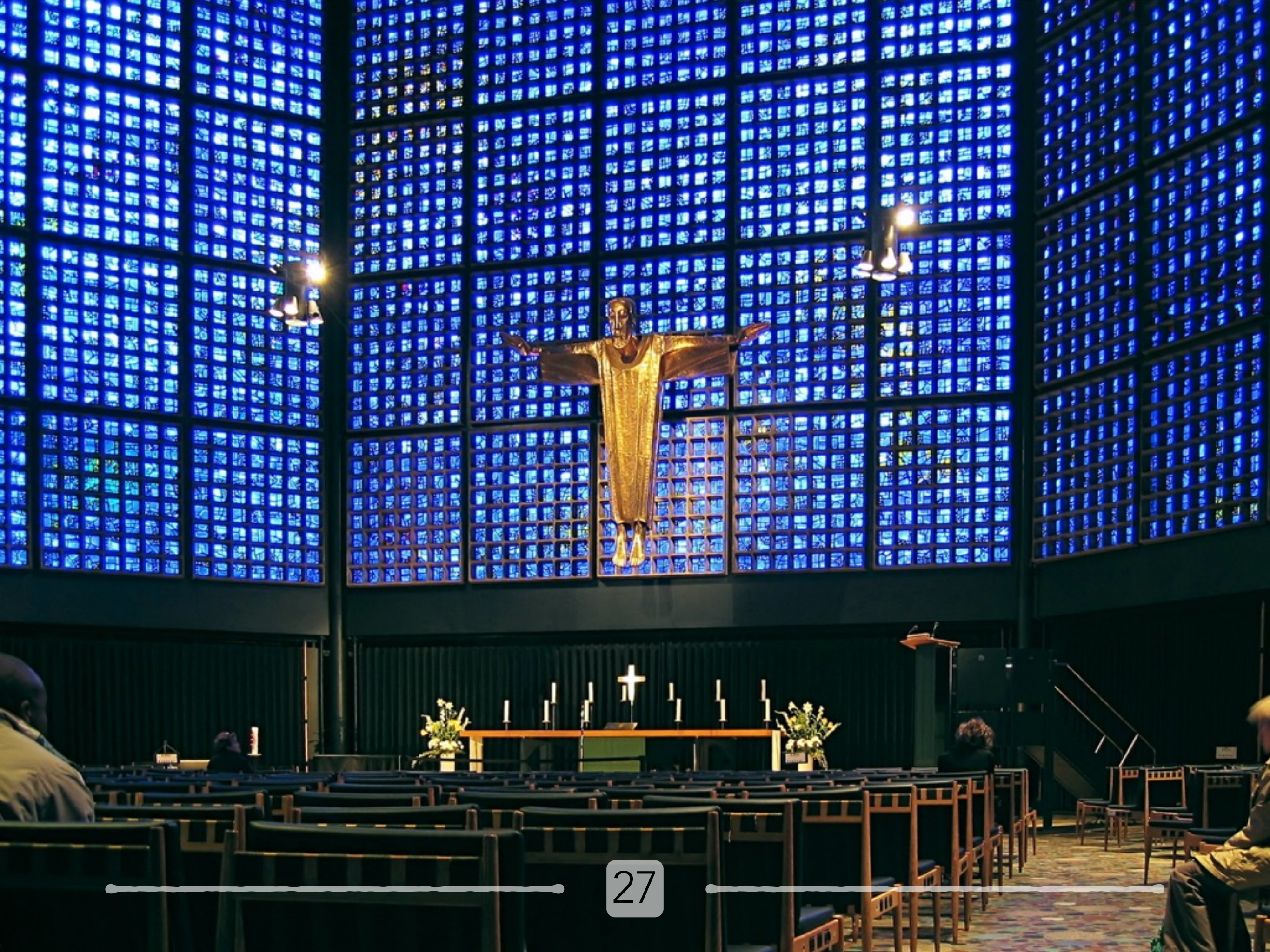


High Altar Cross, 1962
St. Michael's, Coventry

The HALLMARKS *of* MODERNISM

What are the practical implications?

- The method of making art (*style*) supersedes the function.
- Art that fails to conform to contemporary aesthetic standards is not considered *authentic*.
- Beauty is considered to be subjective.
- Any aesthetic that is *modern* now will go out of style in a decade or two.





“ Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. ”

— C.S. Lewis
Mere Christianity

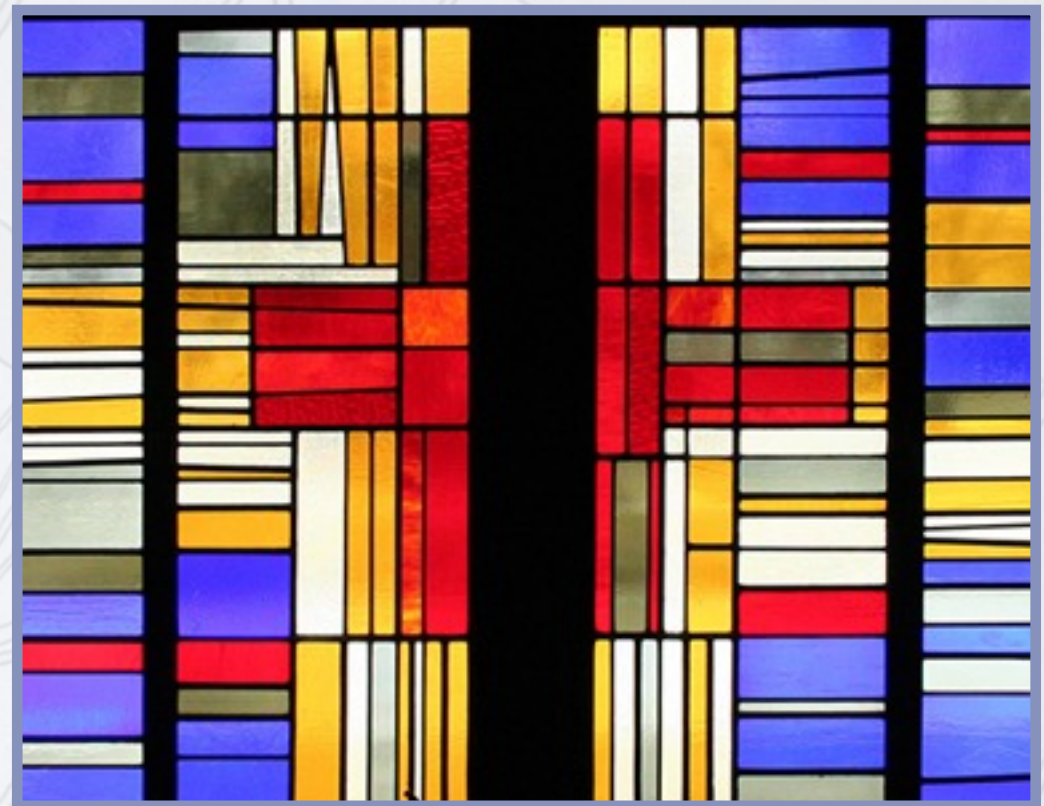
BEATING *a* DEAD HORSE?

"But," you say, "Modernism ended in the 1970s!"

- Except that it has become so firmly entrenched in culture and *academia* that it simply refuses to die.
- Except that Postmodernism simply absorbed Modernism.
- Except that many churches built in a Modernist style still exist.
- Except that for whatever reason, many Christians believe that participating in cultural artistic idioms will make God more accessible to our culture.



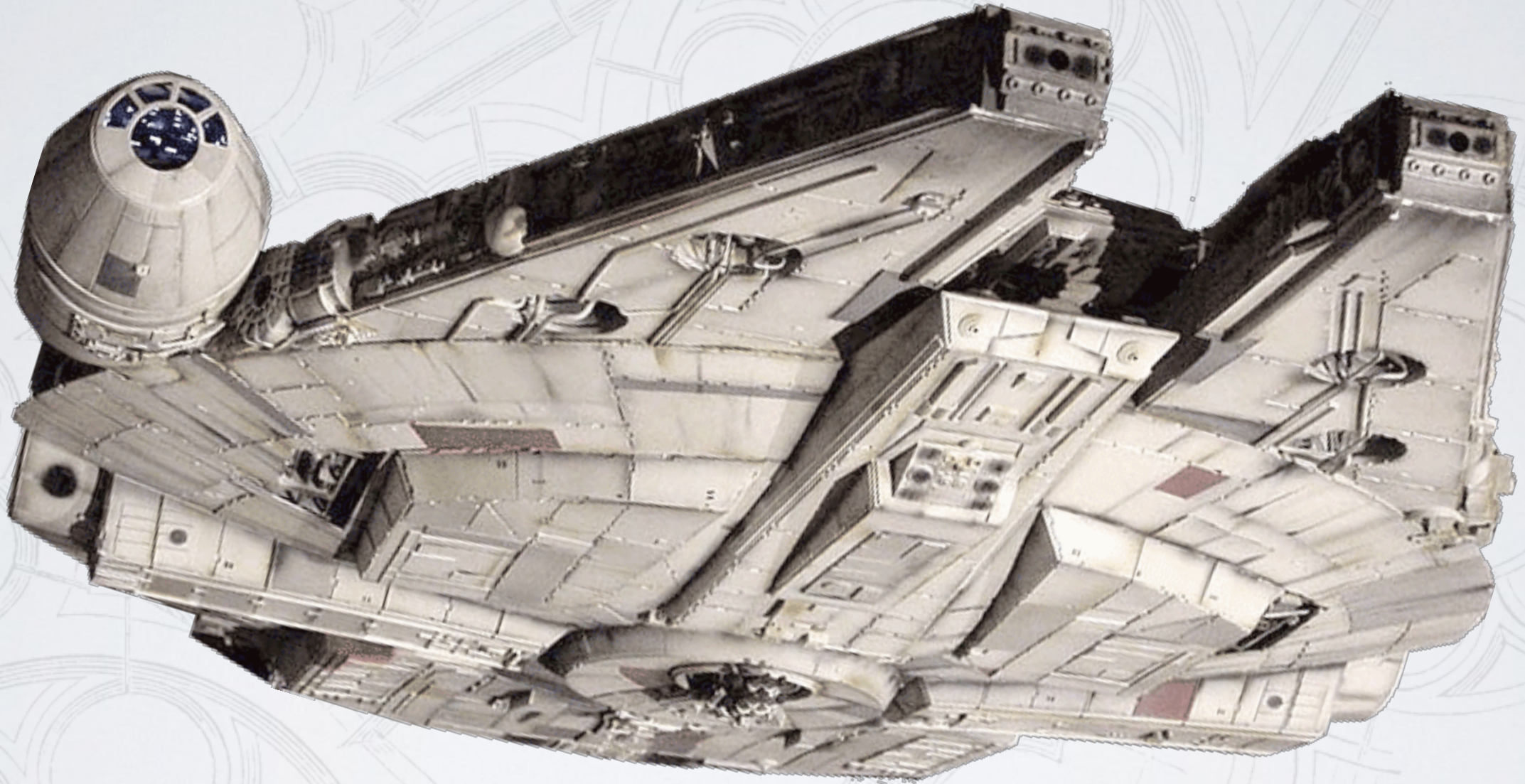




SOME *further* OBJECTIONS

- Every church ever built was modern at one time.
 - True, but in ages past the church shaped its own aesthetic—it wasn't imitating a secular aesthetic.
- The visual language of the people isn't Gothic spires.
 - True, but neither is Modernist abstraction.
 - The visual language of the church has seldom (if ever) borrowed from the street.

REBELLION!



RESTORING *an* ARTISTIC TRADITION

- Educate pastors and laymen on the visual arts in the church.
- Remember: we are stewards of this gift, and members of one Body. Take all vocations seriously.
- Make concerted efforts to incorporate liturgical art into your parish worship.
- Be bold to speak against art that is in poor taste (in love).
- Seek art that will glorify God, proclaim the gospel of Christ, and edify your fellow worshippers.



S.D.G.