Dissonance

(Definition: state of mental conflict, lack of agreement between people or ideas
Antonyms: accord, agreement, concord, harmony, peace)

I am reading an interesting new book, *The Faithful Artist: A Vision For Evangelicalism And The Arts*, by Cameron J. Anderson. In the “Introduction” he explained the dissonance he felt between his church and his passion for art. He described the discord as “the awkward convergence of my evangelical and my secular training” (p. 4). Whereas he entered the study of the visual arts “expectant, believing that painting, sculptures, prints, drawing and photographs could cast fresh light on deeper things” (p. 1), his Christian community manifested “serious misgivings about the legitimacy of art as a vocational endeavor” or even viewed his calling as “a capitulation to carnal desire” (p. 4).

In hindsight Cameron explained that there were “three nearly insurmountable barriers” (p. 2) to a vocation in the visual arts. The first was “the absence of a mentor.” He did not have a mature and empathetic Christian advocate to guide him. As a result, he wrote: “I lacked a ready apologetic…for how or what such an enterprise might contribute to the church and its mission” (pp. 2-3, his emphasis). The second obstacle was his “church’s disregard for the visual arts,” which hovered between “ambivalence and hostility” (p. 3), as well as its “palpable distain for modern art” (p. 3). “To underscore their reservations,” he wrote, “they relied on shoddy biblical exegesis, false dichotomies and the anecdote of scandal” (p. 5). And, the third was “the art world’s hostility to religious belief,” due to its secular, modern, and postmodern worldview.

I suspect that the dissonance that Cameron experienced with his calling is parallel to what many Christians in Argentina experience in their churches today (ages 20-40 especially). Many have told me about their “awkward convergence” of evangelical conviction and secular training or profession. Most cannot easily reconcile what they hear in church with what they experience in the world. Some have encountered the “church’s disregard,” its “palpable distain,” “ambivalence and hostility,” or sometimes even “shoddy biblical exegesis” regarding objections to their profession or aspiration to serve God in the public square. Some pastors express “serious misgivings about the legitimacy of ______ as a vocational endeavor.”

Here are some examples (names have been changed): Matias is a university professor who struggles with the hegemony of naturalism in his faculty. Pedro strives to articulate his biblical worldview through painting. Gustavo tries hard to reconcile the Bible and biology. Pablo endeavors to integrate the biblical worldview with marketing and entrepreneurism. Jorge has a vision for Christians in politics and public policy. Silvia wonders how to integrate faith and philosophy. Martin searches for links between Christian spirituality and the materialism of his psychology faculty. Deborah feels threatened by the secular worldview propagated by the faculty of medicine. Lastly, a woman who works with young people shared her concerns after a nine hour course I taught: “Three nights is not enough instruction. We don’t even know how to process all the information. We need more Biblical and theological study. I work with the young people and I know that they are not prepared for the university and the challenges to their faith that they will face.”
Each of these individuals often feels isolated and unsupported in their churches – spiritually and intellectually. Sometimes, their communities’ stance is even hostile, as if they were “doing the devil’s work” or engaging in “worldly” pursuits unworthy of a serious Christian. But, most of the time they encounter indifference. Their religious leaders do not often integrate the biblical worldview with their cultural and intellectual context. Often, the Gospel, calling, and spirituality are narrowly conceived. The intellectual aspect of God’s word and faith is overlooked. Sadly, many Christian communities do not even know the questions that many Christians face in their schools and workplaces, let alone the answers so sorely needed. Is there an evangelical spirituality for the public square and the marketplace of ideas?

What can be done about this? Consider the three barriers that Cameron mentioned. First is the need for a mentor. Church leaders could become better listeners and more empathetic to the university students and young professionals in their midst. Learn about their questions and struggles. Support them in prayer and reflection. Become their advocates. Second, churches should develop a robust theology of common grace and calling. Endeavor to minimize the influence of the sacred – secular distinction, because Christ is Lord over every day and all professions. And third, programs for the study of worldview, apologetics, and theology would help prepare Christian ambassadors in the marketplace of ideas to express, explain, and defend their faith.

In these ways perhaps the dissonance between doctrine and the world, piety and profession can be reduced. Perhaps together students, professionals, and church leaders could articulate an “apologetic” for “how or what such an enterprise might contribute to the church and its mission” (pp. 2-3). And, also in this manner make positive contributions to the common good for the glory of God.