Art and Sanctification

Cassandra Falke, Ph.D.[1]

Living as Christians in the modern world we are driven to ask questions that the Bible seems to have no answer for. How should a Christian raise her children? How should a Christian behave as a consumer in an industrial capitalist society? Is there a Christian way to grieve? Or many Christian ways? Is there a Christian way to host a party? A Christian way to eat? As menial as these questions sound and as untheological as our daily activities may appear, we are commanded to engage with everything in our world in a distinctly Christian way. The material we handle, the people we adore, the flippant thoughts and the grand thoughts that we think contribute to or detract from our spiritual growth according to how we react to them. This is one implication of being "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s]" (Rom. 12:2). In this essay, I will explore the implications of Paul's concept of transformation for an area of our lives that has grown increasingly separated from religion in the modern era – the production and critique of art.

The questions of how Christians should produce art and how we should respond to art are not unique to the modern period, but for all of the time that we, the church, have had to answer these questions, no one has offered an answer that has earned broad agreement in either policy or practice. Consider, for example, the unchristian emotions that contemporary debates about music in worship sometimes stir.[2] If we worry, however, that this is a problem unique to our generation, we have only to look to the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century or the Beeldenstorm of the sixteenth. The violent emotions (and sometimes violent actions) stirred by the collision of art and theology testify to the profound importance that Christians place on the consolation of the two. In light of the embattled history of the question of art in the church, I won't presume to offer an answer to the questions that this subject raises. I will try instead to provide a broad theoretical framework from one passage of scripture, Romans chapter twelve, that individuals can use in their considerations of specific works of art.

One of the reasons for the church's persistent disagreement over the place of art in Christians' lives is the Bible's reticence on the topic. Romans 12, which provides the immediate context for Paul's command that we be transformed by the renewing of our minds, says nothing about either art or art criticism. Not only does Paul not discuss the arts in Romans 12, he doesn't, I'm afraid, mention art at all, in any of his writings. We might be encouraged to know, however, that

he doesn't say much about tentmaking, which was his line of work, either. He mentions it enough for us to know that he did it throughout his missionary work (2 Cor. 12:16-18).[3] We also know that Paul saw his day job as a tentmaker as an essential part of his ministry. We see him preaching in his work apron in Acts 19:11-12. People carried his shop rags away as relics in hopes of being healed by them.[4] These glimpses into his life at work show Paul exemplifying what it means to be "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12: 1). Although he does not address art (or tentmaking) directly, he shows us by example that our arts can be an essential part of our personal ministry if people see us doing them as a means of fulfilling our lives as Christians, rather than as an end in themselves.

It is this idea of being a "living sacrifice" that begins Romans 12. We are to offer our entire lives, including our creations, to the ends for which we were created. Paul writes: "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." One thing that strikes me about this passage is Paul's juxtaposition of body and spirit. Although they are rhetorically separated (Paul uses two different words), they are conflated in the meaning of the sentence. To use our bodies as a sacrifice is a spiritual act of worship. The word Paul uses for "body" here is "soma," which means the very instrument of life, the complete man.[5] Not the man or woman that we were before salvation, but our new selves (as in Romans 6:13). The implication of this concept upon criticism is, I think, two-fold. First, it introduces the concept that Paul will reinforce in the next verse, a concept we have already mentioned – the complete transformation our lives should undergo. Everything we do should be done, not as the world does it, but as Christ would have us do it. Teaching, writing, discussing are, like going to church, working at the food pantry, raising our children, part of our process of sanctification. They are part of the process by which we are being prepared for eternity with God. The second significance that the concept of *soma* has for Christian criticism is that insofar as we share bodily selves with authors and readers from every time and every place, this commonality is the site from which our sympathy with them begins. They hunger, thirst, marry and grow old as we do. If we know what they have seen or heard, we can try to imagine what it would be like to see and hear these things ourselves because we share the organs of sensual experience with them.[6]

In the phrase "spiritual act of worship," the word that is translated in the NIV as "spiritual" and in the King James as "reasonable" is a derivative of the word "logos," a word which, for Christians, is heavy-laden in implications.[7] "Logikos," reasonable, means pertaining to our faculty for

reason. Becoming a living sacrifice is, therefore, a choice that we make with our reason. We are not like a helpless animal sacrifice. We do not automatically become a living sacrifice by having a relationship with Christ. We have to make the choice. Thus, "Christian art" and "Christian criticism" must mean more than simply art or criticism created by Christians. Rather, our art and criticism must be performed in the spirit of sacrifice. This implies both a recognition of our indebtedness to God for our talents, which are the possessions out of which we make our sacrifice, and a hope of progressing toward redemption.

"Logos" of course is also the term used in John 1: "In the beginning was the Word (the logos) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "Logikos" is then in another sense, our Christ-like and eternal sacrifice. We know that Jesus put his life as a man fully in the service of his divine purpose, and we (although of course it doesn't happen) are commanded to do no less. Our life is purposeless outside of God. And just as Christ's sacrifice stands both within and outside of time, so do our artistic productions stand before an eternal as well as a temporal audience.

After these broad, introductory ideas, Paul becomes more specific about how we should relate to other people. At first I struggled to see how his insights could relate to art or art criticism. An image or a text is not a person. My help in applying this scripture to the evaluation of art came from an unlikely source – a secular Arab named Edward Said. In one of his last works, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Said writes that "for the humanist, the act of reading is the act … of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words."[8] I remembered reading this idea a few years ago, and in preparing for this paper I turned back to it. It gave me a person beneath the text, and Romans 12 has quite a lot to say about how to relate to people. Paul begins with this: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (12:3). Not in accordance with tenure status, or where our degrees are from, or how long we've been doing scholarship. As Christians, when we try to place ourselves in the position of a literary or visual artist we do so in charity, assuming that his or her decisions were made conscientiously and with the hope that the artwork would be both pleasing and instructive. We can, within the bounds of charity, recognize the places where the artist failed and succeeded in the execution of his or her decisions, but to place ourselves in critical judgment over a work of art, noting only its defects, is to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Too often we ask "What would I have done differently, if I had completed this work?" Paul encourages us instead to ask ourselves "to what

extent is this work a manifestation of the process of sanctification in my own life? To what extent will it encourage the process of sanctification in my reader's/viewer's life?" Insofar as we can comply with Paul's instruction here, we can avoid relating to the people touched by our work in accordance with the worldly hierarchies of which we are a part (Gal. 3:28).

Paul's next injunction clarifies his request that we be humble. We each have a particular talent through which we are asked to serve God, so that to some measure, the exercise of that talent is itself part of the process of sanctification. Paul writes that "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (12:6). Some of the gifts he lists are immediately applicable to art and criticism: teaching, encouraging, and leadership. As gifts of grace, these gifts have been bestowed on us to enable us to be living sacrifices. We should take pride in them insofar as they are instrumental to this goal. These gifts are all other-directed, so that taking pride in these gifts directs our focus away from ourselves and toward artists and audience members. Recognizing and cultivating these gifts is essential to thinking of ourselves in accordance with the measure of faith God has given us since our talents are part of this divine gift.

Paul now moves to what is, in terms of its aesthetic implications, the most controversial passage of Romans 12. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil: cling to what is good" (12:9). As simple as this seems, it goes against much of the way that we have been taught to view the arts. Most of us, wittingly or unwittingly, have been influenced by Immanuel Kant's maxim that "a pure judgment of taste has as its determining basis neither charm nor emotion."[9] We don't, according to Kant, react to a work of art with either love or hate. We react with taste, an appreciation of formal beauty.

> When the form of an object (rather than what is material in its presentation, viz., in sensation) is judged in mere reflection on it (without regard to a concept that is to be acquired from it) to be the basis of a pleasure in such an object's presentation, then the presentation of this object is also judged to be connected necessarily with this pleasure, and hence connected with it not merely for the subject apprehending this form but in general for everyone who judges [it]. The object is then called beautiful, and our ability to judge by such a pleasure (and hence also with universal validity) is called taste.[10]

I don't have taste, Kant would say, if I cannot find literature that glorifies an evil act such as torture, beautiful. If the formal elements of the piece demonstrate the author's competence in his genre while still producing something original, something that appears to break the conventions of the genre,[11] then I should (if I am a tasteful person) regard the work as beautiful regardless of its subject matter. For Kant, good and evil, love and hate, in art, don't matter. As familiar and comfortable as the Kantian concept of art may be, it is incompatible with Paul's message in Romans. When viewing a work of art that takes as the "material in its presentation" an evil subject matter, we cannot react with pleasure to the form that that portrayal takes because we cannot contemplate that form without speculating on its compatibility with the artwork's subject matter. We must "hate" the waste of a good form on an evil subject matter. When Paul expands on his idea of "good" elsewhere he writes, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phill. 4: 8). As artists and critics, we are instructed to contemplate these godly traits in both the form and subject matter of our creative productions.

I hope that my comments about Kant have not conveyed that we should judge a work of art on its moral content alone. By pointing out the moral or spiritual standards that Paul implies for works of art, I do not mean to dismiss aesthetic standards. The Ecclesiaste tells us that God has "made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11, NIV). The Psalmist praises God for we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:14). The word "beautiful" occurs thirteen times in the eight short books of the Song of Solomon. And when Mary pours oil on Jesus's feet he calls it "a beautiful thing" (Matt. 26:10). Surely the use of these words is not meaningless. "Beauty" must have some objective content, or the authors of the Bible would not expect us to recognize what it is that Jesus or the wisdom writers are saying when they call a thing "beautiful." And in all of these contexts, "beauty" indicates aesthetic (as opposed to moral) beauty by emphasizing the createdness of the things that are labeled beautiful and by linking our apprehension of this beauty to sensual experience. It should be noted, however, that the word that Jesus uses for "beauty" is "kalon," which also means "good or noble." Mary's anointing is an act that exemplifies her adoration of and respect for Jesus. It is beautiful because the form and moral expression of the act are appropriate to one another and both are appropriate to the worship of Christ. Similarly, our judgments of beauty need to be based on more than form. They need to be evaluated according to their "kalon," their beautiful, and even worshipful, goodness.

But what does that look like? Churchgoers are certainly involved in aesthetic decisions, and if we survey those decisions we see a vast assortment of things deemed "beautiful" or "good." The simplicity of a white clapboard chapel and the four-part harmony we hear within. The majesty of a cathedral and boy's choir. Nor can we ignore the theological implications of these different attempts to build what is beautiful, worshipful, and good. After all, differing opinions of what constitutes beautiful, worshipful art have caused great violence in the past. Across the western front of York Minster, just at the height where I could swing a club or hurl a stone, stand recesses empty of their statues, recesses whose vacuity reminds me of the severe theological distinctions between the white clapboard chapel that I learned to love in my youth and the Minster.

It is tempting to seek a reductive characterization of Christian "kalon" or beauty in music, visual art, architecture, or literature. A specific description of the aesthetic these things ought to subscribe to would allow us to distinguish more easily between art that Paul instructs us to love and that which he tells us to hate. But Paul warns us not to expect the church to be homogeneous or stationary, so our evaluative criteria for art will necessarily vary from person to person and from one period to another. We are as different as the different members of one body, and like a body we, the Church, move and change. Yet we are commanded to work "peaceably" together as does a body (12:5, 18). This means, to make a metaphor of those blank recesses on the front of York Minster, to be mindful of the theological implications of our definitions of kalon without smashing one another's statues.

One critic who discusses what this means for our relationships with fellow Christians and their diverse aesthetics is Frank Burch Brown. Brown articulates what he calls "ecumenical taste." Ecumenical taste requires three things, and these three things build on the foundation that Romans 12 has already helped us lay. Brown says ecumenical taste helps us:

> 1) To recognize and indeed relish certain aesthetic and religious differences without regarding them as inevitably and permanently alienating;
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> 2) To learn to discern, as an act of love, what others find delightful and meaningful in art that has little appeal to oneself or one's group;
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> 3) To notice, both more precisely and more generally, points in life and worship where aesthetic aims and religious aspirations (or aversions) are wedded to one

> another, and thus to see how spiritual growth can have a properly artistic and aesthetic dimension subject to criticism, cultivation, and education.[12]

Brown's ecumenicalism seems very much in line with Paul's instructions in Romans 12.

I have written thus far about a "how" question – the question of how we should evaluate the art that we produce and critique. But Paul's injunction that we be "transformed" by our Christianity raises a more fundamental question – a why question. Why should art and criticism be a part of our lives as Christians at all?

In order to approach this question, I have to make a confession, two confessions, in fact. First, I want to be humble, but I'm not. Furthermore, I cannot discern the beautiful, the worshipful, or the good in art. I want to love what is good, but if I rely on my own knowledge of good and evil then my judgment and my loves will be flawed.[13] I realize that I cannot be humble and cannot love the good. I realize that if I esteemed myself according to my faith in God, I would never again attempt to write as a Christian critic. It's only in the midst of these realizations that I begin to become humble. I am cast back upon those hymns I heard in the clapboard church of my youth: "Come thou fount of every blessing; tune my heart to sing thy grace." I can't fulfill God's call on my life. I can't speak or write as I ought to. In the moments when I realize this, I turn to prayer, to asking that God enable me to love, and as a critic to extol, what is both morally and formally good. Here, I begin to become humble. Paradoxically then, the most important outcome of my attempt to follow Paul's instructions, may be the realization that I cannot obey Romans 12 outside of grace.

Thankfully, God knows I don't really have the discernment required to know when I'm creating art or critiquing art as a living sacrifice ought to. When Jesus restated the law for us in two commandments, he took this into consideration. I can't really understand an author's decisions, but I can love my neighbor as I love myself. I don't always understand why I make decisions, but I have some understanding of the factors that I take into consideration when I do make decisions. Thus, I can try and account for these factors in the life of an author I'm studying. I can try, through grace, to be more ecumenical in my taste and the presentation of my taste.

And here's my second confession, I think this second commandment is easier to work on than the first. I certainly have a better grasp of how to accommodate criticism to this second commandment. But when I ask myself what the creation and critique of art can contribute to the

process of sanctification in my life, I know I really need to wrestle with the first commandment, too. Spiritual development cannot happen without it. "Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first commandment" (Mark 12:29 KJV). I find it hard even to think about how to do that. And what part art can play in that, I'm not sure. I think asking that question is the right place to start, however. God is omnipresent, and yet we don't see him. Beginning to look is prayer, and is the beginning of learning to love him.

Augustine writes a passage that states this beautifully. "Late have I loved you," he prays,

> beauty so old and so new; late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.[14]

"You were with me, and I was not with you." So it is with most of us, and it is through God's touch that we begin the longing for God which carries us into the process of transformation. The subject of seven of these clauses is the divine "You" to whom Augustine addresses his *Confessions*. God initiates these actions. Lloyd Davies articulates what this means for criticism, "God engages His human creatures in mutual discourse and creates an interpretive community to receive and respond to revelation; …A biblical poetics … should be rooted in having been summoned into mutual relationship with God and neighbor."[15]

Being mindful of God's actions in discourses that may appear removed from God, the discourses of art criticism, allows us to see the ultimate referent behind the Christian Humanist activities that Romans 12 appears to recommend. That referent is God himself.[16] When we strive to be humble in our criticism, that is not an act of adjusting our rhetoric; it is the adoption of a prayerful attitude, an attitude of humility before God that will emerge as an attitude of humility toward authors, readers and works of art. When we seek to discern beauty that is not only formally

exemplary, but also good, and therefore worthy of our love, we are seeking to discern in a work a conduit for worshipful activity. When we exercise our gifts, we are allowing God to work through us, and our pride comes from our faith in that working. And finally, when we engage in the actions commanded in Romans 12, actions that appear to fulfill the commandment to love others as ourselves, we do so in order to commemorate the incarnate Christ, the divine other, whose ideal humility and beauty consisted in his willingness to take on the bodily form that we as authors, critics, readers and neighbors share. We hear that the Lord our God is one; we begin to practice loving him with our heart and soul and mind and strength.

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[1] Reprinted with permission from the *Matter* anthology by Shechem Press, 2010.

[2] The Lambeth Conference of 1958 resolved that "the presentation of the message of the Bible to the world requires great sensitiveness to the outlook of the people of today, and urges that imaginative use be made of all the resources of literature, art, music, and drama, and of new techniques appealing to eye as well as to ear," but the conference gives no guidelines for evaluating the appropriateness of particular works of art for the presentation of the Bible. (*The Lambeth Conference Official Website.* "Lambeth Conference 1958". Resolution 10. http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/index.cfm. Accessed 11 April, 2010.)

The Vatican is more specific in its declaration, which reads as follows: "2501: Created 'in the image of God,'[294] man also expresses the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works. Indeed, art is a distinctively human form of expression; beyond the search for the necessities of life which is common to all living creatures, art is a freely given superabundance of the human being's inner riches. Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man's own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill,[295] to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God's activity in what he has created. Like any other human activity, art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man.[296]" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "Part Three: Life in Christ". http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a8.htm. Accessed 11 April, 2010.)

Neither of these declarations has been accepted outside of the communions of the Anglican and Catholic denominations.

[3] Yet Paul does accept gifts while in prison. See Philippians 4:15-16.

[4] I am indebted for this reference to: Ruth Seimens, "Why did Paul make tents?" http://www.globalopps.org/papers/whydid.htm

[5] Vine, W. E. *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1966. 136

[6] Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. (For a further elaboration of this idea, see Eagleton pp. 155-60.)

[7] The word is also heavy-laden for critical theorists since it forms the basis of Jacques Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics. He positions Christianity within this tradition. By doing so, he limits the biblical meaning of the term to the meaning that it had for secular Greek and Roman philosophers. For a response to Derrida and a restoration of logos to its fuller, biblical meaning see Ingraffia, Brian. *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology: Vanquishing God's Shadow*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Chapter 15

[8] Said, Edward W. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism (Columbia Themes in Philosophy).* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 62.

[9] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment.* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987. 515.

[10] Ibid., 505.

[11] Ibid., 85.

[12] Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 12.

[13] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethic*s. Trans. Neville Horton Smith. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955. 34

[14] Augustine. *Confessions.* Trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991. 201.

[15] Davies, Lloyd. "Covenantal Hermeneutics and the Redemption of Theory." *Christianity and Literature*. (Spring-Summer 1997). 357-397.

[16] I use the term "referent" here with Paul Ricoeur's definition in mind:

> In the system of language, say as a lexicon, there is no problem of reference; signs only refer to other signs within the system. With the sentence, however, language is directed beyond itself. Whereas the sense is immanent to the discourse, and objective in the sense of ideal, the reference expresses the movement in which language transcends itself. In other words, the sense correlates the identification function and the predicative function within the sentence, and the reference relates language to the world.
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> Ricoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory.* Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1976. 20.