

## When What is True is Not Pure: *Flannery O'Connor and the Logic of Redemption* | BY RYAN BELL

**Editor's note:** At last year's Adventist Forum conference, "Present Truth in Visual Media: How Film Illuminates Faith," pastor Ryan Bell addressed the topic of the Bible in art and literature in a Saturday evening sermon. This is the transcript of his speech.

When people hear that I'm a pastor in Hollywood, they have such a variety of reactions. Some people are visibly excited by the idea of a church in Hollywood, but most people get anxious. I can see it in a person's face, but their concern is most obvious from the kinds of questions they ask next. People want to know if there is any hope for Hollywood or whether it's hopelessly corrupt and evil. Others offer us their condolences on living in such a lost and sinful place.

There is a great deal of fear about Hollywood and what it represents. A good percentage of those who are excited that we're there express relief that someone, at least, is trying to save those poor wretches who are destroying the fabric of America.

If you were to visit my church (as many of you have), you would discover a small but vibrant and very diverse group of people. Close inspection would reveal an incredibly creative community of artists. You would find that as a group we believe—as a matter of history and theology—that God loves to show up in godforsaken places. This is God's way. We also believe that the way we follow God faithfully is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, by living completely in this world.

So, after five years of thinking about what it means to be a creative artist in Hollywood, attending and speaking at SonScreen Film Festivals, entering a couple of short pieces myself, along with starting up our own film production endeavor called New Name Pictures, the ideas that I want to share with you today have gelled in my mind. I realize I

am out of my depth here today and that there are many people present in the audience who know a great deal more than I do about art and film. Pastoral ministry is terribly interdisciplinary that way. It's important that you know that my method is dialogical, even though there isn't usually a lot of dialogue in a sermon. I think of my sermons as open-ended. That is less an *apology* and more an *invitation* for you to engage with me about these issues this weekend and in the future.

We are here this weekend talking about truth. Not just any kind of truth—*present truth*—truth for today, for the present moment. Not abstractions, but concrete truth, which bears fruit in Christian praxis. How do we access this present truth in an age where the vernacular is visual images and media? Can present truth be conveyed in film? Is the message necessarily diluted? Is the message doomed to be overshadowed by the medium?

The visual arts have historically been forbidden fruit for Adventists, something we want to protect ourselves from, or at least our kids. I'm from the VCR generation—the first generation of young people to have VCRs and therefore the first generation to be confronted with the question of whether the theater itself was bad or just the movie. I also have children, and so I understand what it means to not want them to see certain things.

My title this evening is, "When What is True is Not Pure." Earlier this week my talk acquired a subtitle: "Flannery O'Connor and the Logic of Redemption." Flannery O'Connor was an American novelist, short-story writer and essayist. I have been especially blessed by two of her essays, "The Fiction Writer and His Country" and "The Church and the Fiction Writer."

What I hope to accomplish in this short frame of time is a defense of art—in particular, fiction writing and reading, filmmaking and film-going—as an act of faithful Christian

living. An immodest goal to be sure!

I want to first look at how Philippians 4:8, when applied carelessly to our artistic choices, can create an almost Manichean dualism which results in art that is either sentimental or obscene. What is needed, instead, is art that is in some way prophetic, and I would say, apocalyptic.

First, let's look at the famous text:

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

This text was used to teach me how to choose what entertainment was suitable for a Christian. Whatsoever things are true—no fiction. Whatsoever things are pure—for sure no sex, and probably no violence. Whatsoever is pleasing—to my mother!

Our choices in entertainment, so the argument went, were to be guided by these principles and, in the end, we should only expose ourselves to praiseworthy movies, music, and literature—films that depict events you could emulate yourself. Unlike the Bible, of course, which is full of impure and unjust stories told in lurid detail.

Martin Doblmeier argues convincingly that there is so much in our world that is destructive, so many stories that tear down and offer nothing commendable. One could hardly disagree that we need more positive and uplifting stories. So why would I stand here this afternoon and argue for anything other? Because the way we often separate between what is pure and what is true creates in us a kind of dualistic thinking that gradually erodes deep Christian faith and discipleship and leaves Christians unable to adequately critique the world in which they live for the sake of Christ and His kingdom.

Our artistic ethic, and I think we could broaden this to a kind of cultural ethic, has created people who have learned to compartmentalize their lives. On the one hand we want a spiritual life. On the other hand, we want to enjoy the rest of our lives. There is the life of the Spirit, of God's grace and love. And there's my secular life. Church, and even Sabbath, becomes about a retreat from my secular life for 24 hours, or sometimes just an hour of church. When I get back to my regular life, I hope that something from my spiritual life has rubbed off, but there really isn't much connection

between my two lives except that perhaps I've learned to be a nicer, more well-adjusted person in my secular life as a result of time spent in church. Spiritual life is private, and it will affect a person's "regular" life only in personal and individual ways as they learn to be "better people." But the definition of those "better people" is often heavily controlled by the "secular" culture to which the spiritual world has no access. I see this compartmentalization at work in my church all of the time, especially in our young people.

We occasionally use film clips in worship or to illustrate a point in a sermon. These are films that most of our members will gladly, and even eagerly, see during the week, but to bring them into a discussion of spirituality and faith on Sabbath morning is a serious challenge.

Often our so-called secular counterparts in the media, because they are not constrained by a kind of purpose or mission for their art, are more apt to tell the truth, even if that truth isn't very redeeming. But why should Christians be afraid of the truth? Flannery O'Connor says this is a sign of a weak rather than strong faith!

*It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life; and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident to a certain type of life only, the supernatural is apt to gradually be lost.<sup>1</sup>*

By using a thin and simplistic application of a text like Philippians 4:8, we may, in fact, be doing more harm than good, and actually aiding the disenchantment of the world by dividing it into spiritual and secular.

### **The Problem of Dualism: Sentimentality and Obscenity**

O'Connor continues, talking about Catholic [Christian] readers.

*By separating nature and grace as much as possible, [the reader/viewer] has reduced his conception of the supernatural to a pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene. He would seem to prefer the former, while being more of an authority on the latter, but the similarity between the two generally escapes him. He forgets that sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized*

*in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite. We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite.*<sup>2</sup>

In one succinct expression, O'Connor gets to the heart of the issue that I have been feeling for quite some time. She is talking about literature, but the same could be said for films. This is one key problem with what is called Christian films. Once you know what you're looking for, you see that there is too simple a separation between what O'Connor calls nature and grace or between evil and good. The solutions are also too simple. The story too often skips over the central narrative of Christian faith, the death of Christ.

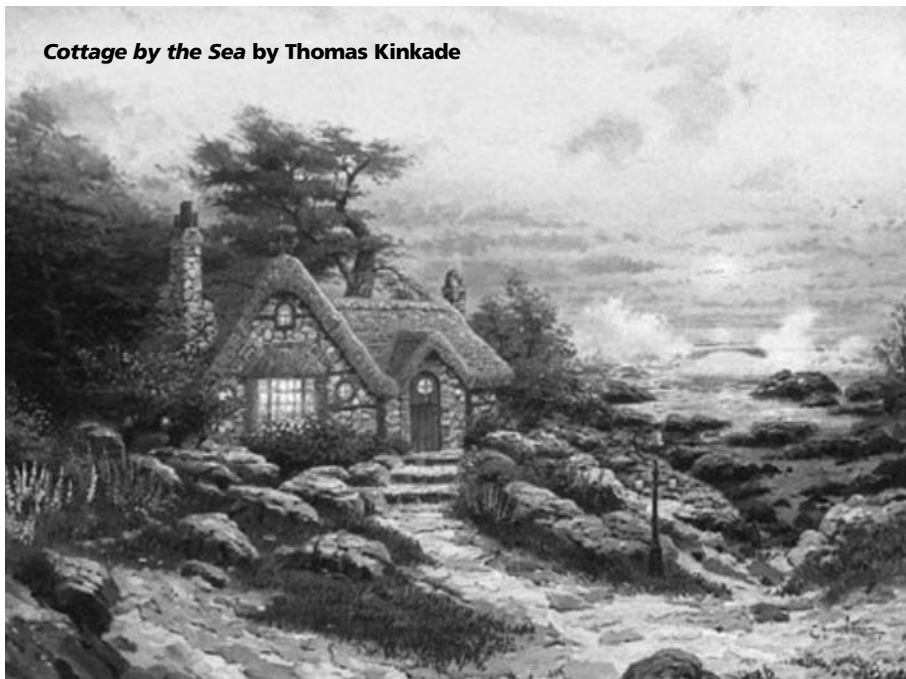
With sentimental film, genuine emotions are sometimes evoked. But even when that is true the viewer almost always feels manipulated. Or, as Ilana Simons, literature professor at The New School and a practicing psychotherapist, says, sentimental art is art that "bullies you into feeling a certain emotion." She adds, "Sentimental art could be called work that takes a short cut by relying on clichés to get us to feel. In contrast, non-sentimental art would be art that explores a situation in a more complex way."<sup>3</sup>



But the problem for the Christian isn't just that sentimental art isn't as "artsy" as non-sentimental art and therefore "bad" art, though that is definitely a problem. I've titled this sermon, "When What is True is Not Pure," hoping to address the question of how the Christian approaches art that takes seriously the pain and brokenness of the world. But I could just have easily posed the opposite question, "What about when what is Pure is not True?" And I think this is just the problem with sentimentality in art. As Christian artists there is no time for sentimentality. The stakes are too high in our world today to waste time in that way.

Let me give you one example that should hopefully not offend too many people, but might. Consider the painting below, *Cottage By the Sea*. This is a painting by Thomas Kinkadee. What is wrong with this painting? Now look above at the other painting. Which do you like better?

Remember what Flannery O'Connor said:



*Sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of sentiment usually in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence, whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary human condition, tends by some natural law to become its opposite.*<sup>4</sup>

It's like she anticipated Kinkadee! And, when you mix this Disneyland sentimentality with Christianity you get this—*The Cross*.

To me, Kinkadee is the prototypical sentimental artist. Ironically, he is sometimes called "the painter of light." Remarkably, he is the most collected artist alive.

This should offend us, this crass

attempt to manipulate our emotions by evoking a pretend world that is, at best, escapism and at worst, a mockery of the human condition which offers no hope.

On the other hand, we see hundreds of films produced by Hollywood that glorify evil and perversity. Brokenness is portrayed in a way that is disconnected from meaning. This is just the flip side of sentimentality. Pornography is the ultimate example of this. Any time the portrayal of brokenness and evil becomes gratuitous, that is, it serves no narrative or artistic purpose, but only to titillate the audience, we wander into the obscene.

You know this when you see it. You can tell the difference between an honest portrayal of war or domestic violence and gratuitous depictions of the same events. These lines are not clear, and an honest depiction of evil and corruption can very easily tip to the obscene. That tipping point is often that moment when you say to yourself, "Okay, I get the point!"

One such example for me is the very powerful, gripping and moving film, *The Stoning of Soriya M.* The film raises many valid issues related to corrupt religious systems and the abuse of women, which is still deeply engrained in many cultures. But many feel it is "too crude" or "manipulative" because it looks directly at its subject, lacking subtlety and nuance. Across the board viewers feel the film takes too many shortcuts and makes its point too directly.

The film is based on true events, which is a good example of how a story based on true events may still not qualify as completely "truthful," and in addition, the film's title gives away the ending. The stoning scene lasts a good 20 minutes and is more than really any viewer should be able to bear. One critic refers to it as "torture porn." Elisabeth and I turned our heads away for most of that scene and found ourselves literally saying out loud through sobs, "Enough already, I get the point!"

In many ways the film is excellent, but there is a critical flaw that allows stereotypes to prevail in the midst of a deeply complex situation and leaves the characters somewhat two-dimensional.

### **The Christian Artist as Prophet**

It was David Dark's 2002 book, *Everyday Apocalypse*, that really started me thinking about these things. Dark uses the word "apocalypse" in its original sense, not as a word that denotes the destruction of the world or predicting the future. Apocalypse is about revealing what is hidden, cov-

ered up or invisible to the usual way of looking at things. Apocalypse is an epiphany—when the truth that is right in front of our faces is suddenly visible in a new way. Usually when we experience apocalypse, things aren't the same after that. Dark says,

*Apocalyptic cracks the pavement of the status quo. It irritates and disrupts the feverishly defended norms of whatever culture it engages...<sup>5</sup>*

This powerfully evocative statement rings true. You know when you've experienced something like that. Something you saw, something you read, something you experienced broke through the status quo—the crust that has formed over "reality." Dark goes on:

*In this sense, apocalyptic is the place where the future pushes into the present. It's the breaking in of another dimension, a new wine for which our old wineskins are unprepared. That which apocalyptic proclaims cannot be fit into existing ways of thinking.<sup>6</sup>*

Isn't this what the ancient Hebrew prophets were up to? Isn't this what Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Amos were doing? In spite of so much that has been said, this is precisely what John is doing in *The Revelation* as well. Aren't all the prophets attempting to crack through the status quo and open a space, creatively, imaginatively, for God's future to push into the present? David Dark evokes that well-worn Leonard Cohen lyric:

*There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.<sup>7</sup>*

The ancient Celts called these moments, experiences, and events "thin places," where the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world overlap. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ was the greatest apocalypse of all. Jesus is our best "revelation"—or apocalypse—of God!

But there are also what Dark has termed "everyday apocalypses." These frequently come in the form of literature and sometimes what we might call "popular culture." This is not an uncritical celebration of popular culture. But there are moments of real glory where truth, goodness, beauty—God—shines through the ordinary. Once more, David Dark:

*By announcing a new world of unrealized possibility, apocalyptic serves to invest the details of the everyday with cosmic significance while awakening its audience to the presence of marginalizing forces otherwise unnamed and unchallenged.*<sup>8</sup>

Apocalyptic names the death-dealing forces of the powers that exist and exposes them for what they are. When apocalyptic has done its work, something profoundly life-changing is revealed. It may not seem that earth-shattering in the moment, but it plants a seed of discontent that grows and bears fruit in conversion and revolution. Art is uniquely suited for this apocalyptic work. Notice what James McClendon, the late Baptist theologian said:

*Art's necessary illusions serve to expose the illusory character of the experienced world. . . . Artists of necessity refer to the given world, yet to be art their work must imply (refer to) a whole new world of unrealized possibility.*<sup>9</sup>

**V**ery often, what is true is not pure. Art sometimes has a prophetic role, to reveal the truth of something—even an ugly truth. Too strong a focus on “staying positive” can allow oppression and evil to flourish, unchecked. Likewise, a glorification of evil that doesn’t deal honestly with the complexities also facilitates the status quo.

Christian artists have a prophetic role. Indeed, Christian writers and filmmakers have perhaps the best vantage point to shed light on our world and reveal the truth in transformative ways. But we won’t be able to do that if we’re bound to a sense of purity which is more like Victorian piety and modernist sentimentality.

Flannery O’Connor says much the same thing as McClendon:

*My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable. . . . Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause.*

*The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever*

*more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. . . . to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.*<sup>10</sup>

What is the alternative? What is the risk in settling for a hyper-idealized, sentimentalized vision of the world?

*Unless we are willing to accept our artists as they are, the answer to the question, Who speaks for America today? will have to be: the advertising agencies. They are entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society, and no one has ever accused them of not being affirmative. . . . Those who believe that art proceeds from a healthy, and not from a diseased, faculty of the mind will take what he shows them as a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances; that is, as a limited revelation but revelation nevertheless.*<sup>11</sup>

In high school I learned to love John Keats’ beautiful closing line from “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

But it isn’t always true, is it? It’s a lovely sentiment, but in the end, it’s a drug that can be used by the powers that be to silence any and all dissent. Christians who take as their dictum, “Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil,” are pawns in the Great Controversy—effectively neutralized. We cannot play our God-given role of pulling back the curtain on the lies and injustices of a world out of kilter or effectively point to a new world without dealing honestly with the world as we have it. And if we cannot do this, we are the theological equivalent of Thomas Kinkade.

But we have a high, if more challenging and risky, calling. As Christians we are driven by the logic of redemption to tell rich, compelling and world-transforming stories, and to become thoughtful readers and viewers of these stories as well.

We need Christian artists. We need Adventist artists—storytellers of all types—screenwriters, novelists, poets, actors, filmmakers, fine artists: poets and prophets of our time. The Christian artist must grapple honestly with the truth of the world as it is, become an astute observer and describer of the world and its perversity, and drink deeply from the narrative of redemption, remembering that

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major textual variant is the so-called “longer ending” of Mark 16:9–20, which is not found in many ancient manuscripts.

4. A popular example is Eugene H. Petterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. An Adventist example is: Jack J. Blanco, *The Clear Word*, which was printed and distributed by the Review and Herald Publishing Association. This Adventist paraphrase is often guilty of more theological interpretation and doctrinal bias than is desirable, even in a paraphrase.

5. See the documents “Modern Versions and the KJV” (1997); Arthur Ferch, “Which Version Can We Trust?” (1998), and Johannes Kovar, “The Textus Receptus and Modern Bible Translations.” <http://www.adventist-biblicalresearch.org>. The paper by Kovar was also published in the *BRI Newsletter* of January 2008.

6. Arthur White, “The E.G. White Counsel on Versions of the Bible,” see <http://whiteestate.org/issues/versions.html>.

7. Probably most influential (and outspoken) is in this respect the independent ministry *Amazing Discoveries*, led by Dr. Walter Veith, who argues that the moderns versions are at least in part the result of Jesuit conspiracies. In his defense of the KJV he is inspired by Benjamin G. Wilkinson, an Adventist educator who, in 1930, published his book *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*. The influence of this book extended to other denominations. Wilkinson’s books are sold via the *Amazing Discoveries* website, <http://amazingdiscoveries.org>. See also: <http://kjonlydebate.com/2009/06/05/youtube-response-the-niv-is-a-jesuit-bible>.

8. For a recent, authoritative study of the concept of inspiration, see: Peter M. van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” in Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 22–57.

9. White, Ellen G. *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 21; *Great Controversy*, p. v.

10. See vol. 5, pp. 175–176.

11. Q is derived from the German *Quelle*, the code name for a collection of sayings of Jesus, which appears to have been available to Matthew, Mark and Luke. M refers to a source from which Matthew drew materials that are unique to his gospel, while L stands for a source that was apparently only known to Luke.

12. Smith, Uriah. *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1944).

13. The titles of the five books include *Patriarchs and Prophets*, *Prophets and Kings*, *Desire of Ages*, *Acts of the Apostles* and *The Great Controversy*.

14. *Christ’s Object Lessons*, *Education*, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, *The Ministry of Healing* and *Steps to Christ*.

15. Except *Prophets and Kings*, which was not fully finished when Ellen White died. The last section was compiled from materials she had written earlier.

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resurrection comes only after death. There are no shortcuts.

We cannot merely tolerate artists in the church. We urgently need them. We must find ways to bless them and give them space to do their creative work. Hope itself is at stake. While the world is in a tug of war between sentimental optimism and nihilistic, sometimes obscene, pessimism, Christian artists have the chance to transcend both and convey hope. When people challenge this position, as they surely will, we must respond, with Flannery O’Connor:

*When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist.*<sup>12</sup> ■

**Ryan Bell** lives with his family in Hollywood, California, where he is the pastor of the Hollywood Adventist Church. The church is home to a growing community of fine artists, photographers, filmmakers, musicians, actors, graphic designers, interior designers, writers and architects. Together they are finding God in some unexpected places.

## Footnotes

1. O’Connor, Flannery. “The Church and the Fiction Writer” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), 151.

2. *Ibid.*, 147–148.

3. Simmons, Ilana. Quoted in <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-literary-mind/200912/what-makes-art-sentimental>

4. O’Connor, 147.

5. Dark, David. *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, The Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic/Brazos Press, 2002), 12.

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. Cohen, Leonard. *Anthem*. Quoted in David Dark.

8. Dark, 11.

9. McClendon, James. *Witness: Systematic Theology*, v. 3, quoted in Dark, 9.

10. O’Connor, Flannery. “The Fiction Writer and His Country” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), 33–34.

11. *Ibid.*, 34.

12. O’Connor. “The Church and the Fiction Writer” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), 146.