



# THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF (ARTISTIC) VOCATION

Works of art not only address the world as it is;  
they also envision the world as it will be.

*by James Romaine*

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In a sermon entitled "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. identified love of self, love of others, and love of God as the three-part structure of a fulfilled and faithful life. These three points of orientation (inward, outward, and heavenward) also provide a model of Christian vocation. Here I'd like to consider how these relate to the artist's vocation; however, these three principles may apply to all vocations.

A biblical understanding of vocation begins with the knowledge that we are each individually created in, by, and for Christ for the purpose of knowing and serving Him.

This biblical self-image begins by considering our being, created in the image of God. This creation mandate is found in Genesis. It begins with Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created . . ." We are first introduced to God as a creator. Not surprisingly, God's creation bears His mark and image. This is most clearly articulated in Genesis 1:26-28:

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*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*

In *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers interpreted these verses as a description of human creators created in the image of a divine creator. She wrote, "The characteristic common to God and man is apparently . . . the desire and the ability to make things." This capacity to create is certainly not the limit of what it means to be created "in the image of God," but a Christian vocation in the visual arts draws its initial direction and purpose from the first chapter of Genesis. God creates every person with particular abilities, experiences, and opportunities through which they honour God in their faithful

pursuit of his designs and desires. This creation mandate of Genesis is the foundation of a sacramental understanding of the creative person "in the image of God," and their creative work in "filling the earth."

Therefore, the creation mandate has both liberties and responsibilities. Responding to this call as a validation and fulfillment of the artist's creative abilities is more than simply permission for the artist to pursue his or her passions. In calling us to fill the earth, the Genesis mandate confirms that creative activity can be a divinely-designed means of glorifying God in the present and being a vessel by which he makes his grace known in the world.

Perhaps in a misunderstanding of the creation mandate, we often live and work as if creation and history were just God and us, that our personal relationship with God absolves us of our responsibilities and privileges to each other and to the world in which we live. Nevertheless, the universe, as created by God, is organically and fundamentally interconnected. Therefore, the community mandate is, in part, an extension of the wholeness expressed in the creation mandate. However, the community mandate also recognizes the truth that creation exists in a state of brokenness because of our sin. The community mandate is a challenge to work toward a spiritual unity, founded on creative acts of love. In John 15:9-12, Christ states, "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

It is noteworthy that Christ gives this command, this love mandate, on the eve of His betrayal by Judas. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that we should not take the gift of Christian community too lightly, since Christ suffered the loneliness of the cross so that we, sinners deserving that estrangement, might have the community founded on the grace provided in his blood. Bonhoeffer qualifies what he sees as the foundation of a Christian community: "We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ." Bonhoeffer's "through and in" suggests that Christ is both the means and end of the community mandate.

The community mandate contains both a promise of Christ's abiding love and a command that we love one another. Both of these have particular implications for the artist. The creative process is an act of love between the artist and her materials. As the work of art is brought to completion, it is a realization of wholeness in which all of the parts are bound together, without any of them being robbed of their own unique individuality. A work of art is a material manifestation of wholeness that welcomes the viewer into its fold.

The third mandate that has bearing on the vocation of the Christian is found in Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'" This commission mandate has both a present-oriented command directing the Christian into the world and an eternity-oriented promise that Christ will complete the work that He has begun. Both the present-oriented command and the eternity-oriented promise have specific implications for the artistic vocation.

The commission mandate recognizes that the final chapter, the completion of creation and the creator's vocation, is redemption and reconciliation in Christ. Therefore, the power of an art founded on the commission mandate is not limited to the present but may also have implications for eternity. Works of art not only address the world as it is; they also envision the world as it will be. Not only that, but the work of art may participate in prophetically calling that more beautiful world into being. 

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