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Deacon Devotional

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DEACON DEVOTIONAL

“Masterpieces”

1 March 2015

by S. Ray Granade

I've just finished reading *The Monuments Men*, about the small group of individuals tasked with saving public and private art looted by Nazis in World War II. Saving it and returning it to its proper owners. You may have seen the movie made from the book. These people dealt with sculpture, flatware, glass, crystal, furniture, oils, watercolors, tapestries, books, incunabula, manuscripts—everything artistic of value. Some of the pieces were acknowledged masterpieces, some “from the school of,” some artwork that paled in comparison with the other. But each piece had been identified as art worth having. Art not worth having, “degenerate” art, modern art, was burned.

My mother was a bohemian spirit in the body of a Southern Baptist preacher's wife. She loved all kinds of art, performed or produced. She loved jazz and classical music, architecture, sculpture, painting, furniture, and fiber arts, particularly rugs. When she talked about moving into assisted living, she wondered what she should take from her three-bedroom house to her single-room space. “It needs to be functional,” I told her, “but it should also feed your soul.” I set up her “room” for her to see by putting pieces inside the imaginary walls until we knew what she could take and where it would go. Then it was time for the artwork. We adorned her walls with art that meant something to her. We made it “her” room. The administrator asked so often to show perspective clients her room that I half-jokingly told him that Mother needed a commission from each new client he got that way.

As you can tell, art unites these two disparate pieces of my personal experience. It also, I think, illuminates what Paul says to the church at Ephesus in what we have as the early second chapter. The city to which he wrote was probably the third largest in Asia Minor with a population about half again that of Hot Springs. It could claim antiquity, being about a thousand years old when Paul wrote. It contained a large theater, capable of seating about half the city's population; the extensive Library of Celsus; and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: The Temple of Artemis (Diana), the ancient world's largest and most beautiful building of its kind. These were cultured people, steeped in Greek learning and arts.

Paul points out that they (and by extension we) were once dead, doomed forever by their many sins. They are marred by sin (like the armless “Venus de Milo”) and selected to be burned. God's mercy, His love, provided revitalization for them (us) “when He raised Christ from the dead.”(v5) He did that, the New Living Translation puts it, so that he “can always point to us as examples of the incredible wealth of his favor and kindness toward us” (v7). Our salvation, Paul concludes, is a gift, not something earned by good deeds. We are “God's masterpiece,” created anew through Christ “so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

I think that Paul uses the word “masterpiece” advisedly. Created anew in Christ, we are examples of what God intended when He created humankind initially. Just as the administrator wanted to use Mother's room as an example of what one could do with the space allotted, so God wants us to be on display, actively showing the world what He can do with the materials at hand. Just as the Monuments Men returned masterpieces to their rightful places, so God puts His church, full of people marred by sin and slated to be burned but renewed by His power, to be examples of what He intended society to resemble. He

wants the church to be in places that those renewed people can do the good things for which He planned long ago.