

Excerpts from “Nudity - Questions and Answers” in a lecture series by Professor H. R. Rookmaaker

(these excerpts are taken from H. R. Rookmaaker’s recorded lectures on “Christianity and Culture” given in 1976 at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, which is still available on CDROM from that seminary or in written form in *The Complete Works of Hans Rookmaaker on CD-ROM* (Carlisle, UK: Piquant Editions)

Question: If art has an ethical side, that implies certain limitations. What are the limitations we need to consider and how far does our freedom go? For instance, in depicting nudity?

As a rule, as a kind of yardstick, we can say that we should always be careful to judge art by what it wants to say and not by what it portrays. Is it a sinful thing to portray the breast of a woman? I would say that’s a silly question. Because an obscenity or something wrong in this respect are not defined by square inches of flesh but are defined by what the portrayal wants to express. Many years ago I had a long discussion about this and I came up with the following thought: why are Christians always talking about nudity, because what is really unhealthy, what is really wrong, the thing we should really be fighting is precisely all the clothed women. I had in mind the cover images of the magazines around us which mostly use women as a kind of attraction feature. Of course these women are nicely clothed – this was twenty years ago and they were all nicely clothed then because one could not show more at that time, but of course they were all very tempting and seductive, in a way they were adulterous persons. So what matters is not the clothing or the absence of clothing but the intention.

There is a great difference, and that’s where the confusion begins, between something that’s social and something that’s in art. When you make a painting of a nude woman, that has nothing to do with nudity in the social reality. Even if there is a relationship it is not a direct one. Winckelmann, the great classicistic theoretician from the middle of the eighteenth century, said: ‘Why is Greek art so beautiful? That is because the artists were able to see nude figures around them in daily life. And these people were all doing sports and that’s why they were so beautiful.’ I would say that this is a naturalistic fallacy, because that was never true. The classical world was not such a fantastically ideal world where everybody walked around as if in a nudist camp. No, the [Greek] artists were painting and sculpting their ideas about humanity. Art is a metaphor, a symbol. I wish I could show you Jan van Eyck’s *Eve* [from the *Ghent altarpiece*] at this moment, one of the most beautiful nudes ever painted and one of the most chaste pictures in the world. Even though it is more precisely painted than most nudes are, in that it shows pubic hair and so on, nevertheless it is so pure. If people viewing such a picture have bad sexual thoughts, the source of such thoughts is inside them and not in the painting. But pictures with completely clothed figures can be very obscene and negative and bad. So we should judge on the basis of the meaning of things and of what is communicated, and not on the basis of a set of rules because that is legalistic.

Nudity is used as a metaphor and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries people did not have the prudishness that came later. And of course they did look back to the Greeks. But why did I use nudes as examples in my lectures? Because they communicate easily, directly, strongly. To explain the same things without the nudes would have meant lectures three times as long – and probably less clear.

Question: But was it not because of their own nakedness that Adam was unable to look at Eve without shame, so that God had to make clothes for them?

I don’t think that shame in this case should be understood in the sense of never showing any nudity. If in our culture it were a social custom that we bathe in the nude on the beaches, then there would be a difference on the beach between some women and others. Some women would be very

sexy and would go beyond the limits of shame, and other would not. Just as at this moment some women with bathing suits are very unchaste, and very seductive, and sexually very provocative, and some are not. That has nothing to do with their clothes. It all depends on how a person uses one's body. Let me tell you a little story. A very, very sexy woman came to L'Abri. This happened about fifteen years ago. She was a filmstar. She became a Christian after three weeks. And Dr Schaeffer said to me later: 'I wish I had some photographs: three weeks before and three weeks after.' Because three weeks afterwards she was not sexy anymore. What had happened? What happened was that her attitude to life and values had changed. But she had certainly not gone out and bought new clothes. She was wearing the same dresses. It is not the dressing or the undressing that makes people chaste but the way we wear our clothes, the way we move, the way we express our corporeality.

In art there are two types of nudity. Kenneth Clark, who wrote a book on this, says that there is nudity in the sense of shame, as in medieval art, and heroic nudes, as you find for instance with Michelangelo. I would say that we find the least shame of all in Michelangelo's *David*. It's a shameless sculpture. I say that not because he happens to be nude but because of his attitude. He stands there and radiates: 'Here I am. I'm not afraid. Look how beautiful I am!' But *Adam* [from the *Ghent altarpiece*] of Jan van Eyck stands in shame before the Lord. He says: 'I am weak.' Just like the Bible says that every person will stand naked before the Lord – that means with nothing to cover oneself. One's weakness will be exposed; one will stand before the Lord knowing that one has failed. That is what shame means in Genesis 3.

There's another, related point to be made about shame. When God does something in the Bible, it always has a double edge to it. I mean this: when God comes with the curse he also brings grace. To be more precise, when God said: 'From this moment on death will be a reality' no one said 'Hurrah, now we are going to die.' Nevertheless there is one reason for saying 'Hurrah, people die.' Just imagine for one moment that after the Fall people were not to die. That would mean having all the worst tyrants and criminals of all of history around us. Happily these people have finished their lives. In that there's grace. People are also afraid of dying and that puts a check on their wickedness, but the gangster who can live without fear of death will quickly become a really nasty menace.

Now the same is true of shame. If God had not given shame to people (and I think it is a gift) then there wouldn't be boundaries. Now when men and women approach each other there are always barriers to overcome, little thresholds to cross, little doors to open. A man never just jumps on a woman unless he rapes her and then we call it rape and that is wrong. But if a man comes to a woman, he starts by touching her softly, and she accepts or answers his touch. And so they go on meeting each other, and every time a little barrier has to be overcome. When there are strong barriers we talk about shame. So there is a difference between bathing together in the nude, as is done in some places in the world (and I don't think there is anything wrong in that), and jumping into bed with one of the women. There are boundaries because there is shame.

Shame is very much tied up with our most intimate parts. If you look at paintings, you will find that there is a limit. The most intimate parts of a woman are never shown. A woman can stand without clothes without her intimate parts being visible. They are hidden. That's maybe why it is easy to portray a woman in the nude, because one can depict her completely in all her beauty and she can become a symbol for humanity in its manifold aspects while evading the real tough point. And you may see many pictures of nude men, but rarely will you see an erection. If you do, it is usually very strong in a wrong sense. You will normally not see that, because that's the moment of shame. It's a gift of God that he put restraints on our sexual relationships. So we don't have free love, thanks to the Lord, because God gave us shame. But we shouldn't say one has to be ashamed whenever one sees a person in the nude. That's a little bit over the top and not how it was meant to be. That's a nineteenth-century interpretation that comes out of Victorian sensibilities. I think we should strive for the right barriers and the right forms, and of course our own feelings are also involved here. We

should strive for more freedom, more openness at this point, even though that is very difficult. If parents are not able to deal with their children on this level, they should try to get their children to go further; maybe in two or three generations' time we will have more openness. We shouldn't be idealistic, though, for never in history was the man-woman relationship completely right. We live in an imperfect world as sinful beings.

. . . .

Question: Can we depict the negative?

Yes, we can portray corruption, murder and all the bad things in the world around us. We can protest in our art and show how ugly and bad these things are. But we must be very careful because the artists around us, the modern artists, also depict these things, though in a very different way. In the way of gnosticism they say that this whole world is bad. But if one paints rape as rape in order to say it's rape and therefore it's bad, one has made a beautiful picture. At least, possibly so. . . .

We always have to do two things, namely to show ugliness as ugly and to hold up beauty as beautiful. If we don't do both at the same time the result will always be found wanting. Because then beauty becomes sentimental or we become gnostic in saying the world is bad. There is always a tension between accepting that we live in a sinful and broken world and at the same time not accepting it. Both acceptance and nonacceptance need to be shown, and they need to be shown together in their inner tension.

Question: But isn't Rubens's painting a lie as well? Does it not suggest rape?

No, it doesn't suggest rape. The picture talks about strong marriage relationships. It uses rape as a metaphor but it's not a story about rape. The other picture shows rape in the bad sense, but this one is not about a real rape – Rubens never said: 'If you rape a woman it's beautiful.' He would have said: 'That's ugly. But the married situation is fantastic, because then woman becomes an inspiration to the man.' And if anyone in the world could say that, it was Rubens himself. He was married twice and both times very happily. He has depicted his wives, also in the nude, because they were his inspiration, in a physical way but in a much deeper way as well.

So you misunderstand the word 'rape' in the title of the painting, because the work brings us into deep realities. Seventeenth-century pictures always stress the strong relationship between man and woman. Rape in the sense of real rape you find in the etching by Rubens of the wife of Potiphar. There you have sheer sex in all its ugliness. Rubens and Rembrandt always show a very high regard for women – not as sex objects (that is twentieth-century) but in the fullness of their humanity. The woman is shown as an inspiration to the man, and not only in relation to her body, because then we get into the Playboy kind of thing. It is not the playgirl that inspires the playboy to be horny! But it is the woman in the fullness of her womanhood that inspires the man to be a real man and to do great deeds in the world. And it can only be done if they live together in a very close relationship, because the strongest unit in the world is a marriage in which the partners are fully man and fully woman. And that's what Rubens is telling us about. This is clear in all of his other pictures and it's so clear when you read seventeenth-century literature. They had a much better and healthier view of marriage than many people around us today, even in Christian circles. Their ideals were much better than ours, and much less sentimental.

Question: Do we then need to have knowledge of all that is implicit in these artworks in order to be able to understand what they are saying?

No. I did start off by saying that you see what you know, and of course your knowledge is implied. But it's not true that one can only understand a painting when one has a lot of art-historical knowledge. That is drawing a wrong conclusion out of a right definition. What we chance upon here

is exactly the greatness of seventeenth-century art. I'm not saying that there is no criticism to be made of Rubens, but I think we should begin with giving honour where honour is due. Rubens is one of the greatest artists in the world. He was a man who at least at this point had a very deep understanding, which he was able to express very beautifully. So, let's not begin with criticism but end with it, very softly in the case of this painting. Rubens's art, as well as Dutch and other seventeenth-century art, works in layers. So, if you're walking in a palace with Rubens's *Rape of the daughters of King Leucippus* [see Plate 5] hanging on the wall, what you see is a very beautiful ornament. Fantastic colors. You can pass it by like that. But when you stop and you look at it, what you see is this: movement, magnificently painted women and men. That is the next layer. Then you begin to ask about the story. What does it tell me? Next you reflect on the implications of the story. Why was it used? I tried to clarify the meaning of subject matter in seventeenth-century art with my scheme of motifs and themes. The painting is not just telling a little story but the story is used to depict a motif. Once you have understood the motif, you can go deeper and deeper until you end with the universal: that love is so important. And then you begin to see that this is one of the greatest works of art. Now when you come to Munich for the first time and you stand in front of that painting, you are not able to talk about it like I am doing now. That's obvious, because I am a professor in the history of art and you are not. But that does not mean that I see things that you do not see. Because the moment I start seeing things that you do not see there is something wrong.

Maybe there *is* something wrong here. Maybe you were raised in the wrong framework. Let me try to clarify this with a story. I gave this same lecture with the Rubens painting half a year ago in Calgary. During the lecture some people left the room. And the next day many people came up to me and said: 'Are these nudes not obscene? Is that not pornography?' Well, when one person comes to you like that, you think to yourself: 'Maybe I overrated my audience, maybe I made a mistake, maybe I didn't make myself clear, of course these people are not accustomed to this type of thing, after all they live in Calgary.' But when people kept on asking me the same thing, I became very worried. Two evenings ago I gave a lecture about God's salvation and our calling. When I had finished, someone said to me: 'I have a question: if a Christian is an artist and he goes to an art school, is that a good thing, for he has to paint nudes and so on?' What is happening here? Are you not living people? You can compare it with this: say you are going to start a new bank. You need to have money, a building, personnel, and to have an understanding of banking and money problems. But if you would then come to me and tell me that you are worrying all the time about where you are going to buy the paper for your office, I would say that maybe you shouldn't start a bank, because your mind is too fixed on insignificant things. Well, if you talk about art, you don't talk about nudity. It's such a little thing in relation to the big things!

Of course nudity is a loaded thing. Why? Not because the nude is so loaded, but because humanity is so loaded and reality is so loaded. And it's good to think about it, but we shouldn't make it too strong. I get really worried when people in America always talk about it. I think it's completely out of context. It's a little thing, not a big thing. It's so beautiful. And if anybody wants to drag the Rubens down and say that it is pornography, I really get angry because they don't know what they are talking about and they are debasing the world. They say that something that is beautiful is ugly. That's rape, rape of the beauty of that woman in that painting. I'm worried about America, I'm worried about Christianity. Why are we talking about it? Is it small legalism? Is it sentimentality? Is reality in which men are men and women are women too strong for us? Having bodies? I'm worried that we may end up as people who don't have bodies, who don't live, who are dead people! This reminds me of the question of a hippie, and I think it is one of the most forceful questions we have to answer. And we as Christians have the answer, and we have to live the answer. The question is: Is there life before death?

So maybe you were raised in a wrong framework and I'm challenging that framework, the

legalistic fundamentalism. The answer to fundamentalism is not to jump into the world and become worldly, but the right response is to get back to the Scriptures because the Scriptures do embrace life in all its fullness. People in the past said it is impossible that the Song of Songs could be about the relationship between men and women, it has to be a kind of metaphor for Christ and the church. Well, of course, the Bible is full of this: the relationship between Christ and the Christian community is that of the bride and the groom. Therefore the Song of Songs is also talking about Christ and the church. But in the first place it's talking about the relationship between a man and a woman. We barely dare to read it at table to our children because it's so strong, strong with all the beauties of life. God says in Ezekiel: 'I found you lying naked in the wilderness. And you were bathing in your blood, you were a newborn baby. And I bathed you and I raised you, and then you became beautiful and your breasts were like towers . . .' And so on. That's the way God speaks about it in the Bible, not as a shameful thing but as something beautiful. Why do we try to rape the Bible and take these things out of it?

Question: Why are evangelical or fundamentalistic people in America so very tight about nudity in art?

Somebody gave me a very interesting answer recently: 'It is because they have always used that little tag to avoid talking about art.' As a result, when anyone begins to talk about art, the very first thing they respond with is: 'O yes, but then you have to go to college and draw nudes and that's no good.' Then they don't need to think about it any further. So they cling to this little question to avoid the big questions. Even so the interest in art is growing and there are many young Christian artists, which is a very new situation and one I'm very happy about. It's so important that artists are there, for there will never be a real reformation without the arts, because the arts bring it to us.

Nevertheless there are questions, and I am not denying that. We need to look at these things from a historical perspective, with an understanding of history and culture, but twentieth-century people tend to be weak in this respect. I remember some years ago saying to an audience of nice American girls from some university: 'You must understand as you're all sitting here very nicely dressed that if we happened to be in Bali, of course, you would all be considered very immoral. For in Bali women walk around with the upper part of their body uncovered but for a woman to show her ankles is considered obscene.' Cultural customs do play a big role. And we should be very careful to judge other cultures. When people, let's say in Japan, bathe together in the nude that doesn't mean that they are immoral people; it only means that they have a different way of doing things. In Europe since the beginning of Christianity the attitude to nudity has always been ambiguous. Sometimes people said yes, sometimes they said no. Some of the things they did we may find strange, but it's our own time that I find very strange indeed. When I go on an excursion with my students it's impossible for boys to sleep in the same room as girls. And everybody would think it very strange if that should happen. But at the same time these same boys and girls read things and look at things that everyone in a previous age (and that is perhaps just ten years ago) would have considered wrong. There's a strange tension in our world in that things which are not acceptable are considered acceptable while acceptable things are considered unacceptable.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was on the whole a much more healthy approach to these things than there is today. People were not prudish. There is a very interesting story I want to mention: during the time of Cromwell there was an Englishman who travelled in Holland and kept a diary. He tells us about his experiences when he visited Delft. What he talks about was not anything extraordinary but something very normal. He went to stay at an inn. As he came in he asked: 'Do you have a bed for me?' And they said: 'Yes.' He ate and drank something and then the guests were ushered to the sleeping hall. There were no small rooms, just one or two big rooms with many beds. And in these beds women, men or couples would sleep. And as they all slept

naked in those days (they didn't have any pyjamas) everybody would undress, because that is how one would go to bed. And nobody thought anything about it; it was the most natural thing. So this Englishman describes how he woke up in the morning and saw a lovely lady wake up and rise. He says: 'And I looked as she dressed, because this Dutch fashion is such an interesting thing. It's so different and wonderful.' Later on he mentions how he didn't dare to kiss the hand of that lady because that was something one just did not touch. So they were not prudish, but at the same time they had strong morals.

In the homes of those days the beds were in the living-room. In Holland they were built into the walls, and one found that in many European countries. So, let's say you were having a gathering in the evening and the daughter of the house said: 'It's time for me to go to bed, for tomorrow I have to wake up early. You gentlemen, you just talk on.' Then she would go to bed, and that would happen in the room. All this changed in the middle of the eighteenth century, one of those very difficult passages in history. Somewhere around 1730 or 1740 there was a medical doctor in Lausanne who published a little book about masturbation saying that masturbation causes sicknesses. He had made it all up, but everyone believed him. And people started to consider lust as something sinful or bad or ugly. Someone in Holland recently made a very extensive study of this. And this man, who is not a Christian, came to the conclusion that the change occurred first of all in humanistic circles. Humanism brought in the change and about ten to fifteen years later the Christians followed suit – which to me is a tragic moment in history. Why did the humanists have such a negative attitude towards lust and the body? Well, just imagine a duke reading in his library. He's reading the latest thing: Diderot and the *Encyclopaedia* from France. He's very well educated and he reads French. And so he reads: 'What is a man?' The answer is basically this: 'There is no difference between people and animals and plants and things.' There is no difference, people are just like the animals. Who said that people were so different? Of course this was meant to be a very violent antichristian statement. It was also something completely unproven. Suppose the duke who was reading that book then says: 'Wonderful what this man is saying, it's great, fantastic, convincing.' An hour later his wife, the duchess, comes in. As he has just been reading that there is no difference between people and animals, when the duchess comes in, basically, she is equivalent to a female rabbit. And he is a rabbit, and they produce children. But it's a little bit difficult to look at the duchess, who is a very cultured person, as a kind of rabbit. So, what should one do? Well, in order to accept Diderot and the *Encyclopaedia* and all that went with it, one had to save one's humanity. And in order to save one's humanity one had to push human carnality right out of the picture, which people certainly did. That's my explanation of why people became so prudish.

In the nineteenth century people even went so far that little girls could have an operation to take away a little piece of their body in order that they would never enjoy sex, because sex was so lustful and sinful. It went that far, I'm not inventing this. But as a Christian I would say that if God gave women that little part, even if it is there only for sexual arousal and enjoyment, then we're not going to say it's wrong. We have to accept it from God's hand and say thank you. It was really wrong that the Christians followed the humanists. It's very interesting that nowadays the humanists violently reject the repression of sex and have turned around to an overindulgence in sex. But Christians, being afraid of the overindulgence – and it's good not to go along with it – cling to the repression instead of raising their own voice and saying clearly what is good. I am not saying that it is easy to have a right balance, but we do need to rethink these things.

Even if we do gain a new perspective on sex and nudity and our bodies, this doesn't mean that we can change everything . . . by tomorrow. There's too much emotion involved, because these things are so very deep and important. Also, the way we were raised and the things that have been brought to us from our own background go very deep and it's very difficult to just jump out of them. So, when a young artist comes to me and he says: 'I'm in the academy, but I have difficulties in

going to the life-drawing class' my first reaction would be: 'Why don't you try it, because you will find out in five minutes that it's not as you think. It has nothing to do with sex. But if you continue to have difficulties, you know there's Christian freedom and there's no one who's going to force you.' Just as Paul said: if you cannot eat meat because for you the meat is contaminated, then don't eat it because you cannot go against your conscience. Though there is a very interesting passage in the Bible, in one of the letters of John, where it's written: if your conscience goes against you, but God says you can do it, God knows better, so don't be afraid. However, if someone comes to me and says: 'I really can't do that, it's against my conscience,' I would say: 'Never force yourself.' Because whatever we do we must do to the honour of God. Even if there's freedom to draw nude figures, this should never be forced upon anyone. But I would also like to stress that we should think these issues through carefully. If personally we cannot do certain things, we should not do them. But that does not mean others who can do those things are sinful and wrong.