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**“FOR THE SAKE OF THE STORY”:
Doctrine and Discernment in Reading C. S. Lewis**

This essay was published in *Modern Reformation* 18:3 (May/June 2009): 33-36.

No modern writer has gotten more Christian truth into more heads than C. S. Lewis. His works of popular apologetics are full of clarity, insight, and good sense; his fiction glows with high imagination and wholesome wisdom. No one is better at showing us the contours of the Christian world view in all their sanity and splendor. Yet when we move from that big picture to the details of specific doctrine, Lewis’s more knowledgeable readers are sometimes distressed to find that he is not an entirely safe guide. For example, he made vicarious penal substitution just one of many theories of the atonement in *Mere Christianity*, and not the one that was central to his thought (it was to Paul’s!).¹ He rejected the doctrine of total depravity in terms that show he did not understand it.² He had a high view of Scripture, but one that stopped short of affirming its inerrancy.³

Such lapses are not central to the good points in Lewis’s expository writings, and they often pass unnoticed. But in his fiction, Christian motifs and their doctrinal implications get incarnated more powerfully, for good or ill. The Stone Table in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* portrays the substitutionary nature of the atonement more accurately than *Mere Christianity* explains it. On the other hand, other passages may plant doctrinally unsound images in the minds of the unwary.

Two such passages will concern us in this essay. Both suggest doctrines that are problematic at best, yet increasingly popular among younger Evangelicals. The passages are related in that both imply the possibility of a second chance for salvation after death; one also suggests inclusivism, the notion of a salvation available apart from an explicit faith in Christ as Lord and Savior embraced in this life. They are found in *The Great Divorce* and in Narnia’s *The Last Battle*.

A SECOND CHANCE AFTER DEATH?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1943), 57f.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1967), 54-55; cf. Donald T. Williams, *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 63.

³ Donald T. Williams, “An Apologist’s Evening Prayer: Reflecting on C. S. Lewis’s *Reflections on the Psalms*,” in *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, Legacy*, 4 vol., ed. Bruce L. Edwards (London: Praeger, 2007), 3:237-56.

The title of *The Great Divorce* refers to the great gulf that exists between Hell and Heaven. A busload of citizens of Hell is allowed to visit the outskirts of Heaven. Lewis as narrator observes their interactions with various departed saints they knew in life, who try to persuade them to stay and go with them on toward the heart of Heaven, the mountains. He also records commentary on those interactions from his own spiritual mentor, George MacDonald, now one of the saints in Heaven. Most of the visitors do not like it in Heaven or cannot bring themselves to part from their sins, and so choose to go back to Hell. But one, a sensualist whose sensuality is objectified as a red lizard sitting on his shoulder, allows the lizard to be killed. As a result, he is transformed from a ghost into a man, and the lizard is resurrected as a stallion. He mounts it and they ride off toward the mountains together.⁴

The Great Divorce is full of splendors and spiritual insights. My own favorite part is the way the “spiritual” world of Heaven is portrayed as *more* real, more substantial, than our familiar material world. Walking on the grass is like walking on sharp knife-blades for the shadowy “ghosts” from Hell; rain drops would go through the ones who do not yet “belong” there like bullets. The Liberal Theologian and the Avant-Garde Artist who decline their invitations to stay are devastating portraits of the besetting intellectual pathologies of their kinds. The “divorce” between Heaven and Hell implied by the title is portrayed wonderfully. The death and resurrection of the lizard is an intriguing picture of the necessity of dying to oneself in order to live to God. Yet the whole premise that creates the narrative framework by which these gems are delivered runs smack up against a line of New-Testament teaching that is not only clear and forthright but just plain blunt: “It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that, the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). “Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

What are we to do with this?

INCLUSIVISM AND IMPLICIT FAITH?

The Last Battle is Narnia’s Book of Revelation. Narnia has its AntiChrist and False Prophet, its Final Apostasy, its Battle of Armageddon, and its Last Judgment, leading to the revelation of the new and true Narnia, Aslan’s Country. The seriousness of the issues facing the faithful in the Last Days is presented well, and once again we get a splendid vision of what heaven might be like:

It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried:

“I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1946), 98-105.

we loved the old Narnia is that is sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-heee-hee! Come further up, come further in!”⁵

This is Lewis at his best. But on the way to this inspiring moment we have a character, Emeth, who is a worshipper of Tash, the cruel and demonic false god of the Calormenes. Emeth discovers *after his death* that he has really been worshipping Aslan all along without knowing it. When he meets Aslan after death he expects to be rejected by him as a Tash worshipper, but instead receives this speech:

Son, thou art welcome. . . . Not because [Tash] and I are one but because we are opposites, I take to me the services thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore, if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath's sake, it is by me he has truly sworn, though he know it not. . . . And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he say the name of Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted. . . . Unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek.⁶

Here we have not only an apparent *post-mortem* conversion but also inclusivism in the form of the doctrine of “implicit faith”: the idea that some who have never heard the Gospel can be saved by Christ's sacrifice without explicit faith in Him, if they follow the light they have. (What Lewis portrays in Emeth he had earlier explained in *Mere Christianity*: “There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it.”⁷) Even more troubling is the absence of grace from Emeth's acceptance by Aslan. The explanation given for the salvation of this “righteous pagan” has reference only to *Emeth's* service, *Emeth's* true desire and seeking; if Aslan's unmerited favor has anything to do with it, it is not important enough to be mentioned. (So the passage at least has the virtue of illustrating the fact that what is called “implicit faith” is often really a misnomer for explicit *works!*)

We have already seen that Scripture gives no clear hope of any second chance for conversion after death; indeed, what it has to say on the matter points decidedly in the other direction. What one believes *here and now* has eternal consequences; this life is that serious. Inclusivism and implicit faith are more difficult. It is not easy to explain why a good God would enact a costly plan of salvation and then apparently leave the great bulk of the human race throughout its history excluded from access to the Good News which is their only hope of redemption. And those who do not know the Law have general revelation. Could not the Holy Spirit use the witness of Nature and the Law written in their hearts (Rom. 1) to bring some of

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956; rpt. N.Y.: Harper Collins, 1984), 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205-6.

⁷ *Mere Christianity*, op. cit., 176.

them to such a faith as that revelation makes possible for them? And might God not count such faith as righteousness? One must certainly sympathize with those who hope it might be so.

Nevertheless, two important considerations have kept most Christians who trace their roots to the Reformation from affirming such a hope as having any sure biblical grounds. First, the references to general revelation in Romans 1 are part of an argument the conclusion of which is that *all* human beings, both Jew and Gentile, are included under sin and rendered without excuse. General revelation is not presented as an alternate path to salvation but as that which condemns the Gentile, just as the Law of Moses condemns the Jew. To find an exception to that universal condemnation in Romans would be to make part of Paul's evidence go against the tenor of his whole argument. It is an exegetical ploy that has no traction once we attend to the train of thought as opposed to its individual propositions by themselves.

Second, as Christians in general and especially as Christian teachers, we have been entrusted with a very definite and specific message: God offers salvation to believing sinners who cast themselves upon Christ as their crucified and risen Lord and Savior. "If we confess with our mouths Jesus as Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved" (Rom. 10:9). As ambassadors of Christ we are authorized and empowered to offer salvation *on that basis* to all who believe. Speculations about the hard cases, the fate of those who have never heard, are not part of that message. We have no authority to offer any other basis of hope outside of and beyond the message we have been given.

If you ask me, "What must I do to be saved," I can only tell you, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." If you ask, "What must the unreached pagan do to be saved," I have no Scriptural warrant for changing the answer; he too must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you ask, "What if he never hears," I can only tell you that there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. I have been given the authority by God Himself speaking in his Word to offer salvation to sinners on the basis of explicit faith in Christ. I have no authority to give anyone the hope or assurance of salvation on any other basis. What God does with the unreached will be in accordance with his justice, his mercy, and his wisdom, and if we find Emeths in Heaven I will be very happy indeed; but if I now offer them any *hope* of anything other than judgment apart from faith in Christ, I step outside of my authority and betray my commission. That is why the *Westminster Larger Catechism* has to give a negative answer to question 60: "Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ, nor believe in him, be saved by their living according to the light of nature?"⁸

READING WITH DISCERNMENT

Lewis, then, despite his many virtues as a Christian thinker and writer, has passages that encourage doctrinal perspectives that are biblically problematic, perspectives to which young Evangelicals in their growing accommodation to the spirit of the age are increasingly susceptible.

⁸ *The Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms with the Scripture Proofs at Large, together with The Sum of Saving Knowledge* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1973), 157.

This we must recognize. But before we can respond properly to what Lewis was doing, we had first better make sure that we understand it. On closer inspection, the support for these questionable doctrines is sometimes less clear than it seemed at first.

For example, in the introduction to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis says, “I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.”⁹ Are the passengers on the bus actually from Hell, then, or not? It’s hard to tell. Maybe Lewis was more concerned to portray the psychology of conversion in a setting that puts Hell or Heaven at stake and shows the contrast between them than he was to tell us whether or not an actual *post-mortem* conversion is possible. This possibility is supported by a comment Lewis made to one Edward T. Dell, who had written to ask about Lewis’s doctrine in 1949. In response, Lewis wrote, “I have no *doctrine* on such a purely speculative point. You must not confuse my romances with my theses. In the latter I state and argue a creed. In the former much is merely supposed for the sake of the story.”¹⁰

This is an important distinction, and it does help a bit. A “supposal” suggested is not necessarily a doctrine defended, and we must not automatically erect the one into the other. Unfortunately, as we have seen, some of the questionable doctrine shows up not only suggested in “romances” but also stated in “theses,” in a book in which Lewis had set out to expound and defend “mere” Christianity. He did not always succeed in doing so.

If Lewis is not always a safe guide to doctrine, should we continue to give him the preeminent place he has had in our reading? Should we continue to recommend him at all? I would say yes, absolutely. Otherwise we should miss the wonders and glories I have already hinted at here, and many more besides.¹¹ But we should be reminded that no extra-biblical writer—not even Luther or Calvin (and definitely not Donald Williams!)—should be read without the constant exercise of critical discernment rooted in Scripture as the plumb-line of truth. As great as he was, C. S. Lewis was no exception to this rule.

Well, that is well and good for adults, who can be held responsible to read with discernment. But should we still give our children the Narnia books to read? No. Read them *with* your children instead! Thus you can make use of an unparalleled opportunity to cultivate their receptivity to all that is true, good, and beautiful while at the same time learning the biblical discernment you will be modeling for them.

CONCLUSION

The same devotion to truth that requires me to dissent from Lewis at points also requires me to acknowledge my great debt to him. Without his influence, I doubt I would be a Christian today at all. If we learn to practice both receptivity *and* discernment, then, he is one of those

⁹ *The Great Divorce*, op. cit., 7.

¹⁰ Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931-1949* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 914.

¹¹ For much more on this point, see *Mere Humanity*, op. cit.

writers who can put us on the road that leads to the place described in the very last paragraph of the Narniad:

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹²

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NOTES

¹² *The Last Battle*, op. cit., 228.