

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A Christian Voice and Martyr

*Todd Kappelman presents a stirring overview of Dietrich Bonhoeffer looking at both his life experience standing against the Nazis and some of his key perspectives on the true Christian life. He was a thought provoking voice for Christianity as well as a famous martyr.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#). *

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Man and His Mission

Since his death in 1945, and especially in the last ten years, Bonhoeffer's writings have been stirring remarkable interest among Christians, old and young alike. Thus, we are going to examine the merits of reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We will do this by examining the man and his particular place in the canon of Christian writers, his background and historical setting, and finally three of his most important and influential works.

Bonhoeffer's importance begins with his opposition to the Nazi party and its influence in the German church during the rise of Hitler. This interest led him into areas of Christian ecumenical concerns that would later be important to the foundation of our contemporary ecumenical movements. Many denominational factions and various groups claim him as their spokesman, but it's his remarkable personal life, and his authorship of difficult devotional and academic works, which have gained him a place in the history of twentieth century theology.

Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Germany (now part of Poland) and had a twin sister named Sabine. In

1933, before Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer, a minister in the Lutheran church, was already attacking the Nazis in radio broadcasts. Two years later he was the leader of an underground seminary with over twenty young seminarians. That seminary is often seen as a kind of Protestant monastery, and is responsible for many of his considerations about the Christian life as it pertains to community. Later the seminary was closed by the Secret Police. In 1939, through arrangements made by Reinhold Niebuhr, he fled to the United States, but returned to Germany after a short stay. He believed it was necessary to suffer with his people if he was to be an effective minister after the war. The last two years of his life were spent in a Berlin prison. In 1945 he was executed for complicity in a plot on Hitler's life.

During the time that Bonhoeffer was in prison he wrote a book titled *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The manuscript was smuggled from jail and published. These letters contain Bonhoeffer's consideration of the secularization of the world and the departure from religion in the twentieth century. In Bonhoeffer's estimation, the dependence on organized religion had undermined genuine faith. Bonhoeffer would call for a new religionless Christianity free from individualism and metaphysical supernaturalism. God, argued Bonhoeffer, must be known in this world as he operates and interacts with man in daily life. The abstract God of philosophical and theological speculation is useless to the average man on the street, and they are the majority who needs to hear the gospel.

We will examine three of Bonhoeffer's most influential and important works in the following four sections. The first work to be considered will be *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1939. This work is an interpretation of The Sermon on the Mount. It calls for radical living, if the Christian is to be an authentic disciple of Christ. The *Ethics*, written from 1940-1943, is Bonhoeffer's most technical theological exposition. It details the problems in attempting to build an

ethical foundation on philosophical or theoretical grounds. Then we will examine more thoroughly *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one of Bonhoeffer's most personal and moving achievements.

## The Cost of Discipleship

Bonhoeffer's most famous work is *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in 1939. This book is a rigorous exposition and interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 9:35-10:42. Bonhoeffer's major concern is *cheap grace*. This is grace that has become so watered down that it no longer resembles the grace of the New Testament, the *costly grace* of the Gospels.

By the phrase *cheap grace*, Bonhoeffer means the grace which has brought chaos and destruction; it is the intellectual assent to a doctrine without a real transformation in the sinner's life. It is the justification of the sinner without the works that should accompany the new birth. Bonhoeffer says of cheap grace:

*[It] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*[\[1\]](#)

Real grace, in Bonhoeffer's estimation, is a grace that will cost a man his life. It is the grace made dear by the life of Christ that was sacrificed to purchase man's redemption. Cheap grace arose out of man's desire to be saved, but to do so without becoming a disciple. The doctrinal system of the church with its lists of behavioral codes becomes a substitute for the Living Christ, and this cheapens the meaning of discipleship. The true believer must resist cheap grace and

enter the life of active discipleship. Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting; the Christian must rise and follow Christ.{2}

It is here that Bonhoeffer makes one of his most enduring claims on the life of the true Christian. He writes that “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”{3} Men have become soft and complacent in cheap grace and are thus cut off from the discovery of the more costly grace of self-sacrifice and personal debasement. Bonhoeffer believed that the teaching of cheap grace was the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works.{4}

Discipleship, for Bonhoeffer, means strict adherence to Christ and His commandments. It is also a strict adherence to Christ as the object of our faith. Bonhoeffer discusses this single-minded obedience in chapter three of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this chapter, the call of Levi and Peter are used to illustrate the believer’s proper response to the call of Christ and the Gospel.{5} The only requirement these men understood was that in each case the call was to rely on Christ’s word, and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world.{6}

In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel we have the story of the rich young man who is inquiring about salvation and is told by Christ that he must sell all of his possessions, take up his cross, and follow. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the bewilderment of the disciples who ask the question, “Who then can be saved?”{7} The answer they are given is that it is extremely hard to be saved, but with God all things are possible.

## **Bonhoeffer and the Sermon on the Mount**

The exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is another important element of *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer places special emphasis on the beatitudes for understanding the

incarnate and crucified Christ. It is here that the disciples are called "blessed" for an extraordinary list of qualities.

The *poor in spirit* have accepted the loss of all things, most importantly the loss of self, so that they may follow Christ. Those who *mourn* are the people who do without the peace and prosperity of this world.[{8}](#) Mourning is the conscious rejection of rejoicing in what the world rejoices in, and finding one's happiness and fulfillment only in the person of Christ.

The *meek*, says Bonhoeffer, are those who do not speak up for their own rights. They continually subordinate their rights and themselves to the will of Christ first, and in consequence to the service of others. Likewise, those who *hunger and thirst after righteousness* also renounce the expectation that man can eventually make the world into paradise. Their hope is in the righteousness that only the reign of Christ can bring.

The *merciful* have given up their own dignity and become devoted to others, helping the needy, the infirm, and the outcasts. The *pure in heart* are no longer troubled by the call of this world, they have resigned themselves to the call of Christ and His desires for their lives. The *peacemakers* abhor the violence that is so often used to solve problems. This point would be of special significance for Bonhoeffer, who was writing on the eve of World War II. The *peacemakers* maintain fellowship where others would find a reason to break off a relationship. These individuals always see another option.[{9}](#)

Those who are *persecuted for righteousness' sake* are willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. Any and every just cause becomes their cause because it is part of the overall work of Christ. Suffering becomes the way to communion with God.[{10}](#) To this list is added the final blessing pronounced on those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. These will receive a great reward in heaven and be likened to the prophets who also suffered.

Bonhoeffer's emphasis on suffering is directly connected to the suffering of Christ. The church is called to bear the whole burden of Christ, especially as it pertains to suffering, or it must collapse under the weight of the burden.<sup>{11}</sup> Christ has suffered, says Bonhoeffer, but His suffering is efficacious for the remission of sins. We may also suffer, but our suffering is not for redemptive purposes. We suffer, says Bonhoeffer, not only because it is the church's lot, but so that the world may see us suffering and understand that there is a way that men can bear the burdens of life, and that way is through Christ alone.

Discipleship for Bonhoeffer was not limited to what we can comprehend—it must transcend all comprehension. The believer must plunge into the deep waters beyond the comprehension and everyday teaching of the church, and this must be done individually and collectively.

## **Bonhoeffer's *Ethics***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work *Ethics* was written from 1940-1943. Intended as lectures, this is his most mature work and is considered to be his major contribution to theology.<sup>{12}</sup> Christian ethics, he says, must be considered with reference to the regenerated man whose chief desire should be to please God, not with the man who is concerned with an airtight philosophical system. Man is not, and cannot, be the final arbitrator of good and evil. This is reserved for God alone. When man tries to decide what is right and wrong his efforts are doomed to failure. Bonhoeffer wrote that "instead of knowing only the God who is good to him and instead of knowing all things in Him, [man] knows only himself as the origin of good and evil."<sup>{13}</sup> With this statement, Bonhoeffer entered one of the most difficult philosophical and theological problems in the history of the church: the problem of evil.

Bonhoeffer believed that the problem of evil could only be understood in light of the Fall of mankind. The Fall caused

the disunion of man and God with the result that man is incapable of discerning right and wrong.<sup>{14}</sup> Modern men have a vague uneasiness about their ability to know right and wrong. Bonhoeffer asserted this is in part due to the desire for philosophical certainty. However, Bonhoeffer urged the Christian to be concerned with living the will of God rather than finding a set of rules one may follow.<sup>{15}</sup> And while Bonhoeffer was not advocating a direct and individual revelation in every ethical dilemma, he did believe that man can have knowledge of the will of God. He said that "if a man asks God humbly God will give him certain knowledge of His will; and then, after all this earnest proving there will be the freedom to make real decisions, and [this] with the confidence that it is not man but God Himself who through this proving gives effect to His will."<sup>{16}</sup>

Perhaps our first response to Bonhoeffer is that he appears to be some sort of mystic. However, it is imperative to understand the time in which he was writing, and some of the specific problems he was addressing. World War II was raging and the greatest ethical questions of the century were confronting the church. Good men, and even committed Christians, found themselves on opposing sides of the war. It would be ludicrous to suppose that right and wrong on individual or national levels was obvious, and that there was universal agreement among Christians. In the midst of all of this confusion a young pastor-theologian and member of the Resistance could only advise that believers turn to Christ with the expectation that true answers were obtainable. Such confidence is sorely needed among Christians who face a world devoid of answers.

The strength of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* lies not in its systematic resolution of problems facing the church, but rather the acknowledgment that life is complex and that all systems outside of humble submission to the Word of God are doomed to failure. As unsettling as Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* may be, it is a

refreshing call to the contemporary church to repent and return to a life characterized by prayer, the traditional mark of the early church.

## **Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Correspondence**

Our final consideration of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in 1945 for his part in an assassination attempt on Hitler, will center on his *Letters and Papers from Prison* begun in 1942. These letters represent some of Bonhoeffer's most mature work, as well as troubling observations concerning the church in the turbulent middle years of the twentieth century.

The opening essay is titled *After Ten Years*. Here Bonhoeffer identifies with the evil of the times, and especially the war. He speaks of the unreasonable situations which reasonable people must face. He warns against those who are deceived by evil that is disguised as good, and he cries out against misguided moral fanatics and the slaves of tradition and rules.

In viewing the horrors of war, Bonhoeffer reminds us that what we despise in others is never entirely absent from ourselves.<sup>{17}</sup> This warning against contempt for humanity is very important in light of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, whose contempt for the war turned into disillusion with humanity. This is a striking contrast between several witnesses to the war who came to very different conclusions. Bonhoeffer's conclusions were the direct result of a personal relationship with Christ. The conclusions of Hemingway, Sartre, and Camus were the pessimistic observations of those without a final hope.

Bonhoeffer faced death daily for many years and came to some bold conclusions concerning how believers might posture themselves toward this ultimate event. He argued that one



could experience the miracle of life by facing death daily; life could actually be seen as the gift of God that it is. It is we ourselves, and not our outward circumstances, who make death potentially positive. Death can be something voluntarily accepted. [{18}](#)

The final question posed in this opening essay is whether it is possible for plain and simple men to prosper again after the war. [{19}](#) Bonhoeffer does not offer a clear solution, which may be seen as an insight into the true horrors of the war, as well as an open-ended question designed to illicit individual involvement in the problem.

Long before movies like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, or *The Thin Red Line*, Bonhoeffer reported on the atrocities of the war. Some of the letters discuss the brutality and horrors of life in the prison camps, and one can certainly ascertain the expectation of execution in many of his letters. The thing that makes these letters so much more important than the popular films is that the letters are undoubtedly the confessions of one who is looking at the war as a Christian. Bonhoeffer was able to empathize with the problems faced by Christians living in such turbulent times.

Bonhoeffer's significance is difficult to assess completely and accurately, but two observations may help as we come to an end of our examination of his work. [{20}](#) We must always bear in mind the time of his writings. This explains much that we might at first not understand. Finally, any Christian would do well to read the works of one who gave his life in direct connection with his Christian convictions. There have been many martyrs in this century, but few who so vividly recorded the circumstances that lead to their martyrdom with both theological astuteness and a vision for future posterity.

## Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 30.

2. Ibid., 53.
3. Ibid., 54.
4. Ibid., 59.
5. Ibid., 87.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. Ibid., 94.
8. Ibid., 98.
9. Ibid., 102.
10. Ibid., 102.
11. Ibid., 102.
12. William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1969), 130.
13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 19.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethage, trans. Reinhold Fuller and others, [rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967)].
18. Ibid., 17.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. An excellent and more thorough consideration of Bonhoeffer's importance can be found in Eberhard Bethage's [ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Another excellent book for those interested in his life is the biography by Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. These books are full of details about the personal life of Bonhoeffer and offer great insights into his Christian life.

# Titanic: A Critical Appraisal

## *Titanic* as Romance and History

James Cameron's epic film *Titanic*, the most expensive film in history, swept the 1998 Oscars and has been both praised and scorned by critics. The Christian community has been especially tough on Cameron and what they properly sense to be an overly romanticized and unnecessarily cheesy retelling of the historic maiden voyage and untimely ending of the largest moving man-made object of its day. Many people who wanted to see a historic drama with special effects, realistic sets, and period costumes were surprised to learn that they would also have to endure a romantic love story, complete with frontal nudity, which celebrated an adulterous affair between a young third class steerage passenger and a wealthy first class socialite who is engaged to be married.

Although many of my initial suspicions were justified when I saw *Titanic*, I was also pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed the story. I would like to offer some guidelines that might assist those who are struggling with an interpretation, or who may be wondering if they too would enjoy this film.

First, I believe that one must realize that there are actually two stories within the film. The main story is not that of the *Titanic* itself but rather the romantic liaison between Jack Dawson, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, and Rose De Witt Bukatar, played by Kate Winslet. The second story, the one bearing the film's title, is the tale of one of the greatest disasters of the modern industrial age, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Unfortunately, it is the romantic story which most viewers will remember, and the one that is most celebrated. I say unfortunately because there are valuable historic and moral lessons to be learned from the retelling of this tragedy if one will take the time to sift through all of the romantic

drivel which threatens to suffocate it.

There is the danger of going to see *Titanic* and forgetting that it is a story that has been retold for most of this century without much of the romanticism that Cameron and Hollywood include in their latest retelling. The real story of the *Titanic* is not about the celebration of heroic individualism and personal autonomy. It is about a single machine which has become a symbol in the twentieth century for man's technological brilliance, resourceful imagination, and inability to completely master his universe. The monuments and personal testimonies include acts of cowardice and bravery, accounts of class conflict, and excessive celebrations of wealth that would make most people blush.

Rushing to hasty judgment about James Cameron's account of the *Titanic* is neither wise nor expedient. I believe that too often our tendency is to reject films, literature, and the arts in general because there are a few things we find objectionable. Francis Schaeffer always cautioned us against hasty judgment when evaluating the arts.(1) Schaeffer believed that the work of understanding a particular piece of art and the artist should always precede an evaluation. For many viewers, the romantic overshadowing of the historic event may prove to be overwhelming and, ultimately, the film will have to be rejected. Likewise, the careful viewer may find that the historic story and its moral lessons are preserved, managing to shine through the Hollywood commercialism and romantic sentimentality.

## ***Titanic*: Romance Hollywood Style**

Having introduced the dual nature of *Titanic*, a fictionalized romance and a factually inspired historic costume drama, I will now examine each aspect separately. By inserting the romantic plot into *Titanic*, Cameron presumes that a modern audience will not be interested in a historic costume drama, even one about the *Titanic*, without some form of entertainment

to elevate the boredom of mere history. As his vehicle, Cameron chooses the love story between Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio), a young bachelor in third class and Rose De Witt Bukatar (Kate Winslet), a young socialite who is engaged to be married.

Jack wins his ticket on the *Titanic* in a last minute poker game and jumps from the gang plank just as the fated ship is pulling out of the harbor. He is the embodiment of the classic male adventurer. Jack has no ties to friends, family, or country. His days are occupied with whatever adventure he chooses and he answers to no man. By contrast, Rose is a beautiful young woman who is accustomed to the finer things in life, a member of the upper class and a lady in every sense of the word. Her family has come to financial ruin, and the only means of rescuing their fortune is for her to marry back into wealth. Rose, distraught with her arranged marriage, is contemplating suicide by jumping overboard when Jack comes to her rescue.

Jack is an amateur artist specializing in portraiture and the human figure. Rose is impressed with Jack's talent and proposes that he paint her in the nude. Jack naturally complies with Rose's request and we see Kate Winslet in the film's only nude scenes. Jack and Rose fall in love, consummate their love out of wedlock, and Rose begins to scheme for a way out of her marital commitment. When the ship begins to sink, it is Jack who leads Rose through the maze of hazards, assists her after the ship sinks, and is finally responsible for her survival. Their love is portrayed as triumphing over natural disasters and societal constraints. They will not be denied by man or God.

We should not vicariously live sinful adventures through the lives of others, whether in film or literature.(2) When we applaud the sinful behavior of others, we participate in their sin and are thus guilty. Likewise, to remain silent is a sin.(3) Too often a film like *Titanic* inspires young people,

Christian and non-Christian alike, to applaud sinful behavior. Young people frequently see romantic adventure and thrilling lifestyles in characters like Jack and Rose. What they often fail to realize is the sinful nature of the romance in the film and the direct contradiction of biblical principles. If young people are going to continue to watch films with mixed messages like those of *Titanic*, it is imperative that we discuss the philosophical and doctrinal content in an intelligent and reflective manner.

Men and women are born with a fallen nature and we should expect to see this nature in fictional literature and film. What we should not do is celebrate this fallen nature and revel in wickedness. And too many people, especially young people, applaud *Titanic* on the basis of the romantic triumphs of Jack and Rose.

## **Humanistic Confidence and Technological Arrogance in *Titanic***

Having discussed the romantic aspect of *Titanic*, discussion of the historic nature of the film is at hand. In order to accomplish this more fully, one must begin with an understanding of the thinking prevalent when the *Titanic* was built and the place that its demise has held throughout the twentieth century.

Understanding the historical milieu of the beginning of this century is a prerequisite for grasping what the *Titanic* meant to those who lived at that time. Following the rebirth of classical studies in the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by a vigorous application of the scientific method to almost all aspects of life. The Enlightenment period was a time marked by some of the greatest discoveries of mankind, discoveries which have so impacted our lives that we cannot imagine our modern society without them.

The first and second Industrial Revolutions followed the Enlightenment period, and the modern world as we know it came into being. The confidence from the Enlightenment period, coupled with the obvious engineering and technical successes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fostered a confidence in man's ability to master his universe that was unrivaled in any preceding period.

The *Titanic*, built during the early and formative years of this century, was truly a modern project in that it was built out of the confidence acquired by the western world during the previous two centuries of progress. Designed by Thomas Andrews, and built by The White Star Line in England, the *Titanic* was completed in 1912 and weighed over 45,000 tons. It was the largest moving man-made object of its day, and eyewitness accounts of it were often marked by a daunting reverence for her sheer size and presence.

The *Titanic* was the pride of the White Star Line and became, for many, a symbol for man's ability to accomplish anything he endeavored. The designers, captain, and engineers claimed that she was the fastest and safest luxury liner on the ocean. We even hear the infamous boast that "God couldn't sink her." Rather than objecting to this type of statement, or assuming a posture of righteous indignation, Christians should understand that lines such as these accurately reflect the true spirit of the time. The *Titanic* may be understood as an overwhelming example of sinful pride on the part of many individuals in that era. She was able to inspire in many, from designers and builders to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who participated in her glory, a false estimation of man's control of the universe.

In 1985, 73 years after the *Titanic* sank, Eva Hart, the last living survivor who was old enough at the time to remember the actual events surrounding the fateful night, had many interesting things to say about the disaster. She said that the entire catastrophe could simply be attributed to man's

arrogance and desire to demonstrate mastery over his universe. We now know that the *Titanic* was traveling too fast to react quickly to the report of icebergs ahead. Coupled with an arrogant over-confidence, this caused a disaster that need never have happened. James Cameron's *Titanic* provides a new opportunity to reconsider some of the lessons that many hold to be fundamental aspects of this tragic event.

## **Class Conflict, Religion and Heroism in *Titanic***

I have discussed the technological arrogance which is usually cited in reference to the *Titanic* disaster and has been part of the story for most of this century. I now want to examine some additional aspects of the film which are valuable as moral lessons and interesting from historical perspectives.

First, and something that has caught many by surprise, is the glaring presence of class conflict in the movie. Men and women from every class of society and many ethnic origins were on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. The early part of this century was characterized by an extreme class consciousness. People were extremely conscious about their social and financial status, and upward mobility was very rare. In the film, as in real life at the time, the poor and the rich have little association with one another. On the occasions when their lives intersect, it is the rich who have all of the benefits and the poor who endure most of the pain and suffering. In *Titanic* we have an opportunity to see this class division from a unique perspective. We can find rich and poor characters with whom we genuinely sympathize, as well as those whom we despise. For the most part though, James Cameron portrays the rich as oppressive, rude, and arrogant. This may or may not be a true perspective of that time, but it does capture the distinction. In the film we are given the opportunity to attend one party for first class passengers and a separate celebration for third class passengers. The third



class folks look like they are having every bit as much fun as the first class passengers, and possibly more.

The heroic aspect of the *Titanic* legend remains intact in Cameron's film. All of the historical facts are not perfect and there have been outcries from some about the portrayal of specific individuals in the film in a manner that is unflattering and factually false. However, the film is true to the account that many people went down honorably and courageously with the ship. Many of the crew remained at their stations throughout the sinking. We witness Captain Edward John Smith's (Bernard Hill) disbelief at the sinking of the great ship, as well as his willingness to go down with her. The musicians who played while the ship was sinking in order to provide a calming background are portrayed as noble and of unflinching courage. There are scenes in which men of all classes step aside so that women and children from all classes can get to the life boats. There was not perfect equality, calm, or heroism. However, there were enough heroic and noble acts performed that night to merit respect for those individuals.

I also found the treatment of Christians to be fair and realistic in the brief scene dealing with the religious life of the passengers. Groups are seen in prayer as the ship sinks. Eva Hart also testified that the last song the band played as the *Titanic* went down was *Nearer My God To Thee*.(4)

## **The Problem of Pain and the Sovereignty of God**

To conclude this appraisal of *Titanic*, I will discuss the theological questions that are raised and offer some insights for discussion. Regardless of one's position on the film, the factual account of 1500 persons losing their lives in a disaster that did not have to happen raises some serious issues. Many Christians believe that God is in control and

that, had He wished to do so, He could have intervened in the *Titanic* disaster. In this instance God did not intervene, and many innocent people perished, including women, children, and infants.

C. S. Lewis summarizes the problem of pain and suffering in this way. "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."(5)

The first part of this problem, which pertains to God's goodness, presupposes that the sinking of the *Titanic* was not good, and that God allowed an evil thing to take place. One response might be that He allowed this to take place to avoid a larger disaster, such as a collision involving two ocean liners. Or perhaps there was a plague or virus on the ship which would have stricken a large portion of the American population, and God prevented the *Titanic* from reaching its destination in order to save millions. While this is pure speculation, it does illustrate that we, being finite, do not have the same perspective as God in determining what is good or evil.

The second part of this problem questions God's ability to intervene in human affairs. Here the argument would be that God saw the *Titanic* in danger, but was powerless to stop the disaster. Any Christian who believes the Scriptures knows that God has miraculously intervened in human affairs in the past, and could do so again at any time. The fact that He apparently did not act may be accounted for by supposing that God saw a greater good in allowing the *Titanic* to sink. Furthermore, He may have been instrumental in her sinking just as He was instrumental in stopping the Tower of Babel from being built.(6) Again, the point here is not to argue this position specifically, but to show that we do not completely understand how God works in every situation. In Isaiah 55:8-9 the prophet declares that God's thoughts and ways are not man's. His

understanding is higher than ours. We should expect His actions to be higher also.

The presence of natural, moral, and gratuitous evil in the world is one of the greatest challenges to the consistency of Christian truth claims. *Titanic* is a wonderful opportunity for believers and non-believers to engage one another. When we remember that over 1500 people perished in the 1912 *Titanic* disaster and thousands of friends and family members were also dramatically affected, the problem of pain and suffering should not be neglected. Very few, if any, of the passengers on board the *Titanic* that night thought it would be their last night on earth. Yet for many, it was just that. Though we can use film as an easy escape and a vehicle for vicarious living, we should both realize and maximize the potential for dialogue and the opportunity for contact with our culture afforded through a film like *Titanic*.

#### For Further Reading

*James Cameron's Titanic*, Forward by James Cameron, Text by Ed. W. Marsh, Photographs by Douglas Kirkland, Harper Perennial: NY, NY 1997.

*Sinking of the Titanic: Eyewitness Accounts*, Ed. Jay Henry Mowbray, Dover Publications Inc. Mineola NY. 1998.

*The Titanic: End of a Dream*, Wyn Craig Wade, Penguin: NY, NY. 1987.

*Titanic, An Illustrated History*. Text by Don Lynch, Paintings by Ken Marschall, Intro. by Robert D. Ballard. Madison Press Books, Ontario, Canada. 1992.

*Titanic: The Official Story April 14-15 1912*. Facsimile Reproductions Of Documents From The Public Record Of The Office Of London, Random House Inc. NY, NY. 1997.

*Titanic: Triumph and Tragedy*, Eaton, John P. & Charles A.

Hass. 2nd ed. Norton, W.W. NY, NY 1994

## Notes

1 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, Vol. I, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, (Crossway Books: Westchester), 30-31.

2 For a more detailed account of how Christians should approach the arts see: Ryken, Leland. *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly about the Arts*. Harold Shaw: Wheaton, 1989. and Ryken, Leland. *Culture in Christian perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts*. Multnomah Press: Portland, 1986.

3 I Jn. 5:17

4 *The Titanic*. Public Broadcasting System. Aired on channel 13, Dallas, TX, May 4, 1998, 9:00 PM.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (The Macmillian Company: New York, 1944), 14.

6 Gen. 11

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# C.S. Lewis: His Enduring Legacy

*C.S. Lewis was a tremendously gifted writer of profound insight and wisdom. Todd Kappelman argues that both Christians and non-Christians should read his wonderful writings, the major of which are reviewed here.*

# A Christian For All Men and A Man For All Seasons

There was a time not too long ago when nearly half of the Christians I enjoyed regular fellowship with, not only knew who C.S. Lewis was, but had actually read at least one of his books. Lewis represented for us a means by which we could enter into some of the deepest theological and philosophical discussions imaginable without possessing a degree in either theology or philosophy. Lewis's writing spoke to children, soldiers, Oxford professors, believers and unbelievers alike. His inviting, conversational tone in writing made him one of the first authors that I can say with some confidence I truly know.

Today, approximately 18 years after my first encounter with Lewis, I know people who have read him, and still others who have heard of him, but far too many who do not read him, nor recommend him to their friends. Without going into a discussion about the shift in our society from being text-driven to media-driven, I would like to make a case for the need to read Lewis, and to recommend him to our friends, both believers and unbelievers. In this essay I will discuss some of his major works and recommend some of my personal favorites that I believe you will enjoy reading.

One reason I recommend Lewis is that, given the extremely diverse society we live in today, the church is in profound need of a person of integrity and knowledge who can speak to as many different groups as possible. Lewis was, and remains, one of the best men for this task. He was born in 1898 and died in 1963. The story of his early life is one of conversion from hard core intellectual atheism to Christianity, and then to one of the great champions of the Christian faith in this century. He was an Oxford professor whose range of writings included theology, ethics, philosophy, literary criticism, science fiction, children's stories, imaginative literature,

and much more. There are very few areas of concern in which Lewis did not have something say, and he always said it with both wit and sensitivity.

Those who have never read Lewis can begin with one of the many volumes of collected essays on theology, philosophy, and cultural issues. *God in the Dock*, with 48 essays, is an excellent place to start. One will encounter titles such as "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ," where Lewis says that we must either accept or reject the gospel, but we cannot explain it away. Other essays have titles such as "The Laws of Nature" or "Religion and Science." One of my favorites in this collection is entitled "We Have No Right to Happiness," in which Lewis warns us that the continual pursuit of happiness as an ultimate goal will result in an unnatural affection for something that will eventually sweep us away.

In a small collection entitled *The World's Last Night and Other Essays*, one will find titles such as "The Efficacy of Prayer" and "Good Work and Good Works." A larger volume entitled *The Seeing Eye* has the wonderful essays "Christianity and Culture" and "The Poison of Subjectivism." These volumes of essays should provide an excellent introduction to Lewis, and help the new reader understand why he is one of the most beloved Christian writers of our time.

## ***Mere Christianity***

We have been discussing the importance of reading the works of C.S. Lewis and have urged those who are not familiar with his works to begin with one of the collections of essays such as *God In The Dock*, *The World's Last Night*, or *The Seeing Eye*.

These essays are an excellent place to start, but it is in *Mere Christianity* that Lewis details what he saw as the essentials of the faith. All of Lewis's writings have a common theme: a reasonable and thorough faith which is capable of reaching everyone from the most highly educated to the

simplest common man on the street. Whether it is the Narnia books for children, the science-fiction trilogy, the essays on theology and philosophy, or the technical works on miracles and the problem of pain, Lewis is committed to a rational and well thought-out faith. There was no easy faith for the Oxford professor, and Lewis would have nothing to do with a religion that was not grounded in both history and fact.

Originally aired as "The Broadcast Talks" in the early forties, *Mere Christianity* has an almost conversational tone to it. This is one of the interesting features that first attracted me to Lewis. It's as if one were sitting down to tea and having a discussion with him; he is continually anticipating, and answering, the questions that his imaginary interlocutor might have. It must be remembered that Lewis is not arguing for a specific denominational faith in this work. Rather, he is attempting to raise the basic tenets of the Christian faith for discussion, acceptance, or even rejection. Lewis says that if one is hesitating between two Christian "denominations," one will not learn from reading this book whether he or she ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic.(1) The faith Lewis is outlining is mere, or basic, Christianity.

Many objections can be, and have been, made to this ecumenical approach. However, this is also the strength of Lewis, and one which I believe is especially relevant for the modern, pluralistic times we live in. Lewis went so far in the ecumenical aspect of this work that he sent the original transcripts for *Mere Christianity* to four clergymen: an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic. They all had helpful advice, and all said they could live with the brand of Christianity that Lewis was detailing as "mere" Christianity.(2) This is a remarkable response which might be difficult to reproduce today.

In the first of the three books, or chapters, Lewis discusses the natural moral law found in all men. He argues that this

natural understanding of right and wrong is a clue as to the nature of the universe and its Creator. In the second of the three books, Lewis outlines the basics of the Christian faith. It is here that the reader encounters the “mere” Christianity of the title. Finally, in book three, Lewis discusses the behavior which one should rightly expect from the believer. Some of the topics he discusses are sexual morality, marriage, forgiveness, charity, hope, and faith. Lewis takes the ideas from the three chapters on the law of human nature and develops that beautifully into the beliefs and behavior one should expect from Christians. *Mere Christianity* also provides an excellent introduction to Lewis at his best, and is a foundation text for understanding his work.

## The Space Trilogy

The space trilogy is remarkable as both a good work of science fiction, and a great work of imaginative theology. Lewis’s science fiction is a sophisticated and highly developed fantasy dealing with the differences between natural and supernatural philosophy, original sin and temptation, as well as the perennial struggle between good and evil.

*Out of The Silent Planet*, published in 1938, is the first volume in the series. The silent planet, Earth, is so named because it has been cut off from beatific language as a result of sin.<sup>(3)</sup> In this initial book, we are introduced to many of the characters who will be used in the following volumes. Elwin Ransom, often taken to be a development of Lewis himself, is a philologist from Cambridge University who is kidnapped while on a walking holiday in the Midlands and taken to Malacandra, or Mars, by two evil men named Devine and Weston.

*Perelandra*, the second volume in the series, was published in 1943, and is my personal favorite in the space or science fiction trilogy. *Perelandra*, or Venus, is a paradisiacal world full of floating and fixed islands and a green-fleshed Adam



and Eve who live in a pre-fallen universe. This unfallen state of existence is perfectly symbolized in the relationship between "The Green Lady," as Eve is called, her husband, and the animal and fish life of the planet. This is a harmonious picture of a world where the natural and spiritual co-exist in beautiful perfection. In the original garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Perelandra, the Green Lady and her husband are forbidden to be on the fixed land after sunset. One of the most interesting features in Perelandra is the naivete of the Green Lady and her husband. They live in an unfallen world, and therefore are unaware of the consequences following willful disobedience. Perelandra is a stunning fictional treatment about the nature of obedience and man's fallen nature.

*That Hideous Strength*, published in 1945, is the third and final installment in the trilogy. In this volume, the action is once again set on earth, the silent planet, and Lewis shows the reader that the result of continual and willful sin is the destruction of the individual, and the propagation of evil on a worldwide scale. As a study of evil, *That Hideous Strength* shows how the wicked sow the seeds of their own destruction.(4)

The brilliance of the space trilogy is that Lewis is able to reverse the perceptions found in the science-fiction of his day and counter that with a theological lesson woven into the fabric of fiction. Lewis understood the ability of fiction to capture the imagination of the reader and thus its ability to be used as a vehicle to raise serious theological concerns. He once said, "Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under the cover of romance without their knowing it." Those who thought that C.S. Lewis was primarily an author of theological and philosophical works will find a refreshing change of pace in the space trilogy.

## ***The Problem of Pain and A Grief Observed***

Now, let's continue our discussion by looking at two works by C.S. Lewis which deal with the problem of evil and suffering. We should begin our discussion by stating that the problem of pain and suffering, or the problem of evil, as it is often referred to, is one of the oldest and strongest objections against the Christian faith. Briefly, the problem of evil runs as follows: If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, He should know about the plight of man, He should care about our situation, and He should rid the universe of pain and suffering.

*The Problem of Pain*, published in 1940, is specifically dedicated to the intellectual problems raised by evil and suffering. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis begins by discussing God's omnipotence and characteristic goodness. By beginning with God's omnipotence, or His unlimited power, Lewis addresses the first charge in the problem of evil, namely that God may in fact be unable to rid the universe of evil. Here Lewis simply states that one need not infer from the existence of an omnipotent God and the existence of evil that God is unable to do something about it. Lewis advances several options; such as God may be using the evil to work out His plan among men; He may be ridding the universe of evil and we cannot see the end; or most importantly, evil is a necessary condition of the relationship between God and His creatures if they are to have a free will.

Again, when addressing the problem of God's goodness and His willingness to help out His creation, Lewis simply argues that one need not, and in fact cannot, come to the conclusion that God is not good based on the available data. We, as finite creatures, argues Lewis, are in no position to draw these kinds of conclusions. There are many perfectly logical explanations for the coexistence of evil and an all-powerful and all-good God. Subsequent chapters in *The Problem of Pain*

deal with human wickedness, the fall of man, human pain, animal pain, and heaven and hell.

Twenty years after the publication of *The Problem of Pain*, in 1961, and just two years before his death at the age of 65, Lewis published a very small work entitled *A Grief Observed*. Whereas *The Problem of Pain* is a theoretical treatment of the problem of evil and suffering, *A Grief Observed* is the pragmatic working out of the problem of evil.

In April of 1956, C.S. Lewis, a 57-year-old dedicated bachelor, married Joy Davidman, an American poet with two young children. Lewis and Davidman enjoyed four years of blissful marriage and were intensely happy together. Joy died of cancer in 1960 at the age of 45. Her death shattered Lewis, and his pilgrimage through the process of bereavement resulted in his writing *A Grief Observed*. When reading this work, one will see Lewis at his most tender moments. He discusses their relationship, his struggles through her illness, his doubts after her death, and most importantly his intense efforts to come to grips with death and dying. *A Grief Observed* shows that Lewis had both emotional and intellectual depth. Any Christian would benefit from reading this small and extremely accessible work.

## ***The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce***

In this discussion we have sought to inform you of the wide range of subjects that Lewis addressed in his writing. In the process we have attempted to direct you to those books and essays that would (1) heighten your desire to become acquainted with his works, or (2) stimulate you to continue reading them. At this point we will look at one of the most widely read of Lewis's books, *The Screwtape Letters*, and another less read, but related work, *The Great Divorce*.

*The Screwtape Letters*, first published in 1942, is one of the

most straightforward and pointed works about hell and demonic activity that Lewis ever penned. The book is a satire about damnation and the efforts of demons to influence men. The "letters" are correspondence between a senior demon named Screwtape, who has centuries of experience in the art of tempting humans, and his younger nephew, Wormwood. The younger demon is a fresh graduate from The Tempters Training College and is on his first assignment. His task involves attempting to block, by any means necessary, a certain individual from becoming a Christian.

Lewis's audience is allowed to read the correspondence between these two demons, whose greatest desire is to facilitate the downfall and ultimate damnation of human beings. One is able actually to enter into a kind of "psychology of damnation" and see how the forces of evil operate in men's lives.

*The Great Divorce*, written just three years later in 1945, deals with heaven and hell and continues the satirical and comedic style of *The Screwtape Letters*. In his story Lewis speaks in the first person and is in the midst of a dream about a bus ride to heaven. The story opens in hell, where Lewis is preparing to leave with several people who are permanent residents in hell. Lewis meets people in various stages of damnation, much like Dante's *Inferno*, all of whom appear to have chosen their eternal residence freely. The story is a contrast between the "solid" people of the heavenly realm and the transparent ghost-like people of hell. The less real inhabitants of hell cannot participate in, or endure, the realness of heaven. The analogy illustrates the difficulty the unregenerate have in even understanding the things of God. Do not be fooled by the satirical nature of *The Great Divorce* or *The Screwtape Letters*, for both contain an abundance of theology. Issues concerning salvation, damnation, heaven, hell, the free will of men, and the practical matters of the Christian faith are all present in these two volumes.

In concluding this discussion, I would first like to urge

anyone who is not familiar with the works of C.S. Lewis to take the time to become acquainted with him. He is one of the most beloved and original Christian writers of this century. Secondly, to those who have read Lewis, and enjoyed him in the past, please recommend this wonderful author to your Christian friends. Lastly, and most importantly, I strongly urge anyone who has a friend who is an unbeliever to use a work such as *Mere Christianity*, or a collection of essays such as *God in the Dock*, as introductions to an ecumenical and eloquent apologist for the Christian faith.

## Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillian, 1943). (Originally aired in three parts as "The Broadcast Talks," p. 6.)
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. Colin Duriez, *The C.S. Lewis Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to His Life, Thought and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1990), p. 199.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

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# The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

*What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and*

*postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).*

## **The Postmodernism Revolution**

There is a sense among many people today that the modern era, both in terms of technical and financial prosperity, as well as personal spiritual well-being, is over. There appears to be a general malaise among many people today, and a certain uneasy feeling that the twentieth-century has entered a new phase. Additionally, most believe that this new phase is not a very good one. Many diverse new “communities” such as feminists, gays, pro-choice advocates, pro-life advocates, conservatives, liberals, and various other groups, both religious and non-religious, make up the global village we now live in. These various groups are frequently at odds with one another and more often than not there is a breakdown in communication. This breakdown can be attributed to the lack of a common frame of reference in vocabulary and, more importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Darwinian

naturalism has been one of the chief philosophical revolutions that has gripped the world. And, although few at the time had any idea how much Darwin's ideas would permeate the culture, no one today doubts the far reaching results of that revolution. The Christian church was not ready for the Darwinian revolution, and thus this philosophy was able to gain a foothold (and later a death grip) on every aspect of modern life, both in academic and popular circles. For decades after the revolution, many church leaders thought it unimportant to answer Darwin and said little or nothing about the new philosophy. Most Christians were, therefore, not equipped to provide coherent answers and were too late in entering the debate. The result is that most of our public schools and universities, and even our political lives, are dominated by the erroneous assumption that Darwinian naturalism is scientifically true and that creationism is fictitious.

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

## **From the Premodern to the Modern**

Historians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and many others use the terms *modern*, *premodern*, and *postmodern* to help them navigate through large pieces of time and thought. In

order to understand what these very helpful terms are used for, we will try to understand the premodern period first. The term *premodern* is used to describe the period before the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The premodern period is often referred to as the precritical period—a time before the criteria of truth became so stringent. The premodern period ends somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the high part of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The major thing one should remember is that, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, the Western world was changing forever, and this would have far reaching impact on every aspect of life, especially religion.

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and handwritten texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that someone had just told you that the world was created by a being that you could not detect with your five senses and that He had left a written communication about His will for your life. You would look around at the world that you lived in, and you would decide if the stories that were told to you



explained the world and were reasonably believable. This method for determining truth is called the *correspondence method of truth*. If the story being told corresponds to the observable phenomenon in the world, then the story is accepted as truth. There is also a *coherence method of truth* in operation during this period. The coherence theory would add to the correspondence theory the idea that all of the individual stories told over a period of time should not contradict one another. These two forms of determining whether something is true or not were the primary means of evaluation for many centuries.

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

## **The Advent of the Modern**

We must now leave our discussion of the premodern period and turn our attention to the beginning of the modern period. Some see the modern era as beginning in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; others, however, believe it began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A main tenet of *modernism* is that human reason, armed with the scientific method, is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge about the universe. During the Renaissance men began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of the earth in ever increasing ways. It was a time marked by

invention and discovery that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism, or a high confidence in mankind. The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where better telescopes and microscopes allowed men to unlock the secrets of the universe. The unlocking of these secrets led to the initial impression that the universe, and the human body, resembled machines and could be understood in mechanistic terms.

In the eighteenth century the progress of science accelerated so rapidly that it appeared as if science would soon be able to explain everything. Many believed that there were no limits to the power of human reason operating with the data from sense perception. In contrast to the truth of the oral tradition in the premodern era, the modern period accepted as truth only that which could be proven to be true. Many of the philosophers and theologians of the modern period sought to devise a rational religion, a faith that could incorporate all of the considerations and discoveries of the new science.

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence to the belief that science and the scientific method would one day yield a utopian society. It is easy to see how the optimism of this period became almost intoxicating to many. The so-called-truths of religion were quickly being cast aside in favor of the new, and better, truths found by science.

Examples found in advertising may be helpful. A company that wished to sell a car or a pair of tennis shoes would appeal to the scientific truths of their product. That is, a company would attempt to persuade a potential buyer into purchasing its product based on the fact that it was the best item obtainable. Add to this scientific furor, the advancement of Darwinian naturalism, and it is easy to see how religious claims seemed like quaint, antiquated beliefs for many people. The modern period culminated in arrogance concerning human abilities and human reason. It proposed a world created without any assistance from God. The modern period differs from the premodern in its rejection of the supernatural or the transcendent which is based largely on the belief that religious truth claims are different than scientific truth claims. According to many, truth itself had changed.

## **The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern**

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more

relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

Modernity may be understood as a time when our best philosophers, theologians, and scientists attempted to make sense out of the world based on the belief in objective reality. One of the central tenets of the era we live in (the postmodern period) is that there is no such thing as objective truth. In fact, the new trend in postmodern thought is to embrace, affirm, and live with philosophical, theological, and even scientific chaos. Earlier we used an example from advertising; suggesting that products were marketed based on their claims to be superior to what a competitor might offer. If we use this example again, postmodern methodology appeals more to a person's feelings than to his or her sense of factual truth. Cars, tennis shoes, and other products are marketed based on image. The best car is not necessarily the one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

Furthermore, Christians are expected to tolerate contradicting truth claims and to look the other way if certain ethical behaviors (abortion, homosexuality, etc.) do not suit their tastes. The current postmodern condition is only in the early

stages of development, not even a half a century old, and yet its devastating effects have penetrated every aspect of our lives. Christians largely responded too late to the threats of Darwinism, and now the destructive effects of that movement are evident to anyone in the Christian community. Postmodernism, and its companion rampant philosophical relativism, should be among the foremost concerns of any Christian who wishes to engage his or her culture and ensure that the gospel of Christ has a fertile context in which it can take root and grow in the future.

## **Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge**

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

When she was pressed on her beliefs concerning reality, the inconsistencies of her philosophy were evident. She stated that everything was a matter of opinion or one's personal perspective. When asked if this belief extended to physical reality, she said it did. She said that a person could look at something in such a way as to alter reality.

The example of the existence or nonexistence of her car was raised. She said that if she believed that her car was not in the parking lot and if another person believed that it was, it could be possible that it actually existed for one person and

not for the other. When one first hears something like this, it sounds as if the person who maintains this position is joking, and could not possibly mean for us to take him or her seriously. However, the sad and frightening truth is that this individual is very serious.

This young woman is representative of a large part of our Western culture, men and women who tend to think unsystematically. The result of this way of thinking is that people often hold ideas that are logically inconsistent and contradict each other. The result is that persons professing to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or even atheists are given equal degrees of credibility. Truth has become a function of personal preference, not correspondence to objective reality.

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is often a statement such as: "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me." This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to

indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God's existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

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# Film and the Christian

*How should a Christian view films? Todd Kappelman, a longtime film critic, calls us to exercise discernment in distinguishing between art and mere entertainment, without damaging our spiritual vitality.*

## The Convergence of High and Low Culture

An examination of the history of our century will reveal the importance of viewing and studying film for any individuals who wish to understand themselves and their time and place. Film is essential because the distinction so many make between so called “high” and “low” culture has in fact disappeared (if it ever existed in the first place).

Approximately one hundred years ago the dawn of electronic technology, beginning with the invention of the radio, gave birth to mass media and communications. The increase in leisure time and wealth fostered the birth and development of an entertainment industry. The decline in the quality of education and the explosion in the popularity of television sealed the union between what was traditionally considered “high” art and popular culture. Western society is now defined more strictly by the image, the sound, and the moving picture than by the written word, which defined previous centuries. Seldom does anyone ask, “What have you read lately?” One is much more likely to hear the question, “What have you seen lately.” We have become, for better or worse, a visually oriented society. Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture which we live in than do the giants



of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series.

The church as a body has a long standing and somewhat understandable tradition of suspicion concerning narrative fiction, the concepts of which apply here to our discussion of film. A brief examination of positions held by some Christians from the past regarding written fictional narratives may help us to understand the concern some have with involvement in fictional narratives as recorded on film.

*Alcuin*, an influential Christian leader of the ninth century was extremely concerned about the worldliness he saw in the church. One of the things that troubled him the most was the monks' fondness for fictional literature and stories about heroes such as Beowulf and Ingeld. Writing to Higbald, Alcuin said: "Let the words of God be read aloud at the table in your refractory. The reader should be heard there, not the flute player; the Fathers of the Church, not the songs of the heathen. . . . What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"[\[1\]](#)

*Tertullian*, the father of Latin theology, writing six centuries earlier voiced a similar concern about Christians involved in secular matters when he said: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[\[2\]](#) Specifically, Tertullian believed that the study of pagan philosophers was detrimental to the Christian faith and should be avoided at all costs.

*Paul*, the apostle, writing to the Church at Corinth, said: "What partnership does righteousness have with iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?"[\[3\]](#)

Conclusion: The objections raised against the arts, both past and present, do have merit and should not be dismissed too quickly. Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that entertainment and art are not used in a manner that

is damaging to their spiritual welfare. It is often a difficult call. For example, many Christians objected to the work of Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman in the fifties and sixties, yet men such as Francis Schaeffer thought that it was necessary to pay attention to what these individuals were saying and why.

## **The Nature of Film and the Opportunity for Christians**

Properly understood film is a narrative medium, a kind of “visual book” with a beginning, middle, and ending that contains some degree of resolution. All film is not created equal; some movies are made with the express purpose of providing diversionary entertainment, while others represent the sincere efforts of artists to make works of art that reflect human emotions and call people to a more reflective existence. This second category of film should be considered an art form and is therefore worthy of the same attention that any other art such as the ballet, sculpture, or painting receives.

Art is the embodiment of man’s response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality.<sup>{4}</sup> Man has always and will continue to express his hope and excitement, as well as his fears and reservations about life, death, and what it means to be human through the arts. He will seek to express his world through all available means, and presently that includes film. *Schindler’s List*, a recent film by Steven Spielberg, is an excellent example of film’s ability to express man’s hopes and fears.

As a picture of reality, film is able to convey an enormous range of human experiences and emotions. The people one encounters in films are frequently like us whether they are Christian or not. Often the people we see in the better films are struggling with some of the most important questions in

life. They are attempting to find meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless universe. These people are often a vehicle used by a director, producer, or writer to prompt us to ask the larger questions of ourselves.

Film is not and should not be required to be “uplifting” or “inspiring.” Christians should remember that non-Christians also have struggles and wrestle with the meaning of life and their place and purpose in the universe. Christians and non-Christians will not and should not be expected to come to the same conclusions to the problems they face in the fictional universe of film. The Scriptures indicate that Christians and non-Christians are different, and this should be a point of celebration, not alarm, for the Christian audience.

T. S. Eliot, speaking about literature, but with much that can be applied to film, had this advice for the Christian:

Literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint... It is necessary for Christian readers [and film goes by extension], to scrutinize their reading, [again film by extension], especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.[\[5\]](#)

Therefore, Christians should take their worldview with them when they attend and comment on any film. They should be cautious about pronouncing a film that does not conform with Christian beliefs or their particular notion of orthodoxy as unfit for consumption or undeserving of a right to exist as art.

Conclusion: The need for participation in film arises from not only the diversity of material with which the medium deals, but also from the plurality of possible interpretations concerning a given film. Christians have an opportunity to influence their culture by entering the arena of dialogue provided by film and contending for their positions and

voicing their objections with sophistication, generosity, and a willingness to hear from those of opposing beliefs.

## **Some Concerns about Christian Participation in Cinema{6}**

Christians are often concerned about the content of certain films and the appropriateness of viewing particular pieces. This is a valid concern that should not be dismissed too quickly and certainly deserves a response from those who do view objectionable material. The two primary areas of concern leveled by the many detractors of contemporary culture as it pertains to film are found in the categories of gratuitous sex and violence. It is crucial that Christians understand the exact nature of sex and violence, gratuitous and otherwise, and how it may be employed in art. Taking only violence as the representative issue of these two concerns, we must ask ourselves what, if any, redeeming value does it have, and can it be used and viewed under some circumstances?

We might turn to the use of gratuitous violence in literature in order to better understand the role of violence in film. If the former is understood and embraced (albeit with reservation), the latter may also be understood and embraced (again with caution) as a means of expression employed by a new image-driven culture.

The image of gratuitous violence in modernity has one of its first and most important articulations in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Recall that in the poem the sailor shoots an albatross for absolutely no reason and is condemned by his fellow sailors, who believed the bird was a good omen, to wear the dead body around his neck. The ship is ravaged by plague, and only the cursed mariner survives. After many days of soul searching on the ghost ship, the mariner pronounces a blessing upon all of creation and atones for his wrongs. A sister ship saves the

man, and he begins to evangelistically tell his story to anyone who will listen.

Every time this poem is read in a class or other group there is invariably some person who is fixated on the act of violence and emphasizes it to the point of losing the meaning of the entire poem. The story is about a mariner who realizes the errors of his ways, repents, and comes to a restored relationship with creation and other men. For Coleridge, the act of violence thus becomes the vehicle for the turning of the character's soul from an infernal orientation to the paradisaical. Other authors have used similar methods. Dante, for example, repeats a similar pattern when he explored the spiritual realms in his poetic chronicle *The Divine Comedy*. First, he takes his readers through the harshness, pain, and misery of the Inferno before moving into Purgatory and finally into the bliss and joy of Paradise. Dostoyevsky composed four novels that begin with the heinous crime of Raskolnikov and develop to the salvation of the Karamazov brothers.

Conclusion: The writers mentioned here and many serious, contemporary film makers often explore the darkness of the human condition. They don't do it simply to posture or exploit, but to see deeply and lay bare the problems and tensions. But, they also do it to look for answers, even the light of salvation/Salvation. The picture is not always pretty, and the very ugliness of the scene is often necessary to accurately portray the degree of depravity and the miracle of salvific turns in fiction. By virtue of their full acquaintance with the dark side of the human condition, when they propose solutions, these solutions appear to be viable and realistic.

## **Biblical Examples of Gratuitous Violence**

The prohibition against and objections to the use of violence in film may be understood better through an examination of the use of violence in the Bible.

One example found in Scriptures is in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Isaiah. In verses fifteen and sixteen the prophet is forecasting the particulars of the future Assyrian military invasion and the conditions the people of Israel and the surrounding countries will experience. He writes:

Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished (Isaiah 13:15-16).

The prophet is talking about the impaling of men by the conquering armies, the willful smashing of infants upon the rocks, and the raping of women. In an oral and textual based society, those who heard the words of Isaiah would have been able to imagine the horrors he described and would have made mental images of the scenes.

In an image-driven society if this scene were to be part of a movie, a scriptwriter and director would have actors and actresses play the parts, and the violence would be obvious to all. Recall the scene in *The Ten Commandments* where the Egyptian armies attempted to follow Moses across the Red Sea. One sees horses and soldiers trapped under tons of water. Their bodies go limp before they can get to the surface. And those who can make it to the top face certain death trying to swim back to shore. In spite of these, and other horrific scenes, this movie is often held to be a "Christian classic" and deemed to be a good family film by many.

A second and even more disturbing example of gratuitous violence in the Bible is found in the twentieth chapter of Judges. Here a Levite and his concubine enter the house of an old man from the hill country of Ephraim to spend the night. While they are there, some wicked men in the city want to have homosexual relations with the Levite traveler and demand that the old man hand them over. The evil men take the man's concubine, rape and kill her, leaving her dead body in the

doorway. The traveler is so distraught that he cuts his concubine into twelve pieces and sends the body parts back to his fellow Israelites. The Israelites then form a revenge party and go into battle with the Benjamites who will not turn over the evil men for punishment.

Again, if this story were to be translated into a visual medium the scenes of rape and later dismemberment of a body, even if they were filmed in standards from the forties or fifties, would be very disturbing.

Conclusion: The purpose of the violence in these examples may be that the details in each passage provide information which serves as a reason for a latter action. Or, the information provided shows us something about the nature of God and the way He deals with sin. If both these examples show a difficult, but necessary use of violence in telling a story, then perhaps violence may be used (portrayed) for redemptive purposes in fictional mediums such as film. This is not an airtight argument, rather the issue is raised as a matter for consideration while keeping in mind that Christians should always avoid living a vicariously sinful life through any artistic medium.

## **Weaker Brother Considerations in Viewing Film**

Paul's great teaching concerning meat sacrificed to idols and the relationship of the stronger and weaker brothers to one another is laid out in 1 Corinthians 8. We should remember that Paul clearly puts the burden of responsibility on the stronger brother. It is this person who should have the interest of the weaker brother in mind.

Persons who exercise rampant Christian freedom when watching films that are objectionable to some others does not necessarily mean that they are strong Christians. It could indicate that these people are too weak to control their

passions and are hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother. Do not urge others to participate in something that you, as a Christian, feel comfortable doing if they have reservations. You may inadvertently cause the other person to sin.

There are basically three positions related to Christians viewing film.

The first of these three is prohibition. This is the belief that films, and often television and other forms of entertainment, are inherently evil and detrimental to the Christian's spiritual well being. Persons who maintain this position avoid all film, regardless of the rating or reputed benefits, and urge others to do the same.

Abstinence is the second position. This is the belief that it is permissible for Christians to view films, but for personal reasons this person does not choose to do so. This may be for reasons ranging from a concern for the use of time or no real desire to watch film, to avoidance because it may cause them or someone they are concerned about to stumble. Willingly abstaining from some or all films does not automatically make one a weaker brother, and this charge should be avoided! One should avoid labeling a fellow Christian "weaker" for choosing to abstain from participation in some behavior due to matters of conscience.

Moderation is the final position. This is the belief that it is permissible to watch films and that one may do so within a certain framework of moderation. This person willingly views some films but considers others to be inappropriate for Christians. There is a great deal of disagreement here about what a Christian can or cannot and should or should not watch. Although some of these disagreements are matters of principle and not of taste, Christian charity should be practiced whenever one is uncertain.



Conclusion: There is a valid history of concern about Christian involvement in the arts and fictional and imaginative literature. This issue extends to the medium of film and manifests similar concerns about film and Christians who view film. However, because film is one of the dominant mediums of cultural expression, film criticism is necessary. If Christians do not make their voices heard then others, often non-Christians, will dominate the discussion. All films contain the philosophical persuasions of the persons who contribute to their development, and it is the job of the Christian who participates in these arts to make insightful, fair, and well-informed evaluations of the work. Not everyone feels comfortable in viewing some (or any) films and the Christian should be especially mindful of the beliefs of others and always have the interest of fellow believers as well as non-believers in mind. While "film," the artistic expression of the cinematic medium has been the focus and not "movies," the entertainment based expression, much of what has been said of the former is applicable to the later.

## **Appendix**

Christians should be aware that the freedoms exercised in participation in the film arts are privileges and should not be practiced to the point of vicarious living through escape into fictitious worlds. In 1 Corinthians 10: 23-31 (and 6:12) the Apostle Paul writes that "everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive."

He is addressing the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in chapter 10 and sexual purity in chapter 6. This may serve as a guide for Christians who are concerned about their involvement in film and a caution against construing what is written here as a license to watch anything and everything. The Apostle is very careful to distinguish between that which is permissible and that which is constructive, or expedient. What Paul means is that, in Christ, believers have freedoms which extend to all areas of life, but these freedoms have the potential to be

exercised carelessly or without regard for others, and thus become sin. The guiding rule here is that Christians should seek the good of others and not their own desires. This would mean that anyone who is participating in film that is objectionable should have the interests of others, both believers and non-believers, in mind. We live in a fallen world and almost everything we touch we affect with our fallen nature, the arts notwithstanding. If we are to be active in redeeming the culture for the glory of God, then by necessity we must participate in the culture and be salt and light to a very dark and unsavory world. It is imperative that Christians who are active in their culture and interested in participating in the ever growing "culture wars," remember Paul's admonition in Philippians that we "work out our salvation daily with fear and trembling." Anything less would be flirting with spiritual disaster and would not bring glory to God.

Parents concerned for the spiritual and psychological welfare of their children would do well to offer more than a list of prohibitions against what films can be viewed. As with anything that involves issues of Christian freedom, maturity in individual matters must be taken into account. The example of a young child's first BB gun may serve as an illustration. In some instances a child may be ready for the first air rifle at age twelve or thirteen. Other children may not be ready until they are eighteen, and some may best served if they never possess the gun in question. Parents should realize that film is a narrative medium which often contains complex philosophical ideas. To continue to absorb films at the current rate and not offer thoughtful criticism on what we are watching is equivalent to visiting museums and announcing that the Picasso or Rembrandt retrospective is "cool" or "stupid." If we are concerned parents, and wish to gain the respect of our children, we can and must do better than this.

## **Notes**

1. "Letter to Highbald," as quoted in Eleanor S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne* (New York:Macmillan, 1951), 209.
2. Tertullian, *On the Against Heretics*, chap. 7.
3. Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.
4. John Dixon, Jr., *Nature and Grace in Art*, as quoted in Leland Ryken's *The Liberated Imagination*, p.23.
5. T. S. Eliot, *Religion and Literature*.
6. Much of the material for this section was first articulated by Jeff Hanson, my co-editor, in the March/April issue of *The Antithesis*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1995.

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