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The Apologetics of Chesterton and Lewis in a World Marked by Disbelief

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The Apologetics of Chesterton and Lewis in a World Marked by Disbelief

by Michael R. Smith

A philosophy major at a small liberal arts college told his mass communication professor that he wanted to believe in God. Could the professor, the student asked, give him some reasons for a belief. The educator reached for his copy of Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and began the slow, systematic argument that all people have a sense of fairness, a kind of law akin to the law of nature, yet these same people fail to keep the law. The professor kept up the monologue, sure that he was as compelling as the legendary British thinker, but before long, the student shook his head and said that he would need a more convincing approach than the idea of men breaking a law that they know they should keep. In an age characterized by meaninglessness and relativeness, these arguments once thought to be timeless are meeting the challenge of the age a postmodernism world view that evaluates all ideas as equal and flawed just the same.

Despite this low regard for a systematic approach to theology and meaning, the two

names that are consistently mentioned when apologists reach for authority are G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis, prolific writers of the early 20th century whose books are yet in print today. As evidence of their popularity, rarely does Dr. Ravi Zacharias, the East Indian conference speaker, fail to drop a line from Chesterton or Lewis in his *Just Thinking* newsletter. The one from February, 1996, mentioned Chesterton for declaring truth is stranger than fiction "because we have made fiction to suit ourselves" (Zacharias 1). In that same newsletter, Bocchino quoted Lewis's *Problem of Pain*, to explain that Christ teaches that God has ultimate control when even men use their freedom to be cruel and unjust (11).

Chesterton (1874-1936) was the more prolific of the two writers, writing novels, several volumes of poetry and biographies of Browning, G.F. Watts, Charles Dickens, William Cobbett, Robert Louis Stevenson, Chaucer, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Thomas of Aquinas. In 1922 when he converted to Roman Catholicism, Chesterton became a

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champion of the faith, but *Orthodoxy* was among his earlier books on religion. He was called the Prince of Paradox (Sheedy 22), remembered for his Father Brown detective fiction ("G.K. Chesterton" 21) but is quoted today for his whimsical and thoughtful analysis of the human condition. Lewis (1898-1963) was acknowledged as a brilliant lecturer, but it is his prose and fiction that continues to keep his name alive ("C.S. Lewis" 22).

Of the two men, Lewis has the wider audience on his view of Christianity if for no other reason than Word Records of Waco, Texas, has released *Mere Christianity* as a book on tape, on which British actor Michael York reads from the famous 1943 BBC broadcasts.

Yet it appears that Chesterton was the influence on Lewis. While each author's book is nearly identical in length, about 170 pages in a paperback format, it is the Lewis book that possesses the best organization that stacks argument upon argument that gently leads the reader to logical conclusions, a dynamic that appears to be lost on some moderns who reject logic and order as reflections of an world view that attempts to co-op audiences in maintaining oppression. For wit and style, both contain lively lines. For instance, Chesterton wrote of the failing of logic short of imagination: "Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. Poets do not go mad; but chess-players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers; but creative artists very seldom. I am not, as will be seen, in any sense attacking logic: I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination" (17). In concluding his chapter on "The Maniac," Chesterton compared Christianity's symbol of the cross to the Buddhist's circle that is infinite but fixed in its size (28). By contrast, "the cross opens its

arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travelers (29)," an invitation to be included in God's family.

Both writers referred to the law of gravity to make their points (Chesterton 32; Lewis, 4) and suggested a standard and the need for objective truth (Chesterton, 36). For those in the culture embracing the skepticism of postmodernism, Chesterton observed:

[T]he fact that he doubts everything really gets in his way when he wants to denounce anything. For all denunciation implies a moral doctrine of some kind; and the modern revolutionist doubts not only the institution he denounces, but the doctrine by which he denounces it. (41)

The writers both mentioned the myth of Beauty and the Beast to support their ideas. Chesterton said the story's theme is to love the unlovable (50), whereas Lewis wrote that by imitating or pretending to be something, a person can really become that model (146). When Beauty kissed the monster, she did so as if it were a man, "and then, much to her relief, it really turned into a man and all went well" (146). Both writers used this illustration to make a number of points, some practical, some academic. Chesterton elevates the power of a narrative, such as the Beauty story, to suggest man's need for mystery and to establish that life as a story means a storyteller must exist. Chesterton wrote, "I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it" (65).

Lewis took a more applied approach and wrote that pretending to be a man is like the Christian idea of the way dressing up as Christ

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works "to turn your pretense into a reality" (147). With this simple illustration, Lewis unwraps a difficult doctrine about the work of the indwelling holy spirit.

The writers also unpacked the idea of a believer's divided existence, to live at once in this world while yearning to inhabit the next simultaneously. Chesterton used the Robinson Crusoe story to establish that a Christian's optimism is based on the idea that believers do not fit in the world, and "the unnaturalness of everything in light of the supernatural" (80). Lewis made the same point by noting that Christians assume built-in desires can be satisfied. However, he wrote:

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same. (106)

These ideas may sound incredible to unbelievers, but both authors emphasized the

power of enduring doctrines, the beauty of orthodoxy (Chesterton 100). Chesterton observed that while nothing is stable in this life, Christianity is eternal (109). He wrote that in avoiding fads, life "has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect" (101). In writing about change, Lewis described faith as the art of holding on to things reason has accepted, despite changes in moods (107). Lewis regarded faith as a virtue that sustained a person when a thing he once accepted as true was reconsidered. He used the example of the benefit of anesthetics in a surgery, which is a reasonable and standard practice but can be terrifying to a person whose emotions convince him that he will choke to death. "The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other," wrote Lewis (108).

In addition to the powerful use of metaphor and example to communicate biblical truths, the writers also addressed complex issues and provoked wondrous thoughts. In explaining the trinity, Chesterton discussed the crucifixion and described a paradox. He wrote that the Christian God is the only god who was in revolt with himself (138). When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God" (138). He challenged the atheist to consider the "one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed an instant to be an atheist" (138).

In writing about the nature of God, Lewis remarked on the observation that God is not readily seen from a materialistic notion,

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making his existence questionable. Lewis wrote:

If there was a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us one of the facts inside the universe no more than the architect of a house could actually be a wall or staircase or fireplace in that house. The only way in which we could expect it to show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way (19).

All in all, the writers developed a case for Christianity that is difficult to deny logically. The trouble these days is found in the rejection of systematic thinking on all fronts. The quick cuts of modern television suggest the chaotic approach used in the culture to attend to information: tuning in now, tuning out a second later. For the person who seeks extra-biblical explanation for the truth of scripture, both books will prove beneficial. I prefer Lewis because I am more familiar with his fiction and his life. My sense is that he was the kind of man whom I would have embraced as a friend, who would have cried with me in tragedy and laughed in victory. Chesterton, on the other hand, possessed a touch of elitism that penetrates his words. While he may have offered the warm handshake and a good word, I suspect that he might have been the type who knew the need but chose to ignore it if a deadline was pressing and another publication was imminent. Nonetheless, both men were intellectual giants who may have done more, said more and written more for the cause of Christ during this century than any other English-speaking thinkers.

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