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# Ethics and Afterlife: The Moral Instruction of Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis

H. Dennis Fisher

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VIII**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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Upland, Indiana

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## **Ethics and Afterlife:**

### **The Moral Instruction of Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis**

H. Dennis Fisher

RBC Ministries

# **Ethics and Afterlife: The Moral Instruction of Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis**

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## **Introduction**

In today's postmodern world, ethical teaching is often relative and subjective. This paper will seek to find commonalities between Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis to provide a viable objective basis for moral decision making in the twenty-first century. The examination of Thomas Aquinas's ethics will be drawn primarily from his *Summa Theologicae*. Aquinas's view will then be compared with and contrasted to C.S. Lewis's moral system. A variety of Lewis's works will be referenced including *The Abolition of Man*, *The Weight of Glory*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, *Letters to Malcolm*, *A Grief Observed*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*.

## **Ethics and Afterlife: Viable Moral Decision Making for Postmoderns**

As we examine Thomas Aquinas and C.S. Lewis concerning their views on accountability and cleansing after death, we do so in a world quite different from theirs. Ours is a technologically sophisticated postmodern society. It is one in which the optimistic faith of the Enlightenment in progress through science and technology has been rejected. Our current *Zeitgeist* elevates heart and feeling over objective certainty. It revels in the eclectic gathering of diverse opinions and innovative approaches to life's problems. Tolerance is preferred

over any kind of universal binding moral conviction. Also, forming meaningful community trumps the rugged individualism so characteristic of past generations. Many postmoderns hold that one of the few certainties left is that everything we know is uncertain. History cannot be trusted because it has been written by "the winners." For the postmodern who surfs on the communication waves of the Internet, living for "the here and now" matters most, rather than what might happen after death. Since Aquinas and Lewis believed there will be a reckoning for the moral choices we make during our lives, what possible relevance might their traditional ethical teaching have for the postmodern mind?

## **Thomas Aquinas: Ethics Found in Nature and in Scripture**

Postmodern assumptions flood the younger generation through web sites, email, twitter, blogs, and cable television. In all the interaction and opinion swapping that takes place, one wonders if an individualistic eclectic moral system can provide the basis for our future civilization. "What is right or wrong for me" can go only so far until it ends up in a court of law to decide. Therefore, in providing moral instruction for postmoderns, we turn to two unlikely sources, a twelfth-century Roman Catholic theologian and a twentieth-

century Oxford don, to find solid ground for objective moral guidance. Thomas Aquinas spent considerable time in his examination of ethics. Surprisingly, the Angelic Doctor wrote far more on the basis and practice of morality than on his treatment of the existence of God. In his *Summa Theologicae*, Thomas explains how an inherent ethical nature has been hard wired into human nature. Not immediately appealing to divine revelation, Aquinas points to natural reason as the initial basis for developing a moral compass.

And so, it becomes evident that since moral precepts belong among the matters that pertain to good behavior, and since these are items that are in conformity with reason, and since every judgment of human reason is derived in some fashion from natural reason, it must be true that all moral rules belong to the law of nature, but not all in the same way.

For, there are some things that the natural reason of everyman judges immediately and essentially as things to be done or not done; for example, Honor thy father and mother, and Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal. Precepts of this kind belong in an unqualified way to the law of nature.<sup>1</sup>

“The law of nature” as Aquinas explains it has a self-evident quality to it. The respect shown to parents or the moral compunction felt upon taking another human life is part of one universal moral fabric. This innate consensus runs through the human as an individual and within each successive generation of humankind. But Thomas goes on to say that these universal moral convictions do need to be learned.

Then there are other things that are judged by a more subtle rational consideration, on the part of the

wise men to be matters of obligation. Now, these belong to the law of nature in this way: they of course require instruction, by which less favored people are taught by those who are wise; for example, Rise up before the hoary head, and honor the person of the aged man (Lev. 19:32), and other injunctions of this kind.<sup>2</sup>

Aquinas believed that humans are moral creatures by nature but also need their consciences educated in orientation to life. The younger must learn from those with greater acquired knowledge and experience. Despite the perennial generation gap, a bridge must be established for the younger to receive ethical information and insight from their elders. Nonetheless, Aquinas also sees that there are limits to acquiring ethics based on human experience alone. In order to accommodate the full range of individual and societal sensibilities, ethics also must be informed by scriptural revelation. To Thomas, man does not stand alone in the natural processes and flow of history. Instead, he inhabits a supernatural universe in which the reality of God, angels, heaven, and hell enter into both the meaning and the moral fabric of his ethical choices.

Finally, there are other matters for the judgment of which human reason needs divine instruction, whereby we are taught concerning matters of divinity; for example, Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing . . . Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in vain (Exod. 20:4, 7).<sup>3</sup>

The first prohibition in the Ten Commandments cited by Aquinas is not necessarily an innate human moral conviction. Indeed, around the world today many sincere worshippers venerate gods and goddesses represented by idols

and graven images. Likewise, profanity and cursing in God's name with little or no compunction can be found in many cultures. Although postmoderns would hold to tolerance as the highest virtue, Aquinas would boldly cite Scripture to condemn these behaviors. In his view there is only one true God who deserves our worship, and His name should be honored with our words and deeds.

By establishing Scripture as the other essential source for moral instruction, Aquinas is in harmony with a consensus of the orthodox Christian traditions. How would the unaided person know of God's aversion to idols or be aware of the prohibition of blasphemy if it were not spelled out for him or her within the pages of Holy Writ? Especially concerning those ethical decisions which affect one's relationship with the Christian God, Aquinas tells us that divine revelation must be consulted.

But Thomas does not isolate the foundation of ethical decisions purely to a list of scriptural codes which when obeyed please God. The great medieval doctor also understood that the moral choices we make affect the kind of people we become. A person who has been embezzling money from his company usually began with small sums which he intended to pay back. The heroin addict did not begin her affair at the point of the needle. Indeed, addiction often begins with the recreational use of the softer drugs like marijuana until the addict moves on to the harder drugs for a bigger high. Similarly, either for good or for ill, each of us is becoming a different kind of person based on the moral choices we make every day.

Because our character is being formed daily, moral virtues or vices inevitably will take root in the human heart in an ever-changing environment. Pursuit of the good will result in desirable character traits or virtues. Thomas delineated four cardinal virtues: prudence (the ability to govern and discipline

oneself by the use of reason), temperance (moderation in action, thought, or feeling; restraint), justice (the act of being just and/or fair), and fortitude (acting according to duty in spite of fear). For Thomas, seeking to emulate these virtues was part of pursuing the good life. An individual who is disciplined and moderate in food, drink, work, and play finds greater joy in life than does the one who pursues these activities to excess. Likewise, intentionally treating others with impartial fairness and being able to stand one's ground for the right despite external threats will earn a reputation for being a person of integrity.<sup>4</sup>

However, as in the case of the rational basis for ethics, virtues must also have a supernatural underpinning. Aquinas added to his list three theological virtues which are grounded in the nature of God through Scripture. This list of virtues includes faith (trust in God through life experience), hope (the belief in a positive outcome related to circumstances), and charity (generous loving kindness toward others).<sup>5</sup>

The Christian walks to a different drum beat than does society at large. And even with medieval Europe being largely Christianized, Thomas understood that baptizing and catechizing each successive generation required an orientation to tangible realities beyond the visible world. Believers should grow in trusting God to work in their lives through intercession and sacrament. In a medieval world where sickness and premature death were constant companions, the Christian virtue of hope was essential. And as a reflection of Christ's own loving spirit, a generous kindness toward others in charity was to be exemplified.

And so as a starting point for doing the right, Aquinas would appeal first to self-evident morals present in nature and then to ethics as revealed in Scripture. With this said, how did C.S. Lewis view a basis for guiding the conscience through life?

### C.S. Lewis and the Tao as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe

Lewis begins his classic *Mere Christianity* with an appeal to conscience. He sets out to explore the idea of “a sense of right and wrong as a clue to the meaning of the universe.” In doing so, Lewis cites popular examples of moral pleading. They range from complaints over cutting in line to the reciprocity of sharing ice cream. It is Lewis’s conviction that a ubiquitous moral law is recognized by all. He wisely points out that a debate over not doing the right thing often reveals a shared agreement about the morally right which transcends our individual preferences. Indeed, ethical reality is at the heart for his argument that a Mind which is the source and judge of such moral instincts is also our Creator, sovereign Lord, and ethical Judge. In the mind of Lewis, the basis for right and wrong is not found within subjective personal opinion but is both objective and eternal. The moral law has existed before we came into our world and will continue on after we have left this temporal universe.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis argues for a natural law of ethics which he chooses to call “the Tao.” The Chinese for centuries used this term to refer to an eternal reemergence of ethical ideas for each successive generation.

The Tao, which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained.<sup>7</sup>

Lewis’s view of ethics resonates with that of Thomas Aquinas. Likewise, we find that the apostle Paul holds a

similar view. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul writes:

for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them).<sup>8</sup>

For Paul, Aquinas, and Lewis, to be human is to have an innate sense of right and wrong. But in his argument, Lewis does not expect his reader to accept this claim without evidence. Therefore, in an appendix of *Abolition of Man*, Lewis provides samples of the same admonitions and prohibitions shared across a wide spectrum of ancient cultures and religions. Here are a just a few.

#### The Law of Justice

##### (a) SEXUAL JUSTICE

‘Has he approached his neighbour’s wife?’ (Babylonian. List of Sins. ERE v. 446)

‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ (Ancient Jewish. Exodus 20:14)

‘I saw in Nastrond (= Hell) . . . beguilers of others’ wives.’ (Old Norse. Volospá 38, 39)

##### (b) HONESTY

‘I have not stolen.’ (Ancient Egyptian. Confession of the Righteous Soul. ERE v. 478)

‘Thou shalt not steal.’ (Ancient Jewish. Exodus 20:15)

‘If the native made a “find” of any kind (e.g., a honey tree) and marked it, it was thereafter safe for him, as far as his own tribesmen were concerned, no matter how long he left it.’ (Australian Aborigines. ERE v. 441)

(c) JUSTICE IN COURT, &C.

'Whoso takes no bribe . . . well  
pleasing is this to Samas.'  
(Babylonian. ERE v. 445)

'Regard him whom thou knowest  
like him whom thou knowest not.'  
(Ancient Egyptian. ERE v. 482)

'Do no unrighteousness in  
judgement. You must not consider  
the fact that one party is poor nor  
the fact that the other is a great  
man.' (Ancient Jewish. Leviticus  
19:15)<sup>9</sup>

It is the striking similarity of virtues applauded and vices condemned across cultures and history which bolsters Lewis's argument. Living in the twentieth century as Lewis did, however, he was not without those who strongly opposed such a set of moral absolutes. Yet even when others argued against them, Lewis observed that they were subtly appealing to the very ethical code they were seeking to undermine and dismiss.

The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or . . . ideologies . . . all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess.<sup>10</sup>

Many in this current generation do not share the moral convictions of Aquinas and Lewis concerning the indestructibility of a universal moral law. Yet current films and other media perennially demonstrate an affinity with traditional virtues. In *Lord of the Rings* we are moved by Frodo's loyalty and courage in his quest to find and destroy the ring of

power. The films of the *Chronicles of Narnia* find a huge audience who want to recover an age of chivalry and virtue which started to erode as our modern age began. In view of this present vacuum, how then can the traditional ethics of Aquinas and Lewis penetrate the mind and heart of our contemporary generation?

May I recommend to the postmoderns adopt a more radical revolution? G. K. Chesterton has wisely observed that every so-called revolution is in fact a restoration. What may initially look new is a recapturing of something which inspired and guided humankind in the past but had been forgotten. Interestingly, the Latin root for revolution is *revolvere* ("to return"). In today's parlance we might say "what goes around comes around."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Lewis said that when making a journey we can lose our way. The worst thing we can do in such a circumstance is to move forward blindly hoping to find the desired destination. We are instead to trace our step back to the place with which we were once familiar. From there we can we can plan a new course of travel. Lewis quipped, "We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive."<sup>12</sup> This is also true of our ethical basis. When traditional morality is dismissed as irrelevant, it is the key to finding our way back again to moral grounding.

Three resources which might be helpful in reexamining the basis for Christian ethics would be *Saint Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics* translated by Paul E. Sigmund, *The Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis and *Ethics: Alternative and Issues* by Norman Geisler. The first book maps out an ethical system which is both biblically and philosophically coherent. The second text shows the Law behind the laws and makes a connection with

other cultures that resonates with today's popular culture. And the third volume provides a realistic guide for Christian ethical discernment in complicated circumstances.

Yet our examination of a Christian moral navigation would be incomplete if we did not take into account Aquinas's and Lewis's view of the afterlife. In their minds, the ultimate consequences for our ethical choices are fully realized beyond our temporal life on earth.

### **Lewis's Polarizing Statement on Purgatory**

Few Christian thinkers have been as popular among Roman Catholic and Protestant adherents as has C.S. Lewis. His writings resonate with diverse people of faith through story, apologetics for Christian orthodoxy, ethical education, and more. However, one teaching of Lewis has created polarization. Near the end of his life, he wrote *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. In this book we find a twin-pronged comment which has alienated Catholics and Protestants alike:

Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him? . . . I believe in purgatory. Mind you, the Reformers had good reasons for throwing doubt on "the Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory" as that Romish doctrine had then become.<sup>13</sup>

The polarization comes from both an affirmation of purgatory and the

rejection of the "Romish doctrine." Lewis's belief in purgatory has been applauded by Catholics and criticized by Protestants. Nonetheless, Lewis believed that we live in a supernatural universe and that ethical choices we now make will affect who we become in eternity. In stating it this way, Lewis compels us to examine the historic development of purgatory under the Holy See of the Church of Rome and contrast it with Lewis's particular view.

### **The Roman Catholic Doctrine of Purgatory**

Despite the changes made in Roman Catholicism since Vatican II, the doctrine on purgatory has largely stayed the same as the one held in the medieval period. A brief overview of the doctrine's historic development will illustrate this.

Purgatory may be defined as "a term used only in W. Catholic theology for the state (or place) of punishment and purification where the souls of those who have died in a state of grace undergo such punishment as is still due to forgiven sins and, perhaps, expiate their unforgiven venial sins, before being admitted to the Beatific Vision."<sup>14</sup>

This means persons are guilty of having committed transgressions which are not of a "grave matter" or committed with their full knowledge. Because these believers have not been absolved of their guilt through confession, absolution, and penance, they must be cleansed from it in the afterlife through the fires of purgatory. After this process is complete, they will enter heaven to behold God's glory through what Aquinas called "the Beatific Vision."<sup>15</sup>

### Aquinas on Purgatory

In *Summa Theologicae*, Aquinas gives the medieval Catholic rationale for the necessity of purgatory. Using the scholastic style of his day, Aquinas reflected on theology by means of asking and answering questions in an organized manner. Nothing may be more representative of this than his *Summa Theologicae*.

. . . it is sufficiently clear that there is a Purgatory after this life. For if the debt of punishment is not paid in full after the stain of sin has been washed away by contrition, nor again are venial sins always removed when mortal sins are remitted, and if justice demands that sin be set in order by due punishment, it follows that one who after contrition for his fault and after being absolved, dies before making due satisfaction, is punished after this life. Wherefore those who deny Purgatory speak against the justice of God: for which reason such a statement is erroneous and contrary to faith. Hence Gregory of Nyssa, after the words quoted above, adds: "This we preach, holding to the teaching of truth, and this is our belief; this the universal Church holds, by praying for the dead that they may be loosed from sins." This cannot be understood except as referring to Purgatory: and whosoever resists the authority of the Church, incurs the note of heresy.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly in the mind of the great Thomas, purgatory is necessary to satisfy the justice of God. Without absolution of sin in this life, a purging is required in the next.

Today's catechism of the Roman Catholic Church still teaches this medieval concept to those being catechized in preparation for their first communion:

"All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven."<sup>17</sup>

As indicated in Aquinas's argument stated earlier, the doctrine of purgatory had developed quite early in the medieval period. Gregory of Nyssa (A.D. 335 – c. 395) was cited by Aquinas. But even earlier, Tertullian alludes to prayers for the dead: "We offer sacrifices for the dead on their birthday anniversaries [the date of death—birth into eternal life]."<sup>18</sup>

In the fourth century, Augustine also spoke of purgatory, although with less conviction than Gregory and Tertullian: "It is a matter that may be inquired into, and either ascertained or left doubtful, whether some believers shall pass through a kind of purgatorial fire, and in proportion as they have loved with more or less devotion the goods that perish, be less or more quickly delivered from it."<sup>19</sup>

But where did the idea of the prayers for the dead originate? An important apocryphal text which is part of the Roman Catholic canon often has been cited to reinforce the idea that intercession for those who have been deceased will affect them in eternity:

So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to

provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. *For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead.* But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. *Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.*<sup>20</sup>

Certainly this short passage does have the kernel ideas for prayer and absolution of others after death. But are there any other biblical references to support the idea? Citing Job's pious offering of sacrifices to provide purification of his sons, the Roman Catholic tradition argues that believers can do the same for loved ones who have already passed in death.

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons [Job 1:5] were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.<sup>21</sup>

But after more than a millennium of medieval Catholic practice grounded much in the belief in purgatory and prayer for the dead, why did the doctrine not survive in the teachings of Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century? The answer would seem to be that it could not with stand one of the major pillars of Protestantism: *sola Scriptura*.

### **The Reformers' Response to Purgatory**

Martin Luther, the former Augustinian monk who led the Protestant Reformation, rejected purgatory as not substantiated by Scripture. He explained:

But even were the book [2 Maccabees] authoritative, it would still be necessary in the case of so important an article that at least one passage out of the chief books [of the Bible] should support it, in order that every word might be established through the mouth of two or three witnesses. . . . Since so much depends on this doctrine which is so important that, indeed, the papacy and the whole hierarchy are all but built upon it, and derive all their wealth and honor from it.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, John Calvin, the great systematic theologian of Geneva, Switzerland, was critical of the doctrine of purgatory. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he wrote:

The doctrine of purgatory ancient, but refuted by a more ancient Apostle. Not supported by ancient writers, by Scripture, or solid argument. Introduced by custom and a zeal not duly regulated by the word of God . . . we must hold by the word of God, which rejects this fiction.<sup>23</sup>

As was true of Luther before him, Calvin's conscience had been taken captive by the Word of God, and all doctrine would be judged by it alone. Rather than look to those who claimed apostolic authority in their time, the Reformers looked to "more ancient" apostles in the New Testament to reject the doctrine of purgatory.

Even today the Roman Catholic Church admits the lack of biblical support for the doctrine. Indeed, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* states that "the doctrine of purgatory is not explicitly stated in the Bible." Yet the doctrine had been developed and sustained through a confidence in holy tradition and succession of apostolic authority through popes and councils.<sup>24</sup>

## Vatican II

For more than four hundred years, the chasm between Protestant and Catholic churches has remained. Yet the largely universal rejection of the doctrine of purgatory by Protestants has not resulted in a similar rejection of it by Rome. Indeed, the major changes which have taken place in the Church of Rome after Vatican II did not result in an abandonment of purgatory:

The doctrine of purgatory clearly demonstrates that even when the guilt of sin has been taken away, punishment for it or the consequences of it may remain to be expiated or cleansed. They often are. In fact, in purgatory the souls of those who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debt.<sup>25</sup>

Today most Protestants still stand opposed to belief in purgatory while the Roman Catholic Church proclaims its reality. With such a deep divide between Protestant and Catholic on purgatory, why would Lewis, a Protestant, retain a belief in it while denying its Roman Catholic origins? Part of the answer may lie in the historic and cultural milieu in which he grew up.

### Lewis's View of Purgatory

In *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*, Joseph Pearce points out that Lewis's early years were spent in Ireland, where his Protestant family may have held some critical attitudes toward their Catholic neighbors. Pearce claims that someone could not grow up as a Protestant in Ireland without developing a subtle aversion to the authority of the pope.<sup>26</sup>

Yet we must also keep in mind that Lewis was an Anglo-Catholic. This Church of England in Lewis's day identified with many of the practices and beliefs of Rome while retaining its separate Anglican identity. Even in that branch of the Christian church, some Anglo-Catholics adhered to what they considered a form of Catholicism but without papal control. Other Anglo-Catholics' identity was clearly Protestant but with more elaborate liturgy.<sup>27</sup>

However, the writings of Lewis do not indicate that he consciously affirmed purgatory because of his understanding of Anglo-Catholicism. Instead, it appears to be far more personal than denominational. His writings provide clues to Lewis's thinking on purgatory.

### Immediate Perfection After Death?

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis reveals his view of a dynamic Christ who will not relent until the believer is made holy. For Lewis, it would appear that the Christian walk of faith is not one of serving a perfectionistic God who makes impossible demands, but rather a joyous collaboration with the Redeemer to share His own glory. Of this Lewis writes:

"Make no mistake," [Christ] says, "if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that. You have free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand that I am going to see this job through. Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect—until My Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with

me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less.”<sup>28</sup>

Lewis’s belief in Christ’s tireless commitment to make believers share in His holiness involves not only this life but also the next. The phrase “whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death” sounds like an allusion to purgatory. Apparently, Lewis’s sense of moral imperfection left him with a feeling of not being worthy to enter directly into heaven.

Indeed, the idea of immediate spiritual perfection after death did not seem viable to him. This attitude of unworthiness can be seen in *A Grief Observed*. Never intending it to be published, Lewis kept a journal of his grieving process after the loss of his wife, Joy, to cancer. Eventually the journal was published, and so we can see into Lewis’s heart and mind concerning the immediate afterlife:

I never believed before—I thought it immensely improbable—that the faithfulest soul could leap straight into perfection and peace the moment death has rattled in the throat. It would be wishful thinking with a vengeance to take up that belief now . . . I know there are not only tears to be dried but stains to be scoured.<sup>29</sup>

A process of cleansing after death seems essential to Lewis. And in keeping with the traditional torments of purgatory in Catholic doctrine, he reflects upon God’s goodness while exacting painful purging. To illustrate this, he offers a familiar scene from the medical field.

But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the

operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it credible that such extremities of torture should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren’t. Either way, we’re for it. What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?’ Have they never been to a dentist?<sup>30</sup>

Lewis appeals to the goodness of God in his argument for painful cleansing after death. It is a process that removes the stain of sin and prepares the soul for eternal bliss. Lewis’s analogy of the good doctor and then the necessary dentist is telling. For Lewis, sin is a serious matter and should not be explained away through value-free language and psychological excuses. Transgressions put Jesus Christ on the cross, and its presence in the life of even the most obedient believer needs to be dealt with. Lewis holds to a purification of the soul after death but does not take his view from the great councils of the Roman church. If not, then what was his source?

### **Lewis’s “Better Way”: An Appeal to Newman’s “Dream”**

If Lewis dismisses the doctrine of purgatory as developed and sustained by the Church of Rome, then what is the basis for his belief? It would appear that Newman’s “Dream of Gerontius” would provide a clue for answering that question. Of this Lewis writes:

The right view returns magnificently in *Newman’s Dream*. There, if I remember it rightly, the saved soul, at the very foot of the

throne, begs to be taken away and cleansed. It cannot bear for a moment longer "With its darkness to affront that light." Religion has reclaimed Purgatory.<sup>31</sup>

The Newman to whom Lewis refers is Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who began his spiritual journey as a Protestant in the Church of England. Newman eventually led the Oxford Movement, which sought to reinstate lost Christian traditions into Anglican theology and liturgy. In 1845 Newman left the Anglican Church and converted to Roman Catholicism. Ordained as a priest in the Roman church, Father Newman was eventually made a cardinal. He came to believe that Anglo-Catholicism was one of the three branches of the true and universal church. (The other two branches are Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.) Clearly, Newman felt that the papal branch was the most correct of the three. Through the ongoing ministry of Newman Centers on university campuses, Cardinal Newman's convictions about the Church of Rome are still felt today.<sup>32</sup>

So what was Newman's dream of purgatory to which Lewis referred? Most likely it is a poem composed by Newman entitled "The Dream of Gerontius." This poetic work tells the story of a pious man's journey from deathbed to purgatory.<sup>33</sup> This following quote from the poem seems to resonate with Lewis's feeling of unworthiness about immediately entering heaven after death.

"His will be done! I am not worthy e'er to see again The face of day; far less His countenance, Who is the very sun." God's dazzling holy radiance only magnifies one's own sinful self-awareness. It would appear that this overwhelming vision of God's Holiness intensifies both a desire for purgatory and a need for comfort in focusing on the One who can give the power to

endure it – "Nathless in life, When I looked forward to my purgatory, It ever was my solace to believe, That, ere I plunged amid the avenging flame, I had one sight of Him to strengthen me."<sup>34</sup>

Certainly Lewis felt purgatory may be necessary but could be endured by the support of a gracious and loving Redeemer. But even so, despite Cardinal Newman putting into words Lewis's own feelings in facing a holy God, why would a poetic text serve as a theological foundation for teachings about the afterlife?

Perhaps when Lewis refers to that "Romish doctrine" of purgatory, he is bringing to mind the Protestant Reformers' criticism of purgatory's pervasive role in church life of the late Middle Ages. Like many Protestants, Lewis may have been thinking of the offering of indulgences to the medieval faithful. In retrospect, the abuse of this practice did undermine the original intent of a Catholic belief in living a circumspect life. Purgatory was also linked with appeasing an angry and punishing God. Indeed, to the Reformers of the sixteenth century, such commercial marketing of merit salvation was out of step with the simple message of the New Testament. Indulgences brought in revenue to the church because fear of flames in the afterlife motivated the faithful.<sup>35</sup>

Yet "the soul" in Newman's "Gerontius" has a very different spirit. He is not fearful of his Redeemer, only at the prospect of being let into heaven without a final cleansing. In this vision of judgment, both a loving God and caring angels ease the purging of sins. The experience of death invites the soul to reflect upon the universe, former loved ones, angels, demons, the triune God, and other vital Christian themes. Yet the main character was aware of his sinfulness and the need for purging. A loving heavenly Father awaited his entry into the eternal

bliss of heaven. It is clear the soul wants to be cleansed and trusts his Redeemer to finish the work, despite the pain. The soul depends upon the prayers of the faithful on earth and looks to God for strength to endure the ordeal.<sup>36</sup>

### **Lewis's Purgatory: A Conviction Inconsistently Expressed**

Part of the paradoxical record of Lewis on purgatory lies in how inconsistently the theme surfaces in his works. In some of his nonfiction writing and correspondence we read only occasionally of his belief in purgatory. Likewise, in his fiction we find a mixed expression of purging of sin after death.

For example, *The Great Divorce* elucidates many ideas on purgatory in novella form. In the book, George MacDonald, a sort of narrator, is asked:

"Is there really a way out of Hell to Heaven?" MacDonald responds: "It depends on the way ye're using the words. If they leave that grey town behind it will not have been Hell. To any that leaves, it is Purgatory. And perhaps ye had better not call this county Heaven. No Deep Heaven, ye understand." (Here he smiled at me.) "Ye can call it the Valley of the Shadow of Life." Later, George MacDonald tells us that entering Heaven or Hell is a process which begins long before physical death: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"<sup>37</sup>

Yet, in contrast to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis's concluding book in the Chronicles of Narnia carries no such view of purgatory. In *The Last Battle*, Lucy is greeted at the entry door to Aslan's country and is told that she has died in a train crash back in England. Now she is invited to enter into the new Narnia, of

which the old Narnia was only a shadow. In the great adventure of spending eternity with the great Lion King Aslan, she is challenged to go "further in and further up." No mention is further cleanings of sin is made as she enters the eternal kingdom of the sovereign Lord whom she loves.<sup>38</sup>

One might argue that Lucy was only a child and because of her devout young life, purgatory was not necessary. However, in *The Silver Chair*, we read of King Caspian dying as an old man. He then appears in Aslan's country (heaven), where his dead body is put in a flowing stream. Aslan pricks his palm and allows blood to flow over the water streaming over the body. Caspian is raised from the dead as a young man and is told by Aslan he will never desire to do anything contrary to Aslan's will in this new state of existence. Here we see instantaneous sinless transformation after death—something Lewis was reluctant to believe in himself.<sup>39</sup>

Although Lewis never formally developed a doctrine of purgatory and did not consistently reflect it in his writing, he did hold to this view until the day he died. In an extant letter to Sister Penelope (dated 17 September 1963, only nine weeks before his death), Lewis stated, "If you die first, and if 'prison visiting' is allowed, come down and look me up in Purgatory."<sup>40</sup> On November 22, 1963, Lewis left this world to encounter Christ in the next. There his view of the afterlife was revised by direct personal experience, as it will be for all of us one day.

And so we have seen the medieval doctor of the Catholic church Thomas Aquinas and the twentieth-century Oxford don C.S. Lewis have many points of agreement. They both believed in natural law and Scripture as a basis for ethics. They also held to a kind of purgatory but for different reasons. Aquinas appealed to the justice of God for purging of the human soul after death. In

contrast, Lewis emphasized a painful postmortem process in which a believer is cleansed for heaven. Yet the Protestant view has denied the existence of purgatory, pointing to the exclusive payment for sin by Christ on the cross (Rom 8:1, 5; 1 Pet 1:18). In view of these different perspectives, how can we find any common ground between the Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, and Protestant points of view?

### **Finding a Point of Agreement for Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and Protestants**

Although many Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and Protestants would agree that there is little explicit mention of purgatory in the Old and New Testaments, an even higher number of believers within these traditions also agree that the Christian must face a final judgment before Christ which will involve testing by fire (2 Cor 5:10; 1 Cor 3:11-15). In some miraculous way unclear to us in our present unenlightened state, Jesus Christ's gaze will burn away all superficial, wrongly motivated, and hypocritical "good works." In their place they will be given a reward of enduring value for faithful service.

Perhaps where Aquinas, Lewis, and Protestants can agree is that Christians will be held accountable for their behavior both now and in the afterlife. This will take the form of an appraisal of our lives which will be administered by divine cleansing fire.

### **Common Ground at the Judgment Seat of Christ**

The Bible teaches that true believers in Christ must one day stand before their Lord for a final examination of the life they lived on earth. Two key passages speak in great clarity about the Christian facing divine judgment after death. Second Corinthians 5:10-11

mentions the accountability to be found there, and 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 tell us of the purging process involved. Since all orthodox Christian traditions recognize the inspiration and authority of these texts, we will now briefly examine these texts.

#### *The Believer's Day in Court: 2 Corinthians 5:10-11*

In 1611 the King James translation from the original tongues of the Bible was published. Because of this version's incalculable impact on the English-speaking world, the King James Bible will be cited along with the original Greek text below for simple reference.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. (2 Cor 5:10-11)

τοὺς γὰρ πάντα ἡμᾶς φανερωθῆναι δεῖ ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ βήματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἵνα κομισῆται ἕκαστος τὰ διὰ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς ἃ ἔπραξεν, εἴτε ἀγαθὸν εἴτε φαῦλον. Εἰδότες οὖν τὸν φόβον τοῦ κυρίου ἀνθρώπους πείθομεν.

The verses preceding this passage speak in warm and confident terms concerning the believer being with Christ after death. Yet the apostle also tells us how we will be also held accountable when we finally see our Lord. The Greek word translated "appear" is φανερωθῆναι and indicates that we will be made manifest. This can imply that we will be revealed for who we truly are in thought, motive, and choice. So often it is easy to feign love and ethical behavior while hiding the darker motives which influence us daily. The "judgment seat" (βήματος) is a platform similar to the one

Jesus stood before when he was condemned by Pontius Pilate (Matt 27:19; Acts 7:5), but in this case, the “condemned One” is now seated in authority and is recognized as Lord and Judge of all.<sup>41</sup>

The central meaning of this passage does not appear to be related to the destiny of the believer regarding heaven or hell. Instead, the genuine Christian will receive the just recompense for the deeds, whether good or evil, performed on earth. The Greek word translated “receive” is κομισηται, which literally means to “receive one’s due.” It is used in the parable of the talents to describe the expectation of productivity (Matt 25:27).<sup>42</sup> “In the body” has the idea of instrumentality. Just as the whole world was made through (διὰ) the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:3), so the sum of our deeds while on earth were performed “through” (διὰ) the body which was given to us. Interestingly, Paul uses “recompense” (ἐπραξεν), whether good or bad. The contrast is not set up as between ethically good deeds and sinful ones. Instead, it is comparison of αγαθον (“upright,” “morally exemplary”) versus φαυλον (“worthless,” “of no account,” “base”). In essence, believers will face the Lord Jesus Christ to have their works assessed and rewarded according to their motive, faithfulness, and worthiness.<sup>43</sup>

Despite Paul’s prior comforting words concerning being with Christ after death (2 Cor 5:1-9), his own response to the judgment seat of Christ is one of reverential fear (φόβον τοῦ Κυρίου). Because he is aware of this certain accountability after death, he seeks to tell others and persuade them of the need for faith in the gospel and by implications of facing a holy God in eternity.<sup>44</sup>

These compelling insights into the believer standing before Christ can motivate the faithful to seek greater obedience in this life. But how do they correlate in any way to in the idea of purging in the next world? The answer

lies in a related passage in which the testing of the believer’s works by fire is explained.

*A Process of Testing by Fire:  
1 Corinthians 3:11-15*

Many Protestant hymns often speak of immediate entrance into God’s glory, whereas Catholic liturgy often reflects upon prayers for enduring purgatory. In addressing this debate concerning the Christian’s experience after death, Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth provides important insights.

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. (1 Cor 3:11-15)

θεμέλιον γὰρ ἄλλον οὐδεὶς δύναται θεῖναι παρὰ τὸν κείμενον, ὃς ἐστὶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. εἰ δέ τις ἐποικοδομεῖ ἐπὶ τὸν θεμέλιον χρυσόν, ἄργυρον, λίθους τιμίους, ξύλα, χόρτον, καλάμην, ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον φανερόν γενήσεται, ἢ γὰρ ἡμέρα δηλώσει: ὅτι ἐν πυρὶ ἀποκαλύπτεται, καὶ ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον ὁποῖόν ἐστιν τὸ πῦρ [αὐτὸ] δοκιμάσει. εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον μενεῖ ὁ ἐποικοδόμησεν, μισθὸν λήμψεται: εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον κατακαήσεται, ζημιωθήσεται, αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται, οὕτως δὲ ὡς διὰ πυρός.

**Jesus Christ as the Foundation**

All sincere followers of Christ are building a life for which their efforts will be tested in eternity. Paul begins his metaphor of building one's Christian life with the foundation. Only Christ Jesus in his person, redemptive work on the cross, victory over death in resurrection, and intercession for us can be a basis upon which to build (θεμελιον άλλον). The ancients understood how the foundation of a building is crucial. For example, the base and underpinning for the great temple of Ephesus was laid with great care: "To avoid the danger of earthquakes, its foundations were built at vast cost on artificial foundations of skin and charcoal laid over the marsh." The basis for the Christian life of faith is established upon Christ's sacrificial death and victorious resurrection from the dead for our redemption. However, the choices we make after believing these great truths will contribute to or detract from the life we are building for God (παρα τον κειμενον, ος εστιν Ἰησους Χριστος).<sup>45</sup>

#### **The Building Materials: Precious or Perishable Materials?**

Paul uses the metaphor of precious and perishable building materials to illustrate the value placed on the life lived: gold, silver, and precious stones (χρυσιον, αργυριον, λιθους τιμιους) and wood, hay, or stubble (ξυλα, χορτον, καλαμην). In the ancient world, each of these materials was used for structures. The marble and granite pillars of ancient Rome are still a wonder. However, perishable items were also used in constructing edifices of lesser importance. Ancient huts were built of wood (ξυλα), hay (χορτος), and stubble (καλαμη). These materials provided walls, entryways, and thatched roofs. Of course, few of these dwellings can be seen today because they were made of perishable building materials. The point Paul is making concerns the eternal value of the

kinds of deeds we perform during our sojourn on earth.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding the evaluation of the Christian's life, Paul points to "the day" (ἡ ἡμερα), a time of judgment (1 Thess 5:4; Rom 13:12). This echoes the "Day of the Lord" or the Jewish idea of judgment day. The "work" (εργον) will be made manifest by fire (εν πυρι αποκαλυπτεται) (2 Thess 1:8; 2:8; Matt 3:12; Luke 3:16.). The materials used in the building will be exposed to fire (το πυρ αυτο δοκιμασει) to see what sort of quality they possess (οποιον εστιν). Most likely this fire will be the penetrating gaze of holiness. If anyone's work shall "abide" (ει τινος το εργον μενει)—that is, its quality withstands the test—God will provide a suitable reward (Matt 20:8). The lazy or disobedient believer who has lived a life of irresponsibility shall suffer loss (ζημιωθησεται, "to be deprived of something" [1 Cor 3:15]). The person's work is burned up (Matt 16:26; Luke 9:25), but that believer shall be saved as though "through the fire" (ουτως δε ως δια πυρος). The punishment is described not as a burning retribution but the believer being deprived of rewards.<sup>47</sup>

These two central passages about the judgment seat of Christ provide food for thought on the believer's evaluation after death. The belief in this final judgment was proclaimed by the apostles and affirmed by the church fathers.<sup>48</sup> A key question, however, must be asked. Will this cleansing take an extended time in purgatory, or will it occur in a moment of time? Once we are outside the space-time continuum we now experience, how do we measure time as we stand before Christ the Judge? Certainly, since the whole span of life must be covered in the evaluation, it hardly seems viable that such event would be instantaneous. Also, as in much of our growth in maturity through imperfect choices in our temporal life, learning from our mistakes and personal growth seem likely to be part of the divine evaluation process.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, it would seem prudent for those who believe in purgatory to place more emphasis upon the grace and love of the One who purges us, as did the soul in "Gerontius." In a similar vein, I would encourage Protestants, especially evangelicals, who see death as a seamless transition to glory and reward to think again about their view. The redemption of Christ through his death, resurrection, and ascension are the basis for our salvation. But even the great spokesperson for this, the apostle Paul, thought that our post-death judgment should fill the believer's heart with reverential fear. We can all agree Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross but also that we will be held accountable for the life we have lived while on the earth.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

We have seen that the view of C.S. Lewis on purgatory does not fit completely within the Roman Catholic tradition and certainly not within that of many Protestant denominations. Yet many Christian traditions would agree that each believer will ultimately face Christ as Judge to receive purging and recompense for the life lived on earth.

Our study has also shown that Lewis's ethical bedrock was found in the law of nature. This starting point was central to the teaching of medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. Both of these men saw a self-evident quality to universal moral norms but also found these as inadequate without being informed by divine revelation in the Christian Scriptures. Finally, the ethical choices that we make every day are feeding into the persons that we will become in eternity. As Lewis explained the social dimension of growing in Christ-likeness, there are no ordinary people:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and

goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people.<sup>51</sup>

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