

Post Modernism, The Chronicles of Narnia And “A Pain In The Mind”

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The hype has begun. How it will ultimately impact and mold the discussion regarding spiritual truth in our Post Modern culture will be interesting to watch. I'm referring of course to the release (oops, I nearly wrote "advent") of the much anticipated *"The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,"* first of 7 highly anticipated movie adaptations of C.S. Lewis' **"The Chronicles of Narnia."** Churches have purchased blocks of tickets (Disney has marketed this heavily to churches), Narnian imagery will now punctuate sermons for weeks (if not months) to come, and all-things-Narnian can now be purchased at Christian gift stores. Articles have been (and are being) penned as to whether the Chronicles are "Christian" stories replete with Christian imagery, or are they simply good stories which incorporate the biblical and universal themes of "the only true myth." Since I can only touch on this subject here, let me point you to some resources. Chuck Colson's Breakpoint commentary for December 9 is a good starting point and contains an excellent on-line bibliography with links to some major publications and articles. You can find your way to it by going to www.breakpoint.org. The debate is somewhat humorous. The idea that the foremost Christian apologist of the 20th Century would write a set of children's stories without their being an outflow of his Christian worldview (which would necessarily incorporate Christian imagery) is to completely misunderstand the man, his worldview and how that worldview affects every area of life. But on the other hand, unlike so many contemporary evangelical Christians, Lewis was not a "bumper-sticker kind of guy." Much of contemporary Evangelicalism seems intent on reducing eternal truth to 10 words which will fit on a bumper sticker - the Kingdom of God on a post card - The Chronicles of Narnia in a tree ornament. Doug Gresham is Lewis' step-son (go rent a copy of the wonderful movie "Shadowlands" if you need to fill in your knowledge gaps at this point). Himself an evangelical Christian, he oversaw the production of the Narnia movie. In a recent interview Gresham weighed in on this debate by explaining that Lewis was concerned first and foremost about writing a good story, and secondly that the story communicate Christian themes. I can't help but muse that if Lewis were alive today he would bemoan the inability of today's Christians to write a good story. As a result we as a Church are in the process of committing the ultimate sin - we are boring our Post Modern culture with the greatest story ever told - the greatest and only "true myth." And this leads me to talk about . . .

Post Modernism - "You Either Get It Or You Don't"

Any discussion of "The Chronicles of Narnia" and their message must inevitably lead to a discussion of the gospel and our Post Modern culture. It really isn't possible to fairly treat the topic of Post Modernism in a single paragraph (but, of course that won't stop me from trying!). In our new house church equipping workbook I have devoted one complete Module (roughly 20 pages) to Post Modernism and its impact on the contemporary Church. Rather than attempting to "re-invent the wheel" at this point, allow me to simply quote from the introduction to our new equipping workbook and my introduction to Module 2 on Post Modernism:

Post Modernism represents the dominant philosophy of our culture today, yet few Christians are even aware of it. The rise of Post Modernism is one of the primary reasons why our old paradigms no longer function as they once did. For this reason I have devoted an extensive Module to a discussion of Post Modernism. Much of contemporary Christian writing on Post Modernism (and there is a lot of it!) seems to have missed the forest for the trees. Most of the discussions seem to be over which tree is most characteristic of the Post Modern forest (the deconstructive, the linguistic, the nihilistic etc.), rather than understanding the origin and nature of the forest itself. The ultimate question has to do with where contemporary Post Modernism stands in the 500 year flow of western thought, of which Post Modernism (regardless of which variety) is the current product and expression. To put it simply, a movement (such as Post Modernism) without a context appears as an anomaly. One of the dangers for the Church is to treat Post Modernism simply as an anomaly to be ridiculed and ignored (or, worse, as a pattern to be embraced) rather than seeing it for the gnostic-like threat it really is to genuine faith. Philosophically, Post Modernism represents a dangerous flirtation with nihilism, a denial both of any binding truth and of any human ability to know such truth. Culturally, Post Modernism represents a dangerous flirtation with "cannibalism", a willingness to consume one's own culture, and whatever stabilizing values have been built up over the centuries, in order to pursue and achieve our own personal success or fulfillment. In a very real sense, Post Modernism is like a feast among cannibals who

have not yet fully comprehended what their invitation to dinner really entails. Post Modernism has infested the church and the contagion is spreading, hence, my inclusion of this module. As authentic biblical Christians, our goal is not to become a "Post Modern Church ." We are neither nihilists nor cannibals. The idea of a "Post Modern Church " is an oxymoron on the same level as a "Christian heavy metal band" or a "death of God theologian." Rather, our goal is to understand Post Modernism to such an extent that we can communicate the message of the Kingdom of God in an authentic manner that challenges the "plausibility structure" of the Post Modern seeker and results in his (or her) personal spiritual transformation. (End quote).

In a nutshell (here we go, oversimplifying the complex) Post Modernism represents the practical cultural expression of a people who live their collective cultural lives beneath Francis Schaeffer's "line of despair" (Schaeffer develops "the line of despair" in his book "Escape From Reason"), the inability to know, explain and live by any "universal truth" (what Post Moderns refer to as a "meta-narrative") such as traditional Judeo-Christian values (O.K., that's the best I can do at condensing 20 pages of explanation!). We must understand that in our Post Modern culture our traditional Christian apologetics simply don't "work." No less an accomplished grass roots apologist than Josh McDowell will tell you that the type of evidential apologetic which he practiced so successfully on college campuses 30 years ago (when I first met Josh, and nearly went to work for him!) will no longer work on those same campuses. Most Christian apologetics today is being written and targeted, not for the Post Modern unbeliever, but for the confused and "post-modern-challenged" believer who still confuses milk for strong drink and meat, and who thinks that Post Modernism is just a school of bad art.

Enter "The Chronicles of Narnia"

As every reader of "The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe" knows, "This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids." Ironically, it was during that same war-time period that Lewis spoke and wrote responses to critics of academia who challenged the validity and importance of cultural pursuits (such as literature and a University education) during such a time of crisis and upheaval as the war presented (couldn't those efforts and resources be better spent elsewhere in the war effort). Lewis' responses became a pair of articles entitled "Christianity & Culture" which have been reprinted in the 1967 book Christian Reflections. In these articles Lewis observed that popular culture (including such as literature and movies) can be likened to "the road into Jerusalem," what I like to refer to as the "suburbs of Jerusalem ." In other words, a Judeo-Christian culture that resonates with biblical values, symbols and thought processes prepares the mind (if not the heart) to consider the claims of the Gospel. To bring this home to our discussion, "The Chronicles of Narnia" movies, in my opinion, are neither the gospel nor the "New Jerusalem," rather, in true C.S. Lewis fashion, they represent Lewis' contribution to the cultural road into Jerusalem . The books (and hopefully the movies) embody those great "mythological" themes (e.g., courage, good vs. evil, sin, forgiveness, the sacrificial & substitutionary death of the innocent for the guilty) which have resonated in the hearts of men since the dawn of time and literature. These great themes, which you and I and Lewis would argue find their fulfillment in what Lewis called the "only true myth" of the gospel, provide an ever-present "pain in the mind" of our Post Modern culture, the very type of "pain in the mind" that led Lewis himself to re-examine Christianity and turned him into "the world's most reluctant convert."

"A Pain In The Mind" And Eternity In The Heart

"He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, without which man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end." -Ecclesiastes 3:11

It was veteran missiologist Leslie Newbigin, in an interview with Tim Stafford for Christianity Today, who observed, *"All thinking begins with a pain in the mind."* Newbigin understood that it is not until some challenger awakens us from our "dogmatic slumber" that we are truly prepared to think new thoughts and re-examine long-held beliefs. In a very real sense, Newbigin "inadvertantly" touched on a biblical truth, namely, that all thoughts of God and of universal truth have their ultimate roots in that ache for eternity that God Himself has planted in the human heart. Even so tortured a nihilistic Post Modern soul as that of Friedrich Nietzsche understood this "truth" when he declared (pardon my paraphrasing the German which is beyond my translation skills), when we are in pain we long for it to be over, but beauty "cries out for all

eternity, for deep, deep eternity.” In other words, the soul of Post Modern man cries out in desperate hope to the very One whom the Post Modern mind rationally denies, and therein lies both the tension of our Post Modern culture and the challenge of Christian apologetics in our Post Modern Age. Most contemporary Christian apologetics appeals to a Post Modern mind which has already concluded that our rational and empirical arguments are unconvincing and our conclusions are invalid, rather than appealing to the heart and soul which still “cries out for all eternity, for deep, deep eternity.”

This is the opportunity provided by such movies as “The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe” (along with “The Lord of The Rings” trilogy which I wish I had more opportunity to explore here. Lewis and Tolkein were close friends, and without Lewis’ encouragement at a difficult point in Tolkein’s life, the Lord of the Rings volumes would never have been finished). They represent an opportunity to tell “a good story” (a “meta-narrative in disguise,” if you will) that touches on those universal themes which resonate with biblical spiritual truth and which explore that eternal ache which God has planted in every heart. The exploration of such themes (Where do these universal notions of good versus evil come from if there is no God? Why does beauty cry out for permanence? Why does the existence of evil cry out for justice?) represent an opportunity for Christians to plant a thorn in the mind of our Post Modern culture, in the genuine and biblical expectation that “all thinking begins with a pain in the mind.”

O.K., it’s time to wrap this up. We need to understand that there is a time and a place for challenging, choosing and believing with respect to Jesus and the gospel. The C.S. Lewis who believed in and wrote “good stories” was the same C.S. Lewis who challenged people to choose:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him, ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity).

But there is an equally important place for communicating sublime truth with a good story, for meditating on the ache of eternity within the human heart, for leaning back in one’s favorite chair with a good cup of tea and reflecting on what it meant when the Professor called out “Further up and further in!” (P.S., You’ll find the answer in “The Last Battle”).

Enjoy the movie. Better yet, enjoy it with a friend.