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The Abolition of Man: First Principles and Pre-Evangelism (or "What C.S. Lewis Taught My Brother")

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The First

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ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Upland, Indiana

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First Principles of Pre-Evangelism
(or “What C.S. Lewis Taught My Brother”)

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**The Abolition of Man:
First Principles and Pre-Evangelism
(or, "What C.S. Lewis Taught My Brother")
by Ted Dorman**

It was 4:30 a.m., a few days before Christmas 1973. My brother Jim and I had spent the previous six hours in animated point-counterpoint concerning the claims of Jesus Christ: I the believer; he the pagan. For the first time in his life, Jim began to perceive the uniqueness of Jesus over against all other philosophers and religious teachers throughout history.

Yet the question remained: Is Christianity TRUE? Can one believe in the Risen Christ in a modern "scientific" age which denies that dead people can come back to life? As one trained in the biological sciences, Jim had looked to natural causes to explain everything from mere physical existence to religion and ethics. Yet he was beginning to think that naturalistic science did NOT have all the answers to life's biggest questions.

But if not in scientific inquiry, where were those answers to be found?

Sensing that Jim's life was at a crossroads, I loaned him my copy of C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*. A few days later (it was December 28, 1973 to be precise), after he had finished reading Lewis, Jim told me that he had

accepted Jesus Christ as Lord of his life. We were now brothers two times over.

What did Lewis's slim volume of three short essays, easily read in one sitting, have to say which became for my brother a bridge from unbelief to faith? And what can we as Christians learn from Jim Dorman's encounter with C.S. Lewis about communicating the Gospel to the modern and post-modern mindset of contemporary culture?

The lessons we can learn from *The Abolition of Man* are multifaceted, much like a glittering diamond perfectly cut by an expert jeweler. I would like to deal briefly with two facets of this small but precious gem of a book. The first of these I will label "First Principles"; the second, "Pre-evangelism."

First Principles

Here I employ the term found in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* #110 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), where he wrote:

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We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart. It is through this latter that we know first principles; and reason, which has nothing to do with this, vainly tries to refute them.

To which Pascal added in *Pensées* #188:

The final step which reason can take is to recognize that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely impotent if it cannot get as far as to realize this.

Three centuries later C.S. Lewis was to confront the intellectual progeny of those Enlightenment Rationalists whom Pascal had excoriated. Lewis's task in the first two chapters of *The Abolition of Man* was to argue for what he called "the doctrine of objective value," i.e. the notion that in non-empirical arenas such as morals and aesthetics "certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and to the kind of things we are" (p. 29). He thereby launched a frontal attack on the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of his, and our, time: The notion that what may be termed "values" (e.g. beauty, morality, religion) are merely matters of personal preference, as opposed to the realm of Reason and applied science, which deals with things as they really are.

In the first chapter Lewis used a newly-published English textbook, which he labeled *The Green Book*, to make his point. He noted how its authors consistently reduced statements of value to statements of personal preference. For example, *The Green Book* insisted that the statement "the waterfall is sublime" says nothing about the waterfall, but only speaks of our feelings about the waterfall.

The same would be true of statements of right and wrong.

Such people, Lewis argued, equate wisdom with the ability to explain away traditional canons of value and morality. These canons, which Lewis dubbed the *Tao*, express themselves with remarkable consistency across both time and culture. This cross-cultural consistency of the *Tao*, Lewis argued, is *prima facie* evidence that the values it expresses set forth universal truths, not merely cultural sentiments. To try to explain them away with rational argumentation is to miss (or ignore?) the point that the *Tao precedes* and forms the *basis* for rational thought. In a word, the *Tao* is Lewis's label for Pascal's "first principles."

Lewis saw clearly where a generation of children raised on *The Green Book* was headed. Having been taught how to explain away every notion of value or "first principles" (the *Tao*) on the basis of "rational" analysis, such children will grow up as "Men Without Chests." For if the "head" represents rational thought, the "chest" represents those virtuous sentiments which guide our thinking towards the nobler aspects of our nature, as opposed to ridiculing those sentiments and thereby reducing us to the animal appetites of our nature. To separate the "head" from the "chest," as does *The Green Book*, would in Lewis's estimation lead to the following scenario:

On this view [promoted by *The Green Book*] the world of facts, without one trace of value, and the world of feelings without one trace of truth or falsehood, justice or injustice, confront one another, and no *rapprochement* is possible (p. 30f.).

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Such a head-only philosophy of education would in turn produce students of whom it may be said:

They are not distinguished from other men by any unusual skill in finding truth. . . . It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out. Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest that makes them seem so. (p. 35)

And yet, Lewis noted with irony, even as all too many of us, students and teachers alike, imbibe the heady brew of *The Green Book*, we continue to clamor for those very qualities we are rendering impossible [by following *The Green Book*]. . . . We make men without chests and expect from them virtue and enterprise. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful. (p. 35)

Nevertheless, Lewis conceded, it is theoretically possible that the "chest" does not really exist. In this view the *Tao* is merely a collection of culturally-relative pronouncements which can be explained away scientifically. In chapter three Lewis confronted this possibility by asking in effect, Where do we end up if we follow this proposition to its logical conclusion?

Pre-evangelism

Lewis's response to this question sets forth one of the greatest examples of what I earlier referred to as "pre-evangelism," or prolegomena to preaching of the Gospel. For as he set forth the full implications of *The Green Book's* world-view, Lewis also set the

stage for a message of meaning and hope to a meaningless, hopeless world.

For Lewis, to explain away the *Tao* would result in nothing less than "The Abolition of Man," the title of the book's final essay. The obvious progress of modern applied science might lead us to a contrary conclusion, namely, that what is just around the corner is "Man's conquest of Nature" (p. 67). Upon closer examination, however, we find that "Man's conquest of Nature" turns out to be the conquest of some men by others, i.e. "a power possessed by some men which they may, or may not, allow other men to profit by" (p. 68).

This, insisted Lewis, is what "'Man's power of Nature' must always and essentially be" (p. 69). "Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men" (p. 71). Here Lewis may well have had fellow Englishman Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in the crosshairs of his rhetorical rifle. At whom might Lewis take aim today? One can only speculate. (Or perhaps Lewis would have decided to go fish rather than to go hunt.)

Furthermore, to conquer nature in the sense of explaining away all elements of the *Tao* by means of naturalistic analysis in the ends frees us not from nature, but from the guardianship of the "first principles" of the *Tao* which have held in check humanity's baser instincts since time immemorial. But if all are free from the strictures of the *Tao*, then there are no first principles to keep some men from enslaving others.

Lewis concluded that the abolition of man completes itself with the destruction of the very concept of human nature. For the first principles of the *Tao* presuppose that human

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nature is in some ways transcendent, and not merely the result of natural cause and effect. But if modern applied science has seen through all of these purported first principles and pronounced them as pure subjective sentiment devoid of truth value, then what is left? Have we not in fact explained away those very qualities which make us human (including those qualities which allow us to transcend the natural world to the extent that we can analyze it in the first place)?

What, then, is left when we have explained away everything? Total agnosticism and solipsism, as exemplified in Lewis's final, devastating analysis of the true end of the modern mindset:

But you cannot go on 'explaining away' for ever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to 'see through' first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.

It was this final paragraph which stopped my brother Jim in his tracks. His desire to explain away all notions of value as mere subjective preference was now revealed for what it really was: the stealing of his soul, the death of his humanity. Lewis's approach, by virtue of not beginning from strictly-Christian

premisses, was for that very reason all the more convincing to Jim's pagan mindset. The one who thought he could sooner or later see through everything realized at last that to do so was in fact a form of blindness. And who better to heal the eyes of the blind than the One who did so almost 2,000 years ago as He said, "I am the Light of the World"?

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see!