

## A Reformed Reading of C. S. Lewis

Sara Heitmann

C. S. Lewis was a member of the Church of England, and Reformed Christians may wonder how much his views accord with standards such as the catechisms and confessions, or the five points of Calvinism. It is difficult to determine to what extent Lewis believed in total depravity and inability, for while he believed in man's corruption and inability to do good works, as well as in God's part in salvation, he complicates the issue by suggesting the possibility of a choice of the free will in salvation.

Total depravity is the doctrine that all men are corrupted in every part, and this includes and implies total inability, whereby man is unable to do any good, or even to begin to turn from sin to God. Total depravity is explained in the third point of doctrine of the Canons of Dort. Article 1 says that man rebelled against God, and that in so doing "he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions" (Canons 2167). Article 2 adds that this corruption is spread to Adam's descendants "not by way of imitation but by way of propagation of his perverted nature" (Canons 2176). Louis Berkhof, in his *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, says of total depravity that "the inherent corruption extends to every part of man's nature, and that there is in him no spiritual good, that is good in relation to God, at all, but only moral perversion" (Berkhof 146). Total depravity, therefore, is due to rebellion against God, is inherent in every man's nature, and affects every part of that nature, including mind, heart, will, and emotions.

Total inability follows immediately from total depravity, and is therefore treated along with it in both the Canons of Dort and Berkhof's *Manual*. Article 3 of the Canons of Dort says of all people that "without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform" (Canons 2167). Berkhof describes this inability similarly, saying that "man cannot change his fundamental preference for sin to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change" (Berkhof 146). Because every part of man is corrupt, including the will, there is nothing good left to effect a change. Therefore man cannot change his nature, he cannot turn from sin to God, and he cannot even begin to move in that direction. This is the predicament of humanity as understood by Reformed Christians.

The examination of books by Lewis yields evidence that he agreed with these doctrines to a great extent. In *Mere Christianity* he says that "fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms" (44). He recognizes, therefore, that all men are in rebellion against God. He also says of "human beings, all over the earth" that "They know the Law of Nature; they break it" (*Mere Christianity* 7). And not only do all men break the law, but Lewis argues that "what we do matters chiefly as evidence of what we are" (*Mere Christianity* 150). Even of good works he asks, "How many of them were done for the right motive?" (150) Lewis apparently believed that men not only sin, but are sinners, even where they appear to be good. Corruption affects not just outward works but who people are, including motives. Christians are not exempt from this corruption, for Lewis says, "We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it," and "The main thing

we learn from a serious attempt to practice the Christian virtue is that we fail" (*Mere Christianity* 110). Lewis believes that everyone has this tendency to evil inside them which affects everything they do, whether outwardly good or bad.

Not even the best and highest of a person is safe from corruption, according to Lewis. In *The Great Divorce*, one of the redeemed tells a visitor from Hell that the higher natural affections are better, but also worse, because they fall farther (97). And later he says, "There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him. And the higher and mightier it is in the natural order, the more demoniac it will be if it rebels" (98). Therefore there is no part of man that is safe from corruption if he turns away from God. This is true of Ransom in *Perelandra*, of whom an eldil says, "And in his best thoughts there are such things mingled as, if we thought them, our light would perish. But he is in the body of Maledil and his sins are forgiven" (195). Ransom is a heroic character, but as part of Earth's fallen race, he is still contaminated even in his best parts by sin. It is perhaps not explicitly spelled out, but there is much to indicate that Lewis believed in an extensive depravity of human nature.

There is also a fair amount of evidence that Lewis believed in man's inability to turn from this sin or change his nature without the help of God. In *Mere Christianity*, he describes repentance as "Laying down your arms . . . This process of surrender--this movement full speed astern," and even, "undergoing a kind of death" (44-45). The problem is that "the same badness which makes us need it, makes us unable to do it" (45). Lewis then recognizes this difficulty that fallen men cannot turn away from their sin to God unless God himself helps them. He believes they cannot change their nature either, for when he explains that sin shows what men are, and that good acts can have bad

motives, he says, "it follows that the change which I most need to undergo is a change that my own direct, voluntary efforts cannot bring about," and also, "I cannot, by direct moral effort, give myself new motives." (*Mere Christianity* 150). Even Christians, therefore, are unable to change themselves, which is why Lewis says the Christian "does not think that God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us" (*Mere Christianity* 49). Lewis therefore believes that fallen man, unless God intervenes, is unable to repent and unable to become good, because he is corrupt in his actions, being, and motives.

In spite of all this, there is a problem, because Lewis also believed in free will, and therefore argued that God cannot begin to work in men until they have freely chosen to let him in. He describes the free will of unbelievers as a compass needle which may or may not point north, to God. The choice is "something they can freely give Him or freely refuse to Him," and "even He cannot produce it by a mere act of power" (*Mere Christianity* 164). He further explains, "He can help it to do so. He cannot force it. He cannot, so to speak, put out His own hand and pull it into the right position, for then it would not be free will any more" (164-165). Lewis, then, believed that at some point there is a choice man must make on his own initiative. He even characterizes God as saying, "You have free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away" (*Mere Christianity* 158). And in *The Great Divorce*, an angel who offers to kill the evil lizard on a ghost's shoulder says, "I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?" (100) This belief that God cannot work in someone until they have consented of their own free will is a complication. If man is unable to turn from sin to God, how can he consent to God's working in him? Does it mean that there is some part

of man's will that is not corrupt? Perhaps Lewis does not believe in an inability as total as the reformers, who taught that man's will is so corrupt he cannot even begin to turn to God until God has already begun to work in him.

However, the free will issue turns out to be more complex, and perhaps less contradictory to total inability, since Lewis describes his own conversion in a way that casts doubt on the free nature of his choice. First, he admits to what extent he was dependent on God's work in him. He uses the analogy of a chess game which he was losing, saying, "Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves" (*Surprised by Joy* 216). His successive realizations he describes as God's moves, bringing him closer to conversion. The first move he describes as an order, or even compulsion (217). And when he finally believed in God, he says he was "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England," and, "a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape" (228-229). Lewis does not sound very free in these descriptions. On the contrary, he describes God as the active one, working changes and nearly dragging him in. And to a friend who was nearing conversion Lewis wrote, "But I think you are already in the meshes of the net! The Holy Spirit is after you. I doubt if you'll get away!" (Letter 93). Here conversion is more a matter of God's work on resisting sinners, which would make more sense for rebellious fallen men.

Lewis still mentions some sort of free choice that played a part in his conversion, but here it is not so clear-cut. He says, "Before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice." His description of this choice to let God in is odd. He explains that "it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the

other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most that I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do' (*Surprised by Joy* 224-225). The concept of free will here is far more complex than it appeared before. He suggests that he could be perfectly free and at the same time unable to choose otherwise. His conversion from Theism to Christianity was by a similar process, with similar resistance, and another ambiguous choice. "Freedom, or necessity?" he asks. "Or do they differ at their maximum? At that maximum a man is what he does; there is nothing of him left over or outside the act" (237). So Lewis believes in free choice, and yet how free it is, or how necessary, and how it is connected to God's work before and after, is not clear. Perhaps Lewis's free choice is not as contradictory to total depravity and inability as appeared at first, if God is working before the choice and if freedom doesn't contradict necessity.

Does Lewis then believe in total depravity and inability? His books describe man as in rebellion against God, corrupt in being and motive and in his best thoughts, and unable to repent, turn, or change. On the other hand, he defends man's free will to choose God on his own. But alongside this freedom, which is indistinct from necessity, is God's active role in bringing us into salvation. If Lewis believes that man's will is capable in its natural state of choosing to let God in, he cannot believe also in total inability. But he also believes in some work of God to push the sinner in that direction, or maybe help his will along. This accounts for total inability better, but it threatens to compromise the free will Lewis adamantly held to. He was only an amateur theologian, and that may account

for this difficulty. Or perhaps his views changed over his lifetime. It is hard to say. But the best that can be concluded from his writing is that he tried to reconcile man's fallen state with free will, and God's saving work with man's choice, and the result was something which, though not perfectly in accord with Reformed teaching, was close to the truth on many points.

Works Cited

- Berkhof, Louis. *Manual of Christian Doctrine*. 1933. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002. Print.
- The Canons of Dort. *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. 2163-2172. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. Letter to Sheldon Vanauken. *A Severe Mercy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977. 91-93. Print.
- . *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1952. Print.
- . *Perelandra*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1944. Print.
- . *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955. Print.
- . *The Great Divorce*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1946. Print.