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'Mere Theology' and 'Jacksplotation,' review of Will Vaus Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C.S. Lewis

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Will Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 266 pp. ISBN (UK): 1-84474-026-9.

All books with the word *Mere*, *Surprised*, or *Lewis* in the title are suspect until proven innocent. The charge is ‘Jacksplotation’, a play upon the words ‘Jack’ (Lewis’ nickname) and ‘exploitation’. Robert MacSwain, who coined the phrase, explains that the world ‘is awash in Jacksplotation’, in books that have little or no scholarly value but seek simply to ‘cash in’ on the legacy of C. S. Lewis, making it difficult to form a learned opinion of his ideas.¹ Both Will Vaus and Alister McGrath have written books titled *Mere Theology*, Vaus in 2004 and McGrath in 2010. The subtitles reveal their important difference: Vaus’ book is *A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis*, and McGrath wrote on *Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind*.² Our business is with Vaus’ book. In this review, a not unfavourable verdict emerges.

After Douglas Gresham’s preface and J. I. Packer’s back cover endorsement have taken the edge off the reader’s preliminary anxiety, the author introduces his book. In *Mere Theology*, Vaus takes the formula ‘What did Lewis believe about _____?’ (p. 16), fills in the blank with twenty-five central Christian themes, and answers them in an equal number of short chapters. The themes may be worth mentioning here: apologetics, Scripture, the Trinity, God’s sovereignty and human free will, the creation, the Fall, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, faith and works, Satan and temptation, the natural moral law, sex, marriage and divorce, gender, politics, war, love, the Church, prayer,

1. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3, n. 7.
2. Will Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). Alister McGrath, *Mere Theology: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (London: SPCK, 2010). McGrath notes Vaus’ book and explains that they both use ‘mere theology’ but in a slightly different sense. ‘I use the phrase in a broader sense, which embraces the theological approaches found in Lewis, and their counterparts within the Christian tradition’ (p. 155, n. 1, emphasis added).

the sacraments, Hell, Purgatory, Heaven, and the Second Coming of Christ.

The chapters are most readable, well structured, and succinct. *Mere Theology* is one-fourth of the length of Walter Hooper's *C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works*.³ Vaus rarely quotes Lewis at length (not an effortless accomplishment), has a knack for arresting opening lines, and most of his between-chapter transitions are good. He is a rather selfless author, adding minimal personal comment or criticism. Instead, he takes the reader by the hand and helps him sift through Lewis' literary legacy, comprised of 'forty published books during his lifetime, not to mention numerous articles, poems and countless letters' (p. 231). Vaus does quote Scripture heavily throughout the book. His hope is that readers will not only be content with the simply educative purpose of his book but will 'look with me along Lewis' writings back up to the God of whom he writes' (p. 16). He doubts that Lewis 'would mind' his numerous Scriptural references.

In one of the most memorable chapters, Vaus explains how Lewis, who had a high tolerance of paradox and of the limit of human reason, resisted any definite solution to what Austin Farrer called 'the verbally insoluble riddle of grace and freewill' (p. 60). However, Vaus suggests that, over the years, Lewis' view of the relationship of human responsibility and God's sovereignty may have undergone a gradual change, so that there 'is a decided emphasis, in Lewis' last interview, on God's sovereignty in Lewis' own salvation' (p. 61). This interesting observation would certainly be worth investigating further.

In the same chapter, Vaus correctly notes that Lewis 'seems to misunderstand the doctrine of total depravity' (p. 50)—at least based on Lewis' treatment of it in *The Problem of Pain*. Vaus explains that this doctrine 'means not, as Lewis suggests, that people are as bad as they could be but rather that at no point are people as good as they should be', and that 'every aspect of a person's being has been affected by sin, including the ability to choose' (p. 50). Vaus does not comment on

3. Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), originally published under the title *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*.

whether Lewis would have objected to this 'faithful' understanding of the doctrine. I suspect he would have agreed wholeheartedly with the first part, but been ambivalent about the second. What Lewis ultimately objected to, regardless of precise doctrinal formulations, were certain anthropological presuppositions and a spirit that (to borrow extracts from Vaus himself) led 'some Christian writers [to] find pleasure itself to be sinful' (p. 75), or to nurture 'a permanently horrified perception of our sin' (p. 181), and so on. Lewis was not the sort of man who would call human virtues 'splendid vices'.

Vaus is candid but careful in his assessment of Lewis' view of marriage and divorce, noting how his relationship with Joy 'may have changed his views on divorce and remarriage' (p. 137). Earlier in life, Lewis had counselled a woman whose husband was unfaithful, giving supportive advice, but ultimately sharing his belief that if she divorced her husband, she was 'not [free] to remarry' (p. 133). Vaus points out that obviously Lewis changed his mind, since he himself married Joy 'under similar circumstances' (p. 137), or at least found some way, in his own case, to reconcile the irreconcilable. The author slips in his belief that both Jesus and Paul 'seem to allow divorce *and* remarriage in the case of either adultery or desertion' (p. 137, n. 37, emphasis added), but graciously tucks it in the safety of an endnote.

Vaus' chosen observations are valuable. Some of them, like the one on total depravity, suggest Protestant interests. Not that he wishes to impose any confessional leanings, but rather that there are certain issues that, as an Evangelical Christian author writing for the readers of InterVarsity Press, he most naturally would notice. An equal share of (critical) attention could have been paid to what Cole Matson has called Lewis' 'barriers to Catholicism'.⁴ It would be interesting to know what a Roman Catholic commentator, in a similar book, would have singled out for closer inspection. Would they, for instance, have challenged the interesting logic of Lewis' argument in support of prayers *for* the dead, but against asking for the prayers *of* the dead (pp. 177-8)?

4. See Cole Matson's review on Milton Walsh's book *Second Friends: C. S. Lewis and Ronald Knox in Conversation*, in *The Journal of Inklings Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Oct 2011), p. 96.

Another enjoyable chapter was the one on love. Throughout the book, the reader will seldom hesitate at the author's interpretations or arguments, and only once will this hesitancy solidify into positive disagreement. In Lewis' understanding of human love, Vaus writes, 'Appreciative love is not part of affection: there is the tendency for affection to take its loved ones for granted' (p. 158). We can agree with the second part of that statement but I remain unconvinced by the first. Standard interpretations of *The Four Loves* yield a different understanding of the matter.

Although it is familiarity, not appreciative love, that is the matrix of affection, only extended familiarity with a person can, and eventually will, expose—and thus teach to appreciate—the goodness that is present in every person including 'the ugly, the stupid, even the exasperating'.⁵ When affection grows, Lewis explains, the lover's 'eyes begin to open ... [and] presently begin to see that there is "something in him" after all'.⁶ An important frontier is crossed. In affection we learn 'to appreciate goodness or intelligence in themselves, not merely goodness or intelligence flavoured and served to suit our own palate'.⁷ In this sense, affection turns out to be uniquely appreciative.

However, in Vaus' defence, Lewis can be quite subtle at times. From his pen are also the statements that appreciative love is 'no basic element' of affection, affection is 'not primarily' an appreciative love, and there are moments in affection when appreciative love 'lies, as it were, curled up asleep'.⁸

Paraphrasing Lewis has the inevitable (and thus excusable) flipside of being less entertaining than Lewis himself.⁹ Vaus commits the un-Lewisian and American literary sin of using exclamation marks to flag (and thereby defuse) the potentially funny or surprising, but he almost atones for it by the Lewisian and un-American habit of using italics sparingly. In this he may be working under the patronage of Lewis'

5. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), p. 43.

6. Lewis, *Four Loves*, p. 47.

7. Lewis, *Four Loves*, p. 48.

8. Lewis, *Four Loves*, pp. 45, 47, 46.

9. See John Beverluis's comment on this in *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), p. 19.

advice that ‘a writer ought not to use italics for [emphasis]. He has his own, different, means of bringing out the key words’.¹⁰ Excluding book titles and foreign words, the author gets through the first two-thirds of the book with a mere half dozen italicised words, but lets loose after page 173, with a whopping two on page 178.

The triviality of a complaint accentuates the compliment. The job of the critic is both frustrating and easy when a book fails at many things it never sought to accomplish and succeeds in the things it did. If one finds Vaus’ *Mere Theology* uncritical at times, one may have been expecting an academic treatise; if one is repelled by the number of endnotes, one may have been expecting a simple popular book. Though Vaus probably knows how to write both genres, this book is neither. It is primarily written for the layperson, whether student or senior, young or old in faith—just like most of Lewis’ books were, though from his pen we also get *The Allegory of Love* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

But ministers and academics may also benefit from Vaus’ book. Readers well acquainted with Lewis will probably not gain (many) new insights, but they will surely be reminded of (some) forgotten ones. On the very last page Vaus returns to the theme of theology’s pastoral calling. Lewis’ theological books are not perfect, to be sure, but they should be evaluated on the basis of whether or not they ‘point ... to the King of Heaven, Jesus Christ’ (p. 232). The author answers in the affirmative; and one can almost hear his swallowed prayer that *Mere Theology* would too.

As for the problem of ‘Jacksplotation’, the double-solution to the exploitation of a famous author is always the same. Lewis would sanction both steps. First, one must return to the originals. One must read the author’s own books, not (only) one’s own books on the author. Second, just as bad literature is overshadowed by good literature, sloppy scholarship is disarmed by solid scholarship. As oxymoronic as it sounds, *Mere Theology* is a corrective to the problem of ‘Jacksplotation’. It is a trustworthy and accessible guide to Lewis’ thought.

Jason Lepojärvi

10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 5.