



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Permanent Things
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 54-58)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Permanent Things

In his fiction C. S. Lewis displays “the permanent things” – those features of the moral order to the cosmos that in turn hold all cultures and eras accountable. Can this natural order, because it commends itself to reason and lies beyond current political fashions, be a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 119:89-96

Responsive Reading[†]

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

Reflection

We’ve all missed the mark, concludes the Apostle Paul (Romans 3:23). And our miss is sinful, not merely bad luck, or an accident, or carelessness, for we’ve violated standards that we knew we were created to obey. Those objective standards measure us all.

Paul is very thankful that he was raised Jewish, or “under the law” – (“we are Jews by birth, not Gentile sinners” he reminds the Galatians). Yet, though Jews enjoy the benefit of hearing the law read in the synagogue, “it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous ...but the doers of the law” – and no one is a faultless doer. What about the rest of the people who “do not possess the law”? Gentiles have no excuse either, Paul reasons, for “their own conscience also bears witness.” As children of the Creator, “what the law requires is written on their hearts” and they have not been reading their hearts (Romans 2:12-16).

To develop practical reason, or become skilled at discerning what we should do, we must embrace the standards God has written on our hearts. Moral education, C. S. Lewis explains in *The Abolition of Man*, includes the gracious discovery of these permanent norms and values. We discern them by reflecting on:

- ▶ *experiences of pure and spontaneous pleasure.* God created us to enjoy all that is good. These moments of joy – because they are not distorted by sinful desires – are “patches of Godlight” breaking into our daily lives. They illumine who we are as human beings and what we were meant to become.
- ▶ *disordered pleasures.* Even inordinate human desires, if they are unmasked as “the sweet poison of the false infinite” that they



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truly are, shed indirect light on human nature. In his fiction, for instance, Lewis “is extremely adept at exposing...the inordinate love of possessions that, because of human fallenness, masquerades as satisfaction in the present life.”

► *humankind’s common moral treasury*. In many cultures we find moral beliefs that commend themselves to our reason.

Permanent truths about human joys and needs, God, and the world give us a perspective above changing political fashions. The unhealthy option, T. S. Eliot warns, is simply to assume “the actual constitution of Society, or that which [our] more generous passions wish to bring about, is right, and Christianity must be adapted to it. But the Church cannot be, in any political sense, either conservative or liberal, or revolutionary. Conservatism is too often conservation of the wrong things; liberalism a relaxation of discipline; revolution a denial of the permanent things.”²

The permanent things may also serve “as a bridge between Christian and non-Christian morality,” Charles suggests, for “in civil society, religious and non-religious people conform to the same ethical standard in order to be governable.”

Study Questions

1. Do “moments of joy” illumine who we are as human beings and what we are meant to become? Have you learned something about being human in such moments?
2. Discuss T. S. Eliot’s warning that Christians should not be conservative, liberal, or revolutionary. How is that possible?
3. Is belief in what Eliot calls “permanent things” fashionable in contemporary American culture?
4. In G. K. Chesterton’s hymn “O God of Earth and Altar,” what is causing society to drift? What is the corrective?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Earth and Altar”

O God of earth and altar, bow down and hear our cry,
our earthly rulers falter, our people drift and die;
the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide;
take not Thy thunder from us, but take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, from lies of tongue and pen,
from all the easy speeches that comfort cruel men;
from sale and profanation of honor and the sword;
from sleep and from damnation, deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether, the prince and priest and thrall;³
bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all;
in ire and exultation aflame with faith and free,
lift up a living nation, a single sword to Thee.

Gilbert K. Chesterton (1906)
Suggested Tune: AURELIA

¹Romans 2:12-16

²“The Idea of a Christian Society,” in *Christianity and Culture* (Harvest Books, 1960), 77.

³With this medieval image, Chesterton refers to president, pastor, and citizen.

Permanent Things

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider to what extent and in what way the moral order to the cosmos is “written on the hearts” of human beings.
2. To explore why it is important for Christians to articulate a transcendent moral order.
3. To examine whether contemporary American culture is receptive and sympathetic to what T. S. Eliot calls “permanent things.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the hymn “O God of Earth and Altar,” locate the tune AURELIA in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Comment

Share the paragraph summary of Lewis’s argument in *The Abolition of Man*, which begins “If there is nothing universal in the moral nature of humankind, then what constraints are there, beyond our political decisions, on how we will treat one another and organize our communities? (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 56-57).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will help members guide their lives by the permanent norms and values, not by changing political fashion.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 119:89-96 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study introduces C. S. Lewis’s view of the centrality of natural law in moral education. The basic idea of natural law is this: (1) there is a fundamental moral order to the cosmos; (2) its norms and values are true independently of what we desire or believe; and (3) this order “seems right” to all humans who reflect carefully on their hearts—in other words, these standards commend themselves to their reason.

Significantly, Lewis believes we need well-tuned hearts as well as thoughtful minds in order to discern the natural law. Think of this “law” (despite its name) not as some legislation to be memorized, but as the way everything was supposed to function when God created Eden. The natural law includes the way our desires were supposed to be ordered and our relationships with God, one another, and the wider creation should have developed. Since God created us to love what is good and to flourish in these rightful relationships, living according to the natural law satisfies our deepest longings. No wonder, then, that “reading” carefully what has

been written on our hearts—by attending to those desires and relationships that produce “pure and spontaneous pleasures” and by recognizing when our desires have gone terribly wrong—will illumine for us God’s natural order.

Though many Christians would say that there is much more to Christian morality than living in harmony with the natural law, they might agree with Lewis on its importance as a starting point in moral education for several reasons: (1) it is an avenue to understanding God’s intent for the cosmos; (2) since natural law norms are permanent, they provide a perspective from which to measure the changing cultural and political views; and (3) because the natural law commends itself to all human beings, its norms can be a bridge between Christian and non-Christian moralities.

Study Questions

1. Being in love, giving birth to a child, rapt enjoyment of a great painting, being absorbed in a wondrous landscape, singing a requiem, cuddling with a loved one under a warm blanket, savoring a tasty meal, experiencing a moment of insight, receiving a friend’s encouragement, and so on. Ask members to make their own list of joyful moments. Consider how each moment points toward something human beings need or the relationships we were created to enjoy.
2. Encourage members to discuss, from their study of this brief context, what Eliot means by “conservative,” “liberal,” and “revolutionary.” How does his comment apply to the present temptation to identify Christian discipleship with the social, economic, international, and environmental platform of any single political party? In the same essay, Eliot says that Christianity does not offer a single plan for society—for the best plan is one that is efficient in a specific time and culture; but it does give “fundamental principles” about human beings, God, and the world that tell us what would be *wrong* for every time and in every culture.
3. What trends in American culture encourage us to neglect “permanent things”? For some people, institutions such as family, community, congregation, and government, have little authority; rather, each person has authority over his or her own values. Relationships are reduced to contractual agreements, so that we owe to others only the services we’ve voluntarily promised. Some people believe we can define ourselves by our choices, especially our consumer purchases. Members may reflect on Harold Shapiro’s comments quoted on p. 57.
4. Chesterton decries the political drift (“our earthly rulers falter”) caused by prideful affluence (“the walls of gold entomb us, the swords of scorn divide”). The government’s misuse of power, economic and military, has been disguised for a time by “lies of tongue and pen” and “easy speeches.” Chesterton’s is a society drawn dangerously close to destruction precisely by its success at empire.

Now the hymnist prays that God shall rouse the people from their deceived and damning sleep, and then unite them into a true community that can arise only after the most painful chastening (“smite us and save us all”). This “free” and “living nation” will not be a conquering Christian empire, but a society so smitten down by the wrath and righteousness of God that its single sword will be the Sword of Truth acclaimed in Scripture.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.