

C.S. Lewis and Professor Haldane

By: Robert L. Withers

In its Autumn 1946 edition, *Modern Quarterly* published an article by Professor J.B.S. Haldane attacking Lewis's science fiction trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. After Lewis's death Walter Hooper found an unpublished reply that Lewis had written; Hooper writes:

“-and here the manuscript ends. One page (I think no more) is missing. It was probably lost soon after the essay was written, and without Lewis's knowledge, for he had, characteristically, folder the manuscript and scribbled the title 'Anti-Haldane' on one side with a pencil.

Lewis's reply was unpublished in his lifetime and was first presented to the public in the collection of essays and short stories, *Of Other Worlds – Essays and Stories* by C.S. Lewis.

While there is no substitute for reading Lewis's reply in its entirety, I want to highlight a few sections in some postings.

Lewis begins:

I had better note the one point of agreement between us. I think, from the Professor's complaint that my characters are 'like slugs in an experimental cage who get a cabbage if they turn right and an electric shock if they turn left', he suspects me of finding the sanctions of conduct in reward and punishment. His suspicion is erroneous. I share his detestation for any such view...In my romances [note that Lewis uses the term *romance* in a technical literary sense – the Space Trilogy is romantic] the 'good' characters are in fact rewarded. This is because I consider a happy ending appropriate to the light, holiday kind of 'poetic justice' of romance for an ethical theorem. I would go further. **Detestation for any ethic which worships success** is one of my chief reasons for disagreeing with most communists. [Remember that Lewis is writing in 1946, right after WWII.] In my experience they tend, when all else fails, to tell me that I ought to forward the revolution because 'it is bound to come'. One dissuaded me from my own position on the shockingly irrelevant ground that if I continued to hold it I should, in good time, be "mown down" – argued, as a cancer might argue if it could talk, **that he must be right because he could kill me.** [Bold print mine.]

Lewis, I should warn some readers, is only using communists as an example, before his essay is over he will cast a wide net.

As you can see from my use of **bold print** the ethic of “if it leads to success it is right/might makes right” caught my attention for it is the ethic of not only our society, but of much of the professing church.

Yesterday I read an advertisement for a “minister of spiritual formation” posted by a church. Among the qualifications is a “successful track record of multiplying small groups”. The entire posting read like a posting for a business executive – a history of success, success, and more success was required. Such a history may or may not be the “track record” of someone who knows the territory of spiritual formation into the image of Jesus Christ. Any pastor or vocational minister of the Gospel who knows the Gospel should be cautious about communicating an ethos of success to his people – for the way of the Cross is hardly a way of success – at least not success in the eyes of the world, nor success in the eyes of the aforementioned church seeking a minister of spiritual formation. Transformation into the image of Jesus Christ occurs, more often than not, in the crucible of defeat, disappointment, and rejection.

The Gospel of the Cross of Christ is about finding our lives in Christ; not finding our lives in success. The truth of the Gospel is a truth to live and die by **without regard to pragmatic considerations**. Elsewhere in his body of writing Lewis writes in effect, “I don’t believe the Gospel because of what it does for me; I believe the Gospel because it is true.” [That’s not an exact quote but it’s close].

Do I realize how deeply an ethic of success has penetrated my own heart and thinking? What about you?