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May 11, 2008: When Bad Theology Happens to Good People

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: When Bad Theology Happens to Good People

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5/11/2008--I am reminded of the difference between religion of depth and its opposite in comparing C.S. Lewis with Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People", who is speaking in Pittsburgh this week. According to a story in the Jewish Chronicle, Rabbi Kushner is speaking on his book, "How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness". For the Rabbi, his answer to this question represents a rejection of the Christian dogma of Original Sin. Rabbi Kushner is not rejecting the doctrine rejected by many Christian theologians that we are literally punished for the sin of Adam and Eve. He is rejecting the different formulation that the sin of Adam and Eve is forever recapitulated as human beings always choose disobedience to God's will for us. Rabbi Kushner believes that this idea—that men and women are genuinely evil at heart—is a harmful Christian doctrine because it causes people to regard themselves as bad just because they are not perfect. Now I think Kushner is doing therapy here and not theology and certainly not Jewish versus Christian theology. God tells Abraham in Genesis 17:1: "walk before me and be perfect". Even though the Hebrew is probably better translated as blameless or even whole, the point is not so different. Whatever it is that Abraham was to be, you and I are not. Kushner wants us to feel good about ourselves. But why should we? Kushner seems to me to be pushing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. I know myself to be an enemy of God. The complacency Kushner accepts leads to a bourgeois world in which the inviolability of our lifestyles is taken as a given, despite its cost to the rest of the world. Compare this to C.S. Lewis in his lectures about God, entitled, Beyond Personality. For Lewis, the point of "belief" in Christ is to allow God to remake us into something we are not, yet. We are to be made into human beings for the first time. Everything is to be taken from us. Everything is on loan from God. We will truly live for the first time. This is not just Christian thinking. The people of Israel were not just to be okay, just not to hurt anyone in an obvious way, just to be nice. They were to be a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation. Ex. 19:6. Israel was not that, and paid the price in national disaster. God is not easy to please, apparently. Much harder to please than Rabbi Kushner.