

Romancing Mortification: A Response to Lewis

Micah McCormick

In Camille K. Lewis' recent article, "Publish and Perish?: My Fundamentalist Education from the Inside Out," Lewis makes public the intended final chapter of her book, *Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism*.¹ Introducing the chapter, Lewis recounts the conflict she experienced with Bob Jones University (BJU) over the chapter's content, a struggle that eventually led to her resignation from the school in 2007. Lewis acknowledges that along her journey she has become more prophetic and less sagacious, a move readily apparent when one compares chapter six with the first five chapters. Yet Lewis' goal is neither simply to expose nor to rant but to imagine "a productive criticism for sectarian rhetoric and religion."² In short, Lewis fears that Jim Berg, dean of students at BJU, represents a recent trend toward a rhetorically tragic frame, and she puts forward instead the more comedic frame offered by Walter Wink and Jim Wallis. Lewis' goal is certainly admirable, but at the end of the day her criticism is not as productive as it could be. Her most recent rhetoric is, from one perspective, captivating, but it is not Burkean enough, because it is not romantic enough, to use her own frame.

For Lewis, Berg portrays religion as mortification rather than romantic cultivation. Thus, in a dramatic twist, Berg becomes the unorthodox outsider who needs to be refused if the romantic separatist ideal is to succeed. I suggest another alternative: Berg can be reread and incorporated into Lewis' romantic frame. This move is more strategic, not least because the concept of mortification is not as marginal to fundamentalist identity as some might wish. Even more, Scripture, the constitutional document for Protestant fundamentalism, can be employed to engage these religious sectarians rather than to drive them away. The resources for such a democratic inclusion (and potential transformation) are actually latent in Lewis' own work.

"Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality."³ So observes Burke. If what he says is true of the vocabularies we seek and the language we speak, perhaps even more so is it true of the language we borrow from others. Historians select their events, journalists select those they interview, and writers select they quote and what quotes they choose to use. Lovers quote each

other, for better and for worse. In examining Lewis' use of Berg, selection and deflection develop along the timeline of her relationship with BJU.

Lewis says that when she read Berg's *When Trouble Comes*, she was presented with someone who was "not at all the Berg I thought I knew."⁴ The Berg she thought she knew was her original inspiration, the one who pointed her towards desire, towards a romance wherein the secular Other wanted what the religious sectarian had. Yet the post-9/11 Berg, unlike the Berg of 1999, appears enmeshed in tragedy. In the remodeled Berg, "the Christian walk is . . . a tragic precipice upon which we teeter. One little slip to the left or the right, one little glimpse down below, and we're doomed."⁵

I would suggest that there has not been such a striking change in Berg. Rather, if I could trade on the romantic imagery, the earlier Lewis was full of hope over the prospects of establishing a long and fruitful relationship with BJU. She "honestly believed" change and progress was possible.⁶ It was easier to overlook the foibles of BJU administration. But as time went on, and communication stagnated, it became more difficult to overlook their shortcomings, and the weaknesses of important campus personalities like Berg grew more pronounced.

The first clue that this is a more realistic assessment comes from the title of Lewis' chapter six: "Just Two Choices on the Shelf—Growing Grace or Killing Self." Here she plays off of one of Berg's favorite quips: "Just two choices on the shelf—pleasing God and pleasing self." Berg's statement has a tragic ring to it, and for Lewis it actually spells the killing of self rather than the Christian habit of growing grace. And yet, note the year of the book from which the quote is drawn—1999. In other words, if Berg is to be rhetorically criticized for this aphorism, he had it coming quite a ways back.⁷ That Lewis could ignore the saying in earlier days and find it so abrasive now does not demonstrate a rhetorical about-face from either Berg or BJU, but a change in her perspective.

Lewis goes on in the chapter to argue that Berg's view of the Christian doctrine of sanctification is essentially Keswick, and is thus at odds with historic Protestant theology.⁸ Sanctification deals with the believer's growth in holiness. This growth is certainly a desirable thing from a Christian perspective, and the traditional viewpoint sees the believer as active while at the same time dependent on God's empowering grace. In contrast, Keswick theology tends to stress passivity—let go and let God, so that "any sign of will is certain doom."⁹ But paradoxically for Keswick Christians the focus often does end up on the individual rather than on

God. The believer must continually ask, “Am I surrendered enough?” The good dog and the bad dog within are equally powerful, and a weight of guilt and responsibility can rest heavy on the Keswick believer’s shoulders, instead of a confidence in the God who is more powerful than sin, the God who acts on behalf of his people and within his people, as in the historic viewpoint.

In pinning Berg as Keswick, Lewis argues that in regards to sanctification, “Berg presents the believer as the agent alone.”¹⁰ Lewis makes her case by merely lifting out statements in which Berg emphasizes the fact that the believer has certain responsibilities. Yet traditional historic Protestant theologian would deny this facet of sanctification. Again, from the historic Protestant perspective, both God and man must act in sanctification.¹¹ To say that believers are obligated to repent, or love, or pray, or follow any other Scriptural command does not mean that sanctification is primarily, much less solely, up to them, and one might question whether Berg really espouses such a viewpoint. On the very first page of *When Trouble Comes*, Berg says that God is the one who “can rescue us”¹² Right from the outset, God is the primary agent. Shortly thereafter, after listing potential “troubles,” Berg assures the reader that every trouble is presents an opportunity “to watch God at work.”¹³ Also of note, Berg has actually written a book specifically on the subject of sanctification.¹⁴ In the opening chapter, “Understanding Biblical Change,” he includes a section on “the person of change,” which he identifies as the God’s Holy Spirit.¹⁵ So God begins “the work of changing;” he “empowers;” he “works in the ‘process of change.’”¹⁶ In addition, the Christians from the past whom Berg most approvingly quotes on sanctification are not Christians who stand within the Keswick movement but theologians from the more historic Protestant perspective.¹⁷ Furthermore, in many places Berg does not espouse a graceless, guilt-filled post-conversion experience; he speaks of post-conversion changes toward holiness as “a cooperative venture between God and us.”¹⁸ Christians can never live in their “own strength”;¹⁹ rather they live by the supply of God’s power,²⁰ and importantly, they change not in order to earn a relationship with God but because they already have one.²¹ I will not belabor the reader with more quotes to demonstrate my point, but a historic outlook on sanctification prevails in the vast majority of that book.

Lewis’ selectivity needs to be tempered with gentility. Those who woo should not be blind to faults, but those seeking to persuade sectarians should be prepared to paint their subjects in kinder colors. Lewis need not present BJU or its dean of students as a picturesque figurine

void of blemish. But just as Lewis read her initial BJU texts in a more generous and romantic fashion, there is plenty of room to read the current Berg in the same romantic light.

At the heart of Lewis' rhetorical critique of Berg is agitation with the idea of "mortification." The notion of a believer purging himself through mortification is wrong-headed from the get-go. The self becomes a scapegoat which can never finally be driven into the wilderness, and a vicious cycle of suicidal (if metaphorical) violence is inevitable. As an alternative rhetorical model, Lewis puts forward the work of Walter Wink. Wink, in eschewing violence, posits a solution akin to Burke's comedy: "ownership of one's own evil and acknowledgement of God in the enemy."²² Wink would have us break the myth of redemptive violence.²³ God loves us and accepts us, though we are flawed; God loves our enemies, though they too are flawed; we should therefore love our enemies. Lewis asserts with confidence, "Wink's strategy finds resonance not only with Burke, but also with our romantic sectarians."²⁴ On a certain level, what Wink says can indeed gel with various aspects of sectarian rhetoric. But a more important question must be asked: will Wink really find a home in Protestant Fundamentalism? Will they be persuaded to adopt his ideas? If the answer is "no," is it worth the energy to try and foist Wink upon the separatists? Unfortunately, this particular rhetorical identification simply will not gain currency among Protestant fundamentalists.

Just as the religious sectarian seeks to persuade the secular other to want what it has, so too the secular other must seek to persuade, rather than merely vilify, the religious sectarian. If change occurs in the context of a conversation, sectarians must be engaged rather than simply denounced. For Burke, there is a well-known link between identification and persuasion. Thus the politician speaking to farmers says, "I was a farm boy myself."²⁵ He might also dress in overalls and use their vocabulary.²⁶ In speaking to our others, in engaging them in conversation, we must also use their texts, and use them in a faithful manner. The problem with linking Wink as an ally of Fundamentalism is that they can never view him as such. In his push against redemptive violence, Wink argues that the central act of Christian history and Christian Scripture—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—should not be viewed in the traditional way.²⁷ Fundamentalists find tremendous solace in singing lines such as, "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus" ²⁸ For them, the wrath of God is a stark reality, and the only way people can escape it is because Jesus bled for them. This is Conversion Doctrine 101. So when Wink attacks "penal substitution" while still claiming to espouse a Biblical Christianity, he presents an

insurmountable contradiction. Fundamentalists will be unlikely to approve of anything he says, even if he is “orthodox” in some areas. They will not be persuaded to join arms with a “heretic.” A secularist maybe, but not a heretic.

A fundamentalist’s first allegiance is to Scripture: this is the Sacred Text by which everything must be tried. The Apostle Paul notes among things of “first importance” that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”²⁹ Scripture says that God put Jesus forward as a propitiation in the place of sinners.³⁰ Now of course a perusal of Scripture does bring out some commonalities with Wink: we are all sinners;³¹ we should love our enemies;³² we should leave vengeance to God.³³ But the best way to dialogue with fundamentalists is to appeal directly to their Scriptures, or at least to cite one of their conservative Protestant heroes.

Fundamentalists feel under obligation to obey everything that Scripture says. So yes, they must love others and recognize that the image of God is in them. Yes, they must recognize that the faults of others can be found in themselves as well. But if Scripture says that Christians should go one step further and actually oppose the sin they find in themselves, then they must in all seriousness do it. Merely chuckling at it or ignoring it would not be a robustly biblical action—it would be more like motion. Wink offers an alternative that is comedic, but from a fundamentalist vantage point it is, quite simply, not Christian enough. After all, over and over Christian Scripture speaks positively of the need for believers to put to death the sin in them (“mortify,” to use the language of the old King James Version). Colossians 3:5: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.” Romans 8:13: “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” It was in light of passages like these that the 17th century Protestant giant John Owen wrote his book, *The Mortification of Sin*.³⁴ Mortification will live on as long as the Bible lives on. And yet even Owen’s title is suggestive: mortification need not be seen as the death of self, but as exchanging the ugly for the beautiful.

The comedic critique is a step in the right direction. It is true that at times religious sectarians put on a holy facade and fail to recognize that the immorality “out there” in the world is also in them. But given that “mortification” can not be jettisoned, that it will never become extinct through distraction or disuse, how can Protestant fundamentalists interpret this concept? First, they can be persuaded that mortification does not involve the annihilation of personhood.³⁵ The end goal of mortification is not a race of robotrons or a cookie-cutter civility. The Bible’s portrait of a perfect heaven militates against this very notion. There at the end, where all is done,

and only the believers remain to enjoy God's presence, one finds people "from every tribe and language and nation."³⁶ This picture is contrary to the popularized notion of heaven as a realm where disembodied human spirits flit about, looking exactly the same, and playing exactly the same harps. In Scripture, a certain kind of individuality flourishes in and through cultural community into eternity. Mortification is an attempt to cleanse sinful elements from humans, but never an attempt to destroy humans or culture altogether.

Second, and in conjunction with the first point, fundamentalists can be persuaded from Scripture that what is put to death is the sin that we find in ourselves. In the apostle Paul particularly, terms like "earthly" and "deeds of the body" connote not so much what is human or what is material, but what is morally wrong, what is sinful.³⁷ "Spiritual" deeds like love, joy, peace, etc., stand in contrast to "earthly" deeds like murder, debauchery, drunkenness, etc.³⁸ There will certainly be lively discussion between the secularist and the fundamentalist over just what is morally wrong, but without such discussion transformation is unlikely.

Third, fundamentalists can be reminded that the list of vices reaches to the depths of the heart. Pride, greed, and lust all find their place among the traditional seven deadly sins, and all are condemned in Scripture. These heart issues cannot be mortified merely by isolation. After all, even Jesus said that it is what comes from within a person that defiles that person. It is from within that evil thoughts, murder, adultery, and theft come.³⁹ Religious sectarians can be drawn into conversation with the recognition that they have the obligation to be in the world, even though they can not ultimately be "of" it.⁴⁰

Yet what of that remaining word that sounds so tragic? Can there be a more constructive identification of mortification? If "mortification" must remain, and if a comedic frame is not weighty enough to hold up the fundamentalists' somber picture of sin, how can we stave off a downward spiral of hopelessness? How can sectarians keep from perpetuating tragedy? An answer can be found in Lewis' alternative frame of romance.⁴¹ In *Romancing the Difference*, the sectarian separates in order to woo. Separation becomes an expression of love rather than hatred. Even a concept as grisly as mortification can also be framed as an expression of love. In this story, the beloved is the central figure of Christianity, Jesus Christ, and the sectarian acts as the bride to be.⁴²

Mortification need not be construed as dismemberment, suicide, or annihilation. Rather, it can be seen as preparation for marriage. Importantly, this is not preparation to impress a

potential suitor. This is not Cinderella's sisters putting on a faux charm and trying to force their feet into a slipper that doesn't fit. The engagement ring is already secured. The wedding is scheduled and will take place, because Jesus can never go back on his word. He loves his bride, warts and all. And yet, this would not stop the bride from preparing, especially when the bride realizes that she is remarkably overweight and that her behavior and her station in life leave much to be desired. Mortification is shedding pounds, corralling the demon of drunkenness, and learning to live a life that squares with her new and glorious calling.

In the Old Testament, God's people are told, "Your maker is your husband."⁴³ At the end of Scripture the second coming of Christ is presented as a coming to the marriage banquet.⁴⁴ In these times between Christ's life on earth and his return to earth, the apostle Paul labored to present the Corinthians as chaste virgins to Christ.⁴⁵ Strikingly, the early Christians were told that upon conversion they "died" with respect to their former husband, the law, that they might belong to another, Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ That former relationship of bondage, in which they labored to fulfill a seemingly impossible checklist to find their spouse's acceptance—that former relationship has been itself "put to death." Paul uses the very same word, *θανάτω*, that he uses later in Romans when he tells Christians to put sin to death. They can strive to "mortify" in freedom because the law, that goad to perfection, has already been mortified once and for all by Christ, their betrothed.

To come at the matter from a different angle, if a bride-to-be truly loves her beloved, won't she seek to prepare herself for married life? Won't she willingly give up her old bad habits in order to live a new and better life? For biblical sectarians, in Scripture, the tragedy is that they, like all people, have spat upon their lover, slapped him, and trampled him underfoot. They have crucified the Son of God. The remarkable comedy is that he has not killed them. Romance provides a frame wherein they can live a transformed life, not from fear but from hope. Metaphorically, they present their bodies as a living sacrifice;⁴⁷ they die to their old foolish desires and actions because they are so in love with Jesus Christ.

Fundamentalists can be led down this path of biblical interpretation by means of some of their own favorite guides. J. Gresham Machen, former professor at Princeton in the early 1900s, is sometimes called the "Father of Fundamentalism" for his battles to preserve what fundamentalists saw as historic Christianity. He wrote a book drawing a line in the sand between the new Protestant religion ("Liberalism"), and the old Protestant religion ("Christianity"),⁴⁸ just

the type of demarcation fundamentalists love. Yet in this very doctrinal book he writes of people as “longing for communion with the Holy One.”⁴⁹ He goes on to clarify, “The new relation of the Christian to Christ, according to Paul, involves no loss of the separate personality of the Christian; on the contrary, it is everywhere intensely personal; it is not a merely mystical relationship to the All or Absolute, but a relationship of love existing between one person and another.”⁵⁰ Here Machen does not specify the type of personal relationship, whether a metaphor of friend/friend, parent/child, king/subject, or spouse/spouse. However, the vocabulary of “intensely personal” seems to find the best echo in a spouse/spouse metaphor. Machen, a hero of Fundamentalism, can fit comfortably into a romantic frame.

Even Berg can be drawn into the romantic frame. Lewis says that romance in Berg’s text “is absent.”⁵¹ And yet, when we take in his whole vision of the believer’s sanctification, we find that this is not the case. He makes clear in his programmatic work on sanctification: “Please do not miss the thrust of the previous four chapters Biblical change leads to a passionate relationship with the God of heaven that makes every other love pale in comparison.”⁵² He goes on to speak of the “God-exhilarated lover” and cites Mary, David, and Paul as examples of extravagant lovers.⁵³ Berg need not become the sectarian scapegoat when he can be redirected and incorporated into a vibrant rhetorical project. In this alternative narrative, mortification is not tragic. It is comedic, but it is more than comedic. It is romantic.

Burke refused to let any discipline fall outside of the purview of rhetoric. As ably demonstrated in *The Rhetoric of Religion*,⁵⁴ Burke found theology to be a fascinating and fertile rhetorical field. In theology people proclaim their most basic and ardent beliefs about the most important subjects to them imaginable. This is persuasion with a passion. No wonder Burke found the theological domain so suitable for rhetorical study. It is a little surprising to hear Lewis drive a wedge between theology and rhetoric, as when she told BJU she was not critiquing Berg’s theology but his rhetoric.⁵⁵ How could she not be doing both, especially if rhetoric is so constitutive of truth claims? There is no need to apologize here: in presenting sectarians with alternative rhetorical strategies, these strategies are best presented to sectarians as good theology. Therein lies their appeal.

Lewis argues in *Romancing the Difference*, “If critics understand the motive behind the religious romantic, they can more successfully prevent scapegoating this Other and more likely include it in a robust democratic practice.”⁵⁶ This is wholesome advice, especially when we can

do more than understand—we can provide sectarians with a romantic motive by reminding them of the romantic frame present in their own texts. In this way the conversation is expanded rather than narrowed, and the goals of democracy find more plausible development.

The problem with prophetic confrontations is that sectarians thrive under such denunciations. They see it as a badge of commendation. After all, their Scripture says, “Do not marvel if the world hates you.”⁵⁷ Lewis’ shift in tone, especially given her history of conflict with BJU, is understandable, but at this juncture a more sagacious voice will be more productive. Lewis is a magnificent writer—artistic, imaginative, powerful, and precise. Her voice cannot help but be heard. However, who will listen and how will they listen? The academy might be drawn to take another look at religious sectarianism, but will it be encouraged to engage fundamentalists or to shun them, to speak with them or to denounce them? The pious expect condemnation. Their expectations are frustrated not when they are excluded but when they are included. They can and should be given a theological platform, a Burkean microphone, and a script that is robustly romantic. Who can say what changes might take place in the process?

¹The article appeared in the *Kenneth Burke Journal*, Spring (2008), available at <http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>. The book, *Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism*, was published by Baylor in 2007, and it presents a reworked version of Lewis' dissertation under Bob Ivie.

²<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

³*A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), 59.

⁴<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁵<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁶<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁷And since Berg is a regular public speaker both within and outside of the BJU community, who knows how long he might have been using that phrase? One suspects it would have been common parlance, at least around BJU, for quite some time.

⁸<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁹<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

¹⁰<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

¹¹For example see John Calvin's commentary on Philippians 2:12-13, Ages Digital Library; this point is not in particular dispute; rather the question is what Berg himself teaches.

¹²Jim Berg, *When Trouble Comes* (Greenville: U Bob Jones P, 2002), 1.

¹³Berg 6.

¹⁴Jim Berg, *Changed into His Image: God's Plan for Transforming Your Life* (Greenville, SC: U Bob Jones P, 1999).

¹⁵Berg *Changed*, 7.

¹⁶Berg *Changed*, 7, 9.

¹⁷In the book Berg appears to quote John Owen (26-27, 41, 58, 90) more than any other Christian thinker. Owen is likely the premiere exponent of sanctification from a traditional Protestant perspective. Berg also references Jonathan Edwards (218, 272), J. I. Packer (115, 165), and John Piper (214, 219), all exponents of the more traditional perspective.

¹⁸*Changed*, 9.

¹⁹*Changed*, 917.

²⁰*Changed*, 7.

²¹*Changed*, 113-141; 311-352.

²²Lewis, quoting Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee Trade, 1999, 60).

²³Walter Wink, "Facing the Myth of Redemptive Violence," available at http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/cpt/article_060823wink.shtml. See again *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee Trade, 1999).

²⁴<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

²⁵Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: U California P, 1950), xiv.

²⁶This is what Denzel Washington's character does in the movie *The Great Debaters*.

²⁷Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

²⁸This 19th century gospel hymn can be found at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/n/b/nbtblood.htm>.

²⁹I Corinthians 15:3.

³⁰Romans 3:24-25.

³¹Romans 3:23.

³²Matthew 5:44.

³³Romans 12:19.

³⁴John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004).

³⁵Contra Lewis' portrayal of Berg's rhetoric, <http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

³⁶Revelation 5:9.

³⁷Once again, Berg forthrightly endorses this careful distinction (*Changed*, 25, 91).

³⁸Galatians 5:16-23.

³⁹Mark 7:17-23.

⁴⁰I Corinthians 5:9-10; John 15:19.

⁴¹*Romancing the Difference: Kenneth Burke, Bob Jones University, and the Rhetoric of Religious Fundamentalism* (Waco, TX: Baylor U Press, 2007). Granted that in my picture Christ is the beloved. Still, there is a sense in which believers are wooing unbelievers to want what they have.

⁴²Although I will not offer a full-fledged Pentadic analysis, it might look like this: Scene = this life; Actor = the Biblical Fundamentalist; Act = mortification; Agency = the Holy Spirit; Purpose = Prepare for Wedding.

⁴³Isaiah 54:5.

⁴⁴Revelation 19:7.

⁴⁵II Corinthians 11:2.

⁴⁶Romans 7:1-6.

⁴⁷Romans 12:1.

⁴⁸J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923).

⁴⁹Machen 134.

⁵⁰Machen 189.

⁵¹<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁵²Berg, *Changed*, 213-214.

⁵³Berg, *Changed*, 214-218.

⁵⁴Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: U California P, 1970).

⁵⁵<http://www.kbjournal.org/lewis>.

⁵⁶Lewis, *Romancing*, 11.

⁵⁷I John 3:13.

