

C.S. Lewis believed in purgatory, for heaven's sake

December 4, 2017

WACO—A mainline Protestant professor of philosophy from a Baptist university explained why it made sense for an Anglican author and evangelical icon to believe in a variation on the Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

Purification, not retribution

C.S. Lewis, noted mid-20th century Christian apologist and author, viewed purgatory primarily as a state in which the redeemed are purged of their sins before entering heaven rather than an intermediate place of retributive punishment for people with unconfessed sins, said Jerry L. Walls, scholar in residence and philosophy professor at Houston Baptist University.

Viewed in that sense, some type of purgatory—a process that allows sanctification to be completed before an individual enters God's presence—can be embraced ecumenically, said Walls, a Methodist who now attends an Episcopal church.



Jerry L. Walls of Houston Baptist University presented the inaugural C.S. Lewis Memorial Lecture at Baylor University. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Walls spoke on “C.S. Lewis and the Case for Mere Purgatory” at Baylor University Nov. 30. The Baylor Center for Christian Philosophy and the [Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion](#) sponsored the inaugural C.S. Lewis Memorial Lecture.

In several of his books, Lewis expressed his belief in purgatory, which grew out of his understanding of the doctrine of salvation.

“Our souls demand purgatory, don’t they?” Lewis asked in [*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*](#).

Lewis saw salvation primarily in terms of transformation and sanctification, Walls said. So, in Lewis’ view, purgatory exists not to satisfy God’s sense of justice in punishing the unrepentant, but rather to purify believers in preparation for their everlasting home in God’s presence, he explained.

Sin trains fallen humankind a certain way, and sanctification demands dramatic transformation achieved over a lifetime—and beyond, if necessary, he noted.

“Total transformation requires radical repentance,” Walls said.

Christians of varied stripes agree nothing impure can enter heaven, he said. The question becomes whether the righteousness of Christ is imputed automatically or whether a continuing process of sanctification is essential before a human can enter into God’s presence.

Free will



Jerry L. Walls (Photo / <http://jerrylwalls.com/bio/>)

Walls asked two key questions to consider when examining Lewis’ views on salvation and preparation for eternity: “Is our free cooperation required throughout the sanctification process? ... Is moral and spiritual growth and transformation an essentially temporal incremental process?”

Lewis argued on behalf of free will, even though freedom makes evil possible, because free choice makes possible genuine love, goodness and joy—in this life and in the world to come.

If God unilaterally can make people love him perfectly and worship him wholeheartedly at the point of death, it raises the question whether freedom is worth the price of evil and suffering in life, Walls asserted.

Since God must have good reasons to take our freedom seriously in our relationship to him, it makes sense to believe that freedom continues to the end of the sanctification process, he said.

Transformation as the purpose

Choices made over the course of a lifetime shape character—not simply an initial choice to become a Christian, taken by itself, Lewis argued. Those cumulative choices gradually transform a person’s nature into the image of Christ and create a disposition where a person can delight in God’s presence, he insisted.

“Every Christian is to become a little Christ,” Lewis wrote. “The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”

Lewis took seriously and literally the idea of God making people perfect, not just treating them as if they were perfect. And the process of transformation—sanctification—is long and painful, he stressed.

In [*Mere Christianity*](#), Lewis reminded readers of Christ’s admonition to his followers to “count the cost” before submitting to his lordship.

“You have free will, and if you choose, you can push me away,” Lewis wrote, expanding on an imagined conversation between Christ and a person considering becoming his disciple. “But if you do not push me away, understand that I am going to see this job through.

“Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death, whatever its costs me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect—until

my Father can say without reservation that he is well pleased with you, as he said he was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less.”

In order for individual personality to be maintained between life on earth and life beyond death, spiritual transformation must be voluntary and accomplished through a long process, Walls asserted.

Christians need to understand sanctification as an essential and crucial aspect of grace, he added.

“Sanctification is no less grace than forgiveness and justification,” he said, adding that transformation will lead a true believer to submit willingly to God’s purging of anything that stands in the way of everlasting delight in God’s holy presence.