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A Call to Surrender

In many of his works, Clive Staples Lewis explores the nuanced but critical difference between the concepts of submission and surrender. The two may be parts of the same process, but in terms of a Christian's relationship to God, Lewis draws a marked distinction. Whereas submission can be understood as yielding to a higher will or authority, surrender connotes a complete abandonment of one's self to a being or force. Lewis explores the interaction of the two in the context of theology through both fiction and nonfiction, ultimately arguing that, while submission may be a step in the direction of surrender, the progression of the former to the latter is preferable and perhaps even necessary in the realm of God. In this paper I will examine this argument primarily through its prominence in *The Great Divorce,* while also bringing in support and comparison from instances of submission and surrender evident in other works of Lewis' fiction and nonfiction.

In his prologue to *The Great Divorce* Lewis posits the necessity for full surrender if one is to enter Heaven. He argues, "If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell" (Lewis 466). This argument weaves throughout every story we read within the framework of *The Great Divorce,* stemming directly from the belief that total surrender is absolutely necessary for humans to enter heaven. Vestiges of hell are not

the only prohibited substance–full surrender requires even earthly comforts and desires to fall away to make room for the complete glory of heaven, leaving no room for even a conditional submission. Lewis spends the majority of this work focusing on the stories of those who reject venturing deeper into heaven, or up to the mountains, yet through this he effectively characterizes that which separates those who have been transformed from those who refuse the process. Lewis suggests the decisions made after arrival ultimately distinguish people into two groups: "those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end '*Thy* will be done'" (508). Those who in the end leave towards the path to hell/purgatory submit to the will of God only insofar as they believe it will serve their personal interests–the act of pushing submission one step further into total surrender overcomes that self for the pursuit of a stronger and more joyful reality deep into the mountains.

One of the most salient examples of the necessary distinction between submission and surrender appears in Pam, the Ghost of Michael's mother. After Pam deflects critiques of her actions throughout her life following Michael's death, the spirit urges her to think of something other than Michael. Pam reveals the intensity of her tunnel vision in her assertion that she'll "do whatever's necessary," but is only "quite ready" to submit to some cosmic to-do list because in her great plan, the sooner she starts, "the sooner they'll let [her] see [her] boy" (518). This interaction provides a clear-cut example of Lewis' thesis that submission is not enough, that following God cannot entail following the rules of a higher power as only a means to an end. Rather, He requires a full acknowledgement and surrender to Him "for His own sake," something Pam has blinded herself to along with anything that does not relate to Michael (518). The spirit's reminder to Pam resonates with

the Christian belief that God is Love and the source of Love, as he urges, "He wanted you to love Michael as He understands love," for one "cannot love a fellow-creature fully" before they first "love God" (519). Any complete and perfect expression of love must be informed by a love of He who *is* love–the love itself is not wrong, but its misplacement or selfishness is.

The events in *Perelandra* follow a full perversion and misuse of this human act of total surrender alongside instances of healthy surrender. While Ransom ultimately willingly surrenders his body and life to Maleldil's plan, "fairly certain that he would never again wield an un-maimed body," Lewis also includes a counterpoint to perfect surrender in this text through a stark and terrifying picture of surrender turned foul (128). If surrender to God holds such a powerful place in the human-divine relationship, it then follows that surrender to the evils of the universe would invite a similarly powerful change on a deep level in the human who engages in this surrender. After talking of his new ideology of "a commitment to something which utterly overrides all…petty ethical pigeon holes," where one gives himself up, Weston in his fervor cries," I, Weston, am your God and your Devil. I call that Force into me completely," verbally issuing a complete surrender to the power he so desires (82). Here, language matters. As Ransom later notes, the evil enters "at Weston's invitation, and without such invitation could enter no other" (124). Up until the moment of his surrender, Weston had just toyed around with the ideology of power and surrender, but this requires his invitation, the call for the Force to enter him "completely." Through this episode, Lewis explains his point through its opposite, nearly as powerful and absolutely as complete as a pure and holy surrender to God, the intended direction of man's capacity to surrender.

Returning to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis offers a parallel narrative of the human agency required in the act of surrender. When confronted with the Angel with burning hands, the man struggling against lust initially falls back on a crutch of minimal submission, earnestly suggesting he can "keep it in order now," that "the gradual process would be far better than killing it" (523). He fights against surrender, believing gradual submission affords him the option of hanging on to his addiction while still embarking on a journey further into Heaven. However, once the man has come to terms with the fact that he must fully surrender his addiction, the Angel confronts him with yet another wrinkle, reminding him, "I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible" (524). Here Lewis touches on an important aspect of surrender that distinguishes it from submission. Submission can be forced, but surrender must come entirely as a product of someone's own will, to the point where within this fiction the Angel must ask, "Have I your permission?" (524). This more than anything reveals what makes surrender the end goal in a relationship with God. Lewis puts it this way, in *The Problem of Pain*: "If a game is played, it must be possible to lose it. If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it) and he may refuse" (621). Neither God nor man can force a man to surrender, but each man, should he so choose, may cling to his self or that which he desires more than God, and that any act of surrender comes only by the unique will of he who performs it.

Lewis argues that the act of surrender is the full and final extension of submission to God's will and requires the willing relinquishment of anything that separates one from God. The distinction he draws between submission and surrender does not discount the importance of submission, but rather asserts that submission becomes fully realized only

when it leads into complete surrender. Through his exploration of the theological ramifications of submission and surrender, Lewis comes to the conclusion that not only is it right and good to surrender fully to God, but that the act of surrendering the bits of hell or Earth we cling to allows humans to receive the even greater joys and realities of Heaven. In Lewis' own words, "you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can't give" (676). If a man refuses to surrender his grasp on hell or Earth, his hands cannot be open to that which God freely offers.