

C.S Lewis on Progress

By Dr. Art Lindsley



We have seen so much progress in science, technology, and medicine that has proven to be beneficial and even life-saving.

But C.S. Lewis warned that we cannot give a blank check to “progress” in itself. After all, some progress leads to sickness rather than health.

A story from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the fifth book in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, illustrates the wrong kind of progress. In the book, King Caspian encounters Gumpas, the Governor of the Lone Islands. Gumpas tells Caspian that the slave trade practiced in his domain is an “essential part of the development of the island.” Caspian objects to the practice. Gumpas counters his objections by claiming that all the economic indicators prove his case and that he has the statistics and graphs to back it up.

“Tender as my years may be,” says Caspian, “I do not see that it brings into the islands meat or bread or beer or wine or timber or cabbages or books or instruments of music or horses or armour or anything else worth having. But whether it does or not, it must be stopped.”

“But that would be putting the clock back,” gasps the governor. “Have you no idea of progress, of development?”

“I have seen them both in an egg,” says Caspian. “We call it going bad in Narnia. This trade must stop.”

Caspian’s response reflects Lewis’s contention that not all progress is good. The newly-developed slave trade was an example of “progress” in a direction that would lead to rottenness.

Sometimes we need to go back in order to go forward. G.K. Chesterton said, “Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them as from a root.” Though some would

object that looking backward for wisdom is like turning back the clock to an earlier century, Lewis answers this objection in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be and if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. We have all seen this when we do arithmetic. When I have started a sum the wrong way, the sooner I admit this and go back and start over again, the faster I shall get on. There is nothing progressive about being pigheaded and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistakes. We are on the wrong road. And if that is so, we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on.

Certainly it is never wise to go back to the past simply for its own sake. The past sometimes shows us how to live and sometimes how not to live. The classic proverb holds true: If we do not learn from history's mistakes, we are bound to repeat them.

C.S. Lewis was not afraid to be called old-fashioned or outdated. In "De Descriptione Temporum," his inaugural address to his professorship at Cambridge, Lewis claimed to be more a part of the old Western order than the present post-Christian one. He acknowledged that while his outlook might seem to disqualify him from having anything important to say, it could also be a positive qualification. He admitted, "You don't want to be lectured on...on dinosaurs by a dinosaur." On the other hand, Lewis suggested that, "Where I fail as a critic, I may be useful as a specimen. I would dare to go further...I would say, use your specimen while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs."

Lewis also had a great deal to say about "progress" in economics and politics, even though he did not often comment on these topics. When he was invited by the *Observer* in the late 1950's to write an article on whether progress was even possible, he entitled his contribution "Willing Slaves of the Welfare State." The title itself indicates his sobering message.

In the essay, he encourages progress in "increasing the goodness and happiness of individual lives." He adds, however, "Progress means movement in a desired direction and we do not all desire the same things for our species."

Lewis is particularly concerned about the tendencies in the UK during World Wars I and II to give up liberty for security. He says we have grown "though apparently grudgingly, accustomed to our chains." He warns that once government encroaches on our freedom, every concession makes it more difficult for us to "retrace our steps." Perhaps the most striking quotation from this essay is the one on the nature of the happiness that he would like to see. Lewis says:

I believe a man is happier, and happy in a richer way, if he has 'the freeborn mind.' But I doubt whether he can have this without economic independence, which the new society is abolishing. For independence allows an education not controlled by Government; and in adult life it is the man who needs and asks nothing of Government who can criticize its acts and snap his fingers at its ideology. Read Montaigne; that's the voice of a man with

his legs under his own table, eating the mutton and turnips raised on his own land. Who will talk like that when the State is everyone's schoolmaster and employer?

Note Lewis's desire for freedom, economic and political. This economic "independence" allows free people to eat their own "mutton and turnips." This echoes the classic passage in Micah 4:4 which says that "each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid."

Lewis is especially concerned about the advent of a worldwide welfare state and sees the enticement to accept it. Giving up freedom for security is a "terrible bargain" that is so tempting that "we cannot blame men for making it. We can hardly wish them not to. Yet we can hardly bear that they should." Despite the temptation, if people do make this bargain, the loss of freedom will lead to "total frustration" and "disastrous results, both moral and psychological."

The temptation to turn our destiny over to the state often ignores the realization that some will take charge of others. These will simply be men and women, "none perfect; some greedy, cruel, and dishonest." The more that people in government control our lives, the more we have to ask "why, this time power should not corrupt as it always has done before?"

Lewis believes that we should be progressive if it leads to greater happiness. Sometimes, however, we need to go back in order to go forward, turning the "clock back" or doing an about-face on the wrong road in order to find the right one. We should not be afraid of being called outdated, old-fashioned, or even a "dinosaur."

Sometimes we need to go full-speed astern in order to go forward. If we see that we have begun wrongly we must start all over. In personal life, this means repentance. In public life, it means protecting our freedoms and pushing back against the power of the "welfare state," lest we be increasingly constrained in our ability to choose what we want to do and be.