



**WITNESS TO
TRUTH AND
GRACE IN A
TIME OF WAR:
C.S. LEWIS AND
DOROTHY L.
SAYERS AT THE
BBC (1941-1944)**



By Earl F. Palmer

A THREAT TO THE CIVILIZED WORLD

Threats to people and nations happen both from within and from without. Danger to the integrity of our own character as a people may come from within ourselves when we discount the rights and dignity of others. These dangers can accumulate, and be as much of a threat to the moral fiber of a civil society as the aggressive dangers of an enemy from the outside. The inner danger does damage to the soul of a nation; the threat from beyond a national border brings the possibility of military invasion. In this paper, I trace the role of two English authors, Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis who made an impact in a most difficult time for a country under siege. Each was chosen by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to play a part in broadcasts to the people of England during the war years of 1941-1944. In their own way, both faced up to the threats: danger from within to the very sense of self and the inner strength to withstand the assault; and the danger from without – the war itself that threatened physical destruction to the land and to life.

To begin I want to first put this exposition in the historical context. The 1930s were dangerous years in the world. In Asia, China and Korea faced military invasion by their neighbor Japan. What was happening inside Germany had also created alarm in Europe. Even in the early 1930's G.K. Chesterton, mentor to C.S. Lewis, wrote of the dangers that threatened Germany from within as he watched the autocratic leadership of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party's plan for the new Germany emerge. Chesterton described the drive behind the vision as a "savage tribal patriotism" and "a cult of race."⁽¹⁾ He saw the political and social behavior within Germany as a sinister mysticism under the mask of national destiny.

Hitler and his regime targeted the Jewish people as a world race and religion. Vengeance via government-approved discrimination became national policy. Hitler had won public support by blaming the Jews for what he called the unjust treaty against Germany at the end of WWI. He

attached the economic hardships of the 1920's to the Jews and then featured himself in the forefront as being the answer. As G.K. Chesterton watched this corruption of Germany's soul, he believed that the toxic mysticism of this new form of nationalism would lead to another worldwide conflict. In 1935 he predicted that conflict would start with a German invasion of Poland. Chesterton died in 1936 and did not see his prediction come true. At 4:25 a.m. on September 1, 1939, World War II began with the German attack on Poland. Because of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Soviet Union then joined Germany in this invasion. Two days later Great Britain and France declared war against Germany.

During the autumn 1939 term at Oxford University, C.S. Lewis gave a very important address titled "Learning in Wartime." He argued that students should stay at their posts as student scholars, even in the time of war. He stressed that their scholarship and studies were necessary with these words:

Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. The cool intellect must work not only against cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether...The learned life then is, for some, a duty. At the moment it looks as if it were your duty. ⁽²⁾

By the spring of 1940, Western Europe had already fallen to Germany. The novelist, Dorothy L. Sayers described the grimness of England's situation, "Hitler scooped up Norway, swallowed Denmark alive, bombed and blazed his way across Holland, battered Belgium to a mummy, tossed the British army into the sea, blew France to fragments, the world stood still, and Britain was stripped naked in the arena to await the pounce of the Beast."⁽³⁾ The Battle of Britain began with the most brutal intensity in the fall of 1940, as the massive German bombing raids of London targeted England's greatest city. In September of 1940 with the Blitz underway the children of London were evacuated to the less populated villages of England for their safekeeping.

Winston Churchill became Prime Minister in May of 1940. After the rescue of 338,000 men who were a part of the defeated British Expeditionary Military Force known as "The Miracle of Dunkirk" and just four days after the occupation of Paris by German forces on June 18, 1940, Churchill gave his most memorable speech. He described Britain's battle against German aggression as a defense of Christian civilization:

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more

sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour." ⁽⁴⁾

The speech signaled clearly that England faced danger from more than just a military power; it faced grave spiritual threats to civilization and the greater truth of goodness and justice. In his speech, Churchill relayed the darkness of Germany's aggression as the oppression of fundamental human values. He spoke on behalf of a world in danger - of those countries fighting in the battle for these values, as well as those nations now watching on the sidelines that nevertheless still had a stake in the outcome of this great conflict. King George VI also gave memorable speeches to his people through the BBC.

From the fall of 1940 and beyond an American journalist, Edward R. Murrow, a CBS correspondent and news reporter who had been posted in London since 1937 did his best to keep American radio listeners up to date. In his report to America, *London Calling*, he related: "It is right to call this a peoples' war. I've seen some horrible sights in this city...but not once have I heard man, woman or child suggest that Britain should throw in her hand." ⁽⁵⁾

BBC transmitters from London never ceased to broadcast to the British public and England's armed services radio, as well as through shortwave to Norway, Holland, and France. BBC, headquartered in the heart of London near Oxford Circus, was always a target of the Luftwaffe bombers. Though damaged by numerous hits, the broadcasts never stopped. When we reflect on this perilous time in world history we owe a great debt to the critical, truth-telling role of news reporters and opinion writers such as Edward R. Morrow who told us what they saw happening many miles from our own safety in the America of those years which stood aloof with an isolationist stance and feared involvement in another European war.

The religious broadcasting department of the BBC was charged with the task of encouraging the public to stay both informed yet hopeful with the conviction that England's cause was righteous. Beginning in 1941 the BBC reached out to the two English authors, Dorothy L. Sayers and C. S. Lewis and asked them to play key roles in the religious broadcasts.

A DRAMA REVEALS A STRATEGY THAT STARTS AT THE CENTER

The BBC asked Dorothy L. Sayers to write a radio play about Jesus Christ. She partnered with the brilliant Val Gielgud as artistic director and titled her play, *The Man Born To Be King*. While Sayers made no mention of the battles England faced against the Axis powers, she invited listeners to meet the man, Jesus Christ. In her play, the man born to be King faces threats from outside Judah and from within. She traces the threat from without when the Roman Pontius Pilate ultimately ordered the crucifixion of Jesus. But the earliest dangers come from within Judah itself, from one who called himself Herod the Great. She reveals Herod's deterioration of character, a mark of an inner threat to any nation or leader. In the scene below, Herod hears

from Three Wise Men from the East about their search for the new king born under the star they followed and he discloses his own cynical philosophy of power:

Herod: *What sort of man will this be that is born to be King of the Jews?*

Melchior: *Prouder than Caesar, more humble than his slave; his kingdom shall stretch from the sun's setting to the sun's rising, higher than the heavens, deeper than the grave, and narrow as the human heart.*

Caspar: *He shall offer sacrifice in Jerusalem, and have his temples in Rome and in Byzantium, and he himself shall be both sacrifice and priest.*

Herod: *You speak mysteries. Tell me this: will he be a warrior king?*

Balthazar: *The greatest of warriors; yet he shall be called the Prince of Peace. He will be victor and victim in all his wars, and will make his triumph in defeat. And when wars are over, he will rule his people in love.*

Herod: *You cannot rule men by love. When you find your king, tell him so. Only three things will govern a people—fear and greed and the promise of security. Do I not know it? Have I not loved? I have been a stern ruler—dreaded and hated,—yet my country is prosperous and her borders at peace. But wherever I loved, I found treachery—wife, children, brother—all of them all of them. Love is a traitor; it has betrayed me; it betrays all kings; it will betray your Christ. Give him that message from Herod, King of Jewry.*

Caspar: *Sir, when we have found the Christ —*

Herod: *True, I had forgotten. When you find him, return and let me know.* ⁽⁶⁾

The BBC presented this play, focused on the person of Jesus, at monthly intervals on radio from December 1941 to October 1942. With a cast of 43 actors, the play portrayed the life of Jesus vividly, his ministry of teaching, his defeat and death by Roman Crucifixion, and the surprise victory of his Easter resurrection. Jesus had indeed died, but by surprise had won the battle against the last and final of all dangers, death itself.

Dorothy Sayers made use of everyday London street language, even slang, to tell the story such that ordinary listeners could see in their mind's eye the sustaining power of God's love, not slogans or abstract statements, but the holy history of events that in fact happened in the First Century. *Man Born to be King*, presented the good news that Jesus himself is the pivot upon which everything rotates. Because of his life and victory over death, in the midst of terror and total need he moves us from real danger to hope. Sayers invited listeners to hear stories of ordinary first-century people who discovered the Servant King Jesus of Nazareth.

She broke new ground in drama by presenting Jesus in a contemporary fashion so that people could see for themselves the impact of Christ for their lives in the time and circumstances of war. In this way she helped the British people to discover the implications of this living Jesus, who stands as the beginning and ending of our lives – the Alpha and Omega, and to see not only His relevance at the center, but also His relevance at the edges of life here and now, in a time when the world tilted toward the chaos of war.

RIGHT AND WRONG AS A CLUE TO THE MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE

The second author the BBC enlisted to support its vision was the Oxford Don, C.S. Lewis, who caught the attention of a BBC program director, James Welsh. But C.S. Lewis had a different assignment. Welsh asked him to present five lectures on a heavy weight topic, “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.” Unlike Sayers who started her play at the center with Jesus Christ, and then showed His relevance at the precarious edges of where people live, Lewis approached his task by focusing on the edges, and then moving toward the one living center, Jesus Christ.

What first captured Welsh’s attention were the words in Lewis’ 1940 book, *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis, himself had been a young officer in the Battle of Somme during WWI. He was gravely wounded in that battle, and he described courage in the face of extreme danger:

If I were to say what I really thought about pain, I should be forced to make statements of such apparent fortitude that they would become ridiculous if anyone knew who made them....Yet for that very reason there is one criticism which cannot be brought against me. No one can say, “He jests at scars who never felt a wound,” for I have never for one moment been in a state of mind to which even the imagination of serious pain was less than intolerable. If any man is safe from the danger of under-estimating this adversary, I am that man. I must add, too, that the only purpose of the book is to solve the intellectual problem raised by suffering; for the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified, nor have I anything to offer my readers except *my conviction that when pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than much knowledge, a little human sympathy more than much courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all.* ⁽⁷⁾ [Italics mine]

That same James Welsh wrote a letter to Lewis on February 7, 1941:

I address you by name because, although we have never met, you cannot be a stranger after allowing me — and many others — to know some of your thoughts and convictions, which have been expressed in your book *The Problem of Pain*. I should like to take this opportunity of saying how grateful I am to you personally for the help this book has given me.

I write to ask whether you would be willing to help us in our work of religious broadcasting. The microphone is a limiting, and often irritating, instrument, but the quality of thinking and the depth of conviction, which I find in your book, ought surely to be shared with a great many other people; and for any talk we can be sure of a fairly intelligent audience of more than a million. ⁽⁸⁾

C.S. Lewis spoke to the title offered by Welsh for the first five addresses: *Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe*. His approach to understanding the difference between good and evil was to begin with encounters of people in daily living situations – at the edges of

human life. He traces the crises of war not only in the terms of nations against nations at war but the wrongness that happens on the smaller scale of person to person. The exchange can take the form of actions of disrespect and transgression that might even take place on a number “8” bus in any city and at any time, both during war and during peace. Lack of respect for another human being can start in an ordinary episode or simple interaction – this wrong can happen on any bus and in any place.

Lewis reminds us that when disrespect and even when small-scale wrongness happens to us, we instinctively claim a greater truth that gives us a universally measured worth and right to life and a space that should not be crossed by another person or group of persons. He stressed that this moral source of worth and dignity comes before legal definitions and rules or religious traditions. He describes a universal moral rightness that is built into our consciousness by the Creator of consciousness. Its proof is that we always claim our own worth in times of injustice and harm to our own dignity.

This universal awareness of right and wrong shows through when we root for truth and goodness; we cheer when we see goodness prevail over evil. It is evidence of a greater prior truth. It moves us from the edge toward the source of that presence of truth and grace. C.S. Lewis here is autobiographical because he is describing his own journey from the edges of his earlier pessimism and youthful atheism to the time when he saw the reality of goodness happen. He made this discovery as a young man during his recovery in 1918 in a field hospital in France during World War I. He tells of it in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*.

It was here that I first read a volume of Chesterton’s essays. I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors. It would almost seem that Providence, or some “second cause” of a very obscure kind, quite overrules our previous tastes when it decides to bring two minds together...I did not need to accept what Chesterton said in order to enjoy it. His humor was of the kind which I like best— not “jokes” imbedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularly, but the humor which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the “bloom” on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly....Moreover, strange as it may seem, I liked him for his goodness. I can attribute this taste to myself freely (even at that age) because it was a liking for goodness which had nothing to do with any attempt to be good myself. ⁽⁹⁾

Lewis’ point is that when I myself see goodness in other people’s lives I am drawn toward the source of that goodness – to God. This happens within us and then becomes the beginning of a new understanding of the people around us.

A STRATEGY FROM THE EDGE TO THE CENTER

Lewis' approach during his broadcast talks was to share hope as a journey from the edges where we question notions of truth, good and evil and the innate sense of human dignity toward discovery of the Center where God's Grace abides. Following his 1941-1944 broadcast talks, Lewis collected the talks and copied them into his book, *Mere Christianity*. In the 1961 introduction to *Mere Christianity* he explains his goal in the making of that transition from the edges to the center:

I hope that no reader will suppose that "mere" Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions—as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at. I do not know why there is this difference, but I am sure God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. ⁽¹⁰⁾

In his book *Miracles* written in 1947, Lewis further explains the theological framework of this journey as a time of exploration and testing in which the pieces of the grand puzzle come together:

Let us suppose we possess parts of a novel or a symphony. Someone now brings us a newly discovered part of manuscript and says, "This is the missing part of the work. This is the chapter on which the whole plot of the novel really turned. This is the main theme of the symphony." Our business would be to see whether the new passage, if admitted to the central place which the discoverer claimed for it, did actually illuminate all the parts we had already seen and "pull them together". Nor should we be likely to go very far wrong. The new passage, if spurious, however attractive it looked at the first glance, would become harder and harder to reconcile with the rest of the work the longer we considered the matter. But if it were genuine, then at every fresh hearing of the music or every fresh reading of the book, we should find it settling down, making itself more at home, and eliciting significance from all sorts of details in the whole work which we had hitherto neglected. Even though the new central chapter or main theme contained great difficulties in itself, we should still think it genuine provided that it continually removed difficulties elsewhere. Something like this we must do with the doctrine of the Incarnation. Here, instead of a symphony or a novel, we have the whole mass of our knowledge. The credibility will depend on the extent to which the doctrine, if accepted, can illuminate and integrate that whole mass. It is much less important that the doctrine itself should be fully comprehensible.

We believe that the sun is in the sky at mid-day in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else.
(11)

We learn from Sayers and Lewis of two ways to share the good news of truth and grace: Dorothy Sayers appreciated discovery from the Center to the edges; C.S. Lewis helped us find our way from the edges to the center. I believe that these authors made it clear that Jesus is the one who makes sense of the whole and is able to not only heal the brokenness at the raw edges, but also to fulfill the universal longing of the people in search of the meaning of life as a whole.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

It was in 1939, as the threat from without began to emerge that C.S. Lewis challenged Oxford students. He said “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered...” Lewis helps us to understand how a journey to know Jesus comes through our daily experiences. As an American I need to hear the words of C.S. Lewis for this time just as his students needed them then. I need to think clearly about what is right and what is wrong.

In the play, *Man Born to be King*, Dorothy Sayers contrasts Herod’s self-centeredness with the Three Wise Men’s description of Jesus who lived with “the rule of love” and the importance of Jesus at the center of our lives. From Sayers I need to remember that the life and death of Jesus gives meaning for my life and the life of my neighbors, near and far. For both writers the reply to threats comes from knowing Jesus and taking our cues from Him.

We face external threats today that are serious and ominous. In the United States, we are also experiencing threats from within. They endanger our moral and spiritual well being as a people. They cloud our abilities to parse good philosophy from bad philosophy, or to tell friend from foe. If we can face these internal threats honestly, I believe it will improve our power to understand and address the very real threats we face from outside.

To begin, we face today an internal threat that gives encouragement to “tribal patriotism,” not true national pride. Our policies and pronouncements have at times been reduced to slogans that foster hostility toward those we may perceive as different from ourselves. At first hearing, these slogans may appear to honor and protect America and her greatness. But they just as quickly move to divide us. At times, these words can even be used to excuse and perpetuate hate and isolationism or to harm and diminish a race, a creed, or a people. The true victim of this hostility may ultimately be our own integrity – the inner character of our nation. We remember with horror the nationalism of Adolf Hitler that became the “savage tribal patriotism” of white supremacy. The false patriotism in Germany singled out individuals, especially Jews – men, women and children – who were persecuted within Germany and wherever the German army went. This destructive philosophy, touting the supremacy of one kind of people over those perceived to be outsiders, stained the souls of those who believed in

it. The idea that a particular set of people should dominate at the expense of others was toxic then. And it is toxic now.

We need to answer this bad philosophy with good philosophy. There is a good way of living that models grace and truth – a way of living that recognizes each person has value. Our country was founded and thrived on the rich diverse stream of people God created. It is built on the philosophical tenet that we are all created equal. We must take hold of this *good* philosophy and honor our neighbors and friends at home and around the globe in cooperative efforts to guard and protect the world we share.

Second, we face a rising philosophy of leadership that defines its own code without a commitment of checks and balances, and without the sense of restraint that has been the guiding rule of this democratic republic. This sense of restraint is in the oath that every president, every Supreme Court justice and every legislator of our nation must take – an oath to faithfully abide by, and stand behind the standards of justice and process embedded in our Constitution. This restraint upon the power of democratic leadership is healthy. It has moved our leaders throughout history to show respect for the judiciary, the rule of law, the democratic process and our important values, such as the free press and free and organized religion. It has bound us together, and pulled us back from excesses that would have destroyed other nations. It is one of our great positive legacies and we need it now as much as we ever did.

Third, we face an internal threat of dishonesty and untruthfulness in our own lives and in the world of politics. The good philosophy of truth and truth telling honors traditions of inquiry, argument, and honest debate. This is a tradition that welcomes a free and independent press that can play its own role as watchtowers of the diverse opinions scattered throughout our nation. We must follow this good philosophy of a generous spirit in civil discourse that makes it possible to listen to each other with respect in order to then learn from each other. This means that we engage each other fairly, and avoid insults and personal attacks.

I identify myself as a Christian Evangelical. My goal is to share God's love and healing and His fulfilling truth broadly. I believe that the goodness of Jesus deserves to be told and lived out with every behavior that validates not only my worth but also the worth of every other person. This stance strengthens me and helps me to withstand that which threatens. I thrive best when I live out my role as a Christian with respect for those in my surround and do not push to secure or receive special privileges that diminish others. It is vital that we all strive to keep the ground level, to stand with truth and the rule of love while revering the rule of law and welcoming the checks and balances set down by our forefathers. I have an obligation to do the right thing and hold fast to the good philosophy that Jesus taught in loving my neighbor as myself. After all, He came among us and took our place so that we might live. This reminds me that I must refrain from using the same tactics and manner of behaving as those with whom I find fault. I must find it in my heart to be kind and respectful even in the midst of argument.

I owe it to my own children and grandchildren, along with all other children and grandchildren to commit myself to a way of life that celebrates and welcomes without walls the benefits of

the racial, cultural, religious and international diversity of our world family. Good philosophy welcomes a level field of equal justice under law for every citizen, as well as for all who are not now citizens of this nation but who live, work, and raise children among us. Good philosophy tells us that we need to do the right thing – to demonstrate that we can value one another as Americans and alongside we can care for those from near and far who suffer and flee from the persecution of terror and come to our shores with hopes for the chance of a new beginning.

Affirming the good news of truth and grace as we learned from Dorothy Sayers who approached discovering and living our faith out from center to the edges and from C.S. Lewis who posits that we may also find our way from the edges to the center are each valid in their own way. For both authors the center point of each way is the person of Jesus who wins our respect; it is Jesus who offers grace and finds us. We are then able to find one another because a greater one has found us first. In *Miracles*, Lewis describes that finding:

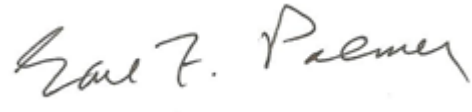
In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity...down to the very roots and sea-bed of the nature he created. But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly strengthens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulder. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour, too.⁽¹²⁾

I owe a debt to BBC, Dorothy Sayers, and C.S. Lewis. It is up to me every day to answer bad philosophy with the good in the way I live. Their voices inspire me to see truth and grace here and now in a new and a deeper way. They bore witness to Jesus *Christ who shows the way*.

Earl F. Palmer

A Note

My family encouraged me to write this article and I appreciate their confidence in my ability to do so. I am grateful for their engaging discussion and giving support to my expression. In particular, I would like to say that I invited my wife, Shirley Palmer Ph.D. to add her voice to the section marked "A Personal Reflection." I also want to give a very special thank you to my Study Assistant at Earl Palmer Ministries, Landon Bennett, for his editorial assistance and thoughtful advice in the preparation of this paper.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Earl F. Palmer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'E' and 'P'.

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EARL PALMER MINISTRIES

serving to encourage and build up faith in Christ

1 Thessalonians 5:11

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