

# G. K. CHESTERTON AS IMAGINATIVE WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE V  
“IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY  
CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

*April 23-26, 2008*

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“Our Lord commands us to love our enemy and our neighbor, because they are usually the same person. In commanding us to love our enemies, he never said that we should have none. If there is one thing that Christ and all of the apostles have taught with a ruthless monotony, it is that to be rich is to be in danger of moral wreck. To be smart enough to make all of that money, one must first be dull enough to want it. Paradox is truth standing on its head and waving its legs to get our attention. There is only an inch of difference between the cushioned chamber and the padded cell.” What do all of these arresting statements have in common? Their commonality lies in their having been uttered by the same man: G. K. Chesterton. He is one of the most eminent witnesses to the Gospel in modern times, and yet not many evangelicals have heard of him. The aim of this talk is to set forth Chesterton’s unique approach to evangelism, but only after laying the groundwork that will help clarify why his witness remains so powerful, almost a century after his death. My task is thus twofold: (1) to show how Chesterton’s apologetic work differs drastically from that of C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright; (2) to demonstrate how Chesterton’s imaginative answers to the ails of our age might become a means for evangelizing the late modern world in a remarkably new way.

## I.

In order to grasp the radicality of Chesterton’s case for Christianity, it is important set it in contrast with two major counter-examples: C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright. In *The Problem of Pain*, an even more succinct summary of his theology than *Mere Christianity*, Lewis begins with the universal reality of the guilty conscience, our sense that we have done wrong. He then moves to God as the unknown Lawgiver who instills the ingrained standard that we have violated, and

who has been made uniquely manifest in Israel. Finally he ends with Jesus Christ as the Judge who allows himself to be judged for our sake, thus forgiving our sins and enabling us to fulfill the law as no merely human savior can do. To show that Christianity has affinities with other world faiths, even though it remains the highest and best self-disclosure of God, Lewis lists the major ethical precepts held in common by the major religions. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis seeks to demonstrate that these widely held moral teachings are universal rather than local by calling them the *Tao*, the Chinese word for “the order of the universe.” The call to become Christian is, for Lewis, the summons to become disciples of the singular Way anticipated and echoed by the other major world faiths. N. T. Wright takes a similar but somewhat more positive approach. Rather than beginning with the guilty human conscience, he describes our four most basic desires: “the longing for justice, the quest for spirituality, the hunger for relationships, and the delight in beauty.”<sup>1</sup> Yet Wright contends that the world fails finally to assuage these unquenchable urges to make human existence more moral, to honor the mystical presence of a reality other than ourselves, to find companionship and community rather than loneliness and solitude, and to enjoy a supernal sense of splendor and loveliness. These undeniable human yearnings that neither we ourselves nor the world can satisfy, Wright proceeds to demonstrate, are fulfilled in Israel and Christ and the Church.

In his most famous work, entitled simply *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton takes a radically different tack than do both C. S. Lewis and N.T. Wright. Though first published in 1908, this book has proved remarkably enduring. The reason, I believe, is that Chesterton has a far darker estimate of our illness, even as he sets forth a far brighter prospect for our cure. His central analytic contention is that, in seeking to open men and women to the Gospel, it will not suffice to make us aware of our sins and our hope for forgiveness, as Lewis contends, nor to make us yearn for our ultimate fulfillment. Chesterton offers the staggering claim, instead, that the modern world is mad. We are insanely rationalistic on the one hand, he insists, or else we are insanely emotional on the other hand. Chesterton’s basic prescription for our madness lies in the restoration of the *imagination* to its proper function—namely, its power to envision the world as

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006) x.

the realm of analogical wonder, and thus to recover an unusual kind of ethics as the means of restoring our sanity, albeit sanity of a very strange kind.

First, then, our insane rationalism. As a Christian, Chesterton has a high regard for reason; yet he is no rationalist. Unlike Lewis, he doubts whether anyone can be argued into the Faith. Christianity can indeed be made convincing, but not by bare-knuckled reason. “Reason itself is a matter of faith,” Chesterton observes. “It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.” Chesterton does not mean that we believe in reason in a religious way, but rather that we assume the rationality of the world as the fundamental postulate and axiom of our very existence. That the world is rational rather than irrational is the basis of everyday life: we could not engage in the most elementary communications and relations if our words and concepts—our reason—did not have a truthful relation to reality. Alas, since the time of Occam and Scotus and Descartes, we have come to believe that there is nothing but reason. Our Enlightenment estimate of reason is reductive, moreover. The only real things are those that can be demonstrated by either empirical science or mathematical logic.

For Chesterton, such rationalism is sheer madness. The rationalist who ignores the limits of reason is always on the verge of becoming a maniac. The maniac is not the person who has lost his mind, Chesterton wisely observes. “The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. [...] He [dwells] in the clean and well-lit prison of one idea.”<sup>2</sup> The chief mental jail cell of modernity is, for Chesterton, the monomaniacal notion that the universe consists of nothing but matter and energy. Though Chesterton identifies such madness as “materialism,” it is perhaps more appropriate to call it *physicalism*. As believers in the triune God who has enfleshed himself, who has become matter for our sake, Christians offer high honor to the material world, and we should never fall into the gnostic error of belittling or despising it. Christians are unabashed materialists.

What Chesterton rightly rejects is the deadly physicalism that attributes everything to mechanical and efficient causes alone, failing to ask about material and formal and final causes—namely, what brings things into being, what enables them to achieve their particular

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 24, 27.

form, what end-cause drives them, what purposes are they meant to serve? In refusing to ask such questions, physicalism turns us in upon ourselves, convincing us that we could not be radically other than our genetics and environment have decreed us to be. Conversion, by definition, is an impossibility. Chesterton does not deny the partial validity of this view. We are profoundly shaped by our cultural and bodily conditions; we are indeed a member of the animal species.

Chesterton was not opposed to Darwin's evolutionary discoveries as such, but rather to the terrible ways in which Herbert Spencer and other capitalists had put Darwin to horrible social uses. They argued, viciously, for the survival of only the mentally talented and the economically fit. Rather than fear Darwin, Chesterton believed that we Christians should embrace the abiding strangeness and the overwhelming otherness of Darwin's world by creating art as fantastic. Our imaginative analogues of the Gospel should remind us that its incredible promises have odd parallels all around us: "A thing may be too sad to be believed or too wicked to be believed or too good to be believed, but it cannot be too absurd to be believed in this planet of frogs and elephants, of crocodiles and cuttlefish." The most absurd of all beings is, of course, our own species. "Man is the ape upside down," Chesterton declares. As the super-primate who is also the sub-angel, humankind is not only radically dependent but also uniquely free.

Christians call inmates in the madhouse of Enlightenment physicalism to break their shackles and to enter the realm of freedom. For while Christians freely acknowledge that things are often determined by the laws of probability, physicalists are unfree to admit the presence of mystery and unpredictability. In this realm, things are not explained in univocal but in analogical terms, above all in paradoxical terms. Paradox is built on the discernment of strange likenesses within unlikenesses, so that the contradictions turn out to be apparent rather than real. Chesterton wittily defines paradox itself by linking such unlikes. Paradox is truth standing on its head, Chesterton famously said, waving its legs to get our attention. We usually regard hand-walkers who use their legs as semaphores as manifestly mad. Yet if one has something remarkably important yet also remarkably unobvious to communicate, how better to do it? The cross is the ultimate paradox because it unites the largest of opposites: death and life. As the instrument of Christ's death, it has been made into the ultimate means of life. This is a visual no less than a

theological paradox. The very form of the cross indicates its freedom, Chesterton contends, especially when compared to the close circle of the physicalist universe, where everything is fixed and determined.

As we have taken the circle as the symbol of [physicalist] reason and madness, we may very well take the cross as the symbol at once of mystery and health. [...] For the circle is perfect and infinite in nature; but it is fixed forever in its size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers.”<sup>3</sup>

Lest we think that contemporary physics, with its reliance on indeterminacy and even chaos theory, has made modernist physicalism obsolete, we need look only as far as the work of the Nobel laureate in physics, Steven Weinberg. “The more the universe seems comprehensible,” Weinberg has announced, “the more it also seems pointless.” Weinberg urges his fellow physicalists, therefore, to take up arms against religion, routing all who would discern moral and spiritual order inherent in the world: “Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done,” Weinberg urges, “and may in the end be our greatest contribution to civilization.” Such maddened rationalism will surely destroy civilization, for precisely the reason Chesterton specifies: its refusal to wrestle with teleology and metaphysics no less than theology and morality.

If hyper-rationality is one form of our modern madness, a consuming emotionalism is the other. The one errs on the side of an exaggerated objectivism, the other on the side of an equally exaggerated subjectivism. Objectivist reason gone mad is the perfect description of modernity, while the subjectivist denial of reason is an apt account of post-modernity. Alisdair MacIntyre argues, in *After Virtue*, that emotivism is a deadlier evil than rationalism. We have almost entirely surrendered our ability to make moral distinctions, MacIntyre argues, because we have lost even the minimal language of ethical discourse. What we have in its place is nothing else than feelings and preferences and allegedly autonomous choices. In such an emotivist and subjectivist world, the only allegedly universal goods are diversity and tolerance. The central post-modernist premise is that the greater the differences among us, the greater the good.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 33. Flannery O’Connor described the cross in similarly paradoxical terms: it is the one Tree with arms wide enough to embrace all the living and roots deep enough to encircle all the dead.

Multiple viewpoints and multiple interests are said to enlarge our comprehension of truth, whereas a singular culture and a monocular perspective shrink both knowledge and wisdom.

There is much truth in such post-modernist perspectivism. All our seeing is indeed subjective and culture-bound. We behold the world through the lenses of our own assumptions. This means that all truth is filtered and sieved, that all understanding is rooted in time and place and community. There is no view from nowhere, no godlike perch from which we can view the world neutrally—as if that were God’s own view. But from such a valid premise that there is no such thing as raw, naked knowledge, the postmodern relativists and emotivists reach invalid conclusions. They hold that we can make *no* comparative moral judgments, *no* time-transcending religious arguments, *no* privileging of certain cultures, for example, that exalt women over cultures that demean them. All attempts to declare the authoritative Word of God is considered hegemonic and oppressive. Christians can be welcomed at the roundtable of multicultural diversity only if we behave ourselves according to the protocols of relativistic truthlessness:

Even as modern political conditions encourage evangelical forms, they tend to deform Christianity insofar as it is ecclesial and incarnate in a culture. Modern notions of tolerance tend to domesticate both the gospel that is being preached and the form of life it entails by treating them simply as one among many private “religions.” Soon religious pluralism transforms from a providential fact into a theoretical good, a natural state of things best left undisturbed. If pluralism is a natural state, missionaries are imperialists. Evangelists who take Matthew 28:19 seriously [are said] to impose their private beliefs on others. St. Paul’s “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16) turns him into an oppressor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William L. Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004), pp. 42-3. Portier adds a footnote that I also affirm: “the point of such critique [of modern pluralism] is not to advocate doing away with legal tolerance but to show its limits and to exhort Christians to transcend it.” Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, in their *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), make Portier’s point even more tellingly: “[I]n the religiously plural society of the United States, sectarian faith is optional for citizens, as everyone knows. Americans have rarely bled, sacrificed or died for Christianity or any other sectarian faith. Americans have often bled, sacrificed and died for their country. This fact is an important clue to the [country’s] religious power. Though denominations are permitted to exist in the United States, they are not permitted to kill, for their beliefs are not officially true. What is really true in any society is what is worth killing for and what citizens may be compelled to sacrifice their life for” (p. 9). When American Christians declare, as they often do, that “I believe that Jesus redeemed the world but that’s only my personal opinion,” all possibility of real evangelism, much less all Christian resistance to unjust state power, has ended before it could even begin.

In an insanely emotivist culture such as ours, we are free to exhibit Christianity as nothing other than another consumer item in the emporium of religious goods and services. Our basic claim that the Gospel is a public and communal way of life, a total reordering of our loves—and thus of our bodies no less than our souls—is literally unthinkable amidst post-modernist madness. Here we are free only to make cafeteria choices about which kinds of cultures and virtues we happen to prefer. It follows that each of us has not only the right but also the obligation to construct ourselves as we wish—and thus not to be constrained by any obligations that we ourselves have not chosen. The Gospel summons to be unconformed to the world but to be transformed into Christ’s image can hardly be heard if our freedom lies in performing endless acts of self-construction. The only test for such acts lies in John Stuart Mill’s so-called “harm” principle: everything must be tolerated if it does no “harm” to others. When a pastor-friend of mine asked an emotivist friend of his to specify what constitutes harm, his post-modernist buddy put the matter primly: “Tissue damage,” he answered.

With remarkable prophetic insight, Chesterton saw it all coming in 1908. He discerned that the worst damage caused by our emotivist insanity is not only physical but also spiritual and, above all, political. We have become so suspicious of the large claims of true reason that we are suspicious of even the most elementary truths. “Madness may be defined,” he writes, “as using mental activity so as to reach mental helplessness.” “We are on the road,” he added, “to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.”<sup>5</sup> Once a robust and full-orbed embrace of reason is surrendered, as Pope Benedict XVI argues in his Regensburg speech, we descend into worship of the will: the sheer power of egoistic choice, the assertion of the strong over the weak. Nietzsche is its philosopher and nihilism is its name. When right reason dies, Chesterton prophesies, we lose our powers of moral and political judgment. We surrender ourselves to supermen and superstates that crush the human soul no less than the human body. Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il; Buchenwald, the Gulag Archipelago, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, My Lai, Darfur—these are the names and these are the places that epitomize our mad emotivist culture of death.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 48, 37.

Chesterton answers our emotivist madness by urging us to reconsider the postmodern notion that strength lies in largeness of numbers and grandiosity of size. On the contrary, true power is found in smallness and weakness. We become free when we become members of the Body of Christ, Jesus' "little flock," and thus in total dependence on him. True liberty, says Chesterton, is found in true limitation, not self-indulgent will-to-power:

Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else. [...] Every act is an irrevocable selection and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses. [...] Anarchism [another name for insane emotivism] adjures us to be bold creative artists, and care for no laws or limits. But it is impossible to be an artist and not care for laws and limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. [...] The moment you step into the world of facts, you step into a world of limits. You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from the laws of their own nature. You may, if you like, free a tiger from his bars; but do not free him from his stripes. Do not free a camel from the burden of his hump: you may be freeing him from being a camel. [...] The artist loves his limitations: they constitute the *thing* he is doing.<sup>6</sup>

## II.

How, then, does Chesterton's work address these twin forms of madness—the insanity of hyper-rationalism and the insanity of hyper-emotivism? Chesterton claims that we learn our most basic lessons about the virtues and the vices from the fantasy stories of our childhood. There we encounter what he calls "The Ethics of Elfland." To embrace the marvels of fairy tales—and thus what J. R. R. Tolkien called the world's one true fairy story that became historical fact; i.e., the Gospel story—we must pass two indispensable tests, says Chesterton. The first elfin trial concerns the *imagination*: whether we are willing to see the world, not as consisting of two separate realms—the visible and the invisible, the literal and the figurative, the necessary and the free, not even the natural and the supernatural. We are required, instead, to discern the cosmos as the mysterious, even the miraculous, overlapping and intersection of these two realms. Only a life immersed in this alloy of what Chesterton calls "the familiar and the unfamiliar" can enable us to answer the most rudimentary human question: "How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it?"<sup>7</sup> To use more conventional theological language:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 45-6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 14.

How can we enjoy God's great gifts without turning them into idols? Unlike Lewis, who appeals to miracle as a rare suspension of nature's regularities, Chesterton insists that miraculous gifts are everywhere at hand, once we perceive the world imaginatively:

You cannot *imagine* two and one not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit; you can imagine them growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail. [...] When we are asked why eggs turn to birds or [why] fruits fall in autumn, we must answer exactly as the fairy godmother would answer if Cinderella asked why her mice turned to horses or her clothes fell from her at twelve o'clock. We must understand that it is *magic*. It is not a "law" because we do not know its general formula.<sup>8</sup>

Chesterton is not appealing to anything akin to black magic, the nefarious attempt to coerce nature by sorcery. For Chesterton, *magic* is a synonym for wonder and surprise and miracle: the mysterious transformation of one thing into another. Conversion—*metanoia*—entails precisely such a transformation of sinners into saints. To be thus transformed, and to call others to such radical renovation of life, requires an analogical use of imagination. He was thoroughly agreed with St. Thomas Aquinas (and with Aristotle before him) that everything has its own *entelechy*, its inherent aim and goal that pushes it toward completion and fulfillment within a larger, indeed, a final *Telos*. Because all "things [tend] to a greater end," Chesterton declares in his splendid little book on St. Thomas subtitled *The Dumb Ox*, "they are more real than we think them. If they seem to have a relative unreality (so to speak) it is because they are potential, not actual; they are unfulfilled, like packets of seeds or boxes of fireworks. They have it in them to be more real than they are. [...] [as when] the trees burst into flower or the rockets into flame."<sup>9</sup>

Our aim as Christians, it follows, is to behold our fellow human beings not as miserable wretches, not as pathetic failures, not even as spiritually deluded mystics. On the contrary, they are all Cinderellas in the making, the chambermaid who becomes a princess riding a magnificent coach drawn by prancing horses. Our non-Christian brothers and sisters are creatures under construction; they are not yet what they were meant to be. Like us, they are unfinished projects. This is our answer to modernist maniacs who say we are helpless to become other than we are. Hence St. Paul's wondrous confession in 2 Cor 5: 16, where he says that he no longer regards

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>9</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1956; first published 1933), p. 181.

anyone from a human point of view, but rather as men and women for whom Christ has died. The Apostle's analogical imagination enables him to see everyone, not as what they humanly seem to be but as what, in Christ, they really are meant to become.

What is the means for such a literally fantastic fulfillment and construction? The answer lies in the second test required for membership in the gospel-world of Elfland—namely, what Chesterton calls “the Doctrine of Conditional Joy.” This is the drastic *if* on which everything hangs, the decision that determines everything else: “A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A word is forgotten and cities perish. A lamp is lit and love flies away. A flower is plucked and human lives are lost. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone.”<sup>10</sup> That the stipulation required for finding joy seems incomprehensible is precisely its point. If it were something obvious and easy, it wouldn't be the Gospel. Our maddened emotivists must be told the importance but also the strangeness of decision.

A properly Christian understanding of the will is that it must be shaped and formed by habituation to moral disciplines and spiritual practices. The call of the Christian life is indeed a call to the one true Way. Our evangelism must aim, therefore, at making our choices become the product of our convictions. We must learn to choose our automobiles and our houses, our food and our clothes, our professions and even our friends, according to our most basic moral beliefs and theological convictions. And as my colleague Barry Harvey rightly contends, we do not choose our convictions so much as they choose us. The Gospel is not a shopping choice. “You did not choose me,” Jesus reminds his disciples, “but I chose you.” This is indeed the great glad news called the Gospel: the unsurpassably glad tidings that, even before the foundation of the world, God loved us, that his gracious embrace of us enables our gracious embrace of him, and thus that we have the enormous privilege of living for this Lord who provides the very basis for our lives.

All salvation lies in an *if*, but it's not an *if* that depends simply on us. God provides the grace by which we avoid the one thing that is forbidden. Everything is ours for the having, but only with the reminder that they are not ours but God's. We have been given them to enjoy, not

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<sup>10</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 61.

to worship. When we make idols of life's good things, they are inevitably taken from us. The cosmos itself thus hangs like a crystal that God could drop, so that everything would go to smash, if indeed we ignore the doctrine of conditional joy. *Robinson Crusoe* is the truest of stories, in Chesterton's view, because it reminds us that human existence hangs on the way in which God has enabled us to pass the test: "all things have had this hair-breadth escape: everything has been saved from a wreck."<sup>11</sup>

It's hard to imagine a better analogy of the Gospel than this one: "Everything has been saved from a wreck." Noah's ark carrying all the freight of the world's life also carried the weight of its sin. The ship sank but God is rescuing everything—man and beast and all other created things. The world is full of such analogies, if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear, hands to feel and nostrils to scent and tongues to taste. Our problem is not that we perceive and thus desire too much, but rather that we envision and thus proclaim too little. We are pathetically blinkered, selfishly purblind. Our finite and fallen imaginations cannot behold the surplus of light that pervades the entirety of created being. The aim of Chesterton's work is to restore such sight and hearing, such feeling and scenting and tasting. "If things deceive us," Chesterton declares, "it is by being more than they seem."<sup>12</sup> Only human beings can know this splendid and blessed truth, and thus is a great burden and a great privilege uniquely ours.

Someone has wisely said that "What we convert people *with* is also what we convert them *to*." If we convert them with sentimental and trite versions of the Gospel, they are likely to remain sentimental and trite Christians. There is nothing either trite or sentimental about Chesterton's "case for Christianity." On the contrary, he answers the mad rationalism and the mad emotivism of our age with the sanity of the Gospel and thus with the tough paradoxes of the Gospel. He reminds us that we are the creatures who have forgotten our name, that we have forgotten who we are, that we have even forgotten that we have forgotten. What we are, of course, is a monstrosity in the Old French sense of *mostre*: a wonder, a marvel, a creature who sticks out anomalously, an animal who is not meant to fit seamlessly into the world:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 69. "It is a good exercise, in empty or ugly hours of the day, to look at anything, the coal-scuttle or the bookcase, and think how happy one would be to have brought it out of the sinking ship to the solitary island."

<sup>12</sup> *Thomas Aquinas*, 180.

Who ever found an ant-hill decorated with celebrated ants? Who has seen a bee-hive carved with the images of gorgeous queens of old? No; the chasm between man and other creatures may have an explanation, but it is a chasm. We talk of wild animals; but man is the only wild animal. It is man that has broken out. All other animals are tame animals, following the rugged respectability of the tribe or type; man alone is ever undomestic....<sup>13</sup>

We thus proclaim that Jesus Christ is the ultimate monster, in this precise sense: He is the God-Man, the unique One in whose image we have both been made and remade.

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<sup>13</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 59, 85, 151.