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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

REFLECTIONS ON *TITANIC*: A METAPHOR OF THE GOSPEL

David Miller

When I first read C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to my daughter, I was deeply moved at the gospel allusions in the story. As a Christian who knew something about Lewis, I expected to find the gospel represented in the book. I knew it wasn't a strict allegory like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, but still I was surprised at the freshness and power with which I was impacted by the scene where Aslan is sacrificed by the White Witch and again by the utter joy of his subsequent resurrection frolic with the children. I was impressed once again by the glory of the gospel and of what our Lord has done for us.

Recently, as I reflected on the movie *Titanic*, I have felt the same reactions as I have begun to see (at a friend's suggestion) something of the same kind of metaphorical portrayal of the gospel story in the unfolding of the movie. The world is enthralled with this \$250 million blockbuster, and the world usually recognized a good story, just as the world has recognized Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a literary classic and Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*, even if the Christian elements escaped them. I think that is the case with *Titanic*. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien talked of creating "myth," in the highest sense of the word—a story that carries a higher meaning that helps us interpret our lives and gives them continuity and dimension. This is what they intended in their

literature, and this is what James Cameron has done in this love story, *Titanic*.

Cultural statements like the movie *Titanic* can be a road sign to our generation. The story has been compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, but it really is much better by far. Instead of merely self-absorbed lovers, whose self-destructive end merely hints at causing a reconciliation of warring families, here the love is self-giving, ending in mutual commitment and redemption, though at the cost of the life of the redeemer. Does this not point to the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Can we not use this message to proclaim the explicit gospel in Scripture and help to show a lost generation the way into the light? And in the process of such reflection, perhaps it may enable us Christians to grasp a little more fully the nature of our salvation and to follow the old Puritan admonition, to "improve our baptism." This movie has captured in an extraordinary way the imagination of many people, indeed, of a generation, Christians and non-Christians alike. It behooves us to discern why and take the role of the Interpreter (cf. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). If people are allowed to think the road sign is the destination, it becomes idolatry, and they are still lost. But if the sign is read and rightly interpreted, it can help some find the true destination.

Many Christians will perhaps disagree, citing the gratuitous sex scene and especially the nude posing scene as elements that mar an otherwise good movie, or even that the movie's message is really only something like a class warfare salvation by jettisoning one's responsibilities and acting on one's feelings.¹ These, along with some foul language and the taking of God's name in vain, may be cited as the movie's flaws, and I do not mean to treat the movie as an allegory in which all the details have meaning. Many are incidental or are part of

Hollywood's view of life, such as sex outside of the context of the marriage covenant, but the story as a whole has, I think, an amazingly close analogy to the gospel.

Purists interested in the historical details of the sinking will think the fictional love story a waste of time. But for those who are willing to see it, this movie is a "myth" of epic proportions, marvelously illustrating the commitment aspect of Christian conversion, culminating in a climactic type of baptism in which the old world, the old life with all its bondage, disappears beneath the waves, and being "dead" to her old master, Caledon Hockley, the heroine emerges to embark on a new life. No metaphor can be pressed in all its details, and this is especially true where the allusions are most likely unintentional, but the correspondence of the details with the Christian gospel are too many to ignore.

In this context, there is an important point to be made from the account in John 4 of our Lord's conversation with the woman at the well. After Jesus tells her to go call her husband and return, she says flatly, "I have no husband." At that point Jesus then rehearses that she has had five husbands and the man she is currently living with is not her husband. At that point, when she realizes she is speaking with a prophet, she apparently changes the subject abruptly and asks about where one ought to worship—there in Samaria on Mount Gerizim where her ancestors worshiped, or in Jerusalem in the Jewish temple. Preachers and commentators have often said that she did this because it was too uncomfortable talking about her failed marriages: she was moving to a "safe" subject—religion. But I think D. A. Carson, in his commentary on John's gospel, is right when he says this is unnecessary psychologizing.² She has already realized that she is speaking to a prophet. Why would she try to avoid a subject that He has just opened to her? She

would have realized she could not hide anything from Him. Instead, what I think is happening is that she has moved the conversation upward to what is really troubling her. No doubt her failed marriages and current unfulfilled relationship outside of marriage bother her, but the real question is how to make sense of this chaotic life of hers. How does one have access to God? She is confused because of conflicts between the religion of the Jews and her own hybrid Samaritan religion which accepted only the Pentateuch as its Scriptures. There was, consequently, no coherent "story," no "myth" to making sense out of her life. Charles Colson quotes Neil Postman as saying that mankind needs a story to define our lives and put things in perspective or else we are lost in chaos. That is where the Samaritan woman found herself, a very unhappy person caught in a chaotic, meaningless life. Her deepest need was not merely to solve her failed personal relationships, but ultimately to find God, and that is the question she asked this Prophet once she realized something of who He was. It is that same human need for a life-defining story that the movie *Titanic* addresses.

That the Lord and His people could be represented by the imagery of lovers is not exactly unbiblical. The Song of Solomon, the book of Hosea, as well as the use of marriage by the apostle Paul, all make this the central picture of God's loving, nurturing covenant relationship. Keil and Delitzsch, in their commentary on the Song of Solomon, note the movement of the story is that the humble shepherd maiden is elevated by their mutual love to the higher social position of her lover (Solomon?), and then that same love, after their marriage, carries him, descending, to her social position in the rustic countryside. That same movement can be discerned in the movie. First Jack ascends to Rose's position

when he is invited to dinner for rescuing her from the rail of the ship, and then she descends to his position when she goes to the party among the Irish in steerage. She also descends to his level when she renounces her first-class status and takes Jack's name at the end of the story.

A 101-year-old Rose tells the tale. In a flashback they go up the gangplank and her fiancé says, "You're about to sail on the greatest steamship ever built, and you act as though you are going to an execution." And that is exactly how she feels: she is imprisoned in a life she hates—pressured into an engagement with a domineering, although wealthy, highly successful businessman by her mother (because their family is facing bankruptcy and this marriage will solve their financial woes). Rose feels trapped. She even says that though *Titanic* was a "ship of dreams" to others, for her it was a slave ship, taking her to America in chains. She is locked into a life she wants to escape, and indeed does seek to jump off the stern of the ship. She can destroy herself, but she cannot save herself. Don't a lot of people feel like that? There she first encounters Jack, a man who is immediately willing to risk his life to save hers, a theme which continues to the end and makes him a Christ figure. As Jack's and Rose's hands touch for the first time at the stern rail of the ship, the camera shows a close-up of their hands, posed for a moment in the manner of Michaelangelo's depiction of God's hand touching Adam's in his painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. This is not accidental, as the world of art has a place in the story, especially in the makeup of Rose's character. It is symbolic of God's life-giving touch on our lives.

But escape by suicide, just like escaping from the sinking ship later on by means of a lifeboat, is not adequate. It just will not do. What Rose needs is a total

break with her old life, not a self-destructive way out (suicide) or a way out that merely preserves that old life (in the lifeboat with her mother); what she needs is to die to herself for the sake of Jack and to actually go down with the ship and undergo a baptism in the sea and only then emerge to a new life.

Jack's love for Rose reflects Christ's love for us because it is entirely gracious: "You jump; I jump," says Jack. It is self-sacrificing, unequivocal and spontaneous. Jack does not love Rose for what she can do for him or because he merely wants her for himself. There is no hint of any self-serving. He loves her purely for the sake of her own welfare. He is willing to die for her even before he knows anything about her. James Cameron has written that it was his intention to portray "the kind of love we all long for, but so seldom find,"³ in other words, an idealized love, self-giving and complete. This is where the essence of this story is unique to the Christian gospel, and therein lies its universal appeal. Donald Bloesch said it well: "There is something spontaneous about *agape* love. You do not have to reflect upon it, you simply do it. *Agape* love is always love in action."⁴ Mankind longs for such love. In their final scene together after the sinking, when it is obvious to them both that Jack will not make it, he can only express thanks that he was on the *Titanic* so he could know her. He has no regrets. His love for her has saved her, and he dies content that his being there has accomplished that. Isaiah's words, speaking of the Messiah, are appropriate, "He shall see . . . the anguish of His soul . . . and be satisfied" (53:11). The song at the end of the movie, "My Heart Will Go On," expresses something of the idea of Song of Solomon 8:7, "Many waters cannot quench love, nor will rivers overflow it." That is a picture of love unreserved, self-giving, spontaneous, entirely gracious:

behold the love of our Lord Christ for His church!

Jack gradually wins Rose's allegiance and affections as he shows her glimpses of the freedom she is forbidden, never forcing himself on her, but pursuing her and sharing his concern for her and his sense of freedom and joy. In one key scene, Jack takes Rose up to the ship's bow, where he himself had spread his hands and enjoyed the force of the wind the first day of the voyage. He coaxes her up on the rail, where he stands behind her to support her and has her stand on the bow, eyes closed, until he says to open them. As the ship races on, she opens her eyes, arms outstretched and experiences the sensation and exclaims, "I'm flying!" Here is an illustration of the sheer joy of freedom—childlike in its delight and a picture of the thrill of the gospel's grace, over against the bondage of sin and the law—and this is beautifully symbolized by her outstretched arms, forming a cross. That cross, leaning on Jack, is the symbol of the salvation Jack is to bring to Rose. It is a costly salvation, but entirely free and undeserved! "May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Another facet of the gospel represented here is that of the Christian's commitment to Christ. Rose's conversion is at first hesitant; she keeps withdrawing out of fear when she is around her fiancé or her mother, and even after a rather complete committal to Jack in the nude posing scene and subsequent sex scene, she still doubts when Jack is accused of stealing the diamond necklace. Although she "denies" him like Peter did Christ in the courtyard of Caiaphas, she later confesses that she knew in her heart that he was innocent. The key commitment scene is when she jumps back on to the ship from the lifeboat. It is *then* that she knows her life is

bound to Jack's—no matter what, even if it means surrendering it and dying with him. But Jack is able to save her. His knowledge of what the water will do when the ship sinks saves her life, and he places her on a floating door that insures that she will live, rather than freeze in the icy water.

That sinking is the baptism that separates Rose irretrievably from her old life. After her rescue, she gives her name as Rose Dawson—taking Jack's name. (The records will show that Rose Dewitt Bukater died on the *Titanic* at age 17.) Just as when the Israelites crossed the Sea of Reeds and were "baptized into Moses" (1 Cor. 10:2), and Christians are baptized into their Lord's name with the triune formula (Matt 28:19), so she goes through a "baptism" with Jack, during which they exchange vows and she receives from him a blessing that is fulfilled in a long life with lots of children and grandchildren. The fact that the story is being told by Rose at age 101 years is not irrelevant. It is the culmination of that life of freedom that is Jack's gift to her.

All I am seeking to do is to point out a "road sign," to borrow C. S. Lewis' image from *Surprised by Joy*.⁵ If you are already on the right road, heading the right way, the road signs are unnecessary, except perhaps as confirmations, and for that we may be grateful. But if you are lost and confused and have no idea which direction to go, the road sign assumes great importance. It is a god-send, and may draw considerable attention to itself in order that people may discern what it is really saying and where to go from here. That is what I think we have here.

A quote from *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley* (vol. 2) sums up, I think, the main theme of this "mythic allegory":

The Just shall live by faith.
 O that I might the power receive
 The simple life of faith to live,
 A stranger by the world unknown,
 To live, shut up with Christ alone!
 Jesus, my real life Thou art,
 Inspire Thyself into my heart,
 And filled with purity divine
 I live, through endless ages Thine.⁶

I say this summarizes the theme because Rose only gradually grows into the truth that her salvation is bound up with her commitment to Jack. Only as she trusts herself to him can she be truly safe from Cal. In a telling line, the aged Rose says, "He saved me in every way that a person can be saved." Redeeming love is the theme, even though this statement is not true in a literal sense (what man needs is salvation from sin before a holy God), but the statement is nonetheless striking in its expression of salvation by redeeming love.

This is a fine line between metaphor and counterfeit. Neither is to be identified with reality. Which it is depends on how it is perceived. If the metaphor is mistaken for reality, then it becomes a counterfeit, and this may be a problem for the many teenagers who are seeing this movie repeatedly. But if we see a metaphor for what it is—a sign post, pointing to reality, then we can appreciate it and put it to its proper use.

Rose's relationship to Cal, her fiancé, reflects the former allegiance believers once had to Satan and slavery to sin. Caledon Hockley is a type of Satan. He offers Rose the world, in effect, when he says, "There is nothing I will deny you—open your heart to me, Rose." He wants to possess her, to own her as one of his many possessions. When he wants to use her she is to be avail-

able; the rest of the time he has no particular interest in her. Cal does not have Rose's heart, and he knows it. "If a man were to give all the riches of his house for love, it would be utterly despised" (Song of Solomon 8:7). Even the rare diamond necklace cannot buy her heart. In an important scene, Cal smashes the breakfast dishes in a rage and calls Rose a "slut." This is because she had gone the night before with Jack to an Irish party in steerage. She has not in fact been unfaithful to him, but it is part of Cal's possession of her that he has made her sleep with him even though they are only engaged. Here is a reflection of Satan's domination: He says to us as he did to our Lord, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9). Satan entices, coaxes and persuades in order to tempt us to sin, and then accuses and condemns us for having done it. If Rose is a "slut," it is because Cal has made her one in his drive to possess her.

The Puritan era has used the language of betrothal to indicate the attachment of the sinner to Satan as well as to the bondage of sin and death. There is a compulsion and yet a willingness about it, a fear of breaking away, yet a desire to be free. Writing in that perspective, John Donne said, addressing the Lord:

I, like a usurped town, to another due
 Labor to admit you, but O, to no end;
 . . . Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,
 But I am betrothed unto Your Enemy.
 Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
 Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
 Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.
 (Holy Sonnets #14)

Donne is using the bold language of biblical imagery and poetically expresses the slavery of sin bound up with the law as opposed to the freedom of the gospel.

In each encounter with Jack, Rose sees more and more of the freedom he offers, and she is drawn to him and that life of freedom.

There is a clear renunciation in her note to Cal accompanying Jack's sketch of her, as well as in the incident of Rose spitting in Cal's face as he tries to stop her from leaving the first-class deck to find Jack. Christians may label such things examples of poor taste, but they actually echo the ancient baptismal ceremony in which the one to be baptized sheds his clothing, turns his back on his past life, spits (symbolically) at Satan, and renounces him and all his works.⁷ In a sense, Rose's renunciation of Cal and her past life is in preparation for her "baptism" when she follows Jack through the water of the sinking, which she has to pass through before she can truly be free of her old life. Even the sketching scene may be thought of in light of a Puritan's prayer:

If traces of Christ's artistry be upon me,
 may He work on with His divine brush
 until the complete image be obtained
 and I be made a perfect copy of Him, my Master.⁸

Rose and Jack's life together living out their mutual commitment is telescoped into a matter of hours by the impending disaster, but it is made thereby all the more intense, and it is no less real for its short duration.

Although the joy of the sexual relationship should only be in the covenant context of marriage, still we can acknowledge that this story does portray what it is like

to be in love in a dangerous, post-edenic world fraught with danger. In the face of arrogance, and the attempted domination of the kingdom of darkness, redeeming love finally triumphs, ultimately conquering even death as (I think) the final scene in the movie shows.

I am tempted to try to press more details of the story into the service of this theme. One example is that Rose's name recalls the Rose of Sharon, the Shulamite maiden of the Song of Solomon (2:1), while Jack's nickname stands for John, "the Lord is gracious." But are all these details merely coincidences? Are they providential, but unintended by the writer? I do not know the answer to that, but the metaphorical elements of this "myth" are there. That I do know. And we may learn something of the gospel by viewing this epic movie with this in mind.

I have written this only as food for thought to stimulate discussion. I think Charles Colson's radio review is very much to the point, and I am trying to pursue that discussion. The *Titanic's* sinking was one of several catastrophic events that seemed to signal the end of the era of Victorian optimism and faith in human achievement and technology: the San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906, the *Titanic* disaster in 1912, and the First World War of 1914-18. The *Titanic* was a kind of symbol of man's pride that goes before destruction (Prov. 16:18). Ultimately the lesson is that of our Lord: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). As Colson aptly observed, "As far as this world is concerned, we're *all* on the *Titanic*."⁹ We need the only true redeeming love of the only One capable of such a salvation: the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again for us.

So what is the bottom line? What is the application of all this before the face of God? I think it is this: This story is an extended illustration of our Lord's command

to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, to love our Lord Christ with reckless abandon (Matt. 22:37). Such things have always been a "stretch" for Christians, but to run the race we need stretching! May our Lord use this article to inspire Christians to love and obey Him more!

Author

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Notes

1. Ben Harris, "Underwater Dangers" in *World*, January 10, 1998, 22.
2. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 221-222.
3. James Cameron, Accompanying notes to CD soundtrack of the movie, *Titanic*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1997.
4. Donald Bloesch, "The Paradoxical Love of the Cross" in *Reformation and Revival Journal*, 6:4, 1997, 133-147.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York and San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1984), 238.
6. *Christianity Today*, January 12, 1998, 49.
7. Augustine Stock, *The Method and Message of Mark* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 374. Cf also A. Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (London: SVS Press, 1974), 28.
8. Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Edinburgh and Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 25.
9. Charles Colson, "Gone with the Waves, a Titanic Moral Lesson" in the radio series, *Breakpoint with Charles Colson* (Prison Fellowship, 1998), n. 80116.