

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

MAY 2002

YOU KNEW I'D HAVE TO GET TO IT EVENTUALLY....

BY TIM KELLER

"LOTR is a great demonstration of the difference between Christian art and propaganda."

The "Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the best selling books of all time and now has become one of the biggest movies of all-time. Rather than offer a review of either the book or the movie, I'd like to share some tentative reflections on what light the phenomenon of "LOTR" sheds on Redeemer's commitment to help Christians 'engage culture' in the City.

First, the LOTR volumes (and most of C.S. Lewis's extremely popular fictional works) were the product of Christian community, not just of individual effort. The "Inklings" were a group of Oxford Christian acad-

emics who met twice weekly in the 1930's and 40's in order to support, shape and stimulate one another's literary output. The main axis of the group was the friendship of Lewis and Tolkien. Originally, Tolkien introduced the atheist Lewis to Christ. Later, however, Lewis 'returned the favor' by being the main support for Tolkien's fiction writing. Tolkien wrote about Lewis just after his death that "The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be

more than a private hobby." (H.Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*, p.165) Many Christians come to a city like New York in order to 'make a contribution' or 'make an impact'. That will not happen unless they are part of stimulating and supportive Christian community.

Second, LOTR is a great demonstration of the difference between Christian art and propaganda. Many believe "art that does not evangelize, praise, or exhort has no place in the kingdom of God or, at best, has an inferior status to confessional works...Also, for many

(continued on page 2)

BEING A DEEK

BY PHILIP TRUSCOTT

"I knew that the function of the diaconate was to help people with problems and I wanted no part of this."

When one of my friends asked if he could nominate me to serve as a deacon my attitude was not positive. I knew that the function of the diaconate was to help people with problems and I wanted no part of this. I knew I would have to help people I would not want to socialize with, whose problems I would not be able to solve, and whose time demands would conflict with my own social and career goals. In my mind's eye I saw the Robot from "Lost in Space" waving his floppy arms and shouting "Danger! Danger!"

I only agreed to serve after it was explained to me that I had some control over the number of people I was required to help. A

few months after I was elected I was walking across Madison Avenue and saw what appeared to be huge volcanic clouds rising over downtown Manhattan.

As the enormity of the World Trade Center attack dawned on me I started a lengthy and ultimately fruitless effort to donate my services to the Red Cross. I was turned away from two displaced persons shelters which said they did not take walk-in volunteers. I lined up for four hours at a Blood Bank before

being told that my hemoglobin was not wanted. As a British citizen it was assumed that I was a carrier of Mad Cow Disease (which those of you who have seen me dance will know is probably true).

Just as I gave up finding an opportunity to serve it suddenly found me. My turn to answer the Redeemer Diaconate Help-line happened to come up on the calendar. As I responded to the phone messages I found myself

(continued on page 3)

INSIDE:

- OFFICER NOMINATION MONTH
- STEWARDSHIP UPDATE
- BEING A DEEK
- CHURCH FAMILY UPDATE

MORE...



(continued from page 1)

YOU KNEW I'D HAVE TO GET TO IT EVENTUALLY....

Christians, [overtly] confessional intent overrides [the importance of] artistic quality. For this reason, much Christian...art has a difficult time finding an interested and appreciative audience beyond a small portion of Christian audience.”

(W.Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open*, p.12.) Tolkien wrote to a friend in 1953 that “I have not put in, or have cut out practically all references to anything like ‘religion’ in the imaginary world. For the [Christian] element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.” (JRR Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 172)

Tolkien believed that there was an indelible human longing for heroic epic, myth, fairy-tale, and stories about escape from death. He simply sought to write a really good story. But, he said, his Christianity affected the original symbolism and shape of the story almost “unconsciously.” In this sense, his Christian beliefs of course influenced his work, but as the fertilizer of his imagination, and not in any allegorical or deliberate way. When this happens (assuming the artistic work itself is one of admirable skill and quality) the Christian ‘messages’ have far more impact and do not come across as coercive or manipulative. They become part of the warp and woof of the work.

There are many Christian ‘messages’, of course, in LOTR. Perhaps most obviously, it has neither a relativistic modern view of evil (e.g. “what is good and evil depends completely on your point of view”) nor a traditional dualistic view of evil (e.g.

Tolkien believed that there was an indelible human longing for heroic epic, myth, fairy-tale, and stories about escape from death. He simply sought to write a really good story. But, he said, his Christianity affected the original symbolism and shape of the story almost “unconsciously.”

“there are intrinsically good people and forces and intrinsically evil people and forces in eternal conflict with one another.”) Instead, LOTR gives us a highly nuanced, profoundly Biblical view. No one, not even the Dark Lord Sauron nor the demonic Balrog was evil in the beginning. Anyone, even the best and brightest characters, can go evil. Even the orcs are just ruined and twisted elves. In fact, the greatest beings are in more danger of succumbing to the seductive power of self-glorification and lust for power. As a result, hardly any of the characters in LOTR are the stock ‘very good’ or ‘very evil’ characters of melodrama. Several good characters go bad (Saruman, Denethor, Ted Sandyman) while several going-bad characters are redeemed (Boromir, Theoden) and one ruined character makes progress only to lapse again and perish (Gollum.) Even the greatest, Galadriel, has to pass a temptation-test in order to purge herself of her ancient over-desire for rule and empire. Without being ‘overtly religious’ this world is profoundly Christian, filled with redeemed and redeemable persons, not the one-dimensional heroes and vil-

lains of fantasy fiction and popular art.

Additionally, despite its form as a ‘heroic quest,’ LOTR undermines any belief that salvation can come through self-effort. The movie conveys well the message that evil is overwhelming and inexorable. There is no might or strength or power in the world sufficient to defeat evil. When Gandalf the Grey is resurrected as Gandalf the White, he says, “but black is mightier still.” Tolkien makes clear that evil cannot be handled by force or simple moral effort, however heroic. As a result, the “quest” in LOTR is really an “anti-quest.” It is not a quest to find something but to lose something. It is taken on not by the strong but by the weak—hobbits. In fact, only the small and weak have any chance to save the world at all.

In the end, salvation comes not through amassing and exerting power but through suffering and weakness and the giving up of all power. The little hero, Frodo, is the complete antithesis of all other ancient heroes of the older mythic prehistories. He has to become so deeply wounded that he loses

(continued on page 4)

REDEEMER REPORT

Kathy Keller
Buddy Mungo
Dave Jacobs

The Redeemer Report is a publication of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
OFFICE • 271 MADISON AVENUE • SUITE 1600 • NEW YORK, NEW YORK • 10016
212-808-4460 (phone) 212-808-4465 (fax)

HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM
EAST 69TH BETWEEN PARK AND LEXINGTON
services at 9:30 • 11:15 • 6:00

CHURCH OF ST. PAUL AND ST. ANDREW
86TH AND WEST END AVENUE
services at 7:00

(continued from page 1)

BEING A DEEK

talking to a WTC survivor who obtained crisis counseling at Redeemer's counseling center, to a man's whose home in Battery Park was uninhabitable, and many, many hotel chamber maids who lost their jobs because of the destruction of the Marriott hotel next to the World Trade Center.

I was a very tiny part of a large operation, but even so it was an enormous privilege to be involved. I wish that I could recite a long list of heroic accomplishments with regard to the people I have been called on to help as a deacon. I have made many visits with people to the Business Library to search for jobs and printed out hundreds of job letters. I have critiqued cover letters and resumes. To date only one person has found employment and that was through his own efforts. Yet there seems to be a striking mismatch between the visible signs of generosity in their gratitude saying how much they appreciate the diaconate or what a difference I am making in their lives. Contrary to my expectations I enjoy working with them.

Clearly there is a richness in my life that would not exist if my original "me first" attitude to being a deacon had prevailed. Looking back on it, my attitude towards Redeemer had centered very much on what it could do for me. I enjoyed the social opportunities and the cookies at the West Side service. In one sense I had a very ordinary experience of Redeemer because I treated it as a sort of land-locked ocean liner and myself as one of the passengers. To have a great experience you must see Redeemer not as an ocean liner but as a Hospital Ship bringing vital medicine to our city. Or to change metaphors to have a mountain-top experience, you have to actually climb the mountain.

STEWARDSHIP UPDATE

As the summer months approach and planning is underway for those long weekends and well-deserved vacations, it is also a good time to remember the ongoing needs at Redeemer. Historically, weekly giving dips significantly in the summer months, requiring us to utilize reserves to maintain our ongoing operations. Many of you have already contacted your local bank and are now having checks sent automatically to Redeemer's offices. This is one way for you to continue to give regularly even during those times when you are out of town. Also, Tim Keller will be sending out letters over the summer to

keep you updated on the challenges and opportunities facing us as a community.

Your ongoing support during this time is important. To assist you in considering your financial commitment to Redeemer, we will be making available on the Redeemer Web Site (www.redeemer.com) a Stewardship Devotional which you can work through individually or in your Fellowship Group. There is also a chart and a "Question and Answer" section under the Stewardship Section of the Web Site as a resource for our members and friends. Thank you again for your partnership and have a great summer!!

MAY IS OFFICER NOMINATION MONTH

How Do I Nominate Someone?

- You must be a member to nominate another member.
- First ask the person that you want to nominate for Elder, Deacon or Deaconess if he or she is a member and willing to be considered for the office.
- Obtain a nomination form from Redeemer's website (www.Redeemer.com) or the information table at all services.
- Fax their name(s) with your signature to the church office to the attention of Andrea Clark at 212.808.4465. You may also send the nomination form by snail mail to the church office or place it in the offering basket.
- The deadline for submitting nominations is May 31, 2002.

CHURCH FAMILY UPDATE

Membership Vows

Winnie Lam
Peter H. Cha
Whitney Alexis Burrell
Susan Marie Kushner
Stacey Linn Middleton
Rosalina C. Pimenta
Sandi Lavery Taylor
William L. Taylor
Kon Ying
Caroline Yu
Linda Mee-Gyung Cho
Tiffany Genelee Turner

Membership Vows

Wendy L. Fung
Joseph R. Gaudio
Mary Joann Armstrong

Adult Baptisms:

Winnie Lam
Linda Mee-Gyung Cho
Wendy L. Fung

Infant Baptism:

Leah Nicole Jennings,
daughter of Tom and
Michelle Jennings

(continued from page 2)

YOU KNEW I'D HAVE TO GET TO IT EVENTUALLY....

the ability to enjoy or live in the world, in order for others to have and keep the world. And at the climactic moment, he doesn't even have the strength to do the final saving deed. There has to be an intervention—an act of 'providence', as it were!—for the world to be saved. At its heart is one who is a suffering servant, one who triumphs through weakness, one who must fall into the dark so we can live in the light.

Lastly, LOTR gives us a very Christian, non-sentimental kind of hope. It is typical for people to think of LOTR as 'escapist fantasy' but that is simply not the case. Normal popular escapist fantasy ends with everyone living 'happily ever after.' It is deeply sentimental. After the villains are dispatched, now 'all is right with the world.' By contrast, LOTR is non-sentimental about the inexorable sadness of life. The good people 'fight the long defeat.' No victory over evil ever lasts, since evil always takes a new shape and rises again. Even a victory over evil will result in the loss and fading

away of good and beautiful things. Frodo's wounds will never really heal. Certainly, the elves can go to a beautiful home in the West, but "if there are malorn trees over the Sea, none has reported it." Why is the book so sad?

As a Christian, Tolkien knew that sin had marred the world more deeply than we wish to admit. We must not be naive or pin utopian hopes to our own ability to create a safe, successful life for ourselves. "The wide world is all about you" says one character, "you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot forever fence it out." But LOTR holds out a distant but profound hope of complete renewal and joy. You have to read very carefully, but mainly in the songs and poems we learn about a future consummation in which the "the world is mended," and about reunions at a distant day "when the lands that lie under the wave are lifted up again...we may meet in the Spring..." It will be a day "when everything sad will become untrue." This is neither the sentimental hope that "if we

just all work together we can build a better world" nor existential despair. This is Christian realism because of sin and joyous consolation because of the assurance of the coming Kingdom of God.

Because they originally 'unconsciously' shaped the story, these 'messages' do not demand that the reader convert to Christianity in order to understand or embrace them. Peter Jackson, the director of the movies, is a man of uncommon artistic skill and integrity, but he shows no evidence of sharing Tolkien's Christian doctrinal commitments. Nevertheless, in an interview with Charlie Rose, he expressed so much admiration for the power and quality of Tolkien's work, that he said, "We decided to honor him by not injecting our own messages into the movies, but rather by letting his messages come through without tampering." That is remarkable. It shows that Christians may find less hostility in the world to the gospel if we incarnate it artistically the way Tolkien did.