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## INVESTIGATING FATHER BROWN: CHESTERTON'S DETECTIVE STORIES AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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*Mindy L. Withrow*

*I*t appears to me that there is very little preaching of a lively kind in the kingdom; but that the greater part deliver it by way of reading from a written discourse.

JOHN CALVIN

*A*lthough we begin to receive the fruit of this consolation when we are admitted into the church, yet we shall not enjoy it fully till the last day of the resurrection is come, when all things shall be most completely restored; and on this account it is called "the day of restitution."

JOHN CALVIN

*W*herever the gospel is preached, it is as if God himself came into the midst of us.

JOHN CALVIN

It may be reasonably maintained that a detective story is meant to be read in bed, by way of courting sleep; it ought not to make us think—or rather, it ought to be a kind of catharsis, taking our minds off the ethical, political, theological problems which exercise our waking hours by giving us artificial problems to solve instead. If this is so, have we not good reason to complain of an author who smuggles into our minds, under the disguise of a police mystery, the very solitudes he was under contract to banish?<sup>1</sup>

These words from Ronald Knox's 1954 essay "Chester-ton's Father Brown" apply to the series of Father Brown detective stories written by British author and critic G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936). Chesterton, one of the most controversial writers of the last century, wrote nearly every genre of literature including poetry, novels, essays, plays, and short stories, and was for many years the editor of *G. K.'s Weekly*. Both a social and literary critic and a brilliant Christian apologist, he made great use of paradox and symbolism, and his witticisms are among the most quoted.

The best known of Chesterton's works is his *Orthodoxy*, an autobiography of sorts, a declaration of his coming-to-faith and the theology he embraced. In it, he admits a preference for expressing his beliefs through artful storytelling, rather than in plain language, and he recognizes that the basic elements of humanity are universal, and

always true to Scripture.<sup>2</sup> He writes, "I have kept my truths: but I have discovered, not that they were not truths, but simply that they were not mine."<sup>3</sup> In another work, an essay titled "A Defence of Nonsense," he further collates art and truth: "Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art. . . . There must always be a rich moral soil for any great aesthetic growth."<sup>4</sup> Chesterton's belief in truth, art, and the commonality of human experience crosses over into all of his writings and sets the stage for the present discussion.

#### FEATURING FATHER BROWN

Possibly the most popular of all his literary endeavors, and the focus of our attention, are the Father Brown stories, five collections of short stories about an English detective-priest.<sup>5</sup> Father Brown has become associated with Chesterton in the way Sherlock Holmes is associated with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>6</sup> Chesterton describes the central character of these stories as a short man with "a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling" and "eyes as empty as the North Sea," a stumbling clergyman incapable of maintaining a grip on his shabby umbrella.<sup>7</sup> But his appearance belies the fact that he is a shrewd observer and that he has, through the confessional, acquired vast knowledge of human nature and the criminal world.

Like Father Brown himself, these well-loved stories are more complex than they initially appear. As the opening quote suggests, these stories may be read as philosophical works written to expose the timeless theological causes of the social problems of mankind, offering the reader an unexpected source from which to gain insight into his or her own nature. For these reasons, the stories are particularly applicable to those in church leadership, an assertion that will be demonstrated after an analysis of the works themselves.

#### SLEUTHING AND SOCIAL CONCERN

In her 1982 biography of Chesterton, Alzina Stone Dale describes Father Brown as "Chesterton's Mr. Pickwick, a mouthpiece for his own wit and wisdom":<sup>8</sup>

Although Chesterton wrote his Father Brown stories hastily (like almost everything else he wrote), often to finance other projects, they contain some of his most gorgeous "word painting," and are shaped by the two things that mark his best work: his personality (evident in the narrator and the protagonist), and his ideas, which were always moral concerns told like fairy tales. . . . As a whole . . . the Father Brown stories represent some of his most characteristic positions, political and social as well as moral and religious.<sup>9</sup>

The amount of social concern expressed in the Father Brown stories has led commentators to declare Chesterton, among other things, a social "prophet."<sup>10</sup>

For an example we turn to the story "The Invisible Man." A man is murdered in a building surrounded by bystanders who guard its only entrance at the time the crime is committed. Upon Father Brown's interrogation, the guards fiercely insist that no one entered or departed the building, yet the victim's body has clearly been removed, and there are footprints on the snow-covered stairs. Father Brown declares that someone did enter the house, a "mentally invisible man," a man "we do not see because we see him too easily," who walked right past the guards with his victim's body.<sup>11</sup> Father Brown points out that "nobody ever notices postmen, somehow . . . yet they have passions like other men, and even carry large bags where a small corpse can be stowed quite easily."<sup>12</sup> The mailman was able to enter the house, murder his victim, and walk out with the body without arousing suspicion, because the bystanders saw him simply as a fixture of the scenery.

In this tale, Chesterton speaks out for the overlooked members of society. As scholar Ronald Knox aptly states, "There is something artificial in a convention which allows us to say that nobody has entered a house when in fact a postman has entered it, as if the postman, being a state official, were not a man."<sup>13</sup> Long before the coining of the term "going postal," Chesterton utilizes the obsession of a particular mailman to point out how self-absorption makes people oblivious to the needs of others around them. With a few modern adjustments, this story could easily center on a police officer, meter reader, or cable installer.

Another demonstration of this concern is "The Queer Feet," which opens as the members of an eccentric club (known, interestingly, as The Twelve True Fishermen) gather at an elegant hotel for their annual dinner. While they dine, their collection of silver, pearl-studded knives and forks, brought along expressly for the fish course, is stolen from the table. Father Brown, at the restaurant on another errand, sits in a nearby room observing a pattern of foot-falls in the passageway that repeatedly changes from the slow saunter of a strolling gentleman to the quick, determined pace of a waiter. He apprehends the would-be thief after deducing that since both gentlemen and waiters wear the same style of evening dress, the thief is getting away with the silverware by acting like a gentleman among the waiters and like a waiter among the gentlemen.<sup>14</sup> Literary scholars suggest that "The Queer Feet" is a prime example of the author's use of the detective story form to demonstrate how social classes blind mankind.<sup>15</sup> The waiters assumed that because the thief acted like a gentleman, he must have been a gentleman; likewise, the gentlemen assumed that because the thief acted like a waiter, he must have been a waiter. Neither set saw him for what he truly was: a thief. At the end of the story one of the gentlemen,

altogether missing the gist of Father Brown's analysis, suggests that the Fishermen start wearing green suits because "one never knows what mistakes may arise when one looks so like a waiter."<sup>16</sup>

These stories clearly present Chesterton's dislike for the distinction of social classes. One can easily find examples of upper class criminals in his stories.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in "The Paradise of Thieves" the man arrested for embezzlement is a wealthy Yorkshire banker. The murderer in "The Secret Garden" is the chief of the Paris Police, and the murderer in "The Wrong Shape" is an affluent doctor. Other stories feature lawyers, princes, and military generals on the wrong side of the law. Although such characterization is not exclusive, the pattern suggests a message about humanity's class-transcending potential for evil.

Chesterton does not present such social commentary alone; he goes further to explain why humanity experiences such societal problems. His conclusion is the depravity inherent in every soul.

#### DETECTING DEPRAVITY

Detective stories are an excellent format with which to illustrate depravity because they study crime. The intent of these stories is not for the reader to focus on details of plot, but for him or her to uncover the social or moral point made in each of them.<sup>18</sup> Chesterton successfully avoids the danger of detective stories—merely holding the reader's interest—by stressing the moral implications of his characters' actions.<sup>19</sup> His focus is not on the deed done (although the peculiarities of the crimes offer further commentary on the human condition), but on the wickedness of the heart that devises it, illustrating Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is devisous above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?"<sup>20</sup>

Chesterton emphasizes man's depravity by his use of both characterization and description, the most obvious of

which is the former. One way he accomplishes this is through the actions of the culprits; often the criminals in these stories give themselves away by making a psychological or theological error.<sup>21</sup> The great outlaw Flambeau makes this mistake in "The Blue Cross" when, disguised as a priest, he tells Father Brown, "Well, I still think that other worlds may perhaps rise higher than our reason. The mystery of heaven is unfathomable. . . ." <sup>22</sup> Such words uttered by church leaders today might not surprise us, given the cross-pollination of religious philosophies in our post-modern culture, but Father Brown reminds us that attacking reason is bad theology.<sup>23</sup> He immediately identifies the impersonation and prevents the attempted theft of a religious artifact. Similarly, in "The Vampire of the Village," Father Brown recognizes the self-proclaimed Puritan minister as a fake, after spotting a crucifix on the wall of the minister's office.<sup>24</sup>

Father Brown himself is an example of Chesterton's use of characterization to illustrate depravity. Lynette Hunter, in her book *G. K. Chesterton: Explorations in Allegory*, explains that Father Brown's success in detection lies in the fact that he has a strong ability to observe and a deep empathy for others.<sup>25</sup> Further, he understands his own depraved nature and identifies himself with the criminal, thereby discerning the criminal mind. In one memorable dialogue, Father Brown is asked to divulge the "secret" of his recent solving of several murders. Reluctantly, he confesses, "It was I who killed all those people. . . . I had murdered them all myself, . . . so, of course, I knew how it was done."<sup>26</sup> He explains that science gets *outside* of criminals to study them as though under a microscope, but he gets *inside*—indeed lives inside—a criminal and therefore perfectly understands him with no need of scientific method. "No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; . . . till his only hope is somehow or other to have

captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat."<sup>27</sup>

A. W. R. Sipe and B. C. Lamb, researchers of celibacy in literature, compare and contrast the priest-detectives created by Chesterton and American author Andrew Greeley.<sup>28</sup> Sipe and Lamb point out that Greeley's criminals are easy to spot as they are the only evil characters in his books, but assert that Father Brown "must work much harder than Father Blackie" because Brown understands that the potential for great evil exists in the heart of every human being.<sup>29</sup> Chesterton demonstrates an awareness of the truth that "flat" characters exist only in fiction; outside of the fictional realm we are immensely complex and thoroughly corrupted by sin, yet redeemable by Christ.

Not only does Chesterton depict depravity with his characters; he also illustrates it with his descriptive techniques. Certainly his ability to paint such striking scenes was influenced by the Slade School of Art in London where he studied for several years before his literary talent was established.<sup>30</sup> W. W. Robson, professor of English literature at the University of Edinburgh, points out that Chesterton's descriptive powers add immensely to the moral meanings of the stories.<sup>31</sup> While the descriptions exist partially to distract the reader (like all mystery stories), they are also meant to help reveal Chesterton's point. To demonstrate, we turn to this passage from "The Hammer of God" in which two men look down from a balcony atop a church:

Immediately beneath and about them the lines of the Gothic building plunged outwards into the void with a sickening swiftness akin to suicide. There is that element of Titan energy in the architecture of the Middle Ages that, from whatever aspect it be seen, it is always running away, like the strong back of some maddened horse. This church was hewn out of ancient and silent stone, bearded with old fungoids and

stained with the nests of birds. And yet, when they saw it from below, it sprang like a fountain at the stars; and when they saw it, as now, from above, it poured like a cataract into a voiceless pit. For these two men on the tower were left alone with the most terrible aspect of Gothic; the monstrous foreshortening and disproportion, the dizzy perspectives, the glimpses of great things small and small things great; a topsy-turvydom of stone in the mid-air.<sup>32</sup>

Professor Robson declares that this artistic passage reveals to the observant reader the answer to the mystery.<sup>33</sup> Father Brown himself offers a direct explanation of the motive immediately following the descriptive passage:

"I knew a man," he said, "who began by worshipping with others before the altar, but who grew fond of high and lonely places to pray from, corners or niches in the belfry or the spire. And once in one of those dizzy places, where the whole world seemed to turn under him like a wheel, his brain turned also, and he fancied he was God. So that though he was a good man, he committed a great crime."<sup>34</sup>

The former passage reveals that the murderer killed because, in a moment of confused "topsy-turvydom," he believed it was necessary to take God's justice into his own hands.<sup>35</sup> Father Brown explains that the power of pride can cause one to forget one's place and try to play God.<sup>36</sup> In this scene, Chesterton juxtaposes architectural description with theological commentary to present a unique portrayal of depravity.

#### REDEMPTION REVEALED

The critics seem to agree that Chesterton is exposing both social issues and the depravity in which they are rooted, but he does not simply observe. His use of the detective

story form, in which the "who done it?" question must be solved, may itself argue that Chesterton is offering a solution to these problems of mankind.<sup>37</sup> Chesterton chooses to make his detective a priest instead of a police officer or private investigator; a good reason for this may be that, according to his Roman Catholic theology, a priest can provide for a wayward soul something that cannot be provided by someone in a secular profession.

Father Brown's investigations appear to serve two purposes: to uncover the facts of the crime and to convince the criminal to turn from his life of crime.<sup>38</sup> Dale remarks: "Father Brown is different from Horne Fisher or other heroes of Chesterton's later tales because he does assume the role of priest to the world, making it his business not only to solve the crime but to save the souls of the criminals."<sup>39</sup> Father Brown is not often seen handing the offender over to the law, but many times he is found admonishing someone to repent. One such instance is the conclusion of "The Invisible Man" where we are told, "But Father Brown walked those snow-covered hills under the stars for many hours with a murderer, and what they said to each other will never be known."<sup>40</sup> It seems reasonable to propose that "in the end, [the murderer] is redeemed. When Chesterton concluded that 'what they said to each other will never be known,' he had to be referring to the seal of Confession."<sup>41</sup> Since confession can truly occur only if God exists to receive it, the act declares faith in both God's existence and his willingness to forgive.<sup>42</sup> Father Brown's gentle proselytizing is one way in which Chesterton points us in the direction of our redeemer.

Another example of Father Brown's purpose to reform is seen when he convinces the owner of "The Queer Feet" to give up the jeweled silverware he has just whisked out from under the dining gentlemen's noses.<sup>43</sup> Later in the series, this particular criminal will become Father Brown's

close friend and professional partner, further proof of the priest's desire for reconciliation.

Often Father Brown leaves the guilty one to the convicting power of the conscience. Following a conversation with Father Brown, the assassin in "The Hammer of God" turns himself in to the local police inspector.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the murderer in "The Wrong Shape" confesses after being told by Father Brown to write a private report of the case—including details that would not be fit for a police report.<sup>45</sup> All of these examples point to the Chestertonian theme of the divine longing for human repentance; the implication is that God is the solution to all the social, and therefore theological, problems of mankind.

#### APPLYING THE ARTS

The Father Brown stories seem to be intended for more than just the amusement of the reader; they are Chesterton's commentary on social and theological issues. At times subtly and other times more obviously the patterns of characterization and description made in this collection uniquely declare Chesterton's Christian theology. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that these stories offer an additional opportunity to those in positions of church leadership. Classic literature, including these stories, has an application to sermon illustrations, counseling sessions, Sunday school classes, and suggested reading lists.

Classic literature is referred to as such because, though settings, characters, and details of plot change, the best books reveal the universal themes of human suffering, sin, and redemption, and are therefore meaningful to all generations. Augustine is famous for remarking, "All truth is God's truth," implying that all concepts that are true, even if not explicitly stated in Scripture, are biblical in essence, since they confirm biblical doctrines. The apostle Paul often used classic sources to reinforce his arguments; his sermon in Acts

17 makes a reference to the Greek poets Epimenides, Aratus, and Cleanthes, whom he quotes to illustrate his point about man's origin being in God.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Jude refers to the Assumption of Moses and the Book of Enoch, two familiar apocryphal texts used heavily by the early church.<sup>47</sup> When we make such use of classics, we reinforce extra-biblically the truths that ultimately belong to God.

When a pastor preaches a sermon on the evils of self-worship, for example, and reads his congregation the passages quoted earlier from "The Hammer of God," he does two things besides illustrate his point: He demonstrates freshly that the truth of the Bible is found all around us, even in architecture and linear perspective; and he raises the "literary bar" of his congregation by offering glimpses of good literature instead of relying exclusively on the more common sports or movie illustrations.

In the same way, Sunday school teachers and counselors can present essential moral teaching through narrative, giving the reader the opportunity to empathize with characters and learn from their mistakes, instead of reading solely the "shalts" and "shalt nots" in a prescriptive fashion.<sup>48</sup> A person who is convinced that he or she is irreconcilable to God may, through Father Brown's gentleness, come to understand the tender grace that God freely offers. And Chesterton is only one of many classic authors whose work can be appreciated in such a method. Couples in premarital counseling that are assigned Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*, for instance, will be permanently moved to guard the marriage bed after suffering with Pieter through the dramatic ruin of everything he loves.<sup>49</sup>

Church leaders are often asked to recommend reading, and the Father Brown stories and other classics that reflect biblical teaching can be offered as companions to excellent biographies, histories, or commentaries. The poor quality of the fiction vying for positions on the best-seller lists



today illustrates that often, as the opening quote of this article observes, we read only to escape from our everyday concerns; but how refreshing is the discovery that we can be entertained with fiction that offers more than simple entertainment.

### CASE CLOSED

The very complexity of Father Brown as the protagonist illustrates Chesterton's purpose for this collection of stories: the use of imagery to express the theological causes of social problems and direct the reader to God as the only means of redemption. All of Chesterton's delighted readers, and particularly those in positions of church leadership, are encouraged to accept these stories as an unexpected source from which we can learn to recognize the evils of human nature. By doing so, we apprehend a new opportunity to study ourselves and become better equipped to worship our Creator.

### Author

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### Notes

1. Ronald Knox, "Chesterton's Father Brown," in G. K. Chesterton: A Half

- Century of Views*. Edited by D. J. Conlon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 138.
2. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1959), 9.
  3. *Orthodoxy*, 12.
  4. G. K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Nonsense" in *The Defendant* (London: Brimley Johnson, 1901, [out of print]), 47; quoted in Alzina Stone Dale, *The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 29.
  5. G. K. Chesterton, *The Complete Father Brown* (London: Penguin Books), 1981. The collections were originally published individually as *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911), *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (1914), *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (1926), *The Secret of Father Brown* (1927), and *The Scandal of Father Brown* (1935).
  6. *Outline of Sanity*, 94.
  7. *Father Brown*, 10.
  8. *Outline of Sanity*, 94.
  9. *Outline of Sanity*, 158. Regarding Chesterton's publication of these stories to finance other writing projects, Dale further explains that when Chesterton's secretary informed him that their bank account was running low, he would "wander off to think about an hour or so, then return with a few scribbled notes and begin slowly to dictate another Father Brown mystery" (*Outline of Sanity*, 258). Since the stories were popular and sold well, publishing one or two of these every so often kept the bank balance in the black.
  10. John A. Newton argues that to all the many titles given to Chesterton must be added the title "prophet" (John A. Newton, "G. K. Chesterton as a 20th Century Prophet," *Epworth Review* 20 [1993]:76). He argues that Chesterton's prophecy relates to three main areas: his concern for personal integrity, his concern for the strengthening of the family and the community, and his strong belief that evil dominates the world ("G. K. Chesterton as a 20th Century Prophet," 79).
  11. *Father Brown*, 76; James V. Schall, *Schall on Chesterton: Timely Essays on Timeless Paradoxes* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 138.
  12. *Father Brown*, 77.
  13. "Chesterton's Father Brown," 139.
  14. *Father Brown*, 51-52.
  15. Brian Able Ragen, "The Uncanonical Classic: The Politics of the Norton Anthology," *Christianity and Literature* 41 (1992): 475.
  16. *Father Brown*, 53.
  17. *Outline of Sanity*, 158.
  18. Garry Wills, *Chesterton: Man and Mask* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 125.

19. *Man and Mask*, 125.
20. A remarkable example of the peculiar nature of these crimes is "The Sign of the Broken Sword." Father Brown remarks, "Where would a wise man hide a leaf? In the forest . . . If there were no forest, he would make a forest" (*Father Brown*, 153). In this case, a regiment of soldiers is led into a battle they cannot win in order that their fallen bodies may hide a corpse, turning a single murder into hundreds.
21. Christopher Hollis, "G. K. Chesterton," in *Supplement to British Book News*. General editor is T. O. Beachcroft (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), 13.
22. *Father Brown*, 21.
23. *Father Brown*, 23.
24. *Father Brown*, 717.
25. Lynette Hunter, G. K. Chesterton: *Explorations in Allegory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 141.
26. *Father Brown*, 464.
27. *Father Brown*, 466.
28. A. W. R. Sipe and B. C. Lamb, "Chesterton's Brown and Greeley's Blackie," *Commonweal* 119 (1992):18-19.
29. "Chesterton's Brown and Greeley's Blackie," 19.
30. *Outline of Insanity*, 30.
31. W. W. Robson, "Father Brown and Others," in G. K. Chesterton: *A Centenary Appraisal*. Edited by John Sullivan (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), 69-70.
32. *Father Brown*, 129.
33. "Father Brown and Others," 70.
34. *Father Brown*, 130.
35. "Chesterton as a 20th Century Prophet," 70.
36. *Explorations in Allegory*, 181.
37. "Father Brown and Others," 137.
38. "Father Brown and Others," 144.
39. *Outline of Insanity*, 259.
40. *Father Brown*, 77.
41. *Schall on Chesterton*, 143.
42. "Father Brown and Others," 135.
43. *Father Brown*, 50.
44. *Father Brown*, 131.
45. *Father Brown*, 101.
46. Paul's sermon to the Athenians affirms that all mankind owes its existence to God. In verse 28 he quotes the poets as saying, "We are his off-

- spring," and applies the phrase to God rather than the original reference, the Greek god Zeus. (He refers to a different line of the same passage of Epimenides again in Titus 1:12.) "While Paul's arguments can be paralleled at some points by the higher paganism of the day, its content is decidedly biblical . . . and its forms of expression Jewish as well as Greek. . . . By such maxims, Paul is not suggesting that God is to be thought of in terms of the Zeus of Greek polytheism or Stoic pantheism. He is rather arguing that the poets his hearers recognized as authorities have to some extent corroborated his message" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. General editor is Frank E. Gaebelin [Grand Rapids: Zondervan] [database on CD-Rom]; available from Zondervan Interactive; see the note on Acts 17:28 for quotes).
47. Jude 9 refers to the Assumption of Moses and Jude 6 and 14-15 quotes nearly word-for-word the Book of Enoch. Although neither book was recognized as belonging to the canon, both were well known to the early church and it is not surprising that Jude would mention these familiar texts in support of his argument.
  48. I am not suggesting that Scripture is not invaluable to the process of shaping character; but in addition to learning from Scripture directly, we have the opportunity to learn indirectly from others who have already learned the truths of the Bible, such as we do in a discipling relationship. The only difference is that instead of a live teacher we are mentored by literary figures. These multiple sources of moral truth reinforce the teaching of Scripture and help us understand it from a fresh perspective.
  49. Alan Paton, *Too Late the Phalarope* (New York: Scribner's, 1958).