



C.S. Lewis the Evangelist

by Philip G. Ryken, Ph.D.

Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

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Recently, in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, *Christianity Today* drew up a list of the fifty books that have exercised the greatest influence on evangelicalism in the last fifty years. The magazine went through a similar exercise ten years ago, when the editors concluded that “one author’s books indisputably affected American evangelicals during this period more than...those of any of the other authors mentioned.” “I mean,” wrote the author, “of course, C.S. Lewis.” Of course. Who else?

Not that the impact of Lewis has been limited to evangelicalism. C.S. Lewis holds sway among mere Christians everywhere. At the same time *Christianity Today* was celebrating its birthday, another publication was rightly advertising Lewis as “an ally we all trust,” Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike.

The marriage of British erudition to American consumerism has produced a marketing sensation. As one writer whimsically observed in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*,

...[T]he Lewis devotee (and there are many, judging from the sales figures) could, upon rising, don his C.S. Lewis sweatshirt, ascertain the date from his C.S. Lewis calendar, make coffee wearing his C.S. Lewis apron and drink it from his C.S. Lewis mug, offer devotion to his Maker in the words of C.S. Lewis, and meditate on what C.S. Lewis had done on that date, before setting off to work or school with his C.S. Lewis tote bag filled with C.S. Lewis books.

Just how influential has C.S. Lewis been? One way to answer that question would be to quantify the sale of his books. The numbers are impressive. As many as one hundred Lewis-related titles are in print at any given time. Roughly two million copies of his

works are sold every year in the United States and the United Kingdom. According to one estimate, Lewis is the best-selling Christian author of all time, with some forty million copies in print altogether. He may also be the most frequently quoted Christian author of all time.



Philip Ryken

The trouble with statistics is that, although they can lie, they cannot tell stories. The important thing about C.S. Lewis is not how many people have read him, but the extent to which reading him has become a life-transforming experience. Popularity is not the same thing as influence; C.S. Lewis has had both.

C.S. Lewis is usually considered to have had a substantial influence on atheists, agnostics, and other unbelievers. In the first critical study of his thought, Chad Walsh identified him as the *Apostle to the Skeptics*. One often sees references to the “numerous” or even “countless” people whom C.S. Lewis has brought to faith in Jesus Christ. To cite just one example, the evangelist Stephen F. Olford speaks of knowing “not just scores, but hundreds of intellectual people...[who] have come to Christ subsequent to reading [*Mere Christianity*].”

Although the influence of C.S. Lewis is widely assumed, it has never been adequately documented. My purpose in this article is to describe the effectiveness of his work as an evangelist. Some questions one might like to answer—such as “How many souls did Lewis help to save?”—are necessarily unanswerable. But among the questions that can be answered there are one or two surprises. For one thing, C.S. Lewis was

not very aggressive at personal evangelism. For another, he seems to have been more gifted at internal evangelism (within the church) than at external evangelism (outside the church). In other words, he has been more successful at keeping people in the kingdom than ushering them in to begin with. Yet there are some valuable lessons to be learned from the evangelism of C.S. Lewis. His life is a portrait of the winsome evangelist: gifted in teaching, persuasive in writing, fervent in prayer, and thorough in discipling.

The Teaching Evangelist

C.S. Lewis was a man of firm evangelistic convictions. So strong was his fervor for the Christian gospel that he became an object of ridicule to colleagues and a source of embarrassment to friends, even among the Inklings. For Lewis the salvation of human souls was “the real business of life.”

Yet the example of C.S. Lewis also challenges some evangelical stereotypes about how an evangelist ought to behave. He was not always winsome in the sense of being charming and engaging. He did not stand in the Oxford City Centre calling passersby to repentance. It was not his usual practice to ask students or colleagues if they had a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Nor did he go door-to-door in Headington Quarry passing out tracts and asking his neighbors, “If you were to die tonight. . .”

On occasion, Lewis seemed even reluctant to evangelize. His long-time driver, Clifford Morris, observed that he rarely used casual conversation as a context for evangelism. In Morris’s words, C.S. Lewis “was no sort of Billy Graham type, at all.” Perhaps this was because he was convinced that, in his own words, “[w]hat we practice, not what we preach, is usually our great contribution to the conversion of others.” It may also have been due to his awareness of “the risk of making a nuisance of ourselves by witnessing at improper times.”

C.S. Lewis was especially reticent to speak of his Christian faith to his students. When the noted ecclesiastical historian A.G. Dickens went to him for undergraduate tutorials, he observed that “Lewis never behaved as a Christian apologist. He wasn’t a sort of heavyweight Christian.” Lewis’s eventual biographer, George Sayer, was scarcely aware of his tutor’s faith at all:

...[F]or the first two years when I was being tutored by him, I did not realize he was a Christian. He’d never brought Christianity up, and indeed I think he thought

it would have been wrong and improper for him to have influenced his pupils in that sort of way. But when I remarked rather casually, I think in my third year, that I’d become a Roman Catholic, well he said, “Good. I’m glad you’ve become a Christian of some sort.”

The experience of Harry Blamires was much the same. It was not until nearly a decade after Blamires had been a student of Lewis that the two men discussed “religious matters.”

One place where C.S. Lewis’s teaching did assume an evangelistic purpose was the Oxford University Socratic Club, for which he served as President from 1941 to 1954. The Socratic Club was open to atheists, agnostics, and believers alike. From the beginning, its purpose was to encourage people to start “facing the question, is the Christian faith true, or not?” Meetings began with a talk on a religious subject by a prominent speaker, followed by vigorous open debate. Lewis always figured prominently in the disputations and he always argued from the distinctively Christian point of view.

The founder of the Socratic Club, Stella Aldwinckle, also remembers Lewis attending a week-long house party during a vacation in 1943. The purpose of the party was to nurture students who were beginning to get serious about the Christian faith. Of the twelve agnostics in attendance, the full dozen returned to university professing faith in Jesus Christ. The success of the holiday suggests how winsome Lewis could be as a personal evangelist.

C.S. Lewis’s involvement with other student groups was less intimate. To some he came as the apostle Paul came to the Corinthians, “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3; KJV). Lady Elizabeth Catherwood recalls Lewis’s reluctance to be overtly associated with the Oxford Intercollegiate Christian Union (OICCU). On one of the rare occasions upon which he agreed to speak to the OICCU, his topic was “What is Christianity?” Catherwood describes the address as a “really splendid, perfect talk.” Lewis presented four facts upon which Christianity depends: the fact of God, the fact of man, the fact of sin, and the fact of salvation.

After the address, a member of the audience stood up and asked, “You know, Dr. Lewis, in the light of all you’ve been saying, this is clearly of vital importance to us all. If everything you’re saying is true, what do we do about it?” Lewis’s reply was blunt: “God forbid, sir, that I should intervene in such a personal matter. Go and talk to your priest about that.” This was hardly winsome evangelism, yet the remark should not

be misunderstood as petulance or indifference. C.S. Lewis viewed himself as an apologist rather than a preacher. He was an evangelist of a particular kind—a teaching evangelist—and he was always careful to observe the limitations of his gifts for evangelism.

Lewis's sense of his evangelistic limitations can be illustrated best from the approach he took in his talks to the Royal Air Force. Early in World War II, a mother who lost her pilot son in combat provided money for the YMCA to sponsor evangelistic work among pilots in training. The intent was for the RAF chaplaincy to wage war on "The Forgotten Front"—the spiritual front. C.S. Lewis was an obvious choice for a speaker. Though initially skeptical of his suitability for the task, Lewis accepted invitations to speak at RAF bases and camps throughout the summer of 1942.

Accounts of the effectiveness of the RAF talks vary. By Lewis's own account they started badly. Scarcely a handful of men attended his first addresses, and there was little response afterwards. As Lewis confessed to Sister Penelope, "I've given talks to the RAF at Abingdon already, and so far as I can judge, they were a complete failure." The impression is sometimes given that the rest of the talks were equally ineffective as evangelism. George Sayer concluded that members of the RAF were "put off by his cool, rational approach, by the lack of emotional and obvious devotional content." Canon H.A. Blair thought the talks featured C.S. Lewis "at his most characteristic, which is just clear 'I'm telling you clear sense.'" Yet Blair denied that they had an evangelistic thrust ("It wasn't evangelistic. It wasn't in the sense of being a conversion talk. It wasn't any kind of hot gospelling.")

These assessments seem unduly negative. Stuart Barton Babbage recounts a memorable meeting in Norfolk at which Lewis bared his soul to a chapel packed with bomber squadrons. He spoke winsomely about the personal cost of his own discipleship and about the greater cost of Christ's obedience. Bishop A.W. Goodwin-Hudson—then an RAF chaplain—was enthusiastic about the response of his men to Lewis's presentation of the gospel. After their first meeting, Goodwin-Hudson hurriedly telephoned his wife to say, "We've had a wonderful response tonight and some of the cream of English manhood have come forward to talk to us and to confess Christ as Saviour and Lord."

Lewis was both moved and humbled by this experience:

"Haddon [as Lewis affectionately called him, due to his confusion about Goodwin-Hudson's name when they

first met on a railway platform], I wish I could do the heart stuff." He said, "I can't. I wish I could." He said, "I wish I could press home to these boys just how much they need Christ. . . Haddon, you do the heart stuff and I'll do the head stuff."

The two men agreed that Lewis would continue presenting a twenty-minute case for Christianity, after which Goodwin-Hudson would issue a passionate gospel appeal.

A similar strategy was employed when C.S. Lewis spoke at a "This is Life" Crusade at Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones' Westminster Chapel in London. Lewis gave a convincing testimony of his own commitment to Christ. This was followed by a gospel invitation from Stephen F. Olford, to which there was a tremendous response. Perhaps Lewis had these experiences in mind when he later wrote:

I am not sure that the ideal missionary team ought not to consist of one who argues and one who (in the fullest sense of the word) preaches. Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal. I have seen this done with great success.

C.S. Lewis, of course, was the evangelistic set-up man, the arguer and underminer of intellectual prejudice.

Lewis's distinction between "the heart stuff" and "the head stuff" yields an important insight about evangelism. Although every Christian has a responsibility to evangelize, not all evangelists are created equal. "It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11; NIV). Although his ministry had an apostolic flavor, C.S. Lewis was not, strictly speaking, an apostle. Nor was he a man of pastoral temper, as his reluctance to do "the heart stuff" indicates. Instead, C.S. Lewis was a *teaching evangelist*. His particular gift was to defend the reasonableness of the Christian faith with strong arguments expressed in simple terms.

The talks C.S. Lewis did for BBC radio during World War II played to his strengths as a teaching evangelist. Although he detested the radio, Lewis accepted the invitation to give the talks because he rightly expected them to reach people who would never read his books. The weekly, fifteen-minute talks were given in three series between 1941 and 1944. They were then published as booklets under these titles: *Broadcast Talks* (1942), *Christian Behaviour* (1943) and *Beyond Personality* (1944). The booklets were

later revised and published in a single volume as *Mere Christianity*, the book which remains Lewis's single most influential evangelistic book.

The BBC talks were a tremendous success. Lewis's vigor and no-nonsense style won him a wide hearing. Since the talks were given during the war, they reached people who were already pondering the ultimate questions of human existence (and non-existence). George Sayer recalls listening to one of the addresses with a pub full of soldiers who heeded the bartender's loud admonition to "listen to this bloke. He's really worth listening to." Lewis was soon inundated with letters from listeners seeking spiritual help. A further measure of the evangelistic impact of the talks is that their published editions became immediate bestsellers.

C.S. Lewis himself did not consider the broadcast talks to be evangelistic, in the strictest sense of the word:

Mine are praeparatio evangelica rather than evangelism, an attempt to convince people that there is a moral law, that we disobey it, and that the existence of a Lawgiver is at least very probable and also (unless you add the Christian doctrine of the Atonement) that this imparts despair rather than comfort.

C.S. Lewis notwithstanding, the talks were both pre-evangelism *and* evangelism. Once the atoning death of Jesus Christ had been introduced to the discussion, the talks became a presentation of the gospel. If C.S. Lewis was not a radio preacher, he was at least a teaching evangelist.

The Writing Evangelist

C.S. Lewis was also a literary evangelist. Indeed, he has had a far greater evangelistic impact through his books and essays than through his tutorials and addresses combined. This is not surprising, since Lewis himself observed that most of his books were "evangelistic." It is also unsurprising because of the natural intimacy between a writer and a reader. Lewis was most winsome in the pages of a book.

That Lewis was a writing evangelist is crucial to his lingering significance, for it enables his evangelistic work to transcend the limitations of time and space. As for time, "He being dead yet speaketh" (Heb. 11:4; KJV). As for space, C.S. Lewis's ministry has extended far beyond the borders of Great Britain. His greatest influence by far has been upon the religious culture of the United States, this despite the fact that Lewis never

set foot upon American shores and treated the nation with some disdain. He once wryly observed to a pupil, "The so-called Renaissance produced three disasters: the invention of gunpowder, the invention of printing, and the discovery of America."

One of Lewis's first American converts was Joy Davidman. Joy was a brilliant poet and writer raised in the Jewish community of New York City. Her path from atheism to Christianity passed through Communism, as well as through a brief flirtation with Judaism.

Several spiritual experiences helped prepare the way for her conversion. One was her reading of the Old and New Testaments as a young girl. Another was her captivation by an ice storm which displayed a beauty that seemed to transcend the material world. Still another was her occasional poetic writing on themes such as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In retrospect, it seemed as if her "inner personality" was "deeply interested in Christ and didn't know it." Later Joy read *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis. Although she still considered herself an atheist at the time, these books "stirred an unused part of [her] brain to momentary sluggish life."

Joy's spiritual transformation was finally precipitated by the nervous breakdown of her first husband, William Lindsay Gresham. Left alone and afraid by his collapse, Joy had a personal encounter with the presence of God. She described it like this: "All my defenses—the walls of arrogance and cocksureness and self-love behind which I had hid from God—went down momentarily—and God came in."

Once God had come in, various Christian writers helped lead Joy to faith in Jesus Christ. Chief among these was C.S. Lewis: "I snatched at books I had despised before...I went back to C.S. Lewis and learned from him, slowly, how I had gone wrong. Without his works, I wonder if I and many others might not still be infants 'crying in the night.'" Joy was so enamoured of the writings of C.S. Lewis that she began to correspond with him. Their correspondence led to friendship, romance, and finally marriage. Yet before C.S. Lewis became Joy's husband, he was her evangelist.

Lewis was equally influential in the conversion of Sheldon Vanauken. Vanauken was a sharp young agnostic from Virginia when he went to Oxford to study literature. Partly inspired by the soaring beauty of the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Vanauken determined to take a second look at Christianity. He did so as much to make sure that Christianity was *not* true as to discover if it was.

The first Christian books Vanauken read were the space trilogy of C.S. Lewis: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Peregranda*, and *That Hideous Strength*. He went on to read many other Christian authors, including G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, Graham Greene, Dorothy Sayers, and T. S. Eliot. But mostly he read everything he could find by C.S. Lewis.

Vanauken found himself on the precipice of the Christian faith but unsure how to take the next step. He wrote to C.S. Lewis for help, hoping that if Lewis could not make a leap of faith for him, he might at least “give a hint of how it’s to be done.” A series of letters ensued, followed by a friendship. This serves as a reminder that winsome evangelism is always a form of friendship. In Vanauken’s case the friendship was crucial, for he found living Christians to be among the strongest arguments for the truth of the gospel. The two men were later drawn even closer by a shared grief: each lost the love of his life through illness.

Lewis encouraged Vanauken’s conversion through his letters and prayers. He soon perceived that his friend was on his way to becoming a Christian, writing, “I think you are already in the meshes of the net! The Holy Spirit is after you. I doubt if you’ll get away!” This terrified Vanauken, but Lewis was right. He had reached a point of no return. Not long afterwards he wrote to Lewis with news of his conversion: “I choose to believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—in Christ, my Lord and my God...I confess my doubts and ask my Lord Christ to enter my life.” For his part, Lewis was elated: “My prayers are answered... Blessings on you and a hundred thousand welcomes. Make use of me in any way you please: and let us pray for each other always.”

The most famous of the American converts of C.S. Lewis remains Charles Colson, former Special Counsel to Richard M. Nixon. Often referred to as Nixon’s “hatchet man,” Colson was known for getting things done. As *TIME* magazine put it, few men in the Nixon Administration were “tougher, wilier, nastier or more tenaciously loyal to Richard Nixon.” Colson was even said to have boasted that he “would walk over [his] grandmother if necessary” to get the President re-elected.

As Colson was drawn into the maelstrom surrounding Watergate, he discovered that his life was empty. He was first confronted with his need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by Tom Phillips, president of the Raytheon Company. Phillips told Colson that “the first step” to facing God squarely was to read a book called *Mere Christianity*.

To help Colson get started, Phillips read aloud from a chapter entitled “The Great Sin.” In that chapter C.S. Lewis exposes the evils of pride. “Pride leads to every other vice,” he writes, “it is the complete anti-God state of mind.” “Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.” These words exposed not only the evils of the Nixon Administration, but also the deepest sins of Colson’s own heart. “Suddenly I felt naked and unclean, my bravado defenses gone. I was exposed, unprotected, for Lewis’s words were describing me.” Colson was not yet a Christian, but the transformation had begun. Already that night he begged God with many tears, “Take me, take me, take me.”

Colson left the next day for a seaside vacation in Maine. He took his copy of *Mere Christianity* with him and wondered if knowing God was simply an emotional experience.

Perhaps, I thought, it is on this intuitive, emotional level that C.S. Lewis approaches God. I opened Mere Christianity and found myself instead face-to-face with an intellect so disciplined, so lucid, so relentlessly logical that I could only be grateful I had never faced him in a court of law. Soon I had covered two pages of yellow paper with pros to my query, “Is there a God?”

One by one the rest of Colson’s questions began to be answered as well: “If God is good, why does He preside over such an evil world?” “If God is listening to my prayers, how can He hear those being uttered at the same time by many millions of others?”

The most important question was the one that still remained: “How does Jesus Christ figure into all this?” Here Colson was helped by Lewis’s famous argument that Jesus Christ was either the Lord, a liar, or a lunatic. As Colson put it, “for Christ to have talked as He talked, lived as He lived, died as He died, He was either God or a raving lunatic...Lewis’s question was the heart of the matter. The words—both exciting and disturbing—pounded at me: Jesus Christ—lunatic or God?”

Colson was ready to make his commitment later that same evening.

I knew the time had come for me: I could not sidestep the central question Lewis (or God) had placed squarely before me. Was I to accept without reservations Jesus Christ as Lord of my life? It was like a gate before me. There was no way to walk around it. I would step through, or I would remain outside.

Charles Colson walked through the open gate to accept Jesus Christ. Indictment on charges related to Watergate, conviction, sentencing, and imprisonment were to follow, then release from prison and a national ministry to prison inmates. But the first step was to read *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis.

The names of some of Lewis's other converts are also worthy of mention. Os Guinness, a gifted critic of church and culture, was converted by reading *Mere Christianity* as an Irish school boy. C.E.M. Joad, Professor of Philosophy at the University of London, was an ardent defender of atheism before being converted by reading *The Problem of Pain*. Chad Walsh is the writer and critic who first grasped the significance of C.S. Lewis for the American church. Walsh was "slowly thinking, feeling, and fumbling" his way towards the Christian faith, but his faith was "more of the mind than of the imagination and heart." When he read *Perelandra*, he finally "got the taste and smell of Christian truth. My senses as well as my soul were baptized." Like Colson, Walsh was eventually helped to recognize the deity of Jesus Christ by pondering the "Lord or lunatic" dilemma posed in *Mere Christianity*.

These brief conversion narratives remind us that evangelism is a team sport. Since the salvation of a soul rests upon a complex of experiences and relationships, each of these men and women was drawn to Christ by a web of influences. C.S. Lewis served merely as first among equals in the conversion process. Lewis himself was careful not to exaggerate the significance of his own involvement: "My feeling about people in whose conversion I have been allowed to play a part is always mixed with awe and even fear."

There is another reason to avoid giving C.S. Lewis more credit than he deserves for these conversions. Coming to faith is never the work of a human being; it is always the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:8). A Christian testimony is a story about the grace of God, not a story about one's own spiritual development or the influence of friends and writers. What saved these converts was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What convinced them to put their trust in Jesus Christ was the Spirit of Christ speaking through the Word of God. As C.S. Lewis once reminded his American readers, "We must remember that neither Paul nor Apollos gives the increase" (1 Cor. 3:6; KJV).

The Praying Evangelist

It would be easy to miss the significance of what C.S. Lewis wrote to Sheldon Vanauken on the occasion

of his conversion: "My prayers are answered." On the lips of some Christians, perhaps, this would be little more than a cliché. For C.S. Lewis, however, prayer was the foundation for effective evangelism. If conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit, and if the work of the Holy Spirit is often prompted by the prayers of believers, then prayer is indispensable to the evangelist.

In 1949 C.S. Lewis wrote a letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk and a former pupil in need of encouragement:

I think a glance at my correspondence would cheer you up; letter after letter from recent converts, by ones and by twos, often (which is most hopeful) married couples with children...it amounts to nothing by the standards of world statistics. But are they the right standards? I sometimes have a feeling that the big mass conversions of the Dark Ages, often carried out by force, were all a false dawn, and that the whole work has to be done over again... Oh, by the way, Barfield was baptized last Saturday: have him in your prayers.

I have two lists of names in my prayers, those for whose conversion I pray and those for whose conversion I give thanks. The little trickle of transferences from List A to List B is a great comfort.

This letter is significant for several reasons. First, it gives a hint of the evangelistic influence of Lewis, with a steady stream of new converts always contacting him by post. Second, it includes a helpful caveat about the dangers of quantifying salvation. Most importantly, it offers a glimpse of C.S. Lewis as a praying evangelist. He made it his regular practice to pray for the unconverted by name, and to give thanks to God when those prayers were answered. This practice also extended to his books, for which he prayed that God would help him "say things helpful to salvation."

The Discipling Evangelist

In 1986 an unscientific survey was taken to determine the extent of the influence of C.S. Lewis in the United States. The following advertisement was placed in publications such as the *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Eternity*, and the *New York Times Book Review*: "The Marion E. Wade Collection is seeking evidence of the impact of C.S. Lewis and his writing on peoples' lives. If you or others whom you know have been markedly influenced by Lewis, will you please write to

us and share your reminiscences." Dozens of lengthy responses were received from America and around the world.

Several respondents testified that C.S. Lewis had been influential in their coming to Christ in the first instance. A theology student at Berkeley explained that his "adult conversion to the faith [he] had been raised in" was "guided by C.S. Lewis." A classicist chanced upon a copy of *The Pilgrim's Regress* in a New York City bookshop, bought it, started reading it that night, and discovered that he had become a Christian by three o'clock the following morning. Lyle Dorsett wrote that during his days as a professor of history at Denver University, C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton "were instrumental in moving me from agnosticism to faith in Jesus Christ." In each of these instances the writings of C.S. Lewis were decisive in an individual conversion to the Christian faith.

Other respondents used Lewis as a partner in their own evangelistic efforts. A minister from Pennsylvania wrote of "haunting the rows of shelves in used-book stores in a relentless search for used copies of *Mere Christianity*" to give away. An English professor at Arizona State University reported, "Several students in my university classes on Lewis have been converted, receiving Jesus Christ as their Savior, as a result of reading and discussing *Mere Christianity*." A Welsh mathematician remembered his father keeping copies of the same book in his glove compartment to give to hitchhikers. Thus one aspect of Lewis's influence has been to help other Christians become active evangelists. A questionnaire filled out by new Presbyterian missionaries during the 1950s revealed that C.S. Lewis had influenced more people to go to the mission field than all other names combined.

The majority of those who responded to the Wade Center query did not write conversion narratives. Instead, men and women from all walks of life wanted to tell how C.S. Lewis had helped them stay on the pilgrim road. A lonely woman struggling with an unwanted pregnancy read and reread *A Grief Observed*. There "every feeling and thought I was having seemed to be written—anger, anguish, denial, hopelessness and the most burning one—who and where is God when we hurt." A professor of English wrote, "His apologetics helped settle and confirm my own faith." Another academic had allowed "high powered math and modern physics" to displace his faith almost entirely. When he read *The Screwtape Letters* his faith "came roaring back—adamant, larger than ever it had been." For a woman trapped in "dry, duty-bound orthodoxy," reading *Mere Christianity* was

a "world-shaking event" which led to a "renewal or rebirth of spiritual vitality and fervor." For a student at a fundamentalist university, recently converted from Roman Catholicism, "it was C.S. Lewis who provided a wonderful sense of Christian sanity in a warped, bitter environment." Lewis's apologetic arguments helped a woman from Stuyvesant "keep the faith," kept a student from Wheaton College "within orthodox Christianity," and enabled a bored Christian student at Akron to find "the Lord and God I had always longed for."

These testimonies conform to what one writer has called "an almost archetypal pattern in the lives of countless (!!) evangelical students of the past three decades":

First in the traditional pattern of appreciating Lewis came a period of gnawing doubt about the whole Christian faith...Into this dark night of the soul swept whatever happened to be the student's first Lewis book. That led inexorably to the others. And what he or she found there was not so much answers—though they were wonderful beyond all hope—but more, an irrefutable demonstration that at least one Christian mind actually existed.

Such men and women were already Christians when they first encountered C.S. Lewis. He did not so much bring them to faith as keep them in the faith. The value of this should not be underestimated. Part of the purpose of apologetics is to shore up the intellectual defenses of Christianity when they start to crumble. This apologetic work is as necessary inside as it is outside the church. Internal evangelism is as valuable as external evangelism. What is the use of rescuing lost sheep if the sheep already in the fold are wandering off, or worse, being pilfered by hungry wolves?

C.S. Lewis did not simply make and keep converts, he also disciplined them. Nearly all those who responded to the 1986 survey explained that C.S. Lewis taught them how to live the Christian life. Some even spoke of him as a "mentor." A pastor from Maryland reckoned that, with the exception of the Bible, the writings of C.S. Lewis had done "more to shape [him] spiritually than any other influence." A Newbery medalist wrote that the characters in the *Chronicles of Narnia* had shaped her understanding of patience as a virtue. Lewis's writings on English literature helped guide a doctoral student in her study of medieval literature. A student worker from West Germany spoke for all: "The impact of Lewis for me is that his words and thoughts have, to a certain extent, become my words

and thoughts and have penetrated my lifestyle, my world-view, my values and attitudes."

A further attempt to solicit testimonies of the influence of C.S. Lewis was made via the Internet in 1996. Visitors to one or another C.S. Lewis web pages were encouraged to tell their stories "about the influence of C.S. Lewis on [their] conversion to faith in Jesus Christ or on [their] subsequent Christian pilgrimage."

Answers to this question followed a pattern similar to the one that emerged from the earlier survey. One or two respondents spoke of owing their salvation to C.S. Lewis. A former atheist, for example, wrote that Lewis helped him see "that if I was going to deny God's existence, I had better be prepared to explain why I sometimes wished so desperately that He did." Another young man was so convinced that Christianity was a hoax perpetuated by "hucksters and vain pompous types seeking fame and glory" that he was stunned when he was unable to rebut the arguments made in *Mere Christianity*.

Other respondents explained how C.S. Lewis kept them in the church. A man struggling with spiritual doubt identified Lewis's "logical arguments for the existence of God and the deity of Christ" as "the single most important factor in coming to complete and total belief in Christ." A seminarian testified that when he read *Mere Christianity*, "for the first time in my life I found solid reasons to bolster my belief." A lapsed Catholic explained how reading Lewis helped shepherd him back into the Roman church, especially because "the evangelical experience C.S.L. himself lived was so close in so many ways to the Catholic experience." Another Christian rejoiced that C.S. Lewis had inspired "a whole new commitment to my Lord and Saviour which grows fresher every day."

The Internet survey again revealed the importance of C.S. Lewis for Christian discipleship. In the words of one respondent, "Lewis has not been a solution for my sins, Christ has already taken care of that, but he has been a comfort in my daily struggle to be a better Christian." A Fortune 500 consultant allowed Lewis's thoughts about materialism and idolatry to shape his dealings with business clients. A Texas lawyer found in C.S. Lewis the authentic Christianity for which he had long yearned, free from the hypocrisy of outward appearances. Another man discovered the grace and joy to overcome his legalistic background by reading Lewis's preface to *Letters to Young Churches*, the J.B. Phillips translation of the New Testament epistles. A fourth grade teacher read the *Chronicles of Narnia* to her students every year, hoping that the books would

introduce them to the joy of life in Christ. Upon reading *The Abolition of Man*, a student at a midwestern Bible college devoted his life to presenting absolute truth to Generation X. C.S. Lewis has helped all kinds of Christians follow the Lord in all kinds of ways.

One striking feature of both the 1986 and 1996 surveys was the eagerness with which respondents wrote of their hope to meet C.S. Lewis in heaven. As they told the stories of their encounters with his writings, they spoke of him with an affection usually reserved for close friends. For C.S. Lewis and his readers, even literary evangelism can become a form of personal, winsome, friendship evangelism.

The foregoing testimonials suggest an important conclusion: the primary influence of C.S. Lewis has been in the area of Christian discipleship. That is to say, his primary impact has been to help people become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in heart, mind, and will. The unscientific nature of the evidence forces this conclusion to fall short of a solid proof. Still, it seems stronger than a mere hypothesis. C.S. Lewis has been a disciple-maker as much as a soul-winner. However many people he has brought into the church, he has helped many more to think and act biblically once they arrived.

Much of the vast correspondence of C.S. Lewis also falls under the category of discipleship. Some of the letters Lewis received came from unbelievers who were curious about the Christian faith. A great many more came from Christians seeking pastoral counsel. These correspondents wrote to Lewis with doctrinal questions, spiritual burdens, and personal problems. To answer such letters was to become a discipling evangelist. One illuminating example comes from one of the Latin letters Lewis wrote to Don Giovanni Calabria, himself a venerable priest and the founder of an Italian orphanage: "You write much about your sins. Beware (permit me, my dearest Father, to say beware) lest humility should pass over into anxiety or sadness." Here Lewis *was* a pastor, counseling, confronting, and consoling.

The lives of Lewis's converts show that he has been most influential in the discipleship of the Christian mind, or perhaps the Christian imagination. Men and women such as Joy Davidman, Sheldon Vanauken, Charles Colson, and Os Guinness have gone on to make outstanding contributions to the imaginative and intellectual life of the church. Joy Davidman is something of a special case, of course, since Christian marriage is always a covenant of discipleship. Yet the others were also shaped by the mind of C.S. Lewis. His work reversed Charles Colson's view of politics,

for example, by convincing him that the individual is more important than the state.

To emphasize the role of C.S. Lewis as a discipler of the Christian mind is not to diminish his stature as an evangelist. A good evangelist is a discipling evangelist. Fulfilling the Great Commission entails more than simply “going into all the world.” It also includes “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20a; KJV). As a discipler of the mind and imagination, C.S. Lewis continues to be a winsome evangelist.

Philip Ryken has written or edited more than twenty books. He has preached at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia since 1995. Dr. Ryken lives with his wife, Lisa, and five children.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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