

## C.S. Lewis on Chronological Snobbery

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D., Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

One of the often-heard objections to faith in Christ is that it is old fashioned or outmoded, a relic of the distant past and therefore easily discarded. After all, what could a two-thousand-year-old faith have to say to us in the twenty-first century?

This was one of the obstacles that C.S. Lewis had to overcome in order to come to faith in Christ. He dubs the problem as one of “chronological snobbery.” His friend Owen Barfield often argued with him on this issue. Lewis’s question was: How could this ancient religion be relevant to my present setting? Lewis defines this chronological snobbery as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.” Lewis eventually came to understand the need to ask further questions such as: Why did this idea go out of date? Was it ever refuted? If so, by whom, where, and how conclusively? In other words, you need to determine if an old idea is false before you reject it; we would not want to say that everything believed in an ancient culture was false. Which things are false—and why—and which things remain true?

Lewis came to the further conclusion that our own age was merely a period which, like past periods, has its own characteristic illusions. We can unthinkingly take for granted certain cultural assumptions, unless they are questioned. The classic illustration is the frog in the kettle. If you put a frog in a kettle of water and slowly turn up the heat, the frog adjusts to the rising temperature and therefore does not jump out—until it is too late. In a similar way, we can be affected by our cultural environment, yet be unaware of the significant impact being made on us. In Colossians 2:8 we are warned to “Beware of philosophy ....” Some believers have used this as a pretext for avoiding the subject altogether, but the only way to *beware* of philosophy is to *be aware* of it. Otherwise, you might fall captive to an alien philosophy and not know it.



Dr. Art Lindsley

So, far from rejecting ancient philosophies, we need the help of past ages in order to see our own times more clearly. Earlier cultures have not had the same assumptions as we have, and as we read books written in earlier times, we are given a helpful vantage point from which to see our present-day views more clearly. Rather than having “chronological snobbery,” Lewis advocated letting the “breezes of the centuries” blow through our minds. We can do this by reading old books. In fact, Lewis made it a rule of thumb that one should read at least as many old books as new ones. Lewis wrote:

It’s a good rule after reading a new book never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to three new ones.... Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all therefore need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period.... None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books....The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds and this can only be done by reading old books.

Perhaps we need to go back in order to go forward. G.K. Chesterton said, “Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them, as from a root.” Today we seem to face a double danger: the danger of forgetting the decisive truth of Christ and the revelation of Scripture and the danger of being caught up in this postmodern, relativistic moment and losing a secure hold on our faith.

Obviously, as human beings trying to communicate with other human beings, we desire to relate to our contemporaries in a manner that is intelligible to them. However, we do not need to take our bearings from their modern or postmodern views. We need the perspective of the past on our present.

The objection will no doubt come: “Surely you are not asking us in the twenty-first century to ‘turn back the clock’!” C.S. Lewis responds to this in *Mere Christianity*. He argues that the clock needs to be turned back if it’s telling the wrong time, or if we have taken the wrong road, we need to go back and take the right one as soon as possible, or if we have started to do a math problem the wrong way, we need to correct it before going further. Lewis writes:

... as to putting the clock back, would you think I was joking if I said that you can put a clock back, and that if the clock is wrong it is often a very sensible thing to do? But I would rather get away from that whole idea of clocks. We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be and if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man. We have all seen this when we do arithmetic. When I have started a sum the wrong way, the sooner I admit this and go back and start over again, the faster I shall get on. There is nothing progressive about being pigheaded and refusing to admit a mistake. And I think if you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistakes. We are on the wrong road. And if that is so, we must go back. Going back is the quickest way on.

You certainly don’t “turn the clock back” or go back to the past for its own sake. Much in earlier ages and of past history can show us how *not* to do things as well as in some cases how to do them. In the former case, the classic proverb applies: If we don’t learn from history’s mistakes, we are bound to repeat them. However, in the latter case, there are some wise words and teaching that need to be preserved and passed on. Some have pointed out that Jesus was not a “revolutionary” wanting to overthrow everything in the established religious order of his day. Jesus was also not a mere “conservative” holding to all the traditional practices of his day, although there was much that he did want to conserve—particularly the truth of Scripture. Our Lord reacted particularly against places where traditions had overturned or obscured the Scriptures. In a similar manner, we need to sift through what is good from our heritage and pass on a valuable inheritance to others. We need to keep the flame of faith burning brightly, letting our light shine, and passing the torch on to succeeding generations.

### *Enslaved to the Recent Past*

In fact, much that passes for the newest, novel philosophies of our time is actually a legacy of the past—primarily not the distant past but the recent past. C.S. Lewis points out in his “Transmission of Christianity” essay that...

...the sources of unbelief among young people today do not lie in those young people. The outlook they have—until they are taught better—is a backwash from an earlier period. It is nothing intrinsic to themselves that holds them back from the Faith.

In Lewis’s time, the teachers were products of the “post-war” (World War I) period. The beliefs of his period became those that were passed on in the sixties. The beliefs of the sixties tend to be the views passed on today, and so on. Lewis says:

This very obvious fact—that each generation is taught by an earlier generation—must be kept firmly in mind. The beliefs which boys fresh from school now hold are the beliefs of the Twenties. The beliefs which boys from school will hold in the Sixties will be largely those of the undergraduates today. The moment we forget this we begin to talk nonsense about education.

Even more, the attitude and disposition of the teacher tends to be passed on to the student. Since the mood of postmodernism is so cynical, it tends to produce cynical students. Lewis maintains:

None can give to another what he does not possess himself. No generation can bequeath to its successor what it has not got. ... if we are skeptical we shall teach only skepticism to our pupils, if fools only folly, if vulgar only vulgarity, if saints sanctity, if heroes heroism.

So that which we receive in contemporary education is not so contemporary as it seems. It tends to be affected by the previous generation. Today’s novelties tend to be a legacy of the recent past. It’s not a question of *whether* the past will affect us but *which* past—the recent past or more distant past. If we really want to be skeptical about the past, be skeptical about the present. “Chronological snobbery” thoroughly applied would lead to questioning all of our present fashions. Those who neglect past history tend to be enslaved to the recent past.

*The Dinosaur*

We cannot be afraid of being called old fashioned, outdated, or dinosaurs. C.S. Lewis gave a classic talk as his Cambridge inaugural address titled “De Descriptione Temporum.” Toward the end of that address, Lewis claims to be a part of the Old Western order more than the present post-Christian one. This might be both a disqualification and a qualification. It would be a disqualification because who would want to sit through a lecture on dinosaurs by a dinosaur? Lewis says, “You don’t want to be lectured on a Neanderthal Man by a Neanderthaler, still less on dinosaurs by a dinosaur.” Yet Lewis’s claim might also, from another point of view, be a qualification. Although a dinosaur lecture might not prove to be very illuminating, it might tell us some things we would like to know, especially having never seen a live dinosaur. Lewis explains the “qualification”:

And yet is that the whole story? If a live dinosaur dragged its slow length into the laboratory, would we not all look back as we fled? What a chance to know at last how it really moved and looked and smelled and what noises it made! And if the Neanderthaler could talk, then, though his lecturing technique might leave much to be desired, should we not almost certainly learn from him some things about him that the best modern anthropologist could never have told us? He would tell us without knowing he was telling.

Lewis claimed that he read ancient texts as a native would rather than as a foreigner might read them. That made him admittedly a dinosaur. Although you might be tempted to disregard him as old fashioned, he might nevertheless be useful as a specimen. Lewis says:

...where I fail as a critic, I may yet be useful as a specimen. I would dare to go further. Speaking not only for myself but for all other old Western men whom you may meet, I would say, use your specimen while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs.

Although we may be disregarded as a specimen of an earlier age, a dinosaur, it is not necessarily safer or better to march in step with the latest or newest trends in philosophy or culture.

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