



## **What Can We Learn from C.S. Lewis's Conversion Story?**

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There is no one template for conversion to Christianity. In fact, it seems that in our contemporary Western culture, point-in-time “decisions” for Christ, similar to Billy Graham’s technique for evangelism, are becoming less frequent. Instead, conversions to Christianity now seem to be the result of longer, more linear, and more thought-out deliberations. This was C.S. Lewis’s conversion story, and his journey to Christianity culminated ninety years ago today, as Lewis went on an after dinner walk with his friends J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson along the picturesque walking trail, Addison’s Walk, on the grounds of Magdalen College.

Lewis’s writings still instruct, encourage, and form us today. Even his conversion story provides us with valuable lessons, particularly as believers wrestle with Christ’s command in Matthew 28 about the best ways to go and make disciples in a culture becoming more hostile to public Christian witness. One of these lessons from Lewis’s conversion story which is transferable to us today is that the hard work of evangelism is often located in the context of friendship. It is important to have friends who don’t think like we do, vote like we do, or even share our Christian faith.

Such was the case when Tolkien and Lewis met at an Oxford faculty meeting in 1926. Lewis was not yet a Christian, while Tolkien was a devoted Catholic. Their friendship got off to a rocky start, as Lewis recorded their first meeting in his diary by writing, “No harm in him: only needs a smack or so.”<sup>vi</sup> Yet over time, their love of all things related to Norse mythology drew them together.

Hugo Dyson was someone Lewis had only come to know more recently. When they met, Dyson was teaching at the University of Reading. Lewis wrote his life-long friend Arthur Greeves about Dyson describing him as, “a man who really loves truth: a philosopher and a religious man.”<sup>vii</sup> There was an immediate gravitational pull toward Dyson with Lewis telling Greeves, “having met him once I liked him so well that I determined to get to know him better.”<sup>viii</sup>

Their evening together started with dinner, and then moved to Addison’s Walk, and finally, the trio settled down back in Lewis’s room. The last hurdle for Lewis in his intellectual assent to Christianity was the concept of redemption. Christ’s death on the cross as atonement for sinful humanity seemed to him either “silly or shocking.”<sup>iv</sup> Tolkien tapped out of the

conversation at 3 a.m. and went home. Lewis and Dyson continued talking for another hour before going to bed at 4 a.m. Over the course of that long evening, Tolkien and Dyson rendered

their most important service as friends by making Lewis see that the idea of sacrifice in the pagan myths that Lewis so enjoyed, were palatable to him, yet the idea of sacrifice within the Christian story with its accompanying meaning and significance was not. Tolkien and Dyson were able to chaperone and guide Lewis into his realization that Christianity was “a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened.*”<sup>v</sup>

Through their respective friendships with Lewis, Tolkien and Dyson had earned the necessary capital as friends to be present with Lewis at that pivot point in his life. The lesson for us is that capital like this is earned from thoughtful give and take, debating, arguing, and perhaps the most important element in any friendship, listening. Too often in our current climate promising and budding friendships that experience any friction or disagreement propel us to our now popular default positions of tribalism, and precious opportunities for evangelism are missed.

Another important lesson for us today is that all evangelism must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who prepares the heart of the hearer to receive the Gospel message. At some point while strolling along Addison’s Walk, Lewis remembered the three were “interrupted by a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still, warm evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it was raining.”<sup>vi</sup> Tolkien and Dyson understood this metaphysical intrusion as an obvious parallel from Acts 2:2, “And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind...”<sup>vii</sup> A few days later, the Spirit’s work was complete, and by the time Lewis concluded a trip to the local zoo while riding in the side car of his brother Warnie’s motorcycle, he finally believed “Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”<sup>viii</sup>

Lastly, the most important lesson we can learn from Lewis’s conversion story is that we are heirs to a treasure trove of evangelistic tools courtesy of Lewis himself. *Narnia* and the *Space Trilogy* can be used to “steal past those watchful dragons”<sup>ix</sup> as Lewis wrote, as an imaginative apologetic. *The Problem of Pain* and *A Grief Observed* can be gently slipped into the hand of a hurting friend. And of course, *Mere Christianity* has been the impetus for thousands toward a relationship with Jesus. It is from Lewis’s own story that we can midwife others to the Greatest Story of all.

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<sup>i</sup> C.S. Lewis, *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C.S. Lewis, 1922-1927* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1991), 393.

<sup>ii</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis. Vol. 1: Family Letters, 1905-1931*. Edited by Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 918.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 976.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., 977.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 970.

<sup>vii</sup> Acts 2:2 (ESV)

<sup>viii</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 19550, 237.

<sup>ix</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say What’s Best to Be Said,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 37.