



# C.S. Lewis

— A PROFILE IN FAITH —



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INSTITUTE



# C.S. Lewis: *A Profile in Faith*

edited by Joel S. Woodruff, Ed.D.  
& Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D.Min.

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## Introduction

The C.S. Lewis Institute was founded in 1976 to equip followers of Jesus in the legacy of C.S. Lewis to articulate, defend, and live their faith in personal and public life. Lewis was a sinner saved by grace through faith, who through reason and imagination was led into a relationship with Jesus. While not perfect, his life is an example to us of how God can use someone who is radically committed to being a disciple of Jesus in all areas of life. He was not a trained theologian, a clergyman, or priest. Instead, he was an English Literature tutor and lecturer at Oxford University and Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University, who used the gifts that God had given him to point people toward Jesus Christ. His books of fiction, apologetics, science fiction, autobiography, poetry and non-fiction, and his essays and sermons have instructed and inspired millions. The manner in which he lived his life, as well, was a witness to the loving work of the Holy Spirit in his life.

This book includes chapters written by a variety of authors, including some of the greatest Lewis scholars in the world, for the C.S. Lewis Institute's journal, *Knowing & Doing*. The chapters together present a profile of the life and faith of C.S. Lewis, and are organized into the following four areas: Lewis's life and faith, his thought and teaching, his family and friends, and writers who influenced Lewis. We hope that all who read the accompanying chapters in this book on Lewis will be inspired to fully dedicate their lives to knowing and doing all that our Savior has commanded us as His disciples.

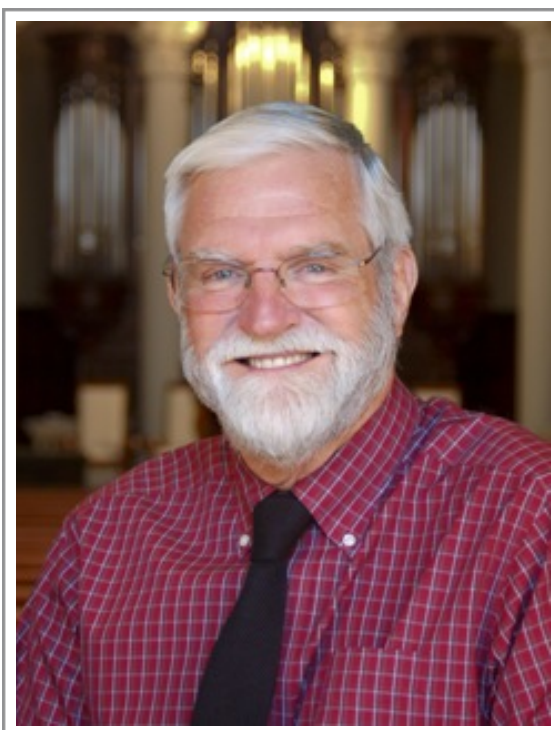
# Part I: Lewis's Life and Faith

# C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

*Author, Christian Apologist, Oxford Don*

by Lyle Dorsett, Ph.D.

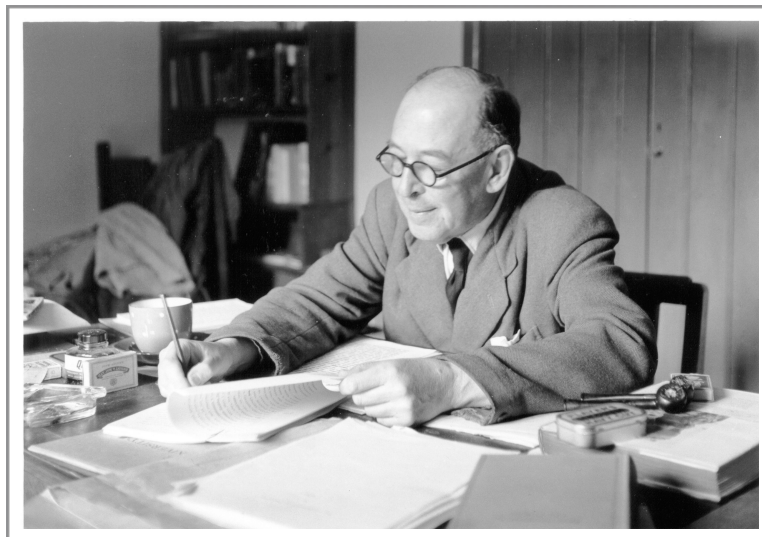
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“I’m tall, fat, rather bald, red-faced, double-chinned, black-haired, have a deep voice, and wear glasses for reading,” C.S. Lewis wrote to a young admirer in 1954. If the famous author had been prone to notice clothing, he might have added that his trousers were usually in dire need of pressing, his jackets thread bare and blemished by snags and food spots, and his shoes scuffed and worn at the heels.



C.S. Lewis. Used by permission of the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

But Jack, as C.S. Lewis’s friends knew him, was not bothered by fashion. It is not that he was slovenly. On the contrary, he was meticulous about the precise use of words, the quality of evidence presently in arguments, and the meter in verse. Nevertheless, the style and condition of personal attire was near the bottom of his list of concerns, whereas books and ideas were among his top priorities.

## Early Influences

Lewis was born into a bookish family of Protestants in Belfast, Ireland, November 29, 1898. His father, Albert, and his mother, Florence Augusta Hamilton, possessed first-rate minds, and they were members of the Church of Ireland. Eclectic in their reading tastes, they purchased and read many books, and their love for the printed word was passed on to their children. Jack and Warren (his only sibling, three years his senior) were not only read to aloud and taught to read, they were encouraged to use the large family library.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis recalled early memories of “endless books.” “There were books in the study, books in the dining room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds,” he remembered, and none were off limits to him. On rainy days—and there were many in northern Ireland—he pulled volumes off the shelves and entered into worlds created by authors such as Conan Doyle, E. Nesbit, Mark Twain, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After brother Warnie was sent off to boarding school in England, Jack became somewhat reclusive. He spent more time in books and an imaginary world of “dressed animals” and “knights in armor.” But he did more than read books, he wrote and illustrated his own stories as well.

If Warren Lewis’s exile across the Irish Sea to school in 1905 drove Jack further into himself and books, his mother’s death from cancer in 1908 made him even more withdrawn. Mrs. Lewis’s death came just three months prior to Jack’s tenth birthday, and the young man was hurt deeply by her passing. Not only did he lose a mother, his father never fully recovered from her death. For many years thereafter, both boys felt estranged from their father, and home life was never warm and satisfying again.

The death of Mrs. Lewis convinced young Jack that the God he encountered in church and in the Bible his mother gave him was, if not cruel, at least a vague abstraction. Four or five years later, by 1911 or 1912, and with the additional influence of a spiritually unorthodox boarding school matron, Lewis forsook Christianity and became an avowed atheist.

By autumn 1914 C.S. Lewis was somewhat adrift. He had lost his faith and his mother, and he felt alienated from his father. He was extremely close to his brother, but they saw one another only on holidays. A new friendship was beginning with a fellow student, Arthur Greeves, but it was interrupted in September when C.S. Lewis was sent to Great Bookham, Surrey, to be privately tutored by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant teacher and friend of Lewis's father.

"The Great Knock," as the Lewis family dubbed Mr. Kirkpatrick, had a profound effect upon the teenaged youth. He introduced him to the classics in Greek, Latin, and Italian literature, and helped him make a beginning in German. Kirkpatrick not only led Lewis to great books, he pushed him to understand them in the original languages. A most demanding tutor, Kirkpatrick helped Jack learn how to criticize and analyze, and he taught him how to think, speak, and write logically. Consequently, after nearly three years with Kirkpatrick, C.S. Lewis was tough-minded and widely read. Many years later, Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy*, "My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished."

The debt was large indeed. Kirkpatrick helped the young man prepare for scholarship examinations at Oxford, and the demanding mentor played no small role in Lewis's outstanding performance at University College, where he took highest honors in honor moderations, greats, and English in 1920, 1922, and 1923, respectively.

If Kirkpatrick taught Lewis to think critically—to demand evidence for even the most casual assertions—Oxford introduced him to a wide horizon of ideas. Whereas Lewis's hard-pressing mentor had helped him

reinforce his atheism, a few associates at Oxford forced him to re-examine his belief in a universe without God.

## Oxford Years

Lewis entered the world of Oxford in 1917 as a student, and he never really left. Despite an interruption to fight in World War I and his professorship at Cambridge beginning in 1955, he always maintained his home and friends in Oxford. He loved the bookshops, the pubs, and the Bodleian Library, and he reveled in the company of local men who loved to read, write, and discuss books. His attachment to Oxford was so strong that when he taught at Cambridge from 1955 to 1963 he commuted back to Oxford on weekends so that he could be close to familiar places and beloved friends.

It was in Oxford that Lewis pursued things of the mind with fervor. Ideas, books, and debates were ordinary fare in this heady environment. With no particular purpose in life beyond stimulating his imagination, feeding his intellectual curiosity, and writing for publication and posterity, he thoroughly enjoyed academic life. In 1919 he published his first book, a cycle of lyrics entitled *Spirits in Bondage*, which he wrote under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton. In 1924 he became a philosophy tutor at University College. Then in 1925 he was elected a fellow of Magdalen College, where he tutored in English language and literature. The next year his second volume of poetry, *Dymer*, was published under the name Clive Hamilton.

Alongside the generally self-centered life Lewis was leading, he demonstrated a loyal and generous nature. When his college roommate, Paddy Moore, was killed in World War I, Jack befriended Paddy's mother,



Mrs. Janie King Moore, and her adolescent daughter Maureen. Then in 1920, after completing his first degree, Lewis decided to share lodgings with them so that he could more carefully look out for their needs.

## Spiritual Awakening

This gesture of kindness did more than help Mrs. Moore and Maureen; it got C.S. Lewis outside of himself and taught him patience. The association with the Moores also introduced him to Mrs. Moore's brother, a combat veteran who suffered from a severe war inflicted nervous disorder. This personal encounter apparently shook Lewis's confidence in materialism, because a letter he wrote in 1923 to his friend Arthur Greeves suggests a slight spiritual awakening. It seems that the "Doc," as the Moores and Lewis referred to him, came to stay with the trio for three weeks. During the visit "Doc" underwent an ordeal of extreme mental torture. After the attack, when the poor wretch was hospitalized, Lewis wrote to his friend that "Doc" had believed he was in Hell. He wore out his body in the "awful mental tortures," and then died from heart failure—"unconscious at the end thank God." Lewis concluded his observation by suggesting it is "a damned world—and we once thought we could be happy with books and music!"

The spiritual awakening continued, enhanced by reading books by George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton. One MacDonald volume called *Phantastes* had a powerful impact on his thinking. "What it actually did to me," wrote Lewis, "was to convert, even to baptize... my imagination." At Oxford Lewis continued to read MacDonald, and he imbibed G.K. Chesterton as well. The latter author's books, especially *The Everlasting Man*, raised serious questions about the young intellectual's materialism.

While MacDonald and Chesterton were stirring Lewis's thoughts, a close friend, Owen Barfield, with whom he spent much time during and after their student years, pounced on the logic of Jack Lewis's atheism. Barfield became atheist, and then a Christian, and he frequently badgered Lewis about his materialism. So did Nevill Coghill, a fellow student and lifelong friend who was brilliant, yet was, to Lewis's amazement, "a Christian and a thorough-going supernaturalist."

Soon after joining the English faculty at Magdalen College, Lewis met two more Christians, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien. These men became close friends of Lewis. He admired their brilliance and their logic. Soon Lewis recognized that most of his friends, like his favorite authors—MacDonald, Chesterton, Johnson, Spenser, and Milton—held to this Christian angle of vision which threatened his whole world view.

Gradually during the 1920s, two paths were converging in Lewis's mind: one was reason, the other intuition. In 1929 these roads met, and C.S. Lewis surrendered and admitted that "God was God, and knelt and prayed." Within two years the reluctant convert admitted that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—God Incarnate. With this revelation the Oxford don became a communicant in the Church of England.

## A New Life

Christian history shows that when men and women meet Jesus, recognize His Nature, and then decide to trust and follow Him, they become strikingly different people. Those who convert—who turn around and obey Christ's command to "follow me"—are clearly people with changed lives.

If evidence of conversion is a new life, C.S. Lewis was obviously a believer after 1931. Many changes were apparent. His life now had a purpose—to know and obey God. This came to fruition most demonstrably in his writing. Earlier efforts to become a poet were laid to rest. The new Christian devoted his talent and energy to writing prose that reflected his recently found faith. Within two years of his conversion Lewis published *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. This little volume opened a thirty-year stream of books on Christian apologetics and discipleship that became a lifelong avocation. Between 1933 and his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis wrote books—including the seven volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Mere Christianity*—that nudged atheists and agnostics toward the faith, and encouraged and nurtured believers.

As a good steward and responsible professional, Lewis did not ignore his academic discipline. He wrote literary history and criticism such as *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. These books are still widely read and highly regarded.

Despite the large quantity and high quality of his academic publications, Lewis became known as a literary evangelist. The tone and impact of his theological and apologetical books help account for this reputation, as did his own assertion in a rejoinder to his critic, Dr. W.N. Pittenger, published in *The Christian Century*, November 26, 1958, where Lewis admitted that most of what he wrote “is evangelistic.”

## A Growing Reputation

If Christianity altered Lewis's writing habits, the publication of those books had a palpable effect on his personal life. First of all, the change was manifested in the mail. Once Lewis's books became popular, which they did by the 1940s, he was inundated by letters. Because the famous author believed it was God's will for him to answer most of this mail himself, and because he was convinced, as he said in "The Weight Of Glory," that there are "no ordinary people," he took time to write with care to each correspondent regardless of age, education, or place in society. This enterprise consumed many hours each week.

Furthermore, life with fame was laden with other pressures. There were numerous invitations to entertain guests, grant interviews, give lectures, and preach sermons. Writing, to be sure, is a lonely enterprise. This Lewis understood. And even though he felt called by God to write, he likewise felt it was required of him to counsel those who made the pilgrimage to The Kilns, his home on the edge of Oxford. Frequently he believed it was his calling to explain the Christian faith to people over BBC radio, and to the airmen at the RAF bases during World War II.

Preaching sermons, giving talks, and expressing his theological views over the radio throughout the United Kingdom bolstered Lewis's reputation and increased his book sales. With these new circumstances came other changes—not the least being a marked upswing in annual income. Throughout the 1920s Lewis had been getting by on little money. During his student years his father provided an allowance, and Jack supplemented that in various ways. Nevertheless, money was always scarce. And when the young academician took on the responsibility for



Mrs. Moore and her daughter, finances were always tight even with the regular tutorial stipend.

As book royalties mounted during the later 1940s, and continued to spiral upward thereafter, C.S. Lewis refused to upgrade his standard of living. Partly out of disdain for conspicuous living, but mostly out of commitment to Jesus Christ, he established a charitable fund for his royalty earnings.

Neither the extent nor the recipients of C.S. Lewis's charity are fully known. Indeed, he made valiant efforts to conceal this information. It is known that he supported numerous impoverished families, and underwrote education fees for orphans and poor seminarians, and put monies into scores of charities and church ministries.

### **A Late Marriage**

The outreach of Lewis's books and the impact of his charity conspired to make still another significant change in his lifestyle. During the last decade of his earthly pilgrimage, Lewis's world was invaded by an American woman and her two children. In autumn 1952 Joy Davidman Gresham, who had become a Christian partly because she read *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, visited her spiritual mentor in England. Soon thereafter her husband abandoned her for another woman. In the meantime the divorcee, a writer in her own right, moved to London with her two adolescent boys, David and Douglas.

Joy Davidman Gresham gradually fell into financial trouble. Her acquaintance with C.S. Lewis led to his underwriting the boarding school education of David and Douglas. From charity and common literary

interests grew a deep friendship, and eventually agape became eros. They were married in 1956.

Joy was sixteen years Lewis's junior, but that did not prevent a happy marriage. A savage case of cancer, however, cut short their life together. After several years of reprieve from an earlier and nearly fatal bout with cancer, Joy Lewis passed away in Oxford on July 13, 1960. Joy's entry into Jack's life brought much happiness. As he wrote to one friend soon after their marriage, "It's funny having at 59 the sort of happiness most men have in their twenties... 'Thou has kept the good wine till now'." Joy brought C.S. Lewis love, companionship, and two stepsons, complete with all of the delights and problems that naturally come in such circumstances. Furthermore, Mrs. Lewis brought insights, ideas, and a new angle of vision. Raised in a Jewish home, and having written a book on the Ten Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*, she encouraged him to renew his writing of apologetics, in particular *Reflections on the Psalms*. Her influence on what Jack considered his best book, *Till We Have Faces*, was so profound that he told one close friend she was actually his co-author.

## Critics Emerge

C.S. Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman did not enhance his reputation in Great Britain. Long assumed to be a confirmed bachelor, the esteemed professor not only married late in life, he married an American who was at once Jewish, divorced, and personally rather abrasive. In brief, the marriage did not set well with most of Mr. Lewis's friends and acquaintances. The critics notwithstanding, Jack's faithful brother Warren — who lived at The Kilns with Jack before, during, and after the years with Joy — supported him, as did a few other close friends.

C.S. Lewis was hurt by the disapproval of his old friends and colleagues, but it was by no means a new experience for him. Although he enjoyed the conviviality of weekly get-togethers with fellow Inklings (intellectuals and writers who met regularly to exchange ideas and share in good conversation), and the prodigious successes of his books, Lewis was frequently under attack for his decidedly Christian lifestyle. Close friends, among them Owen Barfield and J.R.R. Tolkien, openly disapproved of Lewis's evangelistic speaking and writing. And if the opprobrium of fellow believers was unpleasant, it was mild compared with the attacks from colleagues and strangers who did not share the Oxford author's faith.

It is common knowledge that Lewis's "Christian" books caused so much disapproval that he was more than once passed over for a professorship at Oxford, with the honors going to men of lesser reputation. It was Magdalene College at Cambridge University that finally honored Lewis with a chair in 1955 and thereby recognized his original and important contributions to English literary history and criticism.

Along with Lewis's international reputation, ever-growing royalties, and thousands of fans throughout the English-speaking world, came increasing alienation. Did Lewis take comfort in his Lord's warning in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples would indeed be insulted and persecuted? We do not know.

Lewis died at The Kilns on November 22, 1963. He is buried beside his brother, who lived ten more years, in the cemetery of Holy Trinity Church, Headington Quarry, Oxford. His letters and books, and the lives these writings touch, are his legacy.

# Bearing the Weight of Glory

*The cost of C.S. Lewis's witness*

by Christopher W. Mitchell, Ph.D.

*Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute*

*Professor of Christian Thought, Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University*



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What is it that motivated C.S. Lewis, a comfortable academic with more than enough to do, to direct so much of his time writing and speaking towards the conversion of the unbelieving of the world? What made him sacrifice not only the regard of many of his colleagues but his own academic advancement to defend the faith? The answer will no doubt appear quite obvious once it is stated. But since it says something important about Lewis and something quite profound about the human drama viewed through the lenses of the Christian faith, and because I do not recall anyone having yet called specific attention to the connection I propose (though some have hinted at it),<sup>1</sup> it seems appropriate to present the matter here.

To state the case most plainly, the vividness by which Lewis perceived the potential eternal destinies of every man and woman compelled him to direct a great part of his energies towards the saving of souls. Lewis perceived evangelism to be his lay vocation, and the means by which he expressed this evangelistic impulse were through his writing and speaking. The particulars of his ministry are generally well known. However, a summary of them in the context of his life will be necessary in order to appreciate the significance of his motivation.

Lewis's bent toward evangelism began to assert itself within the first year of his conversion in 1931.<sup>2</sup> He "felt it was the duty of every Christian," observed Owen Barfield, "to go out into the world and try to save souls."<sup>3</sup> In an essay on "Christianity and Culture" Lewis stated plainly that "The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying him, the salvation of the human soul, is the real business of life," and in another place admitted that most of his books were "evangelistic."<sup>4</sup> Speaking of

the fundamental difference between the Christian's and the unbeliever's approach to literature, and by extension to any of the great works of human culture, Lewis said without qualification, that "the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world."<sup>5</sup>

His vision for employing his own fiction as a means of evangelizing came quite unexpectedly and quite early. When in 1939 Lewis became aware that most of the reviewers of his book *Out of the Silent Planet* failed to recognize its Christian theology, the idea struck him that the Gospel could be "smuggled into people's minds" by means of fiction.<sup>6</sup> It was a vision he sustained throughout his career. Less than six months before he died, in answer to the question, asked by an American evangelical: "Would you say that the aim of...your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?", he replied, "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view."<sup>7</sup>

Lewis, whose literary output was enormous, has been aptly called a "literary evangelist."<sup>8</sup> Before his death in 1963, he wrote forty books and edited three. Since his death, nearly a dozen volumes of his essays have been published. In addition, he wrote thousands of letters (many of them published). Add to his writing (most of which was evangelistic) his speaking, praying and discipling,<sup>9</sup> and one begins to sense Lewis's enormous drive to save souls.

It is important to notice, however, as Michael Ward has recently pointed out, that Lewis's brand of evangelism never involved the kind of direct appeal that bids people to "come to Jesus."<sup>10</sup> Lewis saw himself not so much a reaper of souls, but one who prepares the soil, sows the seed, and weeds out what hinders growth. His job, as he understood it, was on

the one hand to seek to break down the intellectual prejudices to Christianity by detecting and exposing the fallacies of current objections to belief in such a way as to make faith in Christianity intellectually plausible, and on the other to prepare the mind and imagination to receive the Christian vision.

His evangelistic genius was not in his ability to inspire faith (this he flatly disavowed), but to maintain an atmosphere where faith could be possible—rationally and imaginatively plausible—and where it could grow and even thrive. He was happy to prepare the way for those who were gifted to reap what had been sown—who could successfully bring the direct appeal to the heart.

The well-known preacher Stephen Olford tells of an experience he had with Lewis during a “This is Life” crusade, held in London, when he found himself on the same platform as Lewis. Lewis spoke first, brilliantly arguing, according to Olford, the case for Christianity before an audience of approximately 3,000. Following Lewis, Olford picked up on a motif that came through Lewis’s message and used it to lead into his own message and ultimately to an invitation for an open commitment to Christ. After the meeting, Olford remembers Lewis coming right up to him, shaking his hand and saying, “That was so impressive and effective. Thank you for that.” “I hope you didn’t mind my taking up on what you said,” replied Olford. “No,” said Lewis, “That was magnificent!”<sup>11</sup>

Lewis’s prominence as a representative of the Christian faith began initially in 1940 with the publication of his book *The Problem of Pain*, rose in 1941 as a result of his series of broadcast talks over the BBC, and reached new heights with the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942. Other avenues for speaking of the faith included such diverse

settings as talks to Britain's RAF, the weekly meeting of the Oxford University Socratic Club, Christian groups on university campuses, and the occasional sermon.

### **A Hated Man**

Lewis's evangelistic impulse not only brought him public acclaim, but also created tensions and hostility among friends and colleagues. Owen Barfield, who was one of Lewis's closest friends, honestly admits that Lewis's zeal for the conversion of the unbeliever bothered, even embarrassed him at times.<sup>12</sup> He could appreciate Lewis's faith as a private matter, but found it difficult to accept his determination to take it public with the aim of converting others.

Barfield was not alone. The amount of ridicule and scorn it fostered among his non-Christian colleagues was especially virulent. His theological books and his standing as a Christian apologist which made him much loved also spawned a great amount of ill-feeling. According to Harry Blamires, Lewis was acutely sensitive to the fact. He recalls that Lewis once told him with great feeling, "You don't know how I'm hated."<sup>13</sup>

One of the reasons for this hatred is that Lewis's use of his training as a scholar in the work of Christian apologetics was viewed by many of his colleagues as a form of prostitution. In an attempt to explain to Walter Hooper the reason for Lewis's unpopularity among so many dons in Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien observed: "In Oxford, you are forgiven for writing only two kinds of books. You may write books on your own subject whatever that is, literature, or science, or history. And you may write detective stories because all dons at some time get the flu, and they have



to have something to read in bed. But what you are not forgiven is writing popular works, such as Jack did on theology, and especially if they win international success as his did.”<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s work on a popular level, which appealed to vast audiences outside the University defied academic protocol. “In the eyes of some,” says Blamires, “he was using a donnish knowledge to mesmerize the innocent masses with dialectical conjuring tricks.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he chose to express his faith in the vernacular rather than in the language of the scholar. Although he did so in order that he might make the faith accessible to all, this was viewed by many in the University as a thing not proper to his profession. Besides, it was thought that a professor of English Literature should teach literature, not theology. It appears that Lewis’s growing fame as an amateur theologian contributed to his being twice passed over for appointments to much-coveted Chairs in English Literature at his University despite his scholarly claim to the appointments. Some certainly objected to his Christianity in itself, but apparently also suspected, along with perhaps even some sympathetic colleagues, that his commitment to the salvation of human souls would not allow him the time to fulfill the duties and responsibilities the position would require.<sup>16</sup>

Lewis was himself, however, clearly uncomfortable with the publicity his success brought. As early as 1941 he was already feeling the sting of hostility and the crush of popularity. Responding to a point made by Dom Bede Griffith in a letter in October of this year concerning his growing public persona, he acknowledges the growing tension within himself: “As for retiring into ‘private life,’ while feeling very strongly the evil of

publicity, I don't see how one can. God is my witness I don't look for engagements."<sup>17</sup>

A particularly burdensome outcome of this growing popularity was the ever increasing amount of correspondence he felt obliged to answer. One of the reasons Lewis chose to terminate the radio broadcast talks was that he could not face the increase in the number of letters that would certainly be generated if he didn't.<sup>18</sup> Already he was spending countless hours responding to the correspondence he was receiving. When describing, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, what he considered the perfect day, he made a special point of noting that an essential element of the happy life was that one "would have almost no mail and never dread the postman's knock."<sup>19</sup>

Yet the number of letters continued to increase as the years went on. There was a time, Lewis told a young correspondent in 1956, when he was apt to delay responding to letters. But that was when there were fewer of them. "[N]ow that I have such a lot to write," he said, "I've just got to do them all at once, first thing in the morning."<sup>20</sup> For, unlike many in his position, Lewis felt a commitment to answer every letter that required a personal response. (His brother Warren, who in 1943 took on the role of secretary for his brother, routinely answered those letters not requiring Lewis's personal attention.) Although there were moments when he complained about his vast correspondence, he continued the practice to the end of his life. A letter dated March 26, 1963, just a few months before his death, provides a vivid picture of both his reluctance and commitment to letter writing. The letter is addressed to Hugh, a young man and the eldest of eight children who had been corresponding with Lewis since 1954: "Don't get any more girls to write to me," he wrote, "unless they

really need any help I might be able to give. I have too many letters already.”<sup>21</sup>

### Lewis’s Evangelistic Drive

Now here is the question: Why did Lewis willingly persist in the kind of evangelistic activity that created obvious tensions and hardships in his personal and professional life and that increased an already heavy work load?<sup>22</sup> He did not have to do so. He could have easily avoided such problems and still lived an active and fruitful, enormously fruitful, Christian life. Admittedly, no single factor can account for Lewis’s actions at any given moment, and certainly in the case of his commitment to evangelize several other factors could be suggested. For example, in one place he explained his passionate and forceful defense of the Christian faith in terms of Donne’s maxim, “‘The heresies that men leave are hated most.’ The things I assert most vigorously are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet I would propose that the primary driving force behind his evangelical impulse is best summed up by his conviction that “there are no ordinary people.”<sup>24</sup> The line comes near the conclusion of his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” which was preached in Oxford at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin on June 8, 1941. Coming when it did, just about the time his ministry as a herald and defender of the Christian faith was taking off, the sermon may reasonably be assumed to express an early fundamental and guiding conviction. The sermon’s beauty, force, and clarity seem to suggest this as well.

Lewis began the sermon with the startling assertion that “if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the

rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desire not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us,... We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>25</sup>

He went on to argue that there is reason to believe that such infinite joy does in fact exist—indeed our deepest longings suggest it is so. At the moment, however, we all are on the wrong side of the door, leaving us with two possibilities: we can choose to be “left utterly and absolutely outside—repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored” or “we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged.” But to get in we must choose to follow Jesus Christ who has opened the way and who invites us to follow him inside. We have a choice. “We walk every day,” said Lewis, “on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.” Consequently it is hardly possible, he concluded in the crowning paragraph of the sermon, to think too often or too deeply about my neighbor’s potential glory.

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations— these are



mortal,...But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”<sup>26</sup>

## A Burden of Glory

Why was Lewis willing to sacrifice his own pleasure and comfort, risk alienating friends and colleagues, and jeopardize possible career opportunities? Because of the enormous magnitude and weight of the possible eternal destinies of human beings: “[A] weigh or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain.”<sup>27</sup> According to Tolkien, Lewis knew the price of such popularity, he knew he would be hated, yet “he was driven to write popular works of theology because of his conscience.”<sup>28</sup> Lewis was convinced that one of these two destinies was true for all humanity, and it compelled him to make the saving of souls the chief end of his earthly labors.<sup>29</sup> To put it most plainly, Lewis preached what he believed, and practiced what he preached. As he said to Dom Bede Griffith in the same year he delivered this sermon, “I don’t see how one can” do otherwise.

This is not to say that Lewis never struggled with his commitment (he would have been happy to have avoided the public notoriety), nor that he felt himself more saintly than other Christians who did not share his sense of urgency in the matter. Rather, he simply did not see that he had a choice. The possibilities were plainly too momentous to be ignored. But Lewis did not do the work of evangelism simply out of a feeling of duty either. It was for him also a labor of love.

Dorothy L. Sayers gave memorable tribute to this side of Lewis’s evangelistic person in a letter addressed to him in May 1943. Sayers had herself by this time become quite well known in Britain for her creative and effective presentation and defense of orthodox Christianity. And like

Lewis she had attracted a growing number of correspondents who wrote to her about religious concerns. Speaking of one particular pesky atheist, she wrote Lewis:

Meanwhile, I am left with the Atheist on my hands. I do not want him. I have no use for him. I have no missionary zeal at all. God is behaving with His usual outrageous lack of scruple....If he reads any of the books I have recommended, he will write me long and disorderly letters about them. It will go on for years. I cannot bear it. Two of the books are yours—I only hope they will rouse him to fury. Then I shall hand him over to you. You like souls. I don't.<sup>30</sup>

Sayers recognized that Lewis “liked souls” in a way she did not. In other words, viewed from the perspective of eternity, he worked sacrificially and without complaint for what he understood to be the soul’s ultimate good. This is not to say that he liked all the people with whom he associated. Lewis was, as are the rest of us, possessed of a particular social disposition. Although he was typically pleasant and courteous to all those with whom he had contact, he maintained that his temperament was such that he tended to shy away from the company of others beyond the close circle of friends he maintained in and near Oxford. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that Lewis did not always like people, he valued them enough to risk directing his unique talents and the majority of his energies toward their spiritual good.<sup>31</sup>

“But heaven forbid we should work in the spirit of prigs and Stoics,” Lewis declared, writing of the ultimate purpose of love in his book *The Four Loves*. “While we hack and prune we know very well that what we are hacking and pruning is big with a splendour and vitality which our rational will could never of itself have supplied. To liberate that splendour, to let it become fully what it is trying to be, to have tall trees instead of scrubby tangles, and sweet apples instead of crabs, is part of our

purpose.”<sup>32</sup> In his fiction, theology, apologetics and correspondence Lewis can be seen hacking and pruning with the hope that his efforts might be used to produce “everlasting splendours.”

I am reminded of the vision expressed by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Although Lewis never refers to this text in “The Weight of Glory,” its spirit and truth pervade the work, and all his work.

Lewis longed above all else for the unseen things of which this life offers only shadows, for that weight of glory which the Lord Christ won for the human race. And knowing the extraordinary nature of every human person, Lewis longed for and labored for their glory as well.

## Notes

1. See for example, Patrick T. Ferry’s fine essay, “Mere Christianity Because There Are No Mere Mortals: Reaching Beyond the Inner Ring,” *C.S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, edited by Angus Menuge (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1997), pp. 169-90, where he suggests that the motive behind Lewis’s sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” unites Lewis’s idea of ‘mere Christianity’ to evangelism.
2. George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 138.
3. Oral History Interview, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, July 19 & 20, 1984, for the Marion E. Wade Center, p. 61.
4. “Christianity and Culture,” *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 14; “Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p.

181. According to the poet and novelist John Wain, who had been one of Lewis's students, "Lewis used to quote with approval general Booth's remark to Kipling: 'Young man, if I could win one soul for God by—by playing the tambourine with my toes, I'd do it.' Lewis did plenty of playing the tambourine with his toes, to the distress of some of the refined souls with whom he was surrounded at Oxford." "A Great Clerke," in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (Harcourt Brace/Harvest Books, 1992), p. 69.
5. "Christianity and Literature," in *Christian Reflections*, p. 10. Similarly, he wrote in the midst of a sharp argument against T.S. Eliot, that "I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial." A Preface to *"Paradise Lost"* (Oxford University Press/Galaxy Books, 1961), p. 9.
6. Letter to Sister Penelope, July 9, 1939, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), p. 322. It is not the purpose of this essay to go into how Lewis dealt with the problem of communicating traditional Christian content by using modern literary forms such as fantasy. Those interested in this aspect will find help in Doris T. Myers, *C.S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1994) and in Meredith Veldman's treatment of the subject in *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-80* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
7. "Cross-Examination," *God in the Dock*, p. 262.
8. Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (New York: Colliers/ Macmillan, 1988), p. 8.
9. Philip Ryken has nicely summarized the various aspects of Lewis's ministry of evangelism under teaching, writing, praying, and discipling in, "Winsome Evangelist: The Influence of C.S. Lewis," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, pp. 55-78.
10. Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, p. 143.
11. Oral History Interview with Stephen F. Olford, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Oxford, England, July 26, 1985, for the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, pp. 6-7. Lewis said that his predominately intellectual approach in evangelism was due to the limitation of his own gifts. However, he was very sensitive to and appreciative of what he called the more emotional and more "pneumatic" kind of appeal which he had seen "work wonders on a modern audience." "Where God gives the gift, the 'foolishness of preaching' is still mighty. But best of all is a team of two: one to deliver the preliminary intellectual barrage, and the other to follow up with a direct attack on the heart "Modern Man and his Categories of Thought," in



- Present Concerns, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Pub., 1986), p. 66.
12. Oral History Interview, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, November 19, 1983, for the Marion E. Wade Center, p. 9.
  13. Harry Blamires, "Against the Stream: C.S. Lewis and the Literary Scene," *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre*, vol. 1 (1983), p. 16. A.N. Wilson wrote that the *Oxford History of English Literature*, published in 1954, "established Lewis as a giant among pygmies of the Oxford English Faculty, which made their failure to promote him to a professorship all the more surprising." *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (W.W. Norton, 1990), pp. 244-45.
  14. Quoted in a letter from Walter Hooper to Christopher W. Mitchell, February 8, 1998. Lewis himself noted that having written imaginative books was used against a writer if he then wrote theology or literary criticism. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 185.
  15. Blamires, "Against the Stream," p. 17.
  16. Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 65.
  17. *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, p. 369., Lewis "was a rare case of the don who is forced into the limelight by the demands of his own conscience," noted Wain. "I believe he would never have bothered to court the mass public at all had he not seen it as his duty to defend the Christian faith...against the hostility or indifference that surrounded it." "A Great Clerke," p. 69. Lewis observed: "If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now — not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground — would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen." Quoted from "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), p. 28.
  18. Sayer, *Jack*, p. 170.
  19. *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1984), p. 143. Walter Hooper states that if all the extant letters of Lewis were published today the entire collection would run to at least a half dozen volumes.
  20. *Letters to Children*, edited by Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 60.



21. Ibid., p. 106f.
22. Lewis typically had a heavy tutorial load each term, frequently lectured, and was often occupied in the afternoons with domestic duties at home. See "Memoir of C.S. Lewis," by W.H. Lewis in *Letters to C.S. Lewis*, p. 37.
23. *Surprised By Joy*, p. 213.
24. "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses*, p. 19.
25. Ibid. pp. 3-4.
26. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
27. Ibid., p. 13.
28. Quoted in a letter from Walter Hooper to Christopher W. Mitchell, February 8, 1998.
29. Patrick Ferry does a compelling job of linking this idea with Lewis's notion of "Mere Christianity": "A respectful regard for the glory of eternity finally must overcome factionalism for the benefit of those who are still outside the faith....As long as there are people who are numbered among those who comprise the communion of saints, the *una sanctu* remains in need of a 'mere' Christianity—because, as C.S. Lewis reminds us, there is no such thing as a 'mere' mortal." "Mere Christianity Because There Are No Mere Mortals," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, pp. 170-71.
30. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Volume 2, chosen and edited by Barbara Reynolds and published by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society (Cambridge: Carole Green Publishing, 1997), p. 413. Sayers is having a bit of fun at her own expense here, for as Barbara Reynolds notes, Sayers continued the correspondence for at least another year and even permitted the Atheist to call on her twice (n. 8, p. 413).
31. Once again, Patrick Terry's treatment of the connection between Lewis's concept of "mere Christianity" and his idea of the "weight of glory" provides a compelling illustration of this point. One further qualification is in order. I do not mean to leave the impression that Lewis's ministry was limited to the written word. See for example his brother Warren's estimate of Lewis's sense of charity in *Memoirs of C.S. Lewis, Letters of C.S. Lewis*, pp. 41-42.
32. *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), pp.117-18.

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# The Generous Heart and Life of C.S. Lewis

by Joel S. Woodruff, Ed.D.

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C.S. Lewis's classic *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* begins,

Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. They were sent to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country . . . He had no wife and he lived in a very large house with a housekeeper . . . and three servants.<sup>1</sup>

What Lewis doesn't tell the reader is that in real life he was the generous old (middle-aged) professor who opened up his home near Oxford to provide shelter and care for children who were evacuated from London and other cities during the German air raids of World War II. This act of hospitality was in part the inspiration behind the *Chronicles of Narnia* and is just one example of the kindness that permeated the life of C.S. Lewis, a generous follower of Christ.

### **The Reluctant Convert**

In Lewis's earlier years, generous probably wouldn't have been the word used to describe the erudite young scholar. Some who knew him in those days might have preferred the word smug. His pride came to him naturally out of a brilliant mind, hardened on the battlefields of World War I and acclaimed through academic success. In the 1920s he finished his student years at Oxford with a rare "triple first," graduating with first-class honors in three different disciplines, philosophy, classics, and English language and literature. He won the Chancellor's Prize for an English essay. And he began lecturing at Oxford and published his first book, *Dymer*, a poem in rhyme royal, all by the age of twenty-eight. Lewis



was eloquent, quick on his feet, and ready to ride roughshod over others in debate with his sarcasm and satirical wit.

His prideful ways, however, were tempered as he began his search for truth and meaning in life. This quest, chronicled in his book *Surprised by Joy*, eventually came to a crisis point: “That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”<sup>2</sup> Lewis soon would wholeheartedly commit his life to serving Jesus Christ as Lord. One of the first fruits of his conversion was the generosity that began to exude from Lewis. As he studied the Scriptures, he came to the conclusion that it truly is “better to give than to receive.”

### **The Gift of Hospitality**

Hospitality, a natural trait of Lewis’s generosity, expanded as his faith grew. Lewis had been supported by his father, Albert Lewis, through all of his student years at Oxford. Upon employment as an Oxford don or professor, Lewis was finally able to support himself, although the salary of a don was meager. On a modest income, he was also providing food and shelter for Mrs. “Jane” Moore, the mother of his deceased war buddy, Paddie Moore. Mrs. Moore’s daughter, Maureen, also lived with them. Lewis had made a pact with Paddie that if either of them were killed in the war, the survivor would take care of the other’s family. True to his word, Lewis ended up caring for Mrs. Moore for the rest of her life. With little money to spare, Lewis lived a simple life.

Upon the death of their father, C.S. Lewis and his brother, Warnie, pooled their inheritance and purchased a home in Headington Quarry,

just outside of Oxford. There, at “The Kilns,” the Lewis brothers, both single, lived with Mrs. Moore and her daughter. The Kilns became a place of generous hospitality. For thirty years Lewis cared tenderly and tirelessly for Mrs. Moore at The Kilns until she died, often doing dishes, laundry and other household chores for her, even as he managed to write his books and do his scholarly work.

After the Germans invaded Poland, the Lewis brothers opened up The Kilns to children forced to evacuate the big cities. The first group was four school girls, and throughout the war several other groups of children came in and out of their home. The highlight during this time was a delightful sixteen-year-old named June Flewett. She brought much fun and laughter to the household. The Lewises’ gift of hospitality was being reciprocated by the gift of joy that emanated from this young lady.

In his later years Lewis opened his home to a brash, gifted, divorced, Jewish American follower of Jesus, Joy Gresham Davidman, and her two sons. This relationship, retold in the movie *Shadowlands*, once again highlights Lewis’s hospitality. After spending time with Joy’s sons, David and Douglas, Lewis wrote humorously in a letter to his friend Ruth Pitter, “I never knew what we celibates are shielded from. I will never laugh at parents again. Not that the boys weren’t a delight: but a delight like surf-bathing which leaves one breathless and aching. The energy, the tempo, is what kills.”<sup>3</sup>

Eventually Lewis married Joy in a civil ceremony, so she could gain British citizenship and remain in the United Kingdom. Though he did this out of his generous spirit, this friendship over time led to romantic love; Lewis and Joy were married by a priest in the hospital where Joy was battling cancer. After only four years of marriage, Joy succumbed to the

ravages of cancer and died. Grief stricken, Lewis wrote one of the most powerful books ever written on grief, *A Grief Observed*. This didn't stop him, however, from continuing to raise Joy's two sons, David and Douglas, paying for their education and including them in his estate.

C.S. Lewis's hospitality was one that permeated his life and blessed many people.

### **Lewis Shares His Time and Talent**

A second area of generosity evident in Lewis was his gift of time to others. Austin Farrer, a close friend of Lewis, remarked about Lewis's "taking of the world into his heart."<sup>4</sup> Lewis was able to connect with people; he could make them feel that what they had to say was important and, more important, that they were of value. This came out in the amount of time Lewis spent communicating in various forms, from meeting with people for lunch and dinner regularly, following up with them by letter, and praying for them.

As his books became well-known, and as soon as he was discovered in America, Lewis began receiving fan mail, particularly from the English-speaking world. Lewis believed that it was his duty to reply to each letter. Eventually he would spend at least an hour every morning responding to letters. His brother, Warnie, would help him with the logistics of organizing and mailing the correspondence. These letters today provide wonderful insights into ways to live out the Christian faith in daily life, while giving us a glimpse into Lewis's warm personality and sense of humor.

An amusing string of letters was written to an American named Dr. Warfield Firor, who regularly sent Lewis care packages of canned hams.

Great Britain was still recovering from the war, so the specialty foods were greatly appreciated. Lewis received so much food from Americans that he gladly shared the spoils with others in town. His letters show not only that he could be generous himself, but also that he knew how to receive generosity with gratitude. For example, he writes to Dr. Firor, “The arrival of that magnificent ham leaves me just not knowing what to say. If it were known that it was in my house, it would draw every housebreaker in the neighbourhood more surely than would a collection of gold plate! . . . I am very deeply grateful to you for your great kindness.”<sup>5</sup>

In *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken tells how while a student at Oxford, Lewis would eat dinner with him and his wife, Davy, engaging in rich conversation well into the night. Through Lewis’s mentoring influence and openness, both Sheldon and Davy eventually were pointed toward receiving Christ’s mercy and grace.<sup>6</sup>

### Endlessly Generous

Finally, Lewis both preached and practiced his deep conviction that he was to use his material wealth to serve the needs of others. He writes in *Mere Christianity*, “Christ says ‘Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You.’”<sup>7</sup> Lewis understood this to mean that all of his life was to be surrendered to God including how he used the money and other resources that had been given to him. He also realized the dangers of materialism. He writes in *The Screwtape Letters*, “Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is finding his place in it, while really it is finding its place in him.”<sup>8</sup>



As Lewis's books became popular, large royalties poured in. Rather than upgrade his lifestyle, Lewis decided to maintain his current standard of living and give the rest away. As he got paid for *The Screwtape Letters*, which were published in *The Guardian*, he instructed the newspaper to send the royalties to a Clergy Widows fund. He did the same with the BBC when they sent money for his radio broadcasts. This generosity got him into some trouble, however, when, after having given the money away, he learned that he owed taxes on it. One of Lewis's weaknesses was math and numbers. One of the fortunate circumstances of Lewis's life was that as a war veteran he was exempt from taking Oxford's math entrance exam; some propose that he may not have passed the test. This should be encouraging to those who struggle with math to know that one of the world's most brilliant men also didn't care for numbers.

Fortunately for Lewis, his good friend and lawyer Owen Barfield set up a charitable trust for him called the Agape Fund. From then on, two-thirds of Lewis's royalties were paid into the trust and distributed anonymously to many people, including those in poverty, clergy widows, seminary students, churches, and many other ministries. Lewis went to great lengths to ensure that his name would not be tied to any of the gifts. He detested the idea of conspicuous living, writing, "This must often be recognized as a temptation. Sometimes our pride also hinders our charity; we are tempted to spend more than we ought on the showy forms of generosity (tipping, hospitality) and less than we ought on those who really need our help."<sup>9</sup>

Lewis also took great joy in giving spontaneously and with fun. In a letter to an American, he wrote,

*It will not bother me in the hour of death to reflect that I have been “had for a sucker” by any number of impostors; but it would be a torment to know that one had refused even one person in need . . . Another thing that annoys me is when people say “Why did you give that man money? He’ll probably go and drink it.” My reply is “But if I’d kept [it] I should probably have drunk it.”<sup>10</sup>*

This doesn’t mean that Lewis didn’t struggle with giving or worry about money. In fact, one of Lewis’s greatest fears was the idea of ending up in poverty. Following the writing of *A Grief Observed*, he became very worried about money. Hooper writes, Lewis “had spent so much over the last years that he now began keeping a minute account of his expenses.”<sup>11</sup>

It was from deep within his own personal experience that Lewis wrote, “For many of us the great obstacle to charity lies not in our luxurious living or desire for more money, but in our fear—fear of insecurity.”<sup>12</sup> However, Lewis, in surrendering his life to Christ, consistently sought to overcome this insecurity by trusting God and giving generously, the antidote to fear, worry, and materialism.

Lewis gave us some wise advice about how much we should give.

*I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusement, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our giving does not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say it is too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot because our commitment to giving excludes them.<sup>13</sup>*

At the end of Lewis’s life, his total estate was worth only £37,772. Not a great deal considering the amount of money, royalties, that had passed through Lewis’s bank accounts, including his Agape Fund.

On December 7, 1963, at the memorial service for C.S. Lewis in the Chapel of Magdalen College, Oxford, Austin Farrar, Lewis's good friend and pastor, said this about Lewis:

*His characteristic attitude to people in general was one of consideration and respect. He did his best for them and he appreciated them. He paid you the compliment of attending to your words. He did not pretend to read your heart. He was endlessly generous. He gave without stint, to all who seemed to care for them, the riches of his mind and the effort of his wit: and where there was need, he gave his money. I will not say what I know about his charities. When he had entered into any relationship his patience and his loyalty were inexhaustible. He really was a Christian—by which I mean, he never thought he had the right to stop.<sup>14</sup>*

Lewis's model of generous living is an example for us today as we seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave all for us and commanded us to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33 ESV).

## Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950; repr. New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 1.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana, 1955), 182.
3. Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 65.
4. Austin Farrer, "In His Image," in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, ed. James Como.
5. C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 836.
6. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 121.
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# The Prayer-Life of C.S. Lewis

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Prayer, perhaps more than anything else, is a true test of a Christian's devotion and intimacy with God. Its presence in a Christian's life says it all. Its absence is the evidence of a merely theoretical framework of faith. So to try to enter into the understanding of Lewis' prayer-life is an attempt to penetrate his very mind and spirit in the most intimate way. Can we do so without presumption? Is it speculative to try to do so? I knew Lewis personally, enough to have a clear impression of his personal faith in the years between 1946 and 1953, when we met in a group discussion that was held in the home that I shared with Nicholas Zernov, during those years. Zernov was then leader of the Society of St. Albans and St. Sergius. It was through him that I got to know Lewis.

While he was a witty raconteur and provocative debater, Lewis was essentially shy about his inner life, so it would be an impossible task to describe his prayer-life unless he had written significantly about prayer. But he made a substantial contribution to the theology of prayer. His last work, published posthumously, *Letters to Malcolm*, he completed in April 1963, just seven months before his death. It deals frankly with issues that he faced privately in prayer. His *Reflections on the Psalms*, published two years earlier, deal with his personal difficulties in reading the Psalms, and also his appreciation of the Christian liturgy of the Psalter. But Lewis was never enthusiastic about his own church life, which in the setting of college chapel was atypical of parish life. So his own focus upon prayer was more personal than corporate. Several of his essays, notably "Work and Prayer" and "The Efficacy of Prayer," challenge us with specific issues of personal prayer. His autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, and *The Screwtape Letters* also contain personal comments on prayer.

In my own encounters with Lewis, he never spoke about prayer. I did communicate once with him directly about the daily prayer meetings of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union where much prayer had been made for the conversion of Sheldon Vanauken, whose wife was active in our prayer-group. Indeed, I told Lewis of Sheldon's conversion the day after it happened. But Lewis was never forthcoming about his own prayer life. A shy man, he was all the more sensitive to the Oxford atmosphere then prevailing, that you no more discussed religion too intimately than you talked about your kidneys. So he simply responded positively to Vanauken's news as a confidant who expected it anyway.

Lewis suffered enough from the cynical reactions of some of his colleagues when his first religious books were published. For he, an English don, should not be dabbling in theology, much less getting cheap publicity in this way. To trespass into another academic discipline was questionable to say the least. So Lewis was very careful to introduce his own theological views modestly, though he did have the support of his friend Austin Farrar and other theologians when he did so. In his *Reflections on the Psalms* he begins, "I write as one amateur to another, talking about difficulties that I have met, or lights I have gained, reading the Psalms, with the hope this might at any rate interest and sometimes even help, other inexpert readers. I am 'comparing notes,' not presuming to instruct."<sup>1</sup> It is only now that some of us have wakened up to the fact that if all of life is carved up among the professions, so that there is likewise no room left for being dilettantes or amateurs in the arts or culture generally, then we shall all be cheated of humanness itself. Lewis got away with it in his day, for when he was questioned about his preaching as a layman at RAF stations during the Battle of Britain, he

could genuinely reply he was just doing his war work, like any other old don who did his duties as an air-raid warden, certainly not very trained but doing his best in an emergency. In such a crisis there is no need for any further apology than what he writes in the preface to his published BBC talks given during the war, when he first came to public attention:

There is no mystery about my position. I am a very ordinary layman, of the Church of England, not especially 'high' nor especially 'low,' nor especially anything else.<sup>2</sup>

When I first met him in the 1940s he looked like Mr. Badger from *The Wind in the Willows*<sup>3</sup>: stout, in an old rumpled brown tweed jacket, brown shoes, pipe in mouth, looking like an Oxford farmer. However, once he began to speak, I realized that few people I had ever met, other than perhaps his friend Dyson, could articulate so well, so humorously, and exactly to the point.

In this paper, I want to describe six traits that I think characterize the personal prayer-life of Lewis, and then to look at three aspects of his own theological reflections on prayer.

### *1. The Earthy Realism of His Prayer-Life*

Lewis was no mystic. He admits this several times in his letters. Others might climb daringly in the mountains of mysticism, but he simply slogged around in the foothills. Rather then, his spirituality is earthy, full of realism, for he was dead scared of sentimentalism. It was expressive of a no-nonsense kind of faith. The first poem of his collection edited after his death spells out his similar poetic credo:

I am so coarse, the things the poets see  
Are obstinately invisible to me.  
For twenty years I've stared my level best



To see if evening—any evening—would suggest  
A patient etherized upon a table;  
In vain. I simply wasn't able.  
To me each evening looked far more  
Like the departure from a silent, yet crowded shore  
Of a ship whose freight with everything, leaving behind  
Gracefully, finally without farewells, marooned mankind—  
I'm like that odd man Wordsworth knew, to whom  
A primrose was a yellow primrose, one whose doom  
Keeps him for ever in the list of dunces,  
Compelled to live on stock responses,  
Making the poor best that I can Of dull things...<sup>4</sup>

Lewis is admitting to us all that his spirituality, like his poetry, is prosaic, ordinary, about the world around him. This down-to-earthness about him, is perhaps the greatest impression he left upon me. Neoplatonism was anathema to Lewis. So instead of saying “we must be spiritually regenerated,” he confesses, “we’re like eggs at present. And you can’t go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”<sup>5</sup> Thus his style is vivid, concrete, practical, empty of “gas,” full of solid stuff. So too his faith is all for “sound doctrine,” not the woolly-mindedness of contemporaries he debated with, who wanted “religion without dogma.” Growing up as a child in a “low” church milieu, he felt later that it did tend to be too cosily living at ease in Zion,<sup>6</sup> not the tough, realistic faith and prayer-life Lewis was to develop later.

## *2. The Practical Realism of His Prayer-Life*

Prayer is not something simply to talk about. It is not even something we “do,” for Lewis. “Saying one’s prayers” was for Lewis only a small part of his experience of prayer. “For many years after my conversion,” he admits, “I never used any ready-made forms except the Lord’s Prayer. In fact I tried to pray without words at all—not to verbalize the mental acts.

Even in praying for others I believe I tended to avoid their names and substituted mental images of them. I still think that the prayer without words is the best—if one can really achieve it.”<sup>7</sup> But we have to remember that our exercise of prayer is only effective as we take ourselves as we really are, and not idealize how we would like to be, and thus try and exercise an unrealistic form of expressing prayer. So Lewis had to learn himself, that “to pray successfully without words one needs to be at ‘the top of one’s form.’”<sup>8</sup> Thinking that we can do always, what we can do on occasion, is an error that makes our prayers also unrealistic, and this Lewis had to discover, as we all must.

The practical rhythm of Lewis was simple enough each day. He would rise at about 7 a.m., take a walk, attend matins at 8 a.m. in college chapel, breakfast, and start tutorials at 9 a.m. Late in the afternoon he would make time for prayerful thought and contemplation, as he walked around the college grounds. Never would he recommend saying one’s prayers last thing at night. “No one in his senses if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bed-time—obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration. My own plan when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however unsuitable, in preference to the last waking moment. On a day of travelling...I’d rather pray sitting in a crowded train than put it off till midnight when one reaches a hotel bedroom with aching back and dry throat, and one’s mind partly in a stupor and partly in a whirl.”<sup>9</sup> In a letter to a friend in 1955, that is to say shortly after he had taken up his professorship at Cambridge, when he used to return home to Oxford at weekends, he said:

Oddly enough, the week-end journeys (to and from Cambridge) are no trouble at all. I find myself perfectly content in a slow train that crawls through green fields stopping at every station. Just because the service is so slow and therefore in most people's eyes bad, these trains are almost empty—I get through a lot of reading and sometimes say my prayers. A solitary train journey I find quite excellent for this purpose.<sup>10</sup>

All this is consistent with Lewis' earlier observations, that much of prayer is really a disposition of heart that is in tune with God's presence in one's life, so that the more our hearts are in tune with and obedient toward God, the less fuss do we need to make about how vocal and articulate we are in "saying our prayers"; provided, of course, that we do not succumb to merely having "warm feelings" or vaguely imaginative thoughts we mistake for real communion with God. This will always demand the most rigorous attentiveness and serious intent to be called real prayer.

### *3. His Natural, Simple, Unstructured Attitude to Prayer*

As we have noted, Lewis was a private person, concealing his soul in the midst of convivial friendships. He remarked on one occasion that friends are not like lovers who look at each other, but in what they hold in common. So friendships were outward looking, not introspective for him. Several times he observes the importance of "looking at," rather than looking "through" things. So he would never have analyzed his prayer-life as we are attempting to do. He would bury us in a loud guffaw of the absurdity of such action.

While still agnostic, in October 1929, Lewis read the *Diary of an Old Soul* by George MacDonald. "He seems to know everything," Lewis confided to Greeves, "and I find my own experience in it constantly."

My surgent thought shoots lark-like up to Thee,  
Thou like the heaven art all about the lark.  
Whatever I surmise or know in me,

Idea, or symbol on the dark,  
Is living, working, thought-creating power  
In Thee, the timeless Father of the hour.  
I am Thy book, Thy song—Thy child would be.<sup>11</sup>

By the following summer term he had also perused *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence, and *Centuries of Meditation* by Thomas Traherne. By the following term he was attending 8 a.m. chapel regularly. But on Christmas Eve, 1930, he writes his friend Greeves, “I think the trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no rational ground for going back on the arguments that convinced me of God’s existence; but the irrational deadweight of my old sceptical habits, and the spirit of the age, and the cares of the day, steal away all my lively feelings of the truth; and often when I pray, I wonder if I am not posting letters to a non-existent address.”<sup>12</sup> The reason for the remoteness of Lewis’ faith at that time was he was still a deist rather than a Christian. So after a long talk one night with Tolkien and Dyson in July 1931, Lewis wrote Greeves further: “I have just passed on from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ—in Christianity—my long talk with Dyson and Tolkien had a great deal to do with it.”<sup>13</sup> Later that year he also read William Law’s *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Lewis was now finding it meaningful to pray for his brother Warren in Shanghai. So he wrote to him at the end of 1931:

When you ask me to pray for you—I don’t know if you are serious, but the answer is yes, I do. It may not do you any good, but it does me a lot, for I cannot ask for any change to be made in you without finding that the very same needs to be made in me; which pulls me up also by putting us all in the same boat, checks any tendency to priggishness.<sup>14</sup>



All this may seem to be biography about prayer rather than theology. But to Lewis the one was impossible without the other. To look at prayer in detachment from its exercise was inconceivable. And since most of one's existence is usually pretty dull and routine stuff, one's prayers are not exceptional either. Indeed, the more honest we become with ourselves, the more "normal" our prayer life will be. As Lewis said early on in his BBC talks on Christian morality, at first Christianity seems to be all about rules and regulations, guilt and virtue, only to find its members are really living in another country. "Every one is filled full with what we would call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they don't call it goodness. They don't call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes."<sup>15</sup> So too, in prayer, Lewis sees that it should become so natural to the believer, that we do not make any fuss about it, but simply do it because that is the nature of the Christian life. Speaking about the struggles we may have in prayer, the distractions and dryness in our lives, he comments: "The disquieting thing is not simply that we skimp and begrudge the duty of prayer. The really disquieting thing is that it should have to be numbered among duties at all. For we believe that we were created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And if the few, the very few, minutes we now spend on intercourse with God are a burden to us rather than a delight, what then?...if we were perfected, prayer would not be a duty, it would be a delight."<sup>16</sup> Clearly our sins handicap us from the openness that prayer requires, while the unreality of the unseen realm of prayer only shows how distant we may be from God and his ways. Like friendship with a dear friend, however, prayer is never forced nor irksome. It grows as the relationship grows too.

#### *4. Supplicatory Prayers for Others*

Praying for his brother was perhaps the first step that Lewis made in supplication for many other people throughout the rest of his life. In the correspondence to an “American Lady,” begun in October 1950, we read Lewis promising again and again, “I will have you in my prayers,” “of course we’ll help each other in our prayers,” “let us continue to pray for each other,” “of course I have been praying for you daily, as always, but latterly have found myself doing so with much more concern.” On this last occasion, he narrates an event that was of special circumstance. He had felt one night with strong feeling how good it would be to hear from her with good news. “Then, as if by magic (indeed it is the whitest magic in the world) the letter comes today. Not (lest I should indulge in folly) that your relief had not occurred before my prayer, but as if, in tenderness for my puny faith, God moved me to pray with special earnestness just before He was going to give me the thing. How true that prayers are His prayers really: He speaks to Himself through us.”<sup>17</sup>

Lewis was not prepared merely to hold that while petitionary prayer is expressing personal need before God, supplication is praying on behalf of others. Early on he had seen that to supplicate for others to be changed by prayer, implied the prayer was also willing to see changes in his life as he prayed for others. But petition and supplication are also part of a greater, more mysterious reality of divine soliloquy, since God intends to be not merely “all” as pantheism declares, but “all in all.” If the Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us and gives us the gift of prayer itself, are we not in our supplications and petitions actually entering into divine soliloquy, to celebrate the sovereign good that God has intended for all his creatures?

So Lewis quotes a poem he found in an old notebook, author unknown, to illustrate this.

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem  
To be in speech with you,  
Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream,  
One talker aping two.  
Sometimes it is, yet not as they  
Conceive it. Rather, I  
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say  
But lo!, my springs are dry.

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake  
The listener's role and through  
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake  
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply  
Nor can; thus, while we seem  
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I  
No dreamer, but thy dream.<sup>18</sup>

"Dream" does suggest pantheism, so Lewis adds, perhaps it is more accurate to call it rather "soliloquy." In fact, Lewis sent Bede Griffiths this poem in 1938, to describe the growing convictions of what prayer meant in his life.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, he worked over this poem several times.<sup>20</sup>

### *5. Prayer as Friendship with God*

Perhaps many of us find that the growth of prayer is also associated with the cultivation of friendships. It is as if the relational quality of life that is nurtured and cultivated in personal friendships on the horizontal level of companionship assists us also to deepen friendship with God in prayer on the vertical level. This, then, is another trait of Lewis. He grew in prayer as he grew into friendships. Sometimes they were boon companionships, at other times they sprung from correspondence with

strangers who became real friends, like “the American Lady.” Perhaps too, as Lewis leaned on confidants in his distresses, so he should reach out to others in their needs too. “Forgiveness,” he once said, “is another name for being forgiven.” This reciprocity explains perhaps the largesse he gave to others in his enormous correspondence, indicative of what he felt he received from his trust in God.

So at the outbreak of the war in 1939, he wrote to his old pupil and friend Bede Griffiths, “I was terrified to find how fearful I was by the crisis. Pray for me for courage.”<sup>21</sup> Again he writes to him in 1954, “I had prayed hard for a couple of nights before that my faith might be strengthened. The response was immediate, and your book gave the finishing touch” (that is, *The Golden String*, Griffiths’ autobiography).<sup>22</sup> Again, on December 20, 1961, Lewis wrote Griffiths after his wife’s death: “I prayed when I buried my wife, my whole sexual nature should be buried with her, and it seems it has happened. Thus one recurrent trial has vanished from my life—an enormous liberty. Of course, this may be old age....”<sup>23</sup>

Another special friend was Sister Penelope Lawson. His first letter to her he wrote in 1939, saying: “Though I’m forty years old, I’m only about twelve as a Christian.... So it would be a maternal act if you found time sometimes to mention me in your prayers.”<sup>24</sup> Then on October <sup>24</sup>, 1940, he told her: “I’m going to make my first confession next week, which will seem an odd experience. The decision to do so was one of the hardest I have ever made; but now that I am committed (by dint of posting the letter before I had time to change my mind) I began to be afraid of the opposite extreme—afraid that I was merely indulging in an orgy of egoism.”<sup>25</sup> A month later, he wrote again to say, “well—we have come through the wall



of fire, and find ourselves (somewhat to our surprise) still alive and even well. The story about an orgy of egoism turns out, like all the Enemy propaganda, to have just a grain of truth in it, but I have no doubt that the proper method of dealing with that is to continue the practice as I intend to do. For after all, everything— even virtue, even prayer—has its dangers and if one heeds the grain of truth in the Enemy propaganda, one can never do anything at all.”<sup>26</sup>

A particular thorn in the flesh for Lewis was Mrs. Moore, who was the mother of a friend killed in the First World War, and with whom Lewis had had an unfortunate romance that turned sour. She continued to live with Lewis and his brother for many years, and her last years in the household got progressively worse. During one particular crisis over her, Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope, “It was a bad time, but I almost venture to say I felt Christ in the house as I have never done before.” Signing himself “Brother Ass,” he added contritely, “but alas such a house for Him to visit!” Years before his brother had wistfully compared their own troubled household with that of the Dysons, where life seemed one long series of delightful picnics! So again Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope on January 3, 1945: “Pray for me, I am suffering incessant temptations to uncharitable thoughts at present; one of those black moods in which nearly all one’s friends seem to be selfish or even false. And how terrible that there should be even a kind of pleasure in thinking evil.”<sup>27</sup> As Mrs. Moore sunk into senility and kept the household in constant discord, he wrote, I have been feeling that very much lately: that cheerful insecurity is what our Lord asks of us.”<sup>28</sup> Again, on June 5, 1951, Lewis wrote her “I especially need your prayers because I am (like the pilgrim in Bunyan) travelling across a plain called Ease! Everything without, and many things within, are

marvelously well at present.”<sup>29</sup> It was at this time that he began to think of writing a book on prayer.

Perhaps it began to dawn upon him that he could not do this without more experience of its reality in his own life, for on February 15, 1954, Lewis wrote again to Sister Penelope, “I have had to abandon the book on prayer, it was clearly not for me.”<sup>30</sup> He kept this postponement for the next nine years of his life, indeed to the year he died. But while he was writing it, his wife Joy Davidman commented how excited she was about his project, as perhaps one of the most important things Lewis would ever do.

#### *6. Prayer-Life is Matured by Suffering*

Perhaps in the meantime, Lewis began to think of what was involved symbolically in the change of locale from Magdalen College, Oxford, to Magdalene College, Cambridge. “My address will be Magdalene, so I remain under the same patroness,” he wrote to Sister Penelope on July 30, 1954. “This is nice because it saves ‘admin.’ readjustments in Heaven.” At the end of the year, he wrote to his friend Veto Gebbert, “I think I shall like Magdalene better than Magdalen.” “It is a tiny college (a perfect cameo architecturally) and they’re so old-fashioned, pious, and gentle and conservative—unlike this leftist, atheist, cynical, hardboiled, huge Magdalen” that had caused Lewis so much hurt.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Bede Griffiths on November 1st, he asked: “Has any theologian (perhaps dozens) allegorized St. Mary Magdalene’s act in the following way, which came to me like a flash of lightning the other day!...The precious alabaster box which we have to break over the holy feet is her heart. It seems so obvious, once one has thought of it.”<sup>32</sup>

So Lewis had come to see that prayer grows in the breaking of the human heart before God. His perhaps was broken since Oxford never recognized his worth to offer him a university professorship, and later still, it was broken again by the far more poignant grief of losing his wife in bereavement. Like all of us do, Lewis continued to struggle with God when,

By now I should be entering on the supreme stage  
Of the whole walk, reserved for the late afternoon.  
The heat was over now; the anxious mountains,  
The airless valleys and the sun-baked rocks, behind me....<sup>33</sup>

Yet in June 18, 1962, he writes: “the plumbing often goes wrong....I need to be near a life-line.”<sup>34</sup> Worse was to come. After the loss of his wife, he asks the raw and naked question:

Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it even inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?<sup>35</sup>

In times of such bitter sorrow, Lewis admitted that “I am not in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him.”<sup>36</sup>

Of this we're certain; no one who dared knock  
At heaven's door for earthly comfort found  
Even a door—only smooth, endless rock,  
And save the echo of his voice no sound.  
It's dangerous to listen; you'll begin  
To fancy that those echoes (hope can play  
Pitiful tricks) are answers from within;  
Far better to turn, grimly sane away.  
Heaven cannot thus, Earth cannot ever, give  
The thing we want. We ask what isn't there  
And by our asking water and make live  
That very part of love which must despair,  
And die, and go down cold into the earth,  
Before there's talk of springtide and re-birth.<sup>37</sup>

Yes, this is perhaps one of the deepest experiences of prayer, to be able to say to our Heavenly Father, "Lord, not my will but thine be done."

### **Lewis' Theology of Prayer**

If Lewis' personal experience of prayer has these six traits—an earthy realism, a practical import, a natural and simple attitude, a strong supplicatory concern for others, warm and honest expressions of friendships, and matured by suffering—how do these characteristics shape his theology of prayer? Perhaps two features he stressed most in his writings were: the problem of causality in prayer, and the nature of petitionary prayer. But like other human beings he had first to overcome morbid experiences of childhood before he could enter into a more truthful realism about the nature and exercise of prayer, so this we must consider as a necessary prelude.

A child tends to relate to God, as he relates with his parents. This correlation, unless corrected and healed, may persist, unconsciously so, throughout life. "My real life—or what memory reports as my real life—was increasingly one of solitude," Lewis reports. He had bad dreams,



“like a window opening on what was hardly less than Hell.”<sup>38</sup> As a child of seven, he admits “solitude was nearly always at my command, somewhere in the garden, or somewhere in the house....What drove me to write was the extreme manual clumsiness from which I suffered,” so that he hated sports. His early years he described as “living almost entirely in my imagination,” or at least “the imagination of those years now seems to me more important than anything else.”<sup>39</sup> Then at the age of ten his mother died. He remembered what he had been taught, that prayer offered in faith would be answered. Then when she died he shifted his ground to believe he now needed to believe in a miracle, seeing God merely as a Magician. It left him with theological confusion about God for years to come. All happiness left him, and like the solid continent of Atlantis that disappeared under the waves, “all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life...it was all sea and islands now.”<sup>40</sup>

At boarding school later, Lewis says he began “seriously to pray and read my Bible and to attempt to obey my conscience.”<sup>41</sup> But his slight alienation from his distanced father increased, and there was emotionally no solid ground for the child. Sometimes he would awake at night afraid that his only brother had slipped off with his father to America, and left him behind. His prayers became sheer acts of despair. Having said them at night, his conscience would whisper he had not said them properly enough, so he would try and try again until he fell asleep in frustration and lack of abiding assurance. A deepening pessimism eventually led him at university to decide he was an atheist, which for many has been the cold comfort of forgetting God in a conversion of relief. Perhaps the dread of frustrated prayers at night-time never fully left him, and the issues of a reasoning faith about prayer were colored perhaps as much from his early

alienation as from his heightened intellectual search for the appropriate enquiry that would serve the logic of the mind, more than the rest of the heart. Perhaps Lewis' cure was to rest in the presence of God, rather than be always enquiring about its appropriateness.

### 1. *Lewis' Emphasis upon "Festoonings in Prayer"*

The bad situations of imagination and conscience that Lewis had placed himself in, as a child, explain perhaps the emphasis he placed later in life upon the importance of placing one's self in what he called "prayerful situations," or "festoonings." Perhaps he learnt this from his own failures as a child to ever pray "properly" at all. Francis de Sales might also have helped him when he advises that in meditation, "place yourself in the presence of God." In honest humility, Lewis also learnt to see that at prayer one is in a more "real" situation than ever one could be in the "real world." Prayer is the struggle to come to grips with "rock-bottom realities." Prayer, then is the struggle for the "real I" to meet with the reality of God. Prayer then is saying, "may it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to." This is the prayer that precedes all prayers. Then, as the great Iconoclast, God in his mercy may shatter all our false ideas and conceptions of him, that so hinder our real prayer in life.

Another area where "festoonings" of prayer are needed is in the realm of causality. Several times in his writings, Lewis recites the *Pensées* of Pascal: "God instituted prayer in order to lend his creatures the dignity of causality." Lewis' comment is that God perhaps "invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose."<sup>42</sup> For God has granted us the dignity of both work and prayer together. So a proper attitude to both is to pray as we work responsibly with the gifts that God has given to us, as well as to go on praying when we can work no more. Indeed, prayer is a

stronger force than causality, not a weaker form. For if it “works” at all, it does so unlimited by space and time. Prayer then, is not a direct action over nature, it is action in co-operation with God, so we are most in harmony with God’s provident action when we are in prayer before him. Perhaps the post-Einsteinian worldview ahead of us, still little appreciated in Lewis’ day, now frees us from being so “hung up” with causality, as some of his contemporaries were, but neither is God. Our relationship with God in faith that pleases him, is therefore still the vital prayerful situation for all praying.

## *2. Lewis and Petitionary Prayer*

Wisely then, Lewis argues that it is a wrong kind of question to ask, “Does prayer work?” It misleads us about the true nature of prayer. The quiet composure of heart before God rests in a relationship that is deeper, far deeper than words can ever express. This is where Lewis so clearly rested, and explains why so little need be said really about prayer. It is to be experienced rather than superficially talked about. At the same time Lewis honestly had difficulty with the apparently inconsistent character of petitions he noted in the gospels. For he observed two different types of prayer which appear inconsistent with each other.<sup>43</sup> Type A is the prayer taught by our Lord: “Thy will be done.” In the light of the great submission of his passion, nothing can be asked for conditionally, only submissively so. It is asked in the Garden of Gethsemane, without any reservation whatever: “nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.” Type B is the petition in faith, able to “move mountains,” to heal people, to remove blindness, and do much else. The apostle seems to advocate it when he urges us to “ask in faith, nothing doubting” (James 1:6-8).

Lewis asked many wise people about this apparent inconsistency and received no clear answer or solution. Hesitantly, Lewis suggested himself that until God has given us the faith to move mountains, it is perhaps to leave them alone, for he created them, and that is his business. Instead, it is advisable to concentrate more attention on Type A prayers, that indicate the surrender of self-will and self-love is more important than getting our own way, for we can easily misinterpret our perception of things in foolish, willful ways. Perhaps what Jesus actually did when he prayed submissively as he did on the night of his betrayal, was actually to identify himself with our weakness, so that even the certitude of the Father's will was withdrawn from him, so that in his extreme humiliation, Jesus prayed as we tend to pray in our weakness. Our struggles may be, says Lewis, to even believe that God is a Listener, not just that he is an Enabler.

Thus Lewis remained modest, extremely so, about his prayer life. Perhaps nothing keeps us humbler than a healthy realism about the inadequacy of our personal relationship with God. Lewis knew times of dryness in his prayer life, what the medieval monks used to call *accidie*. He warns us wisely against viewing our prayer life in relation to our emotions. "Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself," wrote Screwtape to his assistant Wormwood, "we are defeated." The Devil's advice to his evil apprentice is to distract their attention from God himself, to their feelings about God. "So when they ask for charity, let them also be deflected by having charitable feelings. When they pray for courage, let them feel brave. When they seek forgiveness, divert them with feelings about forgiveness. Teach them to eliminate the value of each prayer by the success in producing the desired feeling."<sup>44</sup> At all costs avoid the real



nakedness of the soul before God in prayer. It is that, argued Screwtape, that is so deadly, of being in the living Presence of God himself.

These then, are some of the things Lewis teaches us by his life and honest reflections. They are home-spun, for the truth is always simple, if it is lived rather than being mere theory. As the primary language of the soul, prayer is like saying the alphabet. It may not appear very profound to describe, yet it is essential, the basis of all communication with God, that leads us forward into mysteries yet unknown and still to be experienced. In the mercy of God, he takes our childhood wounds and memories, to show us how deeply we need to ask, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Then in the lessons he gives us through the lives of others, as well as our own, he unfolds the most wonderful journey for the soul we could ever conceive. Little did Lewis realize as a child where that journey would take him. Nor can we. But prayer remains its pulse-beat. We give the last word to Lewis about his own experiences of prayer. “Prayer,” he says, “in the sense of asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us. That he answers prayer is a corollary—not necessarily the most important one—from the revelation. What He does is learned from what He is.”<sup>45</sup>

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# C.S. Lewis the Evangelist

by Philip G. Ryken, Ph.D.

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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.

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*, *Perelandra*, 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.

## Part II: Lewis's Thought & Teaching

# C.S. Lewis's Seven Key Ideas

by Art Lindsley, Ph.D.

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I have heard it said that many well-known thinkers have only two or three key ideas that they develop from various angles throughout their lives. It might be asked: What are C.S. Lewis's key ideas? I have chosen seven to summarize in this essay. The seven I have chosen are:

1. Chronological Snobbery
2. Desire
3. Imagination
4. Objective Values vs. Relativism
5. Myth
6. Immortality
7. Comprehensiveness

1. *Chronological Snobbery*

One obstacle that C.S. Lewis had to overcome was what he called his "chronological snobbery." By that he meant the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is thereby discredited. For instance, people might ask, "What does a 2,000-year-old faith have to do with me?" One of Lewis's friends helped him to ask about ideas that seemed outdated. Why did an idea go out of date and was it ever refuted? If so, where, by whom, and how conclusively? C.S. Lewis later argued that reading old books helped provide a corrective to the blindness induced by our own age. We ought, he maintained, to read one old book for every new one or if that's too much, then one old one for every three new ones. Otherwise, we may be easily enslaved to the ideas of the recent past.

## 2. *Desire*

C.S. Lewis believed that we were made for "joy." God is the great "hedonist." He provides things for humans to do all day long, like "sleeping, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working." But, he also believed that to focus on these "second things" and neglect "first things" such as worshiping and loving God was to be "too easily pleased." He wrote:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Lewis's argument for God's existence from the nature of our desires is fascinating and thought provoking. Just as the existence of hunger points to satisfaction in the reality of food, thirst in drink, sexual desire in sex, drowsiness in sleep (etc) so other "natural" desires: spiritual hunger, desire for supernatural encounters, aspirations to immortality (and so on) act as cosmic pointers to real supernatural satisfaction.

## 3. *Imagination*

C.S. Lewis viewed reason as the natural "organ of truth" and imagination as the "organ of meaning." He believed that the only way we grasp any idea with clarity is if we have an image associated with it. He was able to work with equal facility in philosophical arguments or in writing fiction. Lewis uses images to illustrate his apologetics and communicates profound ideas in his fiction. For instance, he writes a great critique of relativism in *Abolition of Man* and communicates the same ideas in the novel, *That Hideous Strength*.

Imagination acted as a cosmic pointer to Lewis. Once, during his years of unbelief, he was going on a train ride and bought a book (George MacDonald's *Phantastes*). While he was reading, he said that a "new quality" touched his life and his imagination was "baptized." The quality was later described by Lewis to be "holiness." Although it took a while for the rest of him to catch up (reason-satisfied; will-submitted), it was an important first step. Having had this early experience, it is not surprising that he thought that others might feel a similar thing. He felt that his Narnia series might sneak past "watchful dragons" of religiosity enabling us to see old things in new ways.

#### 4. *Absolutes vs. Relativism*

C.S. Lewis argued for objective truth and morality against the relativism of his (and our) day. He felt that establishing the reality of truth and goodness was an essential preparation for the Gospel. He wrote:

For my part, I believe we ought to work not only at spreading the gospel (that certainly) but also at a certain preparation for the gospel. It is necessary to recall many to the Law of Nature before we talk about God. For Christ promises forgiveness of sins: But what is that to those who since they do not know the Law of Nature, do not know that they have sinned? Who will take the medicine unless he knows he is in the grip of disease? Moral relativity is the enemy we have to overcome before we tackle atheism.

Lewis's arguments against relativism are set forth in *Mere Christianity* (Book I), *Abolition of Man*, and in numerous essays.

#### 5. *Myth*

Early in C.S. Lewis's life he noticed the parallels between pagan myths and classic Christianity. In his education it was assumed that the pagan

myths were false and Christianity true. Why was this religion--and this one alone--true? This is one factor that led to his unbelief.

He resolved the problem and wrote about myth in a number of places. A key to his resolution was the increased understanding that if God created the world in a certain way and the human mind with a definite structure, it is not surprising that patterns reoccur. The only question is, Are any of these myths truer than others or, more precisely, Are any of these myths also fact? He came to believe that Jesus was the "myth become fact."

Later he defined myth as an "unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination." Lewis discusses parallel mythologies in his book, *Miracles*, his novel, *Till We Have Faces*, and in other places.

### 6. *Immortality*

Walter Hooper (C.S. Lewis scholar) argues that C.S. Lewis's central idea was that all people are immortal. Lewis wrote: "There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat." Lewis manifested this belief by writing personally to everyone who wrote to him (usually handwritten letters) and giving away all the proceeds of his books. Hooper tells the story of a time when he was with Lewis and they were talking about a man who was very boring.

Hooper told Lewis that the man succeeded in interesting him by the very intensity of his boredom. Lewis replied, "Yes, but let us not forget that Our Lord might well have said, 'As ye have done it unto one of the least of these my bores, you have done it to me.'" In fact, Lewis felt that it was sometimes his duty to visit and help such people.





Lewis also gives us glorious pictures of heaven. For instance, in my favorite of the Narnia Chronicles, *The Last Battle*, he portrays life in the higher country as infinite adventures with an infinitely creative God for all eternity. The last paragraph of *The Last Battle* says:

And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

### 7. *Comprehensiveness*

C.S. Lewis believed that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life and that all truth pointed to Him. Lewis said: "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." He was influenced by G.K. Chesterton who maintained that we become convinced of a theory not just when something proves it but only when everything proves it. Lewis explored reason, imagination, fiction, non-fiction, art, philosophy, classic literature, and poetry finding shafts of light and following them back to the sun (Son).

# C.S. Lewis on Authentic Discipleship

by Christopher W. Mitchell, Ph.D.

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Walter Hooper has on several occasions stated that C.S. Lewis was the most thoroughly converted person he had ever met. If I were to put what Hooper was saying into biblical language, it would go something like this: “From the time Lewis came to faith in Jesus Christ to the day he died, he desired, worked, and struggled, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing, to bring all of his life captive to Christ.” An evangelical would simply have said that Lewis was a model disciple of Christ. I agree with both assertions. I also believe Lewis understood the nature and purpose of Christian discipleship better than most and communicated as clearly as anyone in the English speaking world.<sup>1</sup>

Because my primary aim is to demonstrate the enormous significance of what Lewis has to teach us about Christian discipleship, it is important that I make clear at the outset that Lewis did in fact struggle all his life to embody what he knew to be true of a disciple of Christ. Two examples will suffice. The first comes from a letter Lewis wrote on June 21, 1950, to his friend and former student, George Sayer. Lewis was fifty-one years old. Much of his most important and celebrated work defending and explicating the faith had been published. He was, one might say, mature and well established in his faith. But on this day he penned the following: “My Dear George, I shall be completely alone at the Kilns... from Aug 11 to Aug 19th and am like to fall into a whoreson melancholy. Can you come and spend all or any of this time with me?”<sup>2</sup> Now this is a rather amazing and illuminating statement. Surprising in that a somewhat reserved Lewis should unburden himself in this way to a friend and illuminating inasmuch as it demonstrates that even at this period in his life, he was still wrestling with personal demons, still struggling to keep his way pure. It is

also illuminating in that it demonstrates the depth of his commitment to following Christ.

The second example is found in the last sermon Lewis preached. He delivered it on January 29, 1956, and it was titled “A Slip of the Tongue.” Once again, it is worth noting that Lewis is now fifty-seven years old; once again we might be tempted to safely assume that while he is far from perfect, he surely has all the big issues well in hand. “A Slip of the Tongue,” however, gives us reason to pause. He begins the sermon recounting how, during his morning devotions, he misread the collect for the fourth Sunday after Trinity. Instead of praying “that I might so pass through things temporal that I finally lost not the things eternal,” he prayed, “so to pass through things eternal that I finally lost not the things temporal.”<sup>3</sup> Now we might view this as quite innocent. Lewis did not. For what it alerted him to was that, after all this time, his oldest nemesis to discipleship was still alive and well; namely, his desire for limited liabilities, manifested in that persistent voice in his head that told him to be “careful, to keep his head, not to go too far, not to burn my boats.” Lest the sinister nature be missed, he goes on to make perfectly clear the meaning of these precautions.

*I come into the presence of God with a great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which will prove too intolerably inconvenient when I have come out again into “ordinary” life. I don’t want to be carried away into any resolution which I shall afterwards regret. For I know I shall be feeling quite different after breakfast; I don’t want anything to happen to me at the altar which will run up too big a bill to pay then.*<sup>4</sup>

The root of the matter, said Lewis, was the impulse to “guard the things temporal.” Now what makes this example so full of significance is that the demon he identified and faced off with in this sermon was the most



pervasive and powerful obstacle to his coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Speaking of his pre-Christian understanding of the faith in his book *Surprised by Joy*, he stated that “The horror of the Christian universe was that it had no door marked *Exit*.” The Christian way, in others words, was made horrifying precisely because of its demands. “No word in my vocabulary,” he went on to say, “expressed deeper hatred than the word Interference. But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer.” What Lewis already knew was that at the center of what it meant to be a Christian was the call to complete surrender and obedience to Christ. But Lewis wasn’t finished yet. So great was his aversion to this Christian doctrine that he was compelled to further describe what becoming a Christian would mean for him personally.

*If its picture was true then no sort of “treaty with reality” could ever be possible. There was no region even in the innermost depth of one’s soul (nay, there least of all) which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice No Admittance. And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, “This is my business and mine only.”*<sup>5</sup>

It is no surprise that Lewis titled the chapter in which he tells of his conversion “Checkmate.” It is also no surprise that the epigraph that heads the chapter reads, “The one principle of hell is—‘I am my own.’” For what becomes clear as he nears the point of believing is that the intellectual difficulties had all been addressed; there were no longer any rational barriers to belief. What remained was the barrier of the will. One is reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s poignant observation: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis had come face to face with the reality of Chesterton’s point. All his attempts to find Christianity “wanting” had

failed. He was now left with the “horrible” prospect of willingly allowing himself to become someone else’s; and that someone else was the one who had both the power and the right to hold him accountable to complete and absolute submission—the Transcendental Interferer.

Now before moving on, I should like to make a few observations. First, these examples reinforce both Lewis’s understanding of the call to discipleship and his commitment to it. Second, they make it quite clear that Lewis, like all human beings, was haunted with temptations and conscientiously worked at doing what he could to avoid them. Over the years he made notable progress both in the sanctity of his personal life and in his understanding of the faith. Among the most recognizable change in his character over time was a growing humility and compassion in his daily life. Third, they bear witness, particularly in what he says in “A Slip of the Tongue,” that he took seriously the personal commitments and promises he made before God. And last, rather than undermining the truth of what he taught, these examples add integrity and a large measure of authenticity to what he had to say about the nature and cost of being a disciple of Christ. In short, he modeled the life of a disciple.

Lewis was helped in his ability to grasp and accept this all-encompassing vision of discipleship by what he had been exposed to in his reading of the Greek and Latin classics—the idea of the absolute right of God to expect complete obedience.

*Long since, through the gods of Asgard, and later through the Absolute, He [i.e., God] had taught me how a thing can be revered not for what it can do to us but for what it is in itself. That is why, though it was a terror, it was no surprise to learn that God is to be obeyed because of what He is in Himself . . . To know God is to know that our obedience is due to Him. In his nature His sovereignty de jure [by right] is revealed.<sup>7</sup>*

What had previously been viewed as the great terror and an unwelcome intrusion in his life, he now accepted as God's right. The suddenness of this change Lewis attributed to the fact that he came to accept the right of divine sovereignty before the power of divine sovereignty: the right before the might. Looking back, he recognized this as a great good because it settled for him once and for all where the true good of humanity lay. Union with God and obedience to his commands, he stated, is "bliss and separation from it horror." Ironically, what had once been his deepest desire and only comfort—to be his own—was now the horror, and what was once the horror had become his ultimate comfort. Reflecting on this, he counseled that it would be good for us to remind ourselves that "God is such that if (per impossible) his power could vanish and His other attributes remain, so that the supreme right were forever robbed of the supreme might, we should still owe Him precisely the same kind and degree of allegiance as we now do."<sup>8</sup>

True Christian discipleship, Lewis would have us understand, is first a matter of the heart—the inner life: the recognition, acceptance, and surrender to God's absolute authority over all the affairs of one's life in a way that leaves no place to which one may call one's own. But the surrendered heart, Lewis taught, must also express itself in active obedience to the claims placed upon the believer by the New Covenant. The heart and will of a disciple are, in fact, inextricably bound together. Lewis's most poignant commentary on these matters, particularly the purpose of discipleship and the demands it presupposes, are found near the end of Book 4 of *Mere Christianity*.

Here Lewis made unavoidably clear that the ultimate purpose or aim of discipleship is to become perfectly Christlike. The Bible uses such phrases

as “putting on Christ,” “becoming a partaker of the divine nature,” and “becoming a son or daughter of God,” to flesh out this idea. It is also embodied, Lewis pointed out, in the call to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” a command he took quite literally. In fact he stated that it “is the whole of Christianity” and that “God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful . . . whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.”<sup>9</sup> God is not about the business of making nice people but rather new men and women perfected in the likeness of Christ. Consequently, Lewis went on to say, that the only help we can expect from the Lord is help in becoming perfect. We may want something less, but the Lord is committed to nothing less. Lewis was convinced that this was the very heart of the gospel and, therefore, was also the heart of the call to discipleship. It was the primary reason for which the Son of God came and suffered and died and rose from the grave. This he made unavoidably clear in the chapter “Counting the Cost.”

*That is why He warned people to “count the cost” before becoming Christians. “Make no mistake,” He says, “if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Nothing less, or other, than that. You have the free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand that I am going to see this job through. Whatever suffering it may cost you in your earthly life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect—until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less.”<sup>10</sup>*

That this was the ultimate purpose God had in mind for the sending of his Son, Lewis believed, and it accordingly obligated every believer to do what he or she could to assist others in the way of Christlikeness. He had,



himself, a well-developed sense and awareness that the New Covenant mandate to make disciples had a particular claim upon his own life and career. I do not believe I need to take time here to demonstrate Lewis's lifetime commitment to helping make disciples. One need only look at the enormous number of letters he wrote in answer to people's requests for doctrinal clarification or spiritual direction, or the seemingly endless list of articles, essays, and books he wrote for the same purpose. What is perhaps worth observing is that Lewis was keenly aware that he had received the best education the British university system could offer, that he held an academic post at arguably the most significantly placed English university of his day, that he was highly skilled in the art of argumentation and possessed unusual literary gifts, and he was under orders to bring these things into the service of Christ and his church, at whatever cost to himself.<sup>11</sup>

What I hope is now quite evident is that Lewis possessed a remarkably, perhaps for some alarmingly, robust sense of what it means to be a disciple: robust in its awareness of its costliness in its temporal aspect and gloriously robust in its awareness of its ultimate fulfillment in the eternal state. Nowhere did Lewis give expression to both these aspects as concisely as in the concluding paragraph of *Mere Christianity*.

*But there must be a real giving up of the self... The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin,*

*and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.*

## Notes

1. Although Lewis seldom used the words disciple or discipleship, the biblical idea was present when speaking of the believer's call to a holy life.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 3:39. In this context the word whoreson may be understood to mean wretched or hateful.
3. C.S. Lewis, "A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1996), 137ff.
4. *Ibid.*, 138.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 171, 172.
6. G.K. Chesterton, "The Unfinished Temple," in *What's Wrong with the World*, *Collected Works* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 4:61.
7. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 231–32.
8. *Ibid.*, 232.
9. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 152–55.
10. *Ibid.*, 158.
11. For a treatment of Lewis's sense of stewardship of his gift and academic position and the particular cost to his own life of discipleship, see my chapter, "Bearing the Weight of Glory: The Cost of C.S. Lewis's Witness," in *The Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3–14. (Also included in this book as Chapter 2.)

## Part III: Lewis's Family & Friends

# Major Warren Hamilton Lewis (1895-1973)

by Marjorie Lamp Mead

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Major Warren Hamilton Lewis was a kind-hearted and genuinely humble man, who spent most of his years living a quiet and retiring life. Were it not for his own extensive diary kept over the span of five decades, we would know very little of this reserved gentleman, who in later years grew to prefer the company of a good book to even the most congenial of social gatherings. Like most people, his life was filled with times of genuine happiness as well as moments of great sorrow. But unlike anyone else, he was C.S. Lewis's brother.



C.S. Lewis with his brother, Warren. Used by permission of The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.

### Loving Brother

Though there is no doubt that his name is best-remembered today because he was C.S. Lewis's brother, Warren would have willingly embraced such a designation— and not chafed under it. For in spite of the fact that he was the elder by three years, Warren never evidenced resentment at being overshadowed by his highly visible and successful younger brother. Indeed, if anything he welcomed it, for Warren and his brother (known to him as Jack) were from their earliest days the closest of friends. As Warren himself described their relationship:

I first remember [my brother, Jack], dimly as a vociferous disturber of my domestic peace and a rival claimant to my mother's attention: . . . [but] during these first years . . . we laid the foundations of an intimate friendship that was the greatest happiness of my life and lasted unbroken until his death fiftyeight years later.<sup>1</sup>

Born in a suburb of Belfast in northern Ireland on the 16th of June 1895, Warren spent his early years in a loving and intellectually stimulating home. His mother, Flora Hamilton Lewis, was intelligent and unusually well-educated for her day, receiving her First Class degree in mathematics from Queen's University, Belfast. His father, Albert, had an exceptionally quick mind and a skillful tongue which, coupled with his passionate nature, aided him in becoming a successful solicitor (lawyer) in the Belfast courts.

Along with his younger brother Jack, Warnie was first taught at home by his mother and later a governess. These were idyllic years for the two boys; virtually inseparable, they spent the vast majority of their waking hours together, not only learning their lessons, but also in long periods of creative play. Active children, though not athletic, whenever the weather permitted, the brothers were out of doors exploring the beautiful Irish countryside which was just a short bike ride from their home Little Lea. Another favorite childhood activity was their annual month-long seaside holiday, taken with their mother and nursemaid.

When typical rainy Irish weather forced them indoors, the two boys relished these hours as well. Reading filled much of their time, but they also created and illustrated their own stories. Together, they conceived the imaginary world of Boxen, which combined Warnie's interest in steamships and trains with Jack's passion for chivalrous knights, along with "dressed animals" in the tradition of Beatrix Potter.

These happy early years were the foundation for the lifelong friendship that meant so much to both brothers. Jack described their relationship this way in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*: "Though three years my

senior, [Warnie] never seemed to be an elder brother; we were allies, not to say confederates, from the very first.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Bright But Lazy Student**

In May 1905, shortly before his tenth birthday, Warren was sent by his parents to Wynyard, a small boarding school in Hertfordshire, England. Unfortunately, the choice of school could not have been worse, as it was run by a headmaster who “was an extremely uninspiring teacher—in fact not a teacher at all, but rather a warder who ruled his charges by sheer terror, and saw that the day’s useless allotted task was performed solely by the gusto and dexterity by which he yielded his cane.”<sup>3</sup> The misery of enduring this terrible school was compounded by the fact that little learning actually occurred. Years later Warren acknowledged: “It is a significant fact that I cannot remember one single piece of instruction that was imparted to me [during my four years] at Wynyard, and yet, when I first went there, I was neither an idle nor a stupid boy.”<sup>4</sup>

After his dismal years spent foundering at Wynyard, Warren’s next school could not help but shine in contrast. And indeed that was the case, for Warnie quickly grew to love Malvern College and the freedom it offered (in contrast to the constant harassment he had experienced at Wynyard). This freedom did not translate into academic rigor in his studies, however, for the slovenly academic habits that Warren had acquired at his earlier school remained. Thus, though he was very happy at Malvern, Warren left in May 1913 with little scholastic achievement to show for his four years.

As a result, once Warren decided to apply for a career in the army, it became clear that he would need help preparing for the entrance exam to

Sandhurst Royal Military Academy. With the assistance of W.T. Kirkpatrick, the tutor who was later to have such a great impact on C.S. Lewis, Warren was able to earn a Prize Cadetship to Sandhurst, placing twenty-first out of 201 successful candidates. As Warren later recalled:

When I went to [study with Kirkpatrick] I had what would now be called ‘an inferiority complex’, partly the result of Wynyard, partly of my own idleness, and partly of the laissez faire methods of Malvern. A few weeks of Kirk’s generous but sparing praise of my efforts, and of his pungent criticisms of the Malvern masters restored my long lost self confidence: I saw that whilst I wasn’t not brilliant or even clever, I had in the past been unsuccessful because I was lazy, and not lazy because I was unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup>

## Career Soldier

Due to wartime pressures, Warren’s accelerated officer’s training course was only nine months in length instead of the usual two years. On September 30, 1914, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), and sent to France where he spent most of World War I. Following the end of hostilities, he served in Belgium for a few months, until he was reassigned to England for additional training. During this and subsequent home assignments, Warren’s usual practice was to spend his leaves with his brother Jack, who was then a student at Oxford University, and later a don at Magdalen College, Oxford. Upon occasion, Warren did return to Belfast to visit his father, Albert, but these visits were almost always ones of obligation, for both Lewis brothers had become increasingly estranged from their father since the death of their beloved mother, Flora, in 1908.<sup>6</sup>

Warren’s responsibilities in the RASC were primarily administrative in nature as he fulfilled various supervisory roles overseeing troop supply



needs including, at times, mechanical transport. His later overseas postings included Sierra Leone, West Africa, and two tours of duty in Shanghai, China, where he was stationed when the Japanese attacked in January 1932. Throughout his years in the army (ranging from 1914 until 1932), these overseas tours of duty were interspersed with home assignments at military bases in England.

It was during his first posting in the Far East that Warren received a telegram from his brother, Jack, informing him of their father's death on the 25th of September 1929. The sad news was totally unexpected, as due to the distance from home and the slowness of sea mail, Warren was not aware that Albert was gravely ill. Alone and grieving, far from his brother, Warnie recorded the following thoughts in his diary:

[My father's death] is hurting me more than I should ever have imagined it would have done. For one thing, my relations with him on paper have been friendly and intimate ever since I was unexpectedly ordered abroad, and by mere lapse of time I was perhaps more affectionately disposed to him than I would have been had I been in frequent contact with him. . . . I am glad that the last time we spent together was also one of the happiest we ever had—the first week of April 1927— unclouded by the emotionalism with which he would have spoilt it had he known that I would be half way to China before the month was over. . . . The thought that there will never be any 'going home' for me [to the family home in Belfast], is hard to bear. I'd give a lot at this minute for a talk with Jack.<sup>7</sup>

Some months after his father's death, Warren returned home from Shanghai on leave, during which time he and Jack settled the affairs of their father's estate, including the sale of the family home in Belfast. By this time, Jack was already established as a don at Oxford University, and making his home with the mother and daughter of an army friend, Paddy

Moore, who had died in the war. When Warren's next assignment was a fortuitous posting to nearby Bulford, he was able to spend many weekend leaves visiting Jack's new household in Oxford. Eventually, Jack and the Moores invited Warren to permanently make his home with them when he was no longer in the army. He happily agreed. And so it was that in July 1930, with funds combined from the brothers' inheritance from their father, along with money from Mrs. Moore, this newly formed family unit purchased The Kilns, just outside Oxford. The Kilns, a modest brick home set on eight acres of lovely grounds including woods and a pond, became Warnie's permanent home in December 1932 when he retired with the rank of Captain from the RASC after 18 years of service.<sup>8</sup>

As much as Warnie grew to love his new home at The Kilns, the relationship between Jack and Mrs. Janie King Moore was to cause him great unhappiness. Initially appreciative of the home life Mrs. Moore offered to him and Jack, Warren grew to resent her unceasing demands upon the time and energies of his brother. Jack's commitment to Mrs. Moore was begun with a wartime promise to her son, and he fulfilled it faithfully until her death in 1951. It was an attachment which Warren never did understand or approve, as he reflected later: "The most puzzling to myself and to Jack's friends was Mrs. Moore's extreme unsuitability as a companion for him. She was a woman of very limited mind, and notably domineering and possessive by temperament. She . . . interfered constantly with his work, and imposed upon him a heavy burden of minor domestic tasks. . . . the stress and gloom that it caused him must not be played down."<sup>9</sup> While Warren's assessment of Mrs. Moore may have been overly harsh, there is no doubt that her controlling nature as well as

the long years of her failing health did take a heavy toll on the home life of both Lewis brothers.

In spite of his eventual difficulties with Mrs. Moore, the early days of Warren's retirement were very happy indeed. Though there were the usual annoyances common to any household, Warnie was nonetheless grateful for the many good things which Mrs. Moore and her daughter, Maureen, brought into his life. He was also very glad to be permanently reunited with his beloved brother. But most of all, Warren rejoiced that he was now free from the boredom and restrictions that had begun to prescribe his military life. A year into his retirement, he recorded the following evaluation: "I can say with no reservations whatsoever, that the past twelve months has been incomparably the happiest of my life."<sup>10</sup>

### **Inveterate Reader and Writer**

One of Warren's frequent complaints about life in the army had been that it was difficult to find blocks of uninterrupted reading time in the RASC mess. Though not as disciplined in this pursuit as his brother, reading was nonetheless an essential of his daily life. Raised in a home that nurtured his love for books, whenever possible Warren turned to reading as the preferred way to spend a quiet evening. His reading preferences were eclectic, ranging from the poetry of the *Aeniad* to the humor of P.G. Wodehouse. He devoured mysteries, science fiction, and novels of all sorts. But he also read through an unending supply of history, biography, literary criticism, poetry and drama. Nor did he neglect religious works, as his reading for just one Lenten season illustrates:

I've spent an hour each day in religious reading and during the last six weeks I've read Law's *Serious Call*, Lathom's *Pastor Pastorum*, Jack's *Reflections on the*

*Psalms, God in the Dock, Screwtape, and Letters to Malcolm, G.K. Chesterton's Everlasting Man, and Austin Farrer's Is There a Science of God* – as well of course as my normal daily Bible reading.<sup>11</sup>

Warren's love of words led him into another related pursuit—that of writing, itself. He began his retirement with the ambitious task of arranging, selecting and transcribing the many family documents which he and his brother had inherited at their father's death. These materials consisted of family diaries, letters, miscellaneous papers and photographs covering the years from 1850 through 1930. It took Warren several years to compile these excerpts, along with his accompanying notes and commentary, into eleven bound volumes—which he titled as *Memoirs of the Lewis Family*. Never published, this extensive family record has proved invaluable to those interested in the life of C.S. Lewis.<sup>12</sup>

However, long before he began his work on the *Lewis Family Papers*, Warren had already dedicated countless hours to the writing of his own diaries. Consisting of more than a million and a quarter words, the handwritten diaries fill twenty-three volumes and cover a span of over fifty years (1919-1972). In these pages, Warren wrote of his army experiences, as well as of family life in Belfast and his retirement years at The Kilns. There are records of his walking tours with Jack, conversations with friends, mentions of books he has read and places he has visited, as well as his astute reflections on numerous subjects of all sorts and categories.

Warren's literary and historical curiosity extended to other areas as well. In 1919, his reading of St. Simon's diaries awakened his interest in 17th century France. As he continued to read further in this historical period, his fascination deepened and during retirement he began



composing his own popular histories. Warren's first published book, *The Splendid Century: Some Aspects of French Life in the Reign of Louis XIV*, was issued in 1953. It was followed by six other titles on 17th century France: *The Sunset of the Splendid Century: The Life and Times of Louis Auguste de Bourbon, Duc de Maine, 1670-1736* (1955); *Assault on Olympus: The Rise of the House of Gramont between 1604 and 1678* (1958); *Louis XIV: An Informal Portrait* (1959); *The Scandalous Regent: A Life of Philippe, Duc d'Orleans, 1674-1723, and of his family* (1961); *Levantine Adventurer: The Travels and Missions of the Chevalier d'Arvieux, 1653-1697* (1962); *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon* (1964).

Though not works of extensive original research, his elegantly written histories of 17th and 18th century France were nonetheless well-regarded by reviewers. Described as delightful and witty, his seven books demonstrate his insight into human nature as well as his observant eye for details—literary traits which also characterize his own diaries. Following C.S. Lewis's death in 1963, Warren wrote a biographical volume on his brother which consisted primarily of collected letters. This unpublished work was extensively edited and eventually published as *Letters of C.S. Lewis*.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to his own writing and editing, once he had retired from the army, Warnie also began to serve as his brother's secretary—typing the answers to all of Jack's non-personal correspondence. Because of the vast quantity of letters which came to C.S. Lewis in response to both his books and BBC radio broadcasts, the help which Warren provided in this way was extremely significant. (Warren later estimated that he had typed at least twelve thousand letters for his brother.)

## Steadfast Friend and “Perfect” Gentleman

In spite of Warren’s reserved character, he was a personable and well-liked friend to many. First and foremost, of course, there was his friendship with his brother Jack which has already been described in some detail. Because of the closeness of their relationship, it is not surprising that in later life most of Warnie’s friends were also friends of Jack’s.<sup>14</sup> In particular, this included those men who were members of the Inklings—a group of friends who gathered together weekly in Jack’s Magdalen College rooms for an evening of vigorous conversation that inevitably revolved around literary topics. In addition to the two Lewis brothers, members of the Inklings included: J.R.R. Tolkien and his son Christopher, Robert Havard, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Colin Hardie, Charles Williams, and many other academic friends.<sup>15</sup> Most of the Inklings were writers, themselves, and as a result, one favorite aspect of these gatherings often included readings from their various works in progress, accompanied by extempore criticism—both favorable and not.

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote this description of one meeting to his son Christopher (who also attended the Inklings meetings when he was in Oxford):

C.S.L. [Jack] was highly flown, but we were also in good fettle. . . . The result was a most amusing and highly contentious evening, on which (had an outsider eavesdropped) he would have thought it a meeting of fell enemies hurling deadly insults before drawing their guns. Warnie was in excellent majoral form. On one occasion when the audience had flatly refused to hear Jack discourse on and define ‘Chance’, Jack said: ‘Very well, some other time, but if you die tonight you’ll be cut off knowing a great deal less about Chance you might have.’ Warnie: ‘That only goes to illustrate what I’ve always said: every cloud has a silver lining.’<sup>16</sup>

Not only does this brief description give a wonderful glimpse into the joviality and intellectual repartee which was the core of the Inklings, but it also demonstrates the wit of Warren Lewis—an aspect of Warnie’s personality which has often been overlooked.

Indeed, apart from Jack (and certain members of The Kilns household), it was the Inklings friends who saw the reserved Warren at his unguarded best. And as such, their perception of Warnie is worth noting. While his brother Jack was clearly the dynamic center of the gatherings, Warren was nonetheless a popular and significant contributor to the wide-ranging conversations and intellectual debate. But he also played an important part in the group by often serving on behalf of his brother as a welcoming host. It was a role which Warnie filled naturally and humbly. As John Wain, one of his fellow Inklings observed: “W.H. Lewis, [was] a man who stays in my memory as the most courteous I have ever met—not with mere politeness, but with a genial, self-forgetful considerateness that was as instinctive to him as breathing.”<sup>17</sup>

This sense of Warnie as a true, instinctive gentleman who treated others with genuine courtesy and respect is echoed by his step-nephew, Douglas Gresham, who recorded that

Warnie, a gentleman in all the finest senses of the word, was liked throughout the neighborhood, which, when I arrived, was made up chiefly of the homes of people who worked at the nearby motorcar factories at Cowley. ‘The Major’ was a well known and respected figure; always accorded a civil ‘Mornin’, Major’ or ‘Arternoon, Major’ as he passed by on his regular walks down to Magdalen to work, study or read with Jack in his college rooms during term time.<sup>18</sup>

## A Christian Who Struggled and Yet Persevered

Raised in a Christian home, Warren was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican church in Belfast where his grandfather was rector. In spite of this early foundation, however, Warnie felt little attraction to the faith, and his church-going gradually became more a matter of family tradition than of personal conviction. To be sure, there were moments when he experienced a sense of the transcendent—particularly when as a child he encountered beauty in the natural world—but to a large extent he lived his early years without regard to any spiritual reality. However, in March 1930, while returning from a tour of duty in China, Warren stopped off for a visit to the Buddhist shrine at Kamakura, Japan. Standing before a huge statue of the Dibutsu Buddha, Warren had a profound spiritual encounter, one which reawakened his sense that there was more to life than the material world surrounding him.

It was apparent that God was steadily working on his heart and mind, and in his diary entry of May 9, 1931, Warren recorded:

I started to say my prayers again after having discontinued doing so for more years than I care to remember: this was no sudden impulse but the result of a conviction of the truth of Christianity which has been growing on me for a considerable time: a conviction for which I admit I should be hard put to find a logical proof, but which rests on the inherent improbability of the whole of existence being fortuitous, and the inability of the materialists to provide any convincing explanation of the origin of life. I feel happier for my return to the practice which is a fact that material explanation will cover. When I have prepared myself a little further, I intend to go to Communion once again. So with me, the wheel has now made the full revolution—indifference, skepticism, atheism, agnosticism, and back again to Christianity.<sup>19</sup>



Hints of Warren's spiritual development are scattered throughout his diaries, but unlike the very public expression of his brother's faith, Warnie's Christian belief remained a quiet essential of his life. Over time, he developed a practice of daily prayer and Bible Study, and upon retirement, he was a regular congregant at their neighborhood Anglican church (even serving for a time as churchwarden). His diary also demonstrates the way in which his Christian faith informed his daily actions and struggles. There are frequent expressions of gratitude to God for simple pleasures, and an occasional recognition of the transcendent:

Seeing a birch tree with its russet leaves in the bright sunlight, I got that feeling—or rather vision that comes like a flash of lightening, and leaves a confused feeling that this is only a pale shadow of some unimaginable beauty which either one used to know, or which is just round some invisible corner. I accept it with deep thankfulness whenever it comes as a promise of immortality.<sup>20</sup>

In numerous places, Warren also records his deep desire for God's help in facing the ongoing challenges of life. Among the most severe of these trials was his longtime battle with alcoholism. The addictive attraction of drink was an unfortunate byproduct of his years in the army, when alcohol became his preferred means of coping with stress and boredom. In his younger days, drinking was a crutch which he handled without too much apparent difficulty, but as time went on, the addiction became more destructive. A sensitive and gentle man by nature, Warnie was also subject to bouts of serious depression, which in turn were exacerbated by the affects of alcohol. Thus, in later years, when he sunk into depression—caused often by his reaction to the stressful and unhappy atmosphere in The Kilns as Mrs. Moore's mental health deteriorated—he succumbed to intense drinking binges which caused him and those around him, most especially his brother, great pain.

Warren struggled valiantly to overcome this addiction without the benefit of understanding it as a disease rather than a character flaw. There were months, sometimes years, of hard won success followed by a brief relapse—and then the struggle would begin once again. The severest test to his resolve came with the death of his brother in 1963. The ten years following Jack's death were lonely ones for Warren, filled at times with periods of anxiety and depression. But with God's help, he continued his courageous struggle against turning to the comforts of alcohol, and succeeded more often than not. After a period of declining health and a final visit to his beloved Ireland, Warren Lewis returned to The Kilns where he died peacefully at home on April 9, 1973. He was nearly 78.

## Notes

1. Warren H. Lewis, "Memoir of C.S. Lewis" in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1966), p. 1.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 13.
3. Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. III, (1933), bound typescript in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, pp. 39- 40.
4. Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. III, p. 40.
5. Warren H. Lewis, *Lewis Family Papers*, vol. IV, (1933), p. 62.
6. For more on the death of Flora Lewis, see C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 24-27.
7. Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, ed. by Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 16.
8. When World War II erupted, Warren was recalled to active service and given the provisional rank of Major. He was transferred to the Reserve of Officers in Oxford in August 1941, after being evacuated along with his unit from Dunkirk.
9. Warren H. Lewis, "Memoir of C.S. Lewis" in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, pp. 12-13.
10. Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 129.
11. Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 299.



12. At his death, Warren willed the *Lewis Family Papers* to the Wade Center at Wheaton College, where they are available for use by researchers.
13. The earlier unpublished and unedited biography written by Warren was also willed by him to the Wade Center at Wheaton College, and is available for use by researchers.
14. Warren did stay in touch with one close friend from his army days, Major H.D. Parkin – a friendship that spanned almost thirty years, until Parkin's death in 1958. Though there is not space in this brief biographical sketch to include her, another close friend worth noting was C.S. Lewis's wife, Joy. For more on Warren's relationship with his sister-in-law, see *Brothers and Friends*, pp. 244- 251.
15. For more on the Inklings, see *The Inklings* by Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), *C.S. Lewis: Companion and Guide* by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), and also the forthcoming book, *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* by Diana Glycer (Kent State UP, 2006).
16. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), p. 103.
17. John Wain, *Sprightly Running* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1962), p. 184.
18. Douglas Gresham, *Lenten Lands* (San Francisco: HarperSanFran, 1988), p. 42.
19. Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 80.
20. Warren H. Lewis, *Brothers and Friends*, p. 213

# C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

by Earl F. Palmer, M.Div., D.D., Litt. D.

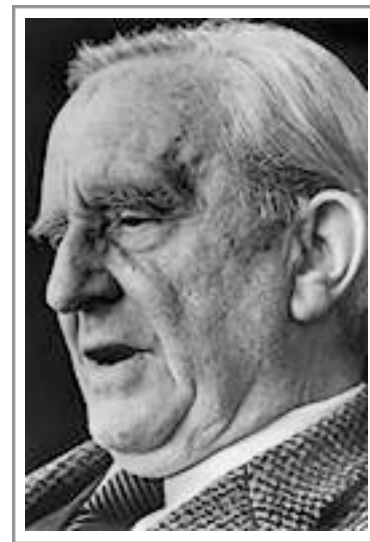
*Founder of Earl Palmer Ministries*



*The Rev. **Earl Palmer** is the founder of Earl Palmer Ministries (EPM), whose goal is to encourage pastors and laity in both discipleship and service as followers of Jesus Christ in today's world. He is a prolific author, a recognized C.S. Lewis scholar, and a featured speaker at seminaries, universities, and churches worldwide. Rev. Palmer served for more than 50 years in pastoral ministry and is Pastor Emeritus to the University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, WA and the Union Church of Manila. He has written numerous books including *Trusting God*, *24 Hour Christian*, and *The Humor of Jesus*. He and his wife, Shirley, have three grown children and seven grandchildren.*



C.S. Lewis was able to make close friendships. And those friendships influenced and shaped his own journey at most of the important turning points of his life—except for one: his love for and marriage to Joy Davidman. His older brother, Warren, was the only friend who knew about that. Lewis made that decision and the steps that led to it by himself. Joy Davidman was a beautiful gift from the Lord that both of them deeply appreciated.



J.R.R. Tolkien

Most of Lewis's friends were baffled by Lewis's marriage to Joy Davidman. But it especially baffled J.R.R. Tolkien, one of his closest friends, and caused a strain in Lewis's and Tolkien's relationship. Nevertheless, the richness and depth of their friendship outlasted that strain.

Tolkien and Lewis shared much in common. Both had lost their mothers to death at an early age, and Tolkien had lost his father as well. Both as young boys made close friends with fellow students at school who shared their love for stories. Both were young soldiers who fought in the First World War on the French front. Both were seriously wounded, both saw death in battle, and both lost close friends in that brutal war of the trenches.

As a lad, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his brother suffered the untimely death of their mother, Mabel. They were both adopted by Father Francis Xavier Morgan, a priest who had been an assistant to Cardinal John Henry Newman. Father Morgan loved these young boys, and guided and provided for the education of the brothers until their adult years. The influence in Tolkien's life of Father Morgan cannot be overemphasized.

Tolkien said, “I witnessed half comprehending the heroic sufferings and early death in extreme poverty of my mother who brought me into the Church; and I received the astonishing charity of Francis Morgan. But I fell in love with the Blessed Sacrament from the beginning.” Tolkien would faithfully attend the mass every day of his life, and he would name his first son, who would himself become a Roman Catholic priest, John Francis Reuel Tolkien. A kind and strong priest, Francis Morgan left a profound imprint upon J.R.R. Tolkien.

For the young C.S. Lewis, the most formative influence upon his life and mind was that of his mentor and tutor, W.T. Kirkpatrick, who taught Lewis as a private, live-in student when Lewis was 16 and 17 years old. Lewis would later write this of Kirkpatrick, in a letter to his father in 1921: “I owe to him in the intellectual sphere as much as one human being can owe another...it was an atmosphere of unrelenting clearness and rigid honesty of thought that one breathed from living with him, and this I shall be the better for as long as I live.”

Tolkien’s career path developed out of his love of language. He began as a lexicographer, went on to Leeds University, and then to Oxford University, where he eventually became the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature. One friend of both Lewis and Tolkien, Owen Barfield, described Lewis as “in love with the imagination” and Tolkien as “in love with language.” Tolkien’s Middle Earth project began as he told hobbit stories to his son John at bed time. He called this project my “stuff,” and he credits a friend who offered him the gift of “sheer encouragement.” Eventually, Tolkien agreed to the publication of his stories: first *The Hobbit*, and then his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The encouraging friend was another Oxford scholar, C.S. Lewis.

J.R.R. Tolkien's fundamental and daily walk of faith in Jesus Christ was discovered first from his beloved Father Morgan and participation in the worship of the Catholic Mass, with its focus on the death of Christ and his victory over death, sin, and the power of evil on our behalf. Tolkien grew to have a certitude and confidence in the powerful grace of God that in the end overcomes the terrors of evil. Evil may itself be strong, but Tolkien built his confidence upon St. Paul's radical affirmation in Romans 5 that "where sin increased, the grace of God increased more." Evil has cumulative force and inner power of its own, but the goodness of ultimate reality rendered in Jesus Christ has even greater power. The adventures in Tolkien's stories live within this certitude of their author.

For Lewis, the journey toward faith in Christ started in the territory of a youthful atheism, following a roadway more like an alpine trail that moves to the right and then to the left, sometimes veering farther away from the destination, and yet finally arriving in an open place of trust in the one who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It started with the honesty and clearness of W.T. Kirkpatrick who, though himself an atheist, taught Lewis to think for himself and to search for answers wherever they are.

In France, while at war, Lewis met a brave and good comrade in arms who was killed in battle before his eyes. Lewis tells about this man in his book *Surprised by Joy*. The goodness in this man surprised Lewis and unnerved his cynicism. He wrote, "In my own battalion also I was assailed. Here I met one Johnson (on whom be peace) who would have become a life-long friend if he had not been killed...in him I found dialectical sharpness such as I had hitherto known only in Kirkpatrick, but coupled with youth and whim and poetry. He was moving toward theism...But it was not this that mattered. The important thing was that he

was a man of conscience.” This man, who was the commander of Lewis’s company, had been a marker of goodness and integrity and in his own way a witness to the reality of God.

Also in France, Lewis was treated for trench mouth and while in a hospital tent, he read a volume of G.K. Chesterton essays. Lewis wrote of Chesterton, “I liked him for his goodness. I can attribute this taste to myself freely (even at that age) because it was a liking for goodness which had nothing to do with any attempt to be good myself...In reading Chesterton, as in reading [George] MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere...”

Both Tolkien and Lewis loved stories of the marvelous, and that affection for stories drew them together in 1926 at a reading group Tolkien had founded called the “Coalbiters.” They gradually came together with a few other friends to meet on a regular basis, to drink beer together and talk about books. These friends included Hugo Dyson, who was also an Oxford scholar; Dr. Havard, a medical doctor; C.S. Lewis’s brother, Warren; Charles Williams, who worked for Oxford University Press; and others who came occasionally. They called themselves the Inklings. These men were Christians. It was a particular, long talk between Dyson, Tolkien, and Lewis that became the decisive moment of discovery for C.S. Lewis. Tolkien helped him to understand the most radical truth about Jesus Christ as the world’s unique, totally-by-surprise, breakthrough of the divine who resolves the world’s catastrophe of human sin, death, and the power of evil. The pieces of a grand puzzle came together, and Lewis decided to believe in the deity of Jesus Christ. He explained it to his friend



Arthur Greeves: “It was the long talk with Tolkien and Dyson that had much to do with it.”

C.S. Lewis dedicated his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, to his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, and Tolkien dedicated his *Lord of the Rings* to the Inklings. It was also Tolkien who was the key influence in persuading C.S. Lewis to accept the professorship offered by Cambridge in 1954.

Lewis honored his experience of friendship with Tolkien and his other friends in the Inklings group in the book, *The Four Loves* (1960). In that important study of love, he wrote that whereas lovers stand face to face, friends stand side by side. The friendship among the Inklings was about the truths they held in common. In friendships like this, Lewis says there is the “what you too! I thought I was the only one” factor, the recognition of a shared vision (p. 96, *The Four Loves*). These words of Lewis help us to appreciate the healthy friendships that marked Lewis’s life. Tolkien’s friendships were not as extensive as were Lewis’s, but they both were marked with the “what you too! I thought I was the only one” factor.

These two story tellers gave to each of us a grand gift of the joy of adventure in their stories of the marvelous. They made us want to read, and for many of us to want to write stories of our own.

For the unsuspecting agnostic or atheist, both of these writers will catch us offguard. There is a sheer goodness and kindness at the core of the resolving surprise that happens to two young hobbits, Frodo and Sam, at Mt. Doom in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. It is a tender goodness that overcomes the dreadful power of the ring. That very goodness in the *Return of the King* is an unforgettable moment that prepares us for the great breakthrough of the powerful grace of God. Gandalf, in the castle of

King Theoden, challenges every fear we have that makes us want to stay safely hidden from the clear cold air of life. Tolkien helps us understand the cruelty of evil and its own inner weakness and rage that finally becomes destructive to evil itself.

Lewis helps us discover the breakthrough of God's love and truth in the "enormous exception" that G.K. Chesterton predicted. We meet the golden lion Aslan, Son of the Emperor from beyond the sea. Lewis once wrote to a friend about the seven Narnia stories, "I wondered what the redeemer would be like given a place like Narnia." Now we have seen it for ourselves, and our lives are not the same. Both men are like friends we wish we knew, both oddly contemporary to us as their stories, letters, essays, and persuasive books allow us to know how they think, and we are the better for it.

C.S. Lewis died in his beloved home, the Kilns, on November 23, 1963. J.R.R. Tolkien was at the graveside of his friend with a few of their Oxford friends and one family member, Lewis's stepson Douglas. Lewis was buried in the churchyard of the Headington Trinity Parish; on his grave are the words that were imprinted on the calendar of his house in Belfast on the day his mother died: "Men must endure their going hence."

Earlier that year, Lewis had written to Tolkien, "All my philosophy of history hangs upon a sentence of your own, 'Deeds were done which were not wholly in vain.'" Lewis is quoting from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

J.R.R. Tolkien died on September 2, 1973. His grave is in the Catholic Cemetery at Oxford, a few feet from his oldest son, the Rev. Father John Reuel Francis Tolkien, who died in 2003.

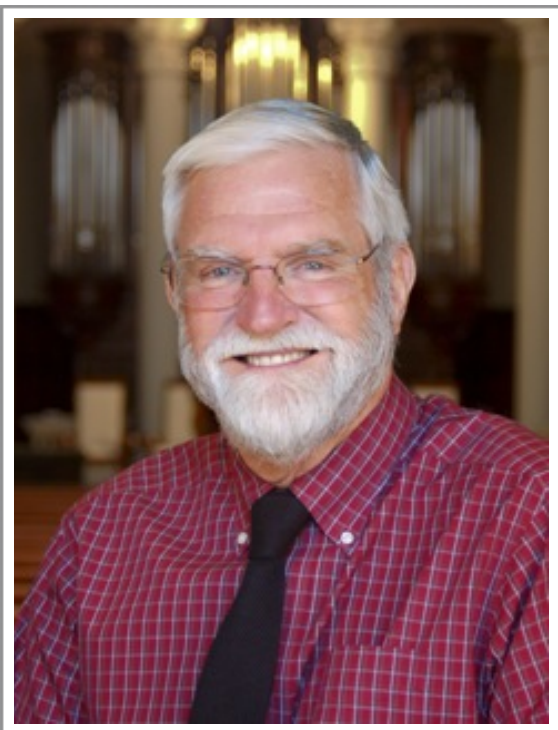
Both men are in their books, and their books are in our hearts.

# Helen Joy Davidman (Mrs. C.S. Lewis) 1915-1960

## *A Portrait*

by Lyle W. Dorsett, Ph.D.

*Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University*



**Dr. Dorsett** holds the Billy Graham Chair of Evangelism at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of numerous books, among them biographies of Joy Davidman (Mrs. C.S. Lewis), E.M. Bounds, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday. Keenly interested in the life and writings of C.S. Lewis, he has published a volume of Lewis's Letters to Children, The Essential C.S. Lewis, and Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C.S. Lewis. His most recent book is A Passion for God: The Spiritual Journey of A.W. Tozer. Lyle also serves as Senior Pastor of Christ the King Anglican Church in Homewood, Alabama. Lyle and his wife, Mary, founded and currently serve as directors of Christ for Children International, a mission to the impoverished in Mexico. The Dorsetts have two children and four grandchildren.

After C.S. Lewis went public with his conversion and commitment to Jesus Christ, controversy hounded him until his death. Fashionable agnostics dubbed him “Heavy Lewis,” liberal Christians reviled him for his lack of theological sophistication, and fundamentalists attacked his interpretation of scripture and his ecumenical charity towards most Christian traditions. But neither these issues nor a host of other contentions stirred up anything like the furor that surrounded his marriage to Helen Joy Davidman. In the minds of many of C.S. Lewis’s friends it was bad enough that a bachelor nearly sixty years old married a woman of forty. But to make matters worse, she was an American divorcee who also happened to be Jewish and the mother of two boys.



Helen Joy Davidman

The brilliant and attractive woman Mr. Lewis married in 1956 possessed a well-deserved literary reputation in her own right years before she met the celebrated Oxford don. Born in New York City to well-educated Jewish parents in 1915, Joy Davidman attended public schools and then went on to earn a B.A. at Hunter College and an M.A. from Columbia University. From childhood Joy exhibited marked intellectual prowess. She broke the scale on an IQ test in elementary school and as a youngster she loved books and typically read numerous volumes each week. Obviously a prodigy, Joy manifested unusual critical and analytical skills, as well as musical talent. Raised in a middle class Bronx neighborhood, Joy Davidman amazed even her brilliant and demanding father by being able to read a score of Chopin and then play it on the



piano without another glance at the score. Similarly she would take her part in a Shakespeare play and memorize her lines after the first reading. Howard Davidman, Joy's brother and her junior by four years, recalled that her striking intellectual powers and aggressive personality elicited his devoted admiration but at the same time inhibited him. To be sure, Howard was no intellectual slouch. Indeed, he excelled at the University of Virginia, became a medical doctor who practiced psychiatry in Manhattan after serving in World War II. Nevertheless, he confessed that he was so intimidated by Joy's writing that he never attempted to publish anything until his sister died.

Joy Davidman graduated from a demanding high school at age fourteen. She read books at home for the next year and matriculated at Hunter College at age fifteen. Clipping through Hunter as an English major and French Literature minor with honors at age nineteen, Joy then became a high school teacher upon graduation. While teaching her first year out of college, she earned a master's degree from Columbia in only three semesters.

In college Joy Davidman exuded a passion for writing. She published some poetry as an undergraduate, and then in January 1936, *Poetry*, a prestigious magazine out of Chicago and edited by the venerable Harriet Monroe, bought several of her poems. Monroe published a few more of Joy's works and then asked her to serve as a reader and editor for the magazine. Consequently Joy resigned her teaching position after one year, and devoted herself fulltime to writing and editing.

Her choice to write turned out to be a wise one. By age twenty-three her poetry caught the attention of Stephen Vincent Benet. He published a volume of her work, *Letters to a Comrade*, in the Younger Poet Series he

edited for Yale University Press. This volume of forty- five poems was celebrated by Benet and it received excellent reviews. Thanks to her initial successes and connection with influential members of the eastern literary establishment, she became a client of Brandt and Brandt, one of New York's finest literary agencies, and Macmillan brought her into their stable of writers. In 1940 *Anya*, her first novel, was published by Macmillan and well-received. She contributed to and edited *War Poem of the United Nations* which appeared with Dial in 1943, and then spent four summers at the MacDowell Colony for writers in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. There she wrote articles, poetry, and edited another volume of verse.

Always the radical with somewhat of an obsessive personality, Joy Davidman, like many intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, proclaimed herself disillusioned with capitalism and the "American system." Joy flirted with Communism during these tumultuous years. And while she never came close to becoming a doctrinaire Marxist, she did advocate socialism over capitalism, especially since the later system, to her mind, had failed and caused the Great Depression. Joy actually joined the Communist Party but found the meetings and most of the members quite boring. If she never advocated or expected the overthrow of capitalism, she did indeed enjoy criticizing both Democrats and Republicans who she believed were less enlightened than the supposedly heroic socialists who led the USSR.

Ultimately Joy Davidman was too intelligent to buy into the romanticized notions of the USSR circulating among the American intelligentsia during the 1930s and early 1940s. Indeed, the only things Joy got out of her brief affair with Communism was part-time employment as

a film critic and book reviewer and poetry editor for *New Masses*, a Communist newspaper, plus an acquaintance with another left-wing writer who would become her husband and the father of their two bright and healthy boys.

As early as 1942 twenty-seven year old Joy Davidman observed that the Communist Party in America had only one valid reason for being, “it is a great matchmaker.” In August that year, Joy married William Lindsay Gresham, novelist, journalist, Spanish Civil War veteran, charming story teller, and sometime guitar player and vocalist in Greenwich Village drinking establishments. Bill had grown disillusioned with Communists and their lofty speeches during his time in Spain. His dim view of the leftist movement hurried Joy out of the Party especially when she gave birth to David in early 1944, and Douglas less than a year and a half later.

By her own admission, Joy Davidman Gresham had been searching for fulfillment for years. College and graduate school, writing and editing, and socializing with some of New York’s most celebrated editors and authors, as well as political activism, were good in their place, but she was empty inside. With highest expectations she entered into family life with her husband. While Bill Gresham wrote and sold novels, including one (*Nightmare Alley*) that became a motion picture starring Tyrone Power, Joy stayed at home, did some freelance writing, and cared for her little boys, and the house and garden.

The Gresham marriage was in trouble from the outset. Bill had a serious drinking problem. Binges and hangovers cut into his writing—just when the growing family required more time and money. Bill not only wasted time and earned little money, he embarked upon a series of extra-marital affairs that at once broke Joy’s heart and drove her to fits of anger

and despair. To make matters worse, she had few friends and absolutely no religion to turn to for strength.

C.S. Lewis once remarked that “every story of conversion is a story of blessed defeat.” By the end of 1945 large cracks began to appear in her protective armor. Better educated and more intelligent than most people, well published and highly respected for a person only thirty years old, Joy had seldom if ever seriously entertained weakness or failure. But Bill’s long absences from home and apparent lack of concern for her and the boys left her devastated. One night in spring 1946 Bill called from Manhattan and announced he was having a nervous breakdown. Whether true or just another cover story for one of his escapades is beside the point. In brief, he was not coming home and could not promise when or if ever he would be back. Bill then rang off and Joy walked into the nursery where her babies slept. In her words, she was all alone with her fears and the quiet. She recalled later that “for the first time my pride was forced to admit that I was not, after all, ‘the master of my fate’ . . . . All my defenses—all the walls of arrogance and cocksureness and self-love behind which I had hid from God—went down momentarily and God came in.” She went on to describe her perception of the mystical encounter this way:

It is infinite, unique; there are no words, there are no comparisons. . . . Those who have known God will understand me. . . . There was a Person with me in that room, directly present to my consciousness—a Person so real that all my precious life was by comparison a mere shadow play. And I myself was more alive than I had ever been; it was like waking from sleep. So intense a life cannot be endured long by flesh and blood; we must ordinarily take our life watered down, diluted as it were, by time and space and matter. My perception of God lasted perhaps half a minute.



Joy concluded that inasmuch as God apparently exists, then there is nothing more important than learning who He is and what He requires of us. Consequently the former atheist embarked upon a journey to know more of God. At the outset she explored Reformed Judaism but could find no inner peace. Always the reader, she devoured books and verse on spirituality, including Francis Thompson's long poem "The Hound of Heaven." It was first Thompson's poetry and then three books by C.S. Lewis—*The Great Divorce*, *Miracles*, and *The Screwtape Letters*—that caused her to read the Bible. And when she got into the Gospels, according to her testimony, the One who had come to her appeared again: "He was Jesus."

Joy Davidman found nourishing spiritual food in the Bible and the writings of C.S. Lewis. Because of her interest in Lewis, the publications of a liberal arts college professor and poet, Chad Walsh, who also happened to be a mid-life convert, caught her attention. Walsh wrote a biographical article on C.S. Lewis for the *New York Times* in 1948, and he published the first biography of Mr. Lewis a few months later entitled *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics*. Joy corresponded with Chad Walsh about her many questions related to Lewis's books and her new-found faith. Walsh understood and respected Joy's pilgrimage so he and his wife, Eva, frequently entertained Joy and her boys at their summer cottage at Lake Iroquois, Vermont.

The C.S. Lewis—Walsh connection provided just the right tonic for Joy's thirsty soul. At Chad's suggestion she read everything Lewis wrote as well as some books by Charles Williams, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers. By 1948 Joy pursued instruction in a Presbyterian Church near her upstate New York home. Soon thereafter she

and the boys were baptized. Between the New York pastor and her mentor, Chad Walsh, Joy grew in faith and began manifesting signs of genuine conversion and repentance.

At Chad Walsh's urging, Joy wrote to C.S. Lewis about some of her thoughts on his books. Although Walsh assured Joy that Lewis always answered his correspondence, it took her two years to find the courage to write. When she did, in January 1950, Lewis's brother noted in his journal that Jack had received a fascinating letter from a most interesting American woman, Mrs. Gresham.

For the next two and a half years Joy and C.S. Lewis carried on a rich correspondence that intellectually and spiritually encouraged each of them. Over that quarter decade Joy's health and family problems opened the way for the famous English author and his talented American pen friend to meet.

During the late 1940s Joy's health deteriorated. She suffered from nervous exhaustion while trying to raise the boys and write enough to pay all the bills. To be sure, Bill Gresham sobered up for brief periods, and he was in and out of the house depending on his moods.

Joy finished several writing projects, including a novel, *Weeping Bay*, that came out with Macmillan in early 1950. She gave a lengthy interview to a reporter for the *New York Post*, and he brought out a multi-part series of Joy's testimony dubbed "Girl Communist." Then while writing a book-length Jewish-Christian interpretation of the Ten Commandments, she became gravely ill with jaundice. Her doctor ordered rest—preferably away from the pressures of her chaotic house and family.

In the midst of this turmoil Joy received a cry for help from her first cousin, Renée Pierce. Renée had two little children, and an alcoholic husband, and a desperate need to live apart from her estranged spouse until a divorce could be finalized. With no money and few alternatives, she threw herself on the Greshams for mercy. Joy took her in and after a few months Renée enthusiastically agreed to oversee the household so Joy could get away for a rest.

With financial help from her parents, Joy sailed for England in August 1950. She found a room in London, rested well, and put the finishing touches on *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*. While in London for four months the Lewis brothers invited Joy to Oxford. Indeed, there were several visits where Joy Gresham and Jack Lewis had opportunity to get better acquainted. Joy laid out her problems before Jack. He listened, grieved for her, and said a sad farewell when she returned to New York in January 1951.

During the four months Joy resided in London, Bill wrote from time to time keeping her informed about the boys. Just before her return, however, he announced that he and Renée were in love and having an affair. He wondered if Joy would consider living under the same roof despite the changed circumstances. Joy had no intention of doing that but she did return with some hope that the mess could be redeemed.

Months of wrangling failed to bring reconciliation. Nine months later Bill sued Joy for a divorce on grounds of her desertion when she went to England. In the meantime C.S. Lewis and his brother, Warren—both of whom had grown extremely fond of Joy—urged her to return to England and bring the boys. She was back in England with David and Douglas before Christmas.

Joy lived in London for nearly two years, trying to support herself by free-lance typing and writing in order to supplement Bill's erratic child-support checks. The boys were placed in private schools thanks to the generosity of C.S. Lewis. For almost two years Joy and Jack visited one another regularly. When Joy's financial situation worsened in August 1955, Lewis secured a place for her in Oxford, not far from his own home. He paid the rent and he and Warren plied her with manuscripts to edit and type.

By Christmas 1955 it was apparent to everyone who knew them that friendship had become love. Lewis visited Joy almost daily and she and the boys spent holidays and special occasions with Warren and Jack at their home, The Kilns. Because Joy was now a divorced woman, there was no impropriety—at least to their mind—for them to see one another on a regular basis. But Joy told her closest friends that although they frequently walked and held hands, marriage was out of the question. Because she was divorced even their friendship appeared scandalous to some people.

In April 1956 the British Government, perhaps because of Joy Davidman's previous Communist Party affiliation, refused to renew her visa. C.S. Lewis was devastated. How could this woman be sent back to the United States where her boys would possibly be abused by their alcoholic father who had more than once done them physical harm? And how could he manage without Joy nearby? She, after all, was the first woman with whom he had been truly close. She was his equal if not superior in intellect, and they were the epitome of two people who truly were like iron sharpening iron,

In fact, C.S. Lewis could not imagine living apart from Joy Davidman. He threw caution and appearances to the wind. They quietly married in a



civil ceremony on April 23, 1956. Now Joy could legally remain in England, with her boys, as long as she wished.

C.S. Lewis inquired about a sacramental marriage in the Anglican Church because to his mind a civil marriage was a legal convenience but not a real marriage. Lewis sought the blessing of the church on the grounds that Joy had legal grounds to be divorced and remarried due to Bill's infidelity, and further because he had been married prior to marrying Joy, and also neither of them were Christians when they were joined in a civil service years before. But the Bishop of Oxford refused. Joy was divorced. The Church did not condone divorce and he would not give his blessing.

Joy and Jack lived apart but they continued to see one another. So much so that some people were critical of their relationship despite the fact that they honored the guidance of the Church. But everything changed in early 1957. Joy was standing in her kitchen, her leg broke, and with excruciating pain she was able to drag herself to a place to call for help. She was rushed to the hospital where x-rays and tests revealed that her body was full of cancer. C.S. Lewis's doctor, who tended to her at the hospital, told me in the 1980s that she was dreadfully ill. There were malignant tumors in her breast and her bones were riddled with cancer. Dr. Humphrey Havard told Jack to prepare for her death. She could not live but a few days or weeks.

Professor Lewis called in a favor from a man he had helped after the war. Father Peter Bide, an Anglican priest with a parish just south of London, was purported to have the spiritual gift of healing. Lewis called him and asked if he would come up to Oxford, anoint Joy with oil, and pray for her. Father Bide arrived at Oxford at night. He and Jack talked

about Joy's situation at some length, and Lewis told him of Joy's dying wish to be married in the Church. Father Bide recalled that he did not feel he could in good conscience deny this poor soul her wish, even though she was not in his diocese. Therefore the next day, March 21, 1957, he anointed her with oil, prayed for healing, and then in the presence of Warren Lewis and one of the sisters at the hospital, he administered the sacraments of Holy Matrimony and Holy Communion. Within a few minutes an apparently dying Joy Davidman became Mrs. C.S. Lewis.

Christian marriage was only the first unexpected effect of Joy's illness. To the amazement of doctors and nurses, she made a rapid recovery after being sent home from the hospital to die. She went into a remission of nearly three years. She and Jack traveled to Ireland and Wales, and they made a memorable trip to Greece with their friends, June and Roger Lancelyn Green. The Lewises' closest friends, the Greens and George and Moira Sayers—all said that she showed no signs of poor health except some edema. Indeed, Joy and Jack were like two school-aged youth who were cutting up and having a wonderful time. That Joy had brought great happiness to Jack became evident by what he wrote to one friend: "it's funny having at 59 the sort of happiness most men have in their twenties. . . [ellipses his] 'Thou has kept the good wine till now.'"

The relationship of C.S. Lewis and Joy lasted only a decade. She first wrote to Jack in January 1950, and the cancer returned with a vengeance in spring 1960. Joy died in July and her ashes (she requested cremation) were scattered over a rose garden at the crematorium. Although it is impossible to quantify the impact of any loving relationship, there is massive evidence to show that these two pilgrims were unusually important to one another. On Jack's part, his early books had helped Joy come to faith in

Christ. His letters and their personal relationship helped her mature spiritually in Christ, and he helped her to develop professionally as a writer. Lewis helped Joy sharpen *Smoke on the Mountain*. He also wrote a Foreword for the British edition, helped promote the book and intervened to secure her a good contract with a British publisher. On her part, Joy had an impact on C.S. Lewis that has seldom been recognized. Lewis admitted that when she and the boys came into his life it was extremely difficult for an aging bachelor to have an instant family in his house. But the result was that both he and Warren were forced outside of themselves and this was precisely what these self-centered bachelors needed. Beyond such intangible benefits, Joy helped Lewis with his writing. She wrote to one person that she increasingly felt called to give up her own writing so that she could assist Jack in his work. Lewis gave up writing non-fiction and apologetical books after he published *Miracles* in 1947. Some people have argued it was because Elizabeth Anscombe so devastatingly attacked a part of the book. In any case Joy Davidman pushed him to take up non-fiction once more and as a result she helped him produce *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958) and she enthusiastically talked him out of a writer's block so he could finally go forward with his longtime coming *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*.

Lewis believed his best book was *Till We Have Faces*, and most students of his books agree. He unabashedly dedicated this classic to Joy Davidman and many saw her in the novel's character Orual. To the point, Lewis believed that Joy helped complete him as a person, and she acknowledged that he did the same for her. A careful reader will also find Joy's fingerprints on several of his other works, all the way from the double meaning title of *Surprised by Joy* to some words and phrases in *The*

*Chronicles of Narnia*. But the clearest evidence of her impact on his thinking and writing is in *The Four Loves* and *A Grief Observed*. Lewis might have written *The Four Loves* without Joy as his wife, but it would have been much less profound and certainly more theoretical than experiential. And finally, *A Grief Observed* could never have been written without the love and pain of Jack's life with Joy.

In the final analysis, then, those of us who thank God for the way C.S. Lewis has been our teacher through his books, must also be grateful for Joy Davidman Lewis. Without her the Lewis collection would be smaller and poorer.

## Note

*This article is based on Lyle W. Dorsett's biography of Joy Davidman: And God Came In (Macmillan, 1983) and a revision of that book titled A Love Observed: Joy Davidman's Life and Marriage to C.S. Lewis (Northwind, 1998), as well as the author's oral history interviews housed at the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.*

*Dorsett's book on Joy Davidman is available in audio format as Surprised By Love: The Life of Joy Davidman: Her Life and Marriage to C.S. Lewis (Hovel Audio) [www.hovelaudio.com](http://www.hovelaudio.com).*



# Part IV: Writers Who Influenced Lewis

# George MacDonald: An Original Thinker

by Tanya Ingham

*C.S. Lewis Institute Fellow & Mentor*



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C.S. Lewis remarks, in *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, that he doubted whether he had ever written a book in which he did not quote George MacDonald. Lewis states that he made no secret of the fact that he regarded MacDonald as his master.<sup>1</sup> Lewis attests to a baptism of his imagination upon reading MacDonald's *Phantastes*. Similarly, G.K. Chesterton describes the impact of *The Princess and the Goblin* with the following words:



George MacDonald

*I for one can really testify to a book that has made a difference to my whole existence, which helped me to see things in a certain way from the start; a vision of things which even so real a revolution as a change of religious allegiance has substantially only crowned and confirmed.*<sup>2</sup>

Admirers of Lewis may be familiar with these laudatory descriptions, but not as familiar with the person praised.

George MacDonald, a Victorian Scottish writer, produced 53 books of varied genre, including fiction, fantasy, sermons, poetry, novels, short stories, and essays. His work was well known in the latter part of the nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. In comparison, MacDonald became relatively unknown during the following century. Biographers consider the decline of interest the result of a change in the modern appetite, which no longer found palatable the didactic style of the religious content of much of his work. MacDonald's son Greville observed that the theological slant became less appealing to an audience that was becoming less theological and that the reader no longer cared for the moral lessons or spiritual challenge inherent in his father's work.<sup>3</sup>

A deeply reverent and sincere Christian, MacDonald was accused of heresy on more than one occasion (and with good reason). His first pastorate was lost in part due to such charges. His life, thought, and work reveal a mystic concerned with widening the vision of others beyond this world; a writer who infused the mundane with the divine or revealed the divine in the mundane; a pastor whose pulpit lay beyond the bounds of the church; an unsystematic theologian; a loyal friend; and a loving husband and father. A complex man, yet childlike in his faith, MacDonald demonstrated a passionate love for God which his life displayed and which he exercised through unquestioning obedience; obedience being for MacDonald the very soul of knowledge and the essential key to Christian growth.

The religious convictions of MacDonald permeated both his life and work. Ronald MacDonald describes the integrity of his father's faith:

*The ideals of his didactic novels were the motive of his own life...a life of literal, and, which is more, imaginative consistency with his doctrine....There has probably never been a writer whose work was a better expression of his personal character. This I am not engaged to prove; but I positively assert...that in his novels, his fantastic tales and allegories, and most vividly, perhaps, in his verse, one encounters... the same rich imagination, the same generous lover of God and man, the same consistent practiser of his own preaching, the same tender charity to the sinner with the same uncompromising hostility to the sin, which were known in daily use and by his own people counted upon more surely than sunshine.<sup>4</sup>*

Christ was the center of his life and work. MacDonald did not hold a position in a church for any significant length of time and consequently did not have a regular pulpit from which to deliver his sermons. Many of his sermons were "delivered" through written form. His sermons are found in the following works: *Unspoken Sermons, 1st Series* (1867),



*Unspoken Sermons, 2nd Series* (1885), *Unspoken Sermons, 3rd Series* (1889), *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870), and *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892).

## The Making of an Original Thinker

George MacDonald was born and raised in the small village of Huntly, which is located in Aberdeenshire in the northeast of Scotland. He was born on December 10, 1824. He lived into the next century, dying in 1905. At the time of his birth, the Industrial Revolution had not reached his village and its economy was dependent upon agriculture and handicrafts. The Celt's love of poetry and music, his passionate nature, his loyalty to family and land, and his sincere piety all distinguished the heritage and life of MacDonald.

He grew up on a farm; his father and uncle ran a bleaching business for several years and farmed the land. In 1832, when MacDonald was eight years old, his mother died from tuberculosis. Helen MacKay MacDonald had been well educated, beautiful, and dearly loved by her husband. She left behind her husband and four sons; Charles, George, Alexander, and John Hill. This loss was alleviated for George when his father remarried seven years later.

George enjoyed his childhood in the environment of a close and loving family. A delicate constitution, which would plague him throughout his adult life, prevented him from being as physically active as some of the other children, though he loved roaming the town and surrounding fields with schoolmates. He did well in school and at an early age began reading such titles as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Paradise Lost*, and Klopstock's *Messiah*. Michael Phillips refers to MacDonald as a "thinker, a juvenile mystic of sorts," who was fascinated with nature and the meaning of life from an

early age.<sup>5</sup> Greville describes how his father's world differed from that of his playmates because "his keener vision everywhere disclosed fairyland and bewitchment, chivalry and devotion."<sup>6</sup>

## The Wrath of God

Isabella Robertson, George's grandmother, insisted upon the children's attendance at the Missionar Kirk in Huntly. His grandmother was an example of a cold, dour, severe woman who had destroyed her son's violin at an early age, considering it a tool of Satan. She had left the Parish Church of Huntly for the more passionate and zealous Missionar's Congregational Church. A portion of George's early religious instruction could be described as strict and joyless. Mac-Donald retained several of the positive aspects of his religious upbringing, such as a fervent, evangelistic spirit, but he did from an early age begin to struggle with aspects of a strict Calvinist theology, questioning the legalism and the teachings on predestination. As he wrestled with questions concerning the nature and character of God, he was not left without positive input. Nature seemed to hint of a God of wonder; a God of creation; a God of joy and delight. Along with nature's testimony, the most important ingredient for George in the forming of a fuller and more positive impression of God at an early age was his father.

George MacDonald Sr. demonstrated warmth, understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Greville describes his grandfather as "of noble presence, well built and robust—a 'wyss' man...brave, patient, and generous; finely humorous, of strong literary tastes, and profound religious convictions." And he says his father's reverence for him was "absolute."<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis states:

*An almost perfect relationship with his father was the root of all his wisdom. From his own father, he said, he first learned that Fatherhood must be at the core of the universe. He was thus prepared in an unusual way to teach that religion in which the relation of Father and Son is of all relations the most central.*<sup>8</sup>

As George MacDonald matured and faced periods of doubt in regard to his faith, it was to his father, both as a source of wisdom and as an example to model, that he turned.

### **The Young Thinker**

In 1840, at the age of sixteen, George was sent to Aulton Grammar School in preparation for the Bursary Competition. He won twelfth place and was awarded the Fullarton Bursary, which granted him fourteen pounds a year. This allowed him to attend King's College, where he excelled in chemistry and natural philosophy. He desired to continue studies in medicine, but lack of funds prevented this. He was forced to miss the third session at university due to lack of funding, and spent the period cataloguing a library in the north of Scotland.

During this interim, he began reading Schiller, Goethe, and E.T.A. Hoffman. He was especially drawn to the German mystic, Novalis. Attracted to his sensitive treatment of nature, his fascination with death, and the general melancholy of his work, MacDonald would later go on to translate Novalis' *Twelve Spiritual Songs*. Michael Phillips discusses how this period strengthened, rather than weakened, his struggling faith. Phillips describes how it gave him the room and boundaries for doubts, and that he returned to university having resolved certain issues. He no longer feared that God would judge him for his doubts or questions, and, more importantly, he felt convinced that his instincts in regard to God's character, goodness, and love were correct.<sup>9</sup>

He returned to the university in 1843, widening his study to include language and literature. He was an “ardent, if nervous, speaker in the Debating Society,” and he enjoyed playing charades. He was also introspective, analytical, emotional, and moody. He demonstrated a complex personality, which revealed him playful and carefree one moment and pensive and withdrawn the next. One of his closest friends at King’s, Robert Troup, wrote in 1898:

*He was studious, quiet, sensitive, imaginative, frank, open, speaking freely what he thought. His love of truth was intense, only equaled by his scorn of meanness, his purity and his moral courage. So I have found him when I became acquainted with him....So I have found him ever since.*<sup>10</sup>

Troup also notes his silent and thoughtful moods and the consequential concern his friends expressed over MacDonald’s spiritual state.

## God’s Call

MacDonald received his master’s degree in chemistry and physics in 1845. The period of 1845-1853 was especially significant in regard to the development of MacDonald’s faith. He had been repelled by the surrounding worldliness and hypocrisy of the church, but he had found renewal and encouragement in the Gospels. The spring of 1847 witnessed a deepening of his Christian experience, marked by a stronger sense of joy. The teachings from youth faded into the background as the reading of Scripture and the teachings of Christ claimed more and more of his attention. He wrote to his father how he was in the habit of reading the Gospels every day and that if the Gospel was not true, he wished his maker to annihilate him, for nothing else was worth living for.<sup>11</sup>

In 1848, MacDonald made the decision to become a Congregationalist minister. He entered Highbury College in London, spending two years



studying Greek and Latin classics, European biblical scholarship, and the Bible in its original languages. He graduated in 1850, fluent in Latin, Koine and Classical Greek, Hebrew, German, and French. An influential part of his experience at Highbury was the teaching of Professor John Godwin. Godwin held the Chair of Systematic Theology and New Testament Exegesis. Suspected of heretical tendencies, Greville remarks that “his mode of thought appears to have been independent with leanings towards Arminianism” and also that “it was for his exposition of the New Testament that my father was most indebted to him.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Husband and Pastor**

During his tutorship, MacDonald had met his future bride, Miss Louisa Powell. They were married on March 8, 1851. The Powells had found the young suitor “unconsciously persuasive” and had “recognized with sure instinct that a daughter given to this lover of God, this poet who opened the eyes of all who were not slaves to pharisaic convention, was in good keeping indeed.”<sup>13</sup> Louisa was sharp-witted, perceptive, and honest. She was also extremely sensitive and throughout their marriage dealt with periods of depression and struggles with self-esteem. George, though, became increasingly dependent upon her for love and encouragement throughout their courtship and marriage. They enjoyed deep companionship in their marriage and lovingly raised eleven children together.

The year of his marriage found MacDonald accepting a position at the Trinity Congregational Church in Arundel. The church was attracted to its young pastor’s sensitivity and humor, but time revealed a ruling minority who found some of the pastor’s admonishments uncomfortable. Greville states:

*My father's flaming words against mammon-worship and cruelty and self-seeking, were as thoroughgoing as the giving of himself to all who needed him....The poor understood him—as they did his Master; but the purse-proud resented his plain speaking and turned away.*<sup>14</sup>

The church expressed a desire for more doctrinal sermons and seemed to be unresponsive to MacDonald's call to be obedient and mirror the goodness of Christ in the mundane activities of life.

The parishioners were uncomfortable with Mac-Donald's emphasis upon the love of God and his treatment of the doctrine of hell. MacDonald had come to believe that the suffering of the damned compromised God's goodness and, thus, could not accept the Calvinist understanding of God's wrath and punishment. He viewed suffering and punishment as God's instruments of purification. His emphasis upon the purgatorial nature of hell and the possibility of redemption beyond the grave reveals threads of universalism in his thinking and beliefs. (See the article on page 6 of this issue on the importance of theology.) MacDonald reveals his frustration with systems of thought to his father in a letter, dated April 15, 1851:

*I firmly believe people have hitherto been a great deal too much taken up about doctrine and far too little about practice. The word doctrine, as used in the Bible, means teaching of duty, not theory. I preached a sermon about this. We are far too anxious to be definite and to have finished, well-polished, sharp-edged systems—forgetting that the more perfect a theory about the infinite, the surer it is to be wrong, the more impossible it is to be right. I am neither Arminian nor Calvinist. To no system would I subscribe.*<sup>15</sup>

## **Preacher Without a Pulpit**

After being dismissed in 1853 by his congregation for heterodoxy, MacDonald shared his particular vision of the truth of the Gospel through lecturing and writing. The publication of *Phantastes* in 1858 propelled his

literary career into a new direction and widened his circle of friends. Acquaintances included Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray, and significant friendships included those of Lady Byron, John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, and Frederick Denison Maurice. Maurice had been forced to resign from King's College due to the charge of heresy. In "A Thanksgiving for F. D. Maurice," MacDonald reveals his sympathetic leanings in the following verse:

*He taught that hell itself is yet within  
The confines of thy kingdom; and its fires  
The endless conflict of thy love with sin,  
That even by horror works its pure desire.*<sup>16</sup>

After lecturing at the London Institute in 1859, MacDonald was invited by the Philosophical Institute of Edinburgh and the Royal Institution of Manchester to give a series of lectures. In the same year, he secured the Chair of English Language and Literature at Bedford College. He supported his family primarily with teaching and lecturing, though his family was often financially sustained by the charity of family and friends. He was asked to preach occasionally, but would never accept monetary compensation for preaching. Eventually he turned to writing novels at the encouragement of his publicist, and their success allowed for the financial provision of his family.

In the fall of 1872, George, Louisa, and Greville sailed for America. George lectured throughout the country. He was received enthusiastically and, aside from physical ailments, enjoyed the trip. *The Princess and the Goblin* was published in 1872, along with *The Vicar's Daughter* and *Wilfrid Cumbermede*. The publication of novels, sermons, and poetry continued up until 1897, with his last publication, *Salted with Fire*.

## Prophet and Poet

MacDonald lived during an era marked by significant philosophical and religious developments that fueled doubts, inspired debates, and challenged traditionally held beliefs. Such developments included the publication of *Darwin's Origin of Species* in 1859; findings and new interpretations in geological studies; the application of German scientific historical methods and principles of literary criticism in biblical studies; and the growing interest in comparative religions. Some evangelicals demonstrated an inability to face the challenges squarely and consequently developed an anti-intellectual reputation. MacDonald's faith was relatively unshaken as he believed that all truth was God's truth. He sustained throughout his life an open and eager disposition towards the advancement of knowledge, which served him well in the wide variety of friendships he maintained.

MacDonald by temperament and experience was comfortable stepping outside the bounds of traditionally held beliefs. His extreme sensitivity to his early religious instruction, which he considered spiritless and life-denying, prompted him to question throughout his life tenets of Calvinism. He wrestled with whether certain doctrines caused the believer to take refuge in beliefs about Christ, rather than in Christ himself. As a romantic poet, he longed to render truth in fresh ways while he struggled with an inherent distrust of system. While aspects of his thinking flow outside the bounds of what evangelicals would consider biblical teaching, for the Christian reader of MacDonald there is still much to glean from his writings and life.

First of all, MacDonald's importance for the contemporary Christian lies in his impact on other Christian thinkers. An obvious example is C.S.



Lewis. In order for the reader to fully appreciate Lewis's thought, he or she must be familiar with the thought of MacDonald. As mentioned earlier, Lewis claimed that he never wrote anything without quoting MacDonald.

An example is Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. Lewis and, in fact, the story serves as a tribute to MacDonald.<sup>17</sup> The book describes a short trip to heaven made by some of the occupants of hell. During the trip, MacDonald serves as Lewis's guide and spiritual mentor. This is very appropriate, since Lewis boldly claimed MacDonald as his "master." Unfortunately, however, Lewis brings in MacDonald's understanding of a purgatorial nature of hell, along with the idea of post-mortem conversion. With an understanding of MacDonald's thought, the reader is able to discern the themes attributable to him and to appreciate the commonalities and differences between the two writers.

Even if one disagrees with aspects of MacDonald's theology, one can still appreciate the good in his work. In *The Pleasures of God*, John Piper describes this good, while recognizing that MacDonald "had thrown away the baby of much true biblical teaching with the bath water of a certain brand of gloomy, lifeless Calvinism."<sup>18</sup> Piper describes how the reader of MacDonald's stories comes away with a "new zeal to be pure" and that one can't help but be impressed by his "radical commitment" to following Christ. The source for the good one finds in reading MacDonald is best summarized by William H. Burnside:

*Part of the attractiveness of George MacDonald's writings is the "natural" way his Christocentricity works out in his novels. Christ was the center of his life, God the most important theme. This is not contrived as an adjunct to his stories, but flows out of the*

*center....For George MacDonald, Christ, above all else, gave meaning and direction to his life.*<sup>19</sup>

Rolland Hein states that MacDonald's "strongest literary gift was to perceive and communicate the realities of Christ through myth" and that "it is this mythic component that makes his stories and tales continue to live today."<sup>20</sup> In short, there is much good to be gleaned by the reader, whether one is inspired through the Christ-like character of a protagonist in one of MacDonald's theological romances or one's longing for truth, goodness, and beauty is stirred by his masterful use and construction of myth.

This passion for Christ and for radical discipleship propelled MacDonald to serve as a type of prophet to his generation. The themes in MacDonald's writing and the topics of his sermons reflect a deep concern for fellow believers, as he witnessed many Victorian Christians assenting intellectually to beliefs while failing to live out the demands of Christian discipleship. He believed that too much attention was given to theological discussion, and not enough to spiritual disciplines that would increase not merely intellectual knowledge, but also one's desire and ability to love others.

The development of his theology is directly impacted by his emphasis upon the practical value of truth above mere theory. This remained a lifelong theme for MacDonald and led him away from biblical orthodoxy at points, as it has others in the history of the church. His belief that it was better to err in one's knowledge than in one's practice, since "to the man who gives himself to the living Lord, every belief will necessarily come right; the Lord himself will see that his disciple believe aright concerning him,"<sup>21</sup> failed to recognize the consistent teaching of Scripture that a

knowledge of the truth is foundational to godly living. Orthodoxy (right belief), orthopraxy (right practice), and orthopathy (right feelings) must be held together, difficult though it may be.

MacDonald's distrust in theological systems increased as he felt many people took refuge in a system of belief rather than in Christ himself, hence avoiding the call to radical discipleship. His concern is wellfounded, as this has been a perennial problem in the history of the church and one that none of us can escape. Each of us has a system of thought, whether recognized and articulated or not, and we can easily rest in it instead of Christ himself. MacDonald helps us surmount this danger and points us to the heart of true discipleship when he says we must, "refuse, abandon, deny self altogether as a ruling, or determining, or originating element in us" as we seek our highest calling, which is willing God's will.<sup>22</sup> He reminds us that our faith should be deep and spirit-transforming, and that our final goal is not information, but transformation through our knowledge of the Lord that we might increasingly enjoy and reflect our Savior.

MacDonald experienced many emotional, spiritual, and physical hardships in his life, yet he remained constant in his trust in the Lord. He remained confident that everything he experienced in life came directly from the hand of God. Every pleasure and pain worked as an essential part of God's redemptive plan for his life. Whether in the role of sage, popular lecturer, gifted poet, prolific novelist, or respected Christian teacher, MacDonald's thought and work reflect a heart and mind captured by the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.



## Notes

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3. Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1924), 374.
4. Ronald MacDonald, *A Northern Window* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1911, repr., Eureka, Ca.: Sunrise books, 1989), 24-25.
5. Michael R. Phillips, *George MacDonald: Scotland's Beloved Storyteller* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Bethany House, 1987), 37-38.
6. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 51.
7. *Ibid.*, 30-31.
8. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 13.
9. Philips, *George MacDonald: Scotland's Beloved Storyteller*, 118-20.
10. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 76.
11. Sadler, ed., *The Letters of George MacDonald*, 16.
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13. *Ibid.*, 116.
14. *Ibid.*, 156.
15. *Ibid.*, 155.
16. *Ibid.*, 398.
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20. Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* (Chicago, Il.: Cornerstone Press Chicago, 1998), 54.





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# G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

*Journalist, Author, Apologist, and Artist*

by Elesha Coffman, Ph.D.

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton was, in a word, huge. Tall and weighing close to 400 pounds, he once told a chauffeur who suggested he attempt to exit a car sideways, “I have no sideways.” But Chesterton loomed large in other ways as well. He commanded the attention of an enormous audience through his prolific production of newspaper columns, short stories, novels, plays, poetry, and non-fiction. He counted many of Britain’s leading lights among his friends and enemies. And he exerted a powerful influence on the next generation of British Christian writers, a group that included J.R.R. Tolkien, T.S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, and C.S. Lewis.



G.K. Chesterton

Nothing in Chesterton’s upbringing suggested such an important career. He was born to a conventionally liberal, middle-class family that fit comfortably into the secular culture of the late Victorian era. Within that culture, Chesterton later wrote in his wonderful *Autobiography*, “We might almost say that agnosticism was an established church.” His education, at the Slade School of Art, was even more resolutely anti-religious, or at least anti-Christian. A creative and restless mind such as Chesterton’s might have been expected to explore anything other than orthodoxy.

Chesterton did try many byways before beginning the path of faith. Spiritualism, theosophy, and other occult pursuits enjoyed a heyday at the turn of the twentieth century, and young Gilbert dabbled in all of them. The nihilistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche also hung in the air, along with the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, while

the psychological speculations of Sigmund Freud glimmered on the horizon. The ideas that affected Chesterton most, though, related to the style then dominating the art world, Impressionism. Many people today find the vague flowers and hazy haystacks of artists like Claude Monet soothing, but they drove Chesterton to the brink of insanity. He reflected in the *Autobiography*,

I think there was a spiritual significance in Impressionism, in connection with this age as the age of scepticism. I mean that it illustrated scepticism in the sense of subjectivism. Its principal was that if all that could be seen of a cow was a white line and a purple shadow, we should only render the line and the shadow; in a sense we should only believe in the line and the shadow, rather than in the cow. ... The philosophy of Impressionism is necessarily close to the philosophy of Illusion. And this atmosphere also tended to contribute, however indirectly, to a certain mood of unreality and sterile isolation that settled at this time upon me; and I think upon many others.

The Impressionist, in Chesterton's view, played too much the role of God, imagining himself to be creating the world entirely from his own perspective. Chesterton could not handle that kind of responsibility, and it sent him into depression. Fortunately, he found his way to the writings of Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson, Walt Whitman, and other authors who affirmed the positive existence of the outside world. Relieved of the burden of creating reality by himself, Chesterton emerged from his depression, left art school, and headed to London's Fleet Street to turn his considerable writing skills toward a career in journalism. In the back of his mind, another quest had begun as well: the search for someone to thank for the beauty of the world he had rediscovered.



## Finding Faith

Chesterton's slow journey toward Christian faith involved many pushes and pulls. The jaded Fleet Street milieu and personal doubts about organized religion, especially Catholicism, held him back. Meanwhile a growing attraction to Frances Blogg, a devout Anglican whom he met at a London debating salon, drew him forward. By the time he married Frances, in 1901, he considered himself a Christian, but his theology was far from mature. He honed his beliefs through spirited printed debates.

Even before he adopted Christianity, Chesterton was certain of what he disliked in modern thought. The radical subjectivity of Impressionism led the mind to a dead end. Enchantment with human potential, as expressed in Nietzsche's Superman ideal or in the milder optimism of average liberals, ignored too much evidence of frailty and corruption. Materialism proclaimed that the visible world constituted the whole of reality but failed to offer proof of this soul-numbing assertion. In short, the trendy philosophers who urged people to question everything could not themselves answer the most basic question, "And why should I listen to you?"

Chesterton first articulated a Christian response to modern skepticism in the pages of a socialist London newspaper called the *Clarion*. Its editor, Robert Blatchford, was a staunch atheist, but he nonetheless felt that faith deserved a fair hearing. For six months in 1903-4, he invited Chesterton and other Christians to defend their beliefs in weekly columns. Chesterton's three contributions argued that the Christian worldview was much more rational than anything so-called rationalists had proposed.

Chesterton lodged additional complaints against the day's leading thinkers in his regular columns for London's *Daily News* and in the 1905 book *Heretics*. These writings attracted the interest of Christians and critics alike, but they raised more questions than they answered. One critical reviewer announced, "I shall not begin to worry about my philosophy of life until Mr. Chesterton discloses his." Chesterton responded in 1908 with his celebrated book *Orthodoxy*, which he called "unavoidably affirmative and therefore unavoidably autobiographical."

*Orthodoxy* traced the author's descent into despair, recovery of wonder through literature (especially children's fantasy literature), and eventual discovery that every "new" truth he encountered had in fact been taught by Christianity for centuries. Chesterton laid special emphasis on the paradoxes of Christianity, those teachings that seem foolish or self-contradictory on the surface but resonate deeply with what the soul knows to be true. For example, while ancient pagans and modern rationalists defined modesty as "the balance between mere pride and mere prostration," Christianity insisted that people embrace both extremes: "In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am a man I am the chief of sinners." Similarly, pagans and rationalists practiced charity as reasonable goodwill toward reasonably deserving debtors. According to these schools of thought, "there were some people one could forgive, and some one couldn't: a slave who stole wine could be laughed at; a slave who betrayed his benefactor could be killed, and cursed even after he was killed." Christianity, by contrast, "divided the crime from the criminal. The criminal we must forgive unto seventy times seven. The crime we must not forgive at all."

In *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton displayed a mature and nuanced, albeit unconventional, faith, but his spiritual journey was not complete. He wondered which church best embodied the fullness of the Christian tradition. First Chesterton joined the Church of England—an obvious choice as the national church and the church of his wife, Frances. He was concerned, though, that modernism seemed to be creeping into Anglican theology, undermining the supernatural claims that had drawn Chesterton to Christianity. Around 1911, he began to believe that only one church could withstand the onslaught of modernism, the Roman Catholic Church.

Several factors weighed in Chesterton's decision to become a Catholic. Frances and his family opposed the move. Many people in England still saw Catholicism as the mysterious, foreign, and despotic religion that had provoked so much pain during the Reformation. On the other side, Chesterton's brother Cecil showed interest in Catholicism, and Chesterton had developed immense respect for a Catholic priest, John O'Connor, who would later become the inspiration for Chesterton's fictional sleuth Father Brown. A trip to Italy, which included Easter morning worship at a Catholic church in Brindisi, tipped the balance. Chesterton joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1922 and was overjoyed when Frances joined, too, in 1926.

### A Sharp Pen

Chesterton never assumed the quiet life of a writer. He lectured and participated in public debates. He traveled. He threw wild parties at which guests had to don costumes and act out sketches. He even appeared, along with George Bernard Shaw and other literary figures, in a western film made during World War I by *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie.

Nonetheless, it is for his many published pieces that he is chiefly remembered.

The Father Brown mysteries are among Chesterton's most treasured works. They follow the whodunit format established by Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle, but Chesterton added spiritual depth. Like Holmes, Brown keenly observes crime scene details and human behavior, but he also diagnoses the heresies that drive people to sin. The Father Brown collection includes 51 tales that are considered by mystery enthusiasts to be some of the best examples of the genre. Chesterton's rules for mystery writing, including transparency regarding clues and a solution simple enough to be shouted in one sentence, were codified by London's Detection Club, an elite group that claimed Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie as members.

Chesterton also gained distinction in the genre of biography, even though his method was far from scholarly. For his famous biography of Thomas Aquinas, he reportedly collected a stack of books on the man, glanced through the first one, shut it, and proceeded to dictate his account *ex tempore*. Yet Chesterton understood Aquinas, and for this reason scholar Etienne Gilson called the biography "the best book ever written on St. Thomas." Chesterton's book on Francis of Assisi rested on no more historical research but has been similarly praised for its charm and insight.

Between work on these and dozens of other books, Chesterton continued to churn out essays on subjects ranging from bits of string and potent cheeses to women's suffrage, World War I, and America's experiment with Prohibition. (He liked the first two and disapproved of the others.) Many of these occasional pieces strike contemporary readers as trivial or time-bound, but others still hit their marks. For example,



Chesterton correctly predicted that “the war to end all wars” would actually lead to a more horrible conflict—what we know as World War II. He also foresaw that the entrance of women into politics and commerce would inevitably invite the greater influence of the state over home life. Frequently quirky or cranky, Chesterton was also frequently right.

Though certainly famous in his day, Chesterton gained even more recognition after his death in 1936. Much of this acclaim stems from the praise of C.S. Lewis, who hailed Chesterton as a model and credited Chesterton’s religious history *The Everlasting Man* with influencing his conversion to Christianity. Chesterton also lives on through countless pithy quotes that pop up in all sorts of books and articles and swirl around the Internet. (Just try searching for “Chesterton quotes” on Google.)

Though Chesterton could not have imagined this development, he would be gratified to learn that twenty-first century society continues to find value in links to the past. He would be even more gratified if encounters with his words enticed people to join the community founded on the Word. As he wrote in *Orthodoxy*,

Plato has told you a truth; but Plato is dead. Shakespeare has startled you with an image; but Shakespeare will not startle you with any more. But imagine what it would be to live with such men still living, to know that Plato might break out with an original lecture tomorrow, or that at any moment Shakespeare might shatter everything with a single song. The man who lives in contact with what he believes to be a living Church is a man always expecting to meet Plato and Shakespeare tomorrow at breakfast.

# Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957)

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**D**orothy Leigh Sayers was born at Oxford on June 13, 1893, and died December 17 (or 18), 1957, at Witham, Essex. Her father, Rev. Henry Sayers, was an Anglican priest and, at the time of Dorothy's birth, headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School. In 1898 her father moved to Bluntisham to serve as a rural parish priest. Dorothy was an only child and delighted to be often the center of attention. Her father jokingly called her "little humbug," and later she describes herself as a little "prig" playing one adult against another.



Dorothy Sayers

In recounting her own early education in *The Lost Tools of Learning*, she describes her development in three stages—Poll Parrot, Pert, and Poetic. From nine to eleven she liked to memorize lists and other amusing things (Poll Parrot). From twelve to fourteen she specialized in contradicting her elders (Pert). From fifteen on she was a rather moody but articulate adolescent (Poetic). In her early years, Dorothy was educated at home by her mother. When she was almost seven, her father decided to teach her Latin. She was pleased with the special attention from her father and with the opportunity to learn a language that her mother and nurse did not know. Quick to pick up her daily Latin lessons, she moved on to learn French and German.

C.S. Lewis described his home as having books everywhere, in the study, in the halls, and in the attic. Dorothy Sayers' home was similar, and she read everything she could find—children's books, classics, and novels. She especially loved *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and her favorite, *The Three*

*Musketeers*. Whatever she read, she remembered, and she was fond of incorporating the stories and their characters into her play and games.

In 1905 her father hired a French governess to teach her French. She was expected to speak French almost all day. During these years, she demonstrated an outstanding aptitude for languages. With hopes of preparing Dorothy for further education at Oxford, her parents sent her away to boarding school at sixteen. Goldophin School was not an easy adjustment. Dorothy had gone from being the center of attention to being one of many girls. It was not the happiest period of her life. However, she did excel in her studies. In 1910, after taking national examinations, she did better than any candidate in England who took both the French and German exams. Finally, she went to Oxford to take the entrance exams offered there and won the Gilchrist Scholarship to Somerville College—one of the highest scholarships in England. In the exam, she demonstrated her passion for translating poetry from one language into poetry in another language. She took a French sonnet and translated it into strict Petrarchean poetic form.

Dorothy loved life at the university, especially discussing ideas late into the night at one of Oxford's many pubs. She would talk about many subjects but particularly, through reading the works of G.K. Chesterton, became a defender of orthodoxy. She later wrote:

To the young people of my generation, G.K.C. was a ... Christian liberator. Like a beneficent bomb, he blew out of the Church the quality of stained glass of a very poor period and let in gusts of fresh air in which the dead leaves of doctrine danced. ... It was stimulating to be told that Christianity was not a dull thing, but a gay thing ... an adventurous thing ... not an unintelligent thing, but a wise thing ... Above all, it was refreshing to see Christian polemic conducted with offensive rather than defensive weapons.



Dorothy had a good musical voice and joined Oxford's Bach Choir. She also participated in plays that she and her friends wrote and produced. The friendships she made during these years lasted throughout her lifetime. In 1912 Dorothy and her friends started a literary club called the Mutual Admiration Society (or M.A.S.). Much like Lewis and Tolkien's Inklings, they met once a week in a member's room to read things they had written for fun and for criticism. At the end of her time at Oxford, she excelled in her written and oral exams, taking First Class Honors in Modern Languages.

There were not many positions available for women at Oxford during this period. Having decided that she was going to be a writer, Dorothy worked at one point for Basil Blackwell at Oxford, publishing a book of poems called *Op I* and another called *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*. She also read all kinds of detective stories. Once she commented that she was going to make detective stories fashionable reading for intelligent people and make money as well. She proceeded to work on *Whose Body*, involving the character Lord Peter Whimsey, who is a regular throughout her novels.

While employed by the advertising agency S.H. Bensons, Dorothy continued to work at her detective fiction. She remained at Bensons for nine years until she was able to write full time. She is said to have invented the slogan, "It pays to advertise," and helped develop a very successful ad campaign for Colemans Mustard. While in London, she met another writer, John Cournos, who became the great love of her life. Unfortunately, her affections were not reciprocated. Although he insisted to her that he did not want to get married and have children, when he left

to go to America, he soon married another woman with children. Dorothy was miserable and bitter as her letters from this period clearly show.

Perhaps it was this emotionally devastating relationship that set her up for personal crisis. She had an affair with a young car salesman (name unknown) that left her unexpectedly pregnant. At that time, society made it hard (culturally and legally) for unwed mothers. Dorothy especially wanted to keep this pregnancy from her parents. The baby's father would do nothing to help her, so she asked her cousin, Ivy Shrimpton, who cared for foster children, to keep the baby. She agreed. Dorothy took a leave from Bensons supposedly to finish her second novel, *Clouds of Witnesses*, and had the baby. Amazingly, she managed to keep her pregnancy a secret. This fact was not revealed publicly until after she died and left almost all of her estate to her son, John Anthony Fleming. John Anthony was born in 1924, and in 1926, she married Oswald Arthur Fleming. Later, Dorothy and Oswald adopted John Anthony and paid his way through boarding school and Oxford University. The adoption was publicly known but not the fact that John Anthony was Dorothy's biological son. Dorothy lived all her life knowing that this "skeleton in the closet" could be revealed in a very public manner. It is conjectured that guilt over her past made it impossible for her to accept Archbishop Temple's offer of an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree later in her life.

Dorothy wrote to Anthony (as he chose to be called), met him when in London, visited him during holidays, and had him visit her at various times throughout her life. It is very possible that she desired to bring Anthony to live with her and her husband. However, "Mac" (as her husband was called) had fought in the First World War, had been exposed to poison gas, and suffered from depression, ill health, and a bad temper.

He did not work regularly after the war and in his later years spent a lot of time at the local pub. In any case, although Mac and Dorothy adopted Anthony, he never came to live with them permanently.

During her early life, Dorothy wrote fourteen detective novels (with Lord Peter Whimsey as the hero), four other novels, and several short stories for broadcasting. By the time she was thirty-five, she was a popular, successful writer. Dorothy participated in the founding of the Detection Club in 1928. G.K. Chesterton served as the club's first president until his death in 1936. E.C. Bentley took over until 1949 when Dorothy became president until her death in 1957. Her successor in that office was Agatha Christie.

In 1930 Dorothy read her own episode of a combined detective story (written by several writers including Chesterton and Christie) on the B.B.C. This was the first of many times her voice was heard on the radio. In 1937 her novel version of *Busman's Honeymoon*— which was first written as a play—came out. This was her last novel about the Whimseys (Lord Peter married Harriet Vane in this last volume.). She began *Thrones, Dominations*, but never finished it. Jill Paton Walsh later completed the novel in 1998.

Dorothy had come to have various doubts about the overall value of her detective stories, and she was given the opportunity to embark on a new stage of life as religious playwright, essayist, and translator. She had become friends with Charles Williams (and later with C.S. Lewis), and he recommended her to the Canterbury Festival, suggesting she write a play. *The Zeal of Thy House*, first performed in Canterbury and later in London's West End, was a great success. She wrote six more plays, including her best known, *The Man Born to be King*. She wrote many religious essays and

a book, *The Mind of the Maker*, examining the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the creative process.

In the last stage of her life, Dorothy's long fascination with Dante's writings prompted her to learn old Italian in order to translate *The Divine Comedy*. She died from heart failure in 1957 while working on Dante's third volume, *Paradiso* (which was later completed by her friend Barbara Reynolds).

During the Second World War, Dorothy traveled to Oxford a number of times to see Charles Williams and to speak at the Socratic Club (presided over by C.S. Lewis) for the purpose of encouraging intellectual exchanges between believers and nonbelievers at Oxford. Both Dorothy and C.S. Lewis delivered talks on the B.B.C. defending Christianity. In 1945, her friend Charles Williams died, leaving Dorothy grief stricken. Soon after Williams' death, C.S. Lewis wrote to ask Dorothy to contribute to a collection of essays written in Williams' honor by Lewis and other Inklings.

Among her other writings, I have found Dorothy Sayers' religious essays very helpful. There are various collections published, but two titles are, *The Whimsical Christian* and *Creed or Chaos*.

Dorothy pursues many themes in her essays. A few illustrations might be helpful:

1. *Sayers was profoundly aware of how people evaded confronting the truth of Christ.* In "Selections from The Pantheon Papers," she writes a satirical piece on some newly discovered papers about a strange society devoted to unbelief (similar to *The Screwtape Letters* by Lewis). Some of the cynical advice given in these papers include:



Remember when cultivating your coldbed of Polemic, never define, never expound, never discuss or assert and assume. Where there is dogma there is always a possible basis for agreement; where there is explanation, there is always the peril of mutual understanding; where there is argument, there may be victory and the dreadful prospect of peace. Again, it is often unwise, and always unnecessary, to invite examination into the merits of your case ... Strive earnestly to confuse every issue ... Any effort to oppose a new idea on the specious pretext that it is nasty, false, dangerous, or wrong should be promptly stigmatized as heresy-hunting, medieval obscurantism, or suburban prejudice.

2. *One of Sayers' consistent themes was that the "dogma is the drama."* She argues in "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" that, far from dull dogma causing churches to be empty, it is the neglect of dogma that produces dullness. Faith in Christ is the most "exciting dogma that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama."

[The gospel is] the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—the terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero.... Now, we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull then words have no meaning at all.

In another essay titled more directly "The Dogma is the Drama," she says that several people came up to her and asked her questions about her Canterbury play, *The Zeal of Thy House*, which presents in dramatic form some of the dogmas of the faith, particularly the Incarnation. The questioners thought that the ideas contained in the play were "astonishing and revolutionary novelties." She argued on the contrary against "this flattering tribute to my powers of invention" and pointed them to the Scriptures and the creeds of the church. She insisted that, "if my play was

dramatic it was so, not in spite of the dogma, but because of it— that, in short, the dogma was the drama.” She closes this essay by asserting:

It is the dogma that is the drama—not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death—but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.

3. *Sayers always pondered the relationship between the image of God in mankind, creativity, and our work.* One aspect of this theme is seen in her essay on “Why Work?” She argues that, “work is the natural exercise and function of man—the creature who is made in the image of his Creator.” In other words, “work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.” Or, put another way, it is more true to say that we live to work than it is to say that we work to live. We too seldom wrestle with the issue of finding a work to which we are “fitted by nature.” We fail often enough to ask, “What type of worker is suited to this type of work?”

[This results in the fact that] right men and women are still persistently thrust into the wrong jobs, through sheer inability on everybody’s part to imagine a purely vocational approach to the business of fitting together the worker and his work.

Another consequence of the biblical view of work is:

...we should not think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy our leisure; we should look on our leisure as a period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work.

Differently stated, it is more true to say that we play to work than it is to say we work to play. Of course, in a fallen world, it is more complex

than this, and we often encounter less than ideal circumstances—but these principles are nevertheless to be kept in the forefront.

Yet another implication is that we need to “recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred.” Sayers says:

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world’s intelligent workers have become irreligious or at least uninterested in religion.... But is it astonishing? How can any one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?

The quality of work is an important thing to emphasize. This is more than telling someone to “not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays.” It is important to say, “work must be good work before it can call itself God’s work.” Sayers says, “No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter’s shop at Nazareth.”

4. *Sayers saw the danger of a false understanding of tolerance in her day.* In the “Pantheon Papers” mentioned earlier, she has a humorous note on “St. Luke of Laodicea, Martyr” (see Rev. 3:16).

St. Lukewarm was a magistrate in the city of Laodicea under Claudius (Emp. A.D. 41-54). He was so broadminded as to offer asylum and patronage to every kind of religious cult, however unorthodox and repulsive, saying in answer to all remonstrances: There is always some truth in everything. This liberality earned for him the surname of ‘The Tolerator.’

Later he fell into the hands of one of the groups he tolerated and was eaten, but his flesh was so “tough and tasteless” that he was spit out. In

another essay, “The Other Six Deadly Sins,” Sayers equates Sloth and Tolerance:

The Church names the sixth Deadly Sin Acedia or Sloth. In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in Hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. We have known it far too well for many years.

Many more great quotes and insights could be explored, but perhaps this gives you a taste that makes you long for more. Author P.D. James says in the preface to *The Letters of Dorothy Sayers*, “Dorothy L. Sayers, novelist, poet, dramatist, amateur theologian, and Christian apologist, is one of the most versatile writers of her generation.” She had “most of the qualities necessary for a good correspondent: command of language, honesty, self-confidence, a lively interest in other people, humour, strong opinions and a pugnacious appetite for a fight in a good cause.”

Catherine Kennedy, in her biography, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*, says that she must be called by the title “few women have earned: woman of letters.” Alzina Stone Dale says, in her biography, *Maker and Craftsman*:

As she wrote, all her talents and interests came together to make her real calling clear to her. Her skill in languages, her ability as a storyteller, her talent as a popularizer of difficult ideas, and her Christian convictions all came together in her work on the life of Christ and her translation of Dante. She had always thought that man is like God in his ability to create, and to her, creation is another word for work.





## Further Reading Recommendations

- *Biography: Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers, by Alzina Stone Dale*
- *Essay Compilations: Creed or Chaos or The Whimsical Christian; play: The Man Born to be King*
- *Non-fiction: The Mind of the Maker (with an introduction by Madeline L'Engle)*
- *Detective Stories: The Nine Tailors (1934) was regarded by mystery writer H.R.F. Keating (1987) as among the 100 best crime and mystery books ever published. There is a Dorothy Sayers Society in England ([www.sayers.org.uk](http://www.sayers.org.uk)), and the Marion Wade Center at Wheaton College has many of her papers and letters.*