

**C. S. Lewis on “Christian Apologetics”**

By Mark Hamilton\*

In 1945 C.S. Lewis delivered a speech to a group of Anglican Church pastors and youth leaders in Wales on the topic of Christian Apologetics and this lecture is printed in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 89-103 under the title of “Christian Apologetics.” Many of the points Lewis makes in his lecture to this audience are quite timeless. Church leaders and pastors who work on the frontlines of Christian ministry today would be wise to heed his directives for practical apologetics.

Lewis begins by telling them that they must know what it is that is being defended, and that clear boundary lines must be drawn as to what is within the definition of Christian doctrine defined as “the faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied in the Creeds, expounded by the Fathers” (90). Without boundaries it would be impossible to defend the Faith for no one would know what they are defending. Apologists should make a clear distinction between this historical faith and their own opinions. One must even face up to those doctrines that one is uncomfortable with because it is not about what we like but about what is true (Lewis himself disliked the doctrine of eternal hell, but considered it to be a part of Christian truth). The modern audience must be convinced that the apologist is defending Christianity not because it is liked or good, but rather because it is objective fact, because it is true (91). This has radical implications for our postmodern relativistic age that rejects all claims to truth.

In the Apologist’s private studying, Lewis believes there are two areas to keep up on: the “recent movements in theology,” and whether there is influence by all the “winds of doctrine” (91). Lewis is greatly concerned that the contemporary church not be compromised by these new theological movements. The Apologist studies and reviews the standard of permanent Christianity through reading “old books”, assuming these to be Christian classics, so he might possess the tools to recognize and confront the error of the new theological trends. This is so the apologist is not stirred by the winds of fashion and keeps clear the “standard by which we must test all contemporary thought” (92). What are those new recent movements in theology and how are we challenging them? Do we understand the traditional faith well enough to defend it and to distinguish it from those recent movements as they arise?

People are under attack in subtle ways through the modern cultural ideas being presented to them, so Lewis issues a warning that the great danger is the enemy’s line of communication. He writes, “It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism which make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books” (93). If a person is saturated in the writings of those who make subtle challenges to Christianity and does so unaware, then one will find one’s ideas shifting

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away from Christianity. This line must be blocked, and to do this Lewis believes we need "not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other—subjects with their Christianity latent" (93). This is certainly happening, but not at a fast enough or qualitatively adequate pace. Lewis believes that the first step to the re-conversion of his Wales was "a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the *Penguin* and *Thinkers Library* on their own ground" (93).

Lewis instructs the Welsh church leaders to recognize that their country is a mission field itself. The goal should no longer exclusively be to edify believers, but now to convert the uninitiated. And just as a missionary being sent to Africa or China must learn the language and culture, Lewis says they need to understand the language and habits of their "own uneducated and unbelieving fellow countrymen" (94). This rings true for the contemporary American clergy as well, who must learn the thinking of the twenty-first century non-Christian in order to communicate the gospel.

Lewis then expounds on four observations about his fellow Englishmen that he wanted the Welsh clergy to sift through to see if they apply to their context. First was skepticism about History. Lewis is surprised that many disbelieve not due the claims of the miraculous but due to their doubt about History, especially about events happening two thousand years ago. They are more likely to accept science than history or to believe "the Pre-historic more than the Historic" (95). So the Bible which falls into the realm of history is harder to believe in than stories of dinosaurs because science has more credibility than history. This is quite relevant today because for many, science has become their religion.

Second is "a distrust of ancient texts." Since we do not have the original documents, errors in copying over time must occur (95). Lewis believes one can point in the direction of science and textual criticism to support the accuracy of the materials. This, however, will not persuade the person who does not want to believe. The issues of text are still crucial today and a good apologist must particularly know how to answer those who question the authority of the Bible on these grounds.

The third observation Lewis makes is that "a sense of sin is almost totally lacking" (95). When the gospel first went forth, it went to people who understood a sense of guilt and were ready for "good news." "We address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else's fault—the Capitalists', the Government's, the Nazis', the Generals', They approach God Himself as His judges. They want to know, not whether they can be acquitted for sin, but whether He can be acquitted for creating such a world" (95). The problem becomes how to make people aware of personal sin. This is truer today than in the day of Lewis as Western culture has become more and more post Christian. American society is quick to recognize social sins but very slow to react to personal sin. People are quick to blame others or make excuses rather than to accept personal responsibility. In approaching this insensitivity to sin, Lewis warns that it is useless to direct attention to sins "they do not commit" or ones "they do, but do not regard as sins." His examples are that they are usually not drunkards but are fornicators, but they do not regard fornication to be sin (96). To awaken the sense of sin, Lewis recommends beginning "from the sin that has been one's own chief

problem during the last week; one is very often surprised at the way this shaft goes home" (96). By whatever method necessary, it is important to "get their mind away from public 'affairs' and 'crime' and bring them down to brass tacks—to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness and conceit in the lives of 'ordinary decent people' like themselves (and ourselves)" (96).

Fourth, it is essential to understand the audience's language to make certain that preacher and listener are speaking the same language and truly communicating. Lewis provides a list of eighteen terms where he sees a gap between what the ministers mean and how it is being perceived in the ears of the congregation. One example is the term 'Church' which means 'sacred building' or 'clergy to the listener and not 'God's people'. Some others he mentions are Catholic, creative, dogma, or primitive. Today a speaker may describe God as a person and the hearer may hear him saying that God is a human being, not that God is self-conscious. The good communicator continues to examine language usage, especially the use of religious jargon. Theology must be translated into the vernacular. States Lewis, "If you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused" (98).

In the final few pages of this speech, Lewis provides a number of clear directives to the apologist-clergyman. He suggests that the method of intellectual attack is best if accompanied by one who provides an emotional appeal with him. He describes the ideal missionary team as consisting of one who argues and one who preaches. "Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal" (99).

Do not water down Christianity by leaving out the supernatural. Miracles are essential to Christianity. Help the audience to understand that people in the ancient world knew the laws of nature and were not naïve about miracles as exceptions to those laws. Lewis does not see that there are many true atheists, so the question of God's existence is secondary to the question of the divinity of Jesus. "The Lord's own words and claims (of which many are quite ignorant) must be forced home" (101). The historicity of the Gospels also must be part of the focus. Clearly the Gospels are presented as history and not as legend.

Lewis instructs them to keep the question of Truth at the forefront. "They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is true but because it is good" (101). Do not allow them to think that one can believe Christianity to be "moderately important." "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance" (101). Lewis does muddle the point a bit when in attempting to write to the public's rejection of salvific exclusivism in Article 23 in the Prayer Book when he says, "of course it should be pointed out that though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that He cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life" (102). And toward religious pluralism, Lewis states, "And it should be made clear that we are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected" (102).

In the final section Lewis argues that Christianity is the superior religion because it is the only one that is both Clear and Thick. "By Thick I mean those which

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have...mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism" are examples (102). It perfectly combines the mysterious with the ethical to create what Otto calls "The Holy." In conclusion Lewis warns of the danger of becoming sidetracked when doing the work of the defender of the faith. One must regularly fall back "from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself" (103).

The good apologist is one who presents the timeless in the common vernacular of the age. The apologist is to teach what is timeless but to wear a "modern dress." "The bad preacher does the opposite: he takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out in the traditional language of Christianity" (93). With the explosion of literature in the field of Christian apologetics there arises a need to reflect back on the works of those who set the standard for apologetics. In this article, "Christian Apologetics," Lewis gives clear and relevant directions to Church leaders, and those who want to impact their culture for Christ today would be well advised to reflect on the advice given by Lewis.