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AN APPRAISAL OF C. S. LEWIS AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN EVANGELICALISM

JOHN WILSON, MOTHERWELL

It is remarkable that, in our century, the most vigorous and popular defenders of historic Christianity have come from the laity. We have had G. K. Chesterton; Dorothy L. Sayers; T. S. Eliot; C. S. Lewis, and Malcolm Muggeridge. Unfortunately, most of them are considered suspect by the Evangelical community; Chesterton and Muggeridge ended up in the Roman Catholic Church and Eliot and Sayers were Anglo-Catholic. Only C. S. Lewis has been accepted – with qualifications – by Evangelicals. Lewis did not align himself to any ‘party’ within the church.

There are many facets to the talents and works of Lewis but I want to concentrate largely on his Christian apologetics. So I intend to consider Lewis the man, his theology and apologetics before attempting an appraisal and discussion of his influence.

The Man

The facts about his life are well known. He was born in 1898 in Belfast and did not have a particularly happy childhood. Although brought up in a nominally Christian home, he became an atheist while still at school. By 1916 he could write:

I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is all mythologies, to give them their proper name, are merely man’s own invention.¹

Although Lewis served, and was wounded, in the First World War he said little about his experiences there. He went back to Oxford with the ambition to be a poet. He was a brilliant student, gained a triple First, and in 1925 gained a fellowship to Magdalen College and so began his academic career. But there, over the years, he was forced to re-examine his atheism. God was after him. Indeed, in his own words, he felt the ‘unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet’. Then, as he writes in his autobiography:

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

1 *They Stand Together (Letters to Arthur Greeves)*, (London and Glasgow, 1979), p. 135.

and reluctant convert in all England. . . . The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a Prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.²

Perhaps astonishingly, these moving words record a conversion to theism, not Christianity. He was still no Christian.

Various influences were now on him. Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* showed Lewis how all history led up to the coming of Christ. Barfield and Tolkien certainly were influential. As a lover of the old myths, Lewis thought the Gospels to be inferior myths and could not see how they could affect his life. He thought the Gospels were the old 'Dying God' story. Tolkien argued that this was indeed the 'Dying God' story but it was a real dying-God story with a precise location in history and with definite historical consequences. Lewis then – two years after becoming a theist – became a Christian in a rather undramatic way. He simply records that, on top of a bus, 'I was driven to Whipsnade Zoo one morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the Zoo I did.'³

From then on, although he lived his life in academic circles, he achieved fame as a Christian apologist. Indeed, perhaps he is more popular today, twenty-five years after his death, than he was in life. C. S. Lewis is something of a cult figure today. There are C. S. Lewis Societies in various parts of the world and there seems to be no end of books by – or about – Lewis being published. Tolkien said that Lewis was the only writer he knew who had published more books after his death than he had in life. His being a cult figure means there is a temptation to take one of two positions. First, there are those who see him as the source of all wisdom and the fount of all truth. Secondly, there is the reaction – reject him out of hand because he is a mere cult figure. I do not think the truth about C. S. Lewis is to be found in either of these positions.

Finally, regarding Lewis the man, there is one other thing we should consider.

An Academic

Lewis was a scholar. He had a first-class mind and was an authority in his own field of literature. Throughout his life he had many academic honours bestowed on him and he became Professor of Medieval Renaissance Literature at Cambridge.

2 *Surprised By Joy* (London and Glasgow, 1955), pp. 182–3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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As a literary scholar he wrote much on his subject and probably his greatest work is his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. Christians generally are not interested in his books on literature but this is a book worth dipping into. It deals with the literature being produced during the English – and Scottish – Reformation and the new age that dawned then. Unlike some literary critics, he understood the importance of religion in that age and had an appreciation of the theology of the Reformers.

I do not want to spend much time on Lewis the literary scholar but, to help us appreciate the man, there are three things which should be said.

1. Lewis enjoyed literature and this comes through in all his works of criticism. As someone who is self educated, and loves literature, I must confess some critics frighten me. They make the reading of a poem or a novel a very serious, solemn and almost awesome task. Lewis never forgot that there can be a great deal of pleasure to be found in reading. His enthusiasm did not make him less a critic.

2. Lewis, the literary critic, suffered because of his Christian faith. He was obviously disliked, if not despised, by his academic colleagues because of his unashamed belief in supernatural Christianity. The fact that he was denied a chair at Oxford shows this. What academic would vote for a man who wrote *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Narnia Chronicles*?

3. Then we should not forget that Lewis spent so much time on Christian apologetics that his study of literature must have suffered. He probably would have written much more on literature if he had not expended so much time and energy defending the faith. Even T. S. Eliot wryly wondered: 'Does the Almighty really require such strenuous efforts of Dr Lewis to push Him back on the throne?'⁴

Lewis was an academic, a literary scholar who loved the old myths but he never made literature into an idol. As he wrote, 'But the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world . . .'.⁵

Lewis the man, the cult figure, was a scholar and a Christian. This leads me to a basic question for our appraisal.

4 T. S. Eliot, quoted in J. Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (London and Glasgow, 1981), p. 234.

5 *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 10.

What Was His Theology?

Before considering his theology I think we should remember one fact. Lewis had no formal theological education and was not a systematic theologian. Some criticisms which have been made against him, from both liberal and Evangelical camps, often ignore this fact. He was not a theologian. He never claimed to be.

In the preface to *Mere Christianity* he defends his intention of concentrating on the main doctrines of the faith and writes, regarding differences among Christians: 'the questions which divide Christians from one another often involve points of high theology or even ecclesiastical history, which ought never to be treated except by real experts. Sadly I should have been out of my depths in such waters; more in need of help myself than helping others.'⁶ Then in the Preface to his book *The Problem of Pain* he wrote: 'If any real theologian reads these pages he will early see that they are the work of a layman and an amateur.'⁷

Lewis saw there was a need to translate Christian doctrines into ordinary language so, when a liberal, a Dr Pittinger, attacked him, Lewis responded: 'If real theologians had tackled this laborious work of translation about a hundred years ago, when they began to lose touch with the people (for whom Christ died) there would have been no place for me.'⁸

Lewis was no theologian but I should add this; he enjoyed theology. As he wrote in a letter, 'When Waring, Tolkien, Williams and I meet for a pint in Bird Street, the fun is often so fast and furious and the company probably think we are talking bawdy when, in fact, we are very likely talking theology.'⁹

Lewis was no theologian but obviously, as a Christian, he had a theology. What was his theology? He saw himself as an ordinary member of the Church of England, neither 'High' nor 'Low' nor anything else. He says: 'About my beliefs there is no secret. . . . They are written in the Common-Prayer Book.'¹⁰ But this does not tell us much: probably the most liberal of bishops happily accept the Common-Prayer Book, no doubt mentally re-interpreting it as they read. I want to look at what Lewis believed about the Scriptures, the person of Christ, salvation and mankind's eternal destiny.

6 *Mere Christianity* (London and Glasgow, 1955), p. 6.

7 *The Problem of Pain* (London and Glasgow, 1957), p. viii.

8 *Timeless at Heart* (London and Glasgow, 1987), p. 117.

9 *They Stand Together*, p. 501.

10 *Mere Christianity*, p. 8.

1. The Scriptures

Regarding the Bible, Lewis was no fundamentalist or conservative Evangelical. He believed the Old Testament contained, as he put it 'fabulous elements'. He saw stories such as Noah and Jonah as 'fabulous' but considered the court history of King David as probably as reliable as the court history of Louis XIV. But, when we come to the New Testament, he has a much higher regard. As he puts it: 'The New Testament consists mostly of teaching, not of narrative at all: but where it is narrative, it is in my opinion, historical.'¹¹

It is an interesting fact that he wrote little about the Old Testament. As far as I know the only work of his based on the Old Testament was his *Reflections on the Psalms*. This book shows he read the Old Testament and actually encouraged others to do so. He suggested that one of the rewards of such reading is that, 'You keep on discovering more and more what a tissue of quotations from it the New Testament is; how constantly our Lord repeated, reinforced, continued, refined and sublimated the Judaic ethics, how very seldom he introduced a novelty.'¹²

I think we can say that Lewis, like many Evangelical Christians, was basically a New Testament Christian. He probably would have agreed with Dorothy L. Sayers who said: 'If you stick to the Gospels and the Creeds you can't go far wrong.'¹³

2. The Person of Christ

There can be no doubt Lewis believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ. He often attacks the idea that Jesus was a mere teacher or example. Several times throughout his apologetic writings he uses the argument that, when you consider what Jesus did and said, he must have been a lunatic, a liar or Lord. He was in no doubt he was Lord.

Lewis marshals his arguments for the divinity of Christ in a letter to a friend who had doubts. He wrote:

I think the great difficulty is this: if he was not God, who or what was He? In Matthew 28:19 you already get the baptismal formula 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'. Who is this 'Son'. Is the Holy Ghost a man? If not, does a man 'send him'? (See John 15:26) In Colossians 1:17 Christ is 'before all things and by Him all things consist'. What sort of man is this? I leave out the obvious place at the beginning of John's Gospel. Take something less obvious. When He weeps over Jerusalem (Matthew 23) why does He suddenly say (v. 34) 'I send unto you prophets

11 *Timeless at Heart*, p. 42.

12 *Reflections on the Psalms* (London and Glasgow, 1961), p. 28.

13 *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*, p. 202.

and wise men'? Who could say this except either God or a lunatic? Who is this man who goes about forgiving sins? Or what about Mark 2:18-19? What man can announce that simply because he is present acts of penitence, such as fasting, are 'off'. Who can give the school a half holiday except the headmaster?

The doctrine of Christ's divinity seems to me not something stuck on which you can unstick but something that peeps out at every point so that you have to unravel the whole web to get rid of it. Of course you may reject some of these passages as unauthentic but I could do the same to yours if I cared to play the game.¹⁴

There can be no doubt that Lewis firmly believed in the divinity of our Lord.

3. The Way of Salvation

It has been suggested that Lewis says little about justification by faith. This is true but I would argue that Lewis was an apologist, not an evangelist. It seems to me that Lewis did hold to the position that it is only through Christ we can find salvation. More specifically, he argued that only through the cross is redemption possible. But he refused to go further. He said: 'The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start.'¹⁵ He goes on to argue that Christians differ on the meaning of the cross but all accept it works. He uses the analogy of eating: we may know nothing of theories of nutrition and nourishment but know a meal will do us good. So, 'A man may eat his dinner without understanding exactly how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works: indeed he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it.'¹⁶

I believe it can be firmly argued that Lewis, without working out the theological implications, definitely believed that salvation is only through Jesus Christ and his death.

4. Our Eternal Destiny

Lewis certainly believed in heaven. Indeed he argued that we do not think, or talk, about heaven enough. As he puts it:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . .

14 *They Stand Together*, p. 503.

15 *Mere Christianity*, p. 54.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.¹⁷

Lewis was certainly 'heavenly minded' as his works show. But he was no universalist. Regarding the thought of hell he wrote:

There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason.¹⁸

That is a good quartet of reasons for believing something: Scripture, especially the words of our Lord, a common belief in Christendom, and the support of reason. Then Lewis presents, what seems to me, to be an unanswerable argument against universalism.

In the long run, the answer to those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: 'What are you asking God to do?' To wipe away their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing away every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? But they will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what he does.¹⁹

There can be no doubt that Lewis believed in heaven and hell and this means he had a high regard for individuals, seeing them as possible gods or goddesses or eventually creatures of nightmare horror. For him, as indeed for all Christians, there are no ordinary people. All are immortal – as he puts it 'immortal horrors or everlasting splendours'.

In all this, apart from his view of some of the Old Testament, we should have no problem in calling him 'Brother'. But it is not as simple as that – nothing ever is. Those with sensitive noses for doctrinal purity can detect whiffs of false doctrine in the life and works of C. S. Lewis. Certainly, at least in the latter part of his life, he had regular confessions, prayed for the dead, and believed in some sort of purgatory. This belief in purgatory was a strange aberration and added to his agony on the death of his wife, Joy. He wrote, in that strangely moving, and brutally honest, book, *A Grief Observed*: 'How do I know all her anguish is past? I never believed before – I thought it immensely improbable – that the faithfulest soul could leap straight into perfection and peace the moment death

17 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

18 *The Problem of Pain*, p. 106.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

has rattled in the throat. It would be wishful thinking to take up that belief now.'²⁰

I think there are two things we can say about these areas where we believe Lewis had been led astray and was not following the plain teaching of Scripture. First, in his writings Lewis concentrated on the main doctrines of the faith and did not teach confession, praying for the dead or purgatory. He nowhere suggests that these are among the essentials of the faith. Secondly, Lewis tended to disarm his critics. In *Mere Christianity* he compared the church to a house with many rooms. He advised:

When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.²¹

Regarding the main doctrines of the faith – the Trinity, divinity of Christ, salvation through his death, and the eternal reality of heaven and hell – in all these areas Lewis is in agreement with the conservative position. Any differences are not in the substance of the faith.

The Apologist

I want now to turn to Lewis the Christian apologist. The first thing we must note is that he was defending supernatural Christianity at a time when it was not socially or intellectually acceptable. In the climate of the Thirties the intellectuals were bowing to the new triune god of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. The whole scientific and philosophical spirit of the age was against traditional Christian beliefs. Even the theological climate was against the historicity of the Gospels. Bultmann and his disciples reigned supreme. It was an age which, as Chesterton found, 'In all the welter of inconsistent and incompatible heresies the one and only unpardonable heresy was orthodoxy.'²²

Lewis was that sort of heretic and was writing at a time when the Evangelical community appeared to have no voice. Then, when you consider who first published his books – Bles, Bodley Head, Faber, Oxford and Cambridge University Press – his achievement is all the more remarkable. These are not the sort of publishers you go to for books on historical Christianity. There was a sense in which Lewis taught himself to be a popular apologist for the faith. After giving some lectures on the radio, later published as *Mere Christianity*,

20 *A Grief Observed* (London, 1964), p. 35.

21 *Mere Christianity*, p. 12.

22 G. K. Chesterton *Autobiography*, (London, 1936), p. 178.

Lewis was invited to give some occasional talks to the men in the RAF. The first lecture on Christianity he gave was a failure. It depressed him but he took comfort that once God used an ass to convert a prophet.

He then applied himself to the task of communicating the Christian faith and, I believe, mastered the art. I want to divide his apologetics into two: Argumentative and Imaginative.

Argumentative Apologetics

As a scholar used to discussing and arguing with students and academics Lewis had to adapt to a totally different audience. He recognized that the problem of communicating to the uneducated lay with the communicator. This was a challenge but, as he said, 'Any fool can use learned language. The vernacular is the real test.' In this connection he said an interesting and challenging thing: 'I have come to the conclusion that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts are confused.'²³ But he did not talk down to people. He asserted: 'Uneducated people are not irrational people. I have found they will endure, and can follow, quite a lot of sustained argument if you go slowly. Often, indeed, the novelty of it (for they have seldom met it before) delights them.'²⁴

It seems to me that this was why Lewis was such a success as a Christian apologist. He treated people as rational creatures able to follow a sensible argument. He did not use theological language. Indeed it is remarkable how seldom he actually quotes Scripture, but he still gets the Christian message across. I suspect that, in our twentieth century, that is a rare and valuable gift.

There are probably two great barriers against propagating the Word of God today: the refusal to accept the supernatural and the lack of any sense of sin. Lewis was a thorough-going supernaturalist. He made no apology for believing in the miraculous. Indeed he appealed to ministers and divinity students:

Do not attempt to water Christianity down. There must be no pretence that you can have it with the supernatural left out. So far as I can see Christianity is precisely the one religion from which the miraculous cannot be separated. You must frankly argue for supernaturalism from the very outset.²⁵

Elsewhere he argued that if you try to preach a Christianity which denies miracles you will make your hearers either Roman Catholic or atheists. So, in his writings, he never apologises for the supernatural in the Christian faith.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Then Lewis had a sense of sin. Indeed his view on how to deal with this problem seems to me wise and relevant. He argued that there is no use talking to people about great sins – most of them have no experience of such things. He said,

In my experience if one begins from the sins that have been one's chief problem during the last week, one is often very very surprised at the way this shaft goes home. . . . we must get away from public affairs and crime and bring them down to brass tacks – to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness and the conceit in the lives of 'ordinary decent' people like themselves (and ourselves).²⁶

This advice is real wisdom. It is comforting to hear of the sins of the rich and the powerful; such things encourage the prayer of being thankful that we are not as other men! But when challenged about pride, greed, envy, spite that I find in my own heart, that is a different story.

I believe this emphasis on what are sometimes called 'petty sins' is important. This was one of the criticisms made against *The Screwtape Letters*. At a time when Europe was aflame with war and Nazism was practising evil on a continental scale, Lewis was writing about greed, gluttony, selfishness and spiritual pride. But in this Lewis was wiser than his critics. As Screwtape advises the young devil:

It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.²⁷

This is something all Christians should know and all preachers practise. The sin which is the true reality is not found in newspaper headlines but is in our own hearts.

Any apologist, particularly in the twentieth century, has to fight on two fronts. There are enemies within as well as without the camp. So Lewis, with his supernatural religion, his belief in the divinity of Christ, the reality of sin and heaven and hell, was in conflict with the liberals and modernists of his day.

Probably his best attack on liberalism is found in his essay 'Fernseeds and Elephants', also published in *Christian Reflections* as 'Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism'. He attacks the Demythologists on their own ground as an academic literary critic who scorns their technique of literary criticism. I only want to say

26 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

27 *The Screwtape Letters* (London and Glasgow, 1965), p. 65.

one thing about that essay. I wish some Christian organisation could publish it as a pamphlet and present it to every divinity student with the hope that it might be compulsory annual reading for them all.

Other attacks on liberalism are to be found in that brilliant fantasy *The Great Divorce*. Here we have a bus run from hell to the foothills of heaven. It is full of clever images and biting satire. Here we have the liberal minister who is willing to enter heaven provided he has scope for his talents and can continue his free inquiry. He is told: 'I can promise you none of these things. No sphere of usefulness: you are not needed there at all. No scope for your talents: only forgiveness for having perverted them. No atmosphere of inquiry, for I bring you to the land not of questions but of answers, and you shall see the face of God.'²⁸ This is rejected because, for the liberal, there 'can be no such thing as a final answer'. He goes back to hell as he has a little study group going and he has a paper to present. Jesus Christ died as a young man and he wants to explore how his theology would have developed if he had lived longer!

There are scenes in the book to challenge us all. One such is where the Teacher tells the narrator: 'There have been men before now who get so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God himself. . . as if the good Lord had nothing to do but exist. There have been some so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ.'²⁹

This book, well worth reading, leads us into Lewis' *imaginative apologetics*.

Imaginative Apologetics

Lewis wrote a science fiction trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Voyage to Venus*, and *That Hideous Strength*. They are much more than science fiction fantasies. Indeed the *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* calls them 'metaphysical fantasies'. The basic idea behind all three novels is that there is an Angel in charge of each planet and the one for earth is 'Bent'. Our planet is silent, in quarantine from the other planets. A Dr Ransom, probably based on Tolkein, is the hero of the three novels. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Dr Ransom is taken to Mars where he finds an unfallen world and learns of the Angels who control the planets. He finds animals who are rational, and have speech and know no evil. Indeed they have no word for evil and 'bent' is the nearest word. In *Voyage to Venus* we have the story of a Paradise which was not lost. Ransom is taken to Venus to battle with evil and prevent the Fall.

28 *The Great Divorce* (London and Glasgow, 1986), p. 80.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

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That Hideous Strength, the third book, is as Dorothy L. Sayers said, 'full of good things, perhaps too full'. This is a good summing up of the book. It is too full of ideas, images and symbols. It is basically about science, or, more properly, Scientism taking over the world. The hope is, as one of the principal characters says, 'If science is really given a free hand it can now take over the human race and recondition it; make man a really efficient animal.'³⁰ Their hopes and schemes are brought to nothing by Ransom and Merlin who rises from his tomb. It ends with Merlin re-creating the aftermath of Babel; the scientists cannot communicate to one another.

So, in these three novels, Lewis examines a planet of innocence; an averted Fall, and the battle between good and evil on our planet. They are still popular, still in print. There are two things we can say about this trilogy. First, Lewis got a lot of theology into these books. He, in his own word, 'smuggled' a lot of Christian theology into the reader's mind. Secondly, Lewis' view of man in the universe has become widely acceptable. In his survey of science fiction, Brian Aldiss writes on how science fiction became less Romantic and says: 'The C. S. Lewis view is winning through, that we are liable to spread destruction wherever we go.'³¹

I must now say something about another imaginative series of books by Lewis. Tolkien, in one of his essays, discusses how the furniture of the drawing room, when it was no longer needed, graduated to the nursery. This, he suggests, is also true of books: *Aesop's Fables*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels*, went from the library to the nursery. In the light of this, perhaps the most surprising, if not the greatest, of Lewis' achievements was to write books for the nursery which ended in the library – even the libraries of theologians. I refer, of course to the Narnia Chronicles.

Narnia is a dream world for children of all ages. It is a land of magic and mystery. A land of enchantment where horses fly, animals talk, and we have fauns, dwarfs, sprites and dragons. The fertile mind of Lewis plundered mythology for creatures to inhabit Narnia. In some ways I suspect he carried this too far. But I do not want to go into this.

Reigning over Narnia we have Aslan, the lion who is the Son of the Emperor-over-the-Sea. Aslan is a brilliant invention; strong but tender, fierce but loving, an obvious symbol of Christ. The fact that is obvious is, I suspect, the reason for the popularity of the books. Certainly they can be read as imaginative fairy tales but they are full of images and symbols which are easily interpreted. This can give aesthetic delight – we can see the hidden meaning.

30 *That Hideous Strength* (London, 1972), p. 25.

31 Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree* (London, 1973), p. 256.

We have, in the Narnia Chronicles, creation; Aslan sang the world into being. We have Fall; sin is brought into Narnia and, in an unforgettable phrase, 'It is always winter and never Christmas'. We have Aslan dying for the sin of another and rising from the dead. And so it goes on until the very end when it is through a stable the children find eternal life. But, interestingly enough, at the end all are not saved. Susan does not enter the stable. She is no longer a friend of Narnia and, as Jill says, 'She is interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipsticks and invitations.'³²

One final comment on the Narnia Chronicles. It is a series for children and at the end the children in the story, and their parents, are killed in a train crash. Children's writers do not usually end stories that way but Lewis did. He knew that the Christian dies and then lives happily ever after. As Aslan tells the children, 'Your father and mother are – as you used to call it in Shadowlands – dead. The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is morning.'³³

I want to leave the Narnia Chronicles there though we could have an interesting discussion of whether there are Platonic elements in the final book. Certainly the concept of 'The Shadowlands' would suggest that as would the idea that the best of our world is a pale reflection of what we will find in heaven. One is left wondering why Lewis says nothing about the new earth (and presumably a new Narnia) promised in Scripture, but they are stories for children. Maybe, one day, someone will do a PhD on the Narnia Chronicles – if someone has not already done so.

Appraisal

Having looked at Lewis the man, his theology and apologetics, I want now to sum up in an appraisal before considering his influence.

But I must begin with a confession. When asked to prepare this paper, I was lukewarm about Lewis. In past years I have concentrated on his literary criticism which has influenced my thinking; I thought I had outgrown his apologetics. But recently, in re-reading his Christian books and essays, I found I had forgotten how good he was: he had many exciting and new things to say to me. I rediscovered how he could approach old questions from new angles. Almost in spite of myself, I was impressed. Like the fools in Goldsmith's poem, it was as if 'I came to scoff and remained to pray'. Of course, as I have indicated, there are some areas where I would not agree with his position. In some of his Christian insights I wish he had gone further. But, in the main, I must confess a renewed admiration for

32 *The Last Battle* (London, 1985), p. 129.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

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Lewis the apologist. It seems to me that this is the key: he was an apologist. He was not a theologian, nor an evangelist, he was a defender of the faith. In this I can understand his concentration on the New Testament. Our faith is based, not on the historicity of Adam, Abraham or Jonah but on Jesus Christ who is Lord and God.

My appraisal must start with the fact that Lewis was a good communicator. All his works are readable. He could communicate to people who had absolutely no theological, or biblical, knowledge. I would be hard pressed to think of any Christian writers who can do that today.

There are two elements which made him a good communicator.

1. *He used common language.* Lewis wrote, in simple language, on profound subjects. In apologetics it is remarkable how seldom he actually quotes Scripture. Yet, he can be true to the Scriptures without sprinkling his writings with texts. For example, there are many glorious texts about the incarnation – Christ leaving the realms of glory for this dark world. In speaking of this truth Lewis says: ‘the second person in God, the Son, became human himself: was born into the world as actual man’, and then he adds: ‘if you want to get the hang of that, think how you would like to be a slug or a crab.’³⁴ We may think that is crude, almost irreverent, but I suggest it communicates. Lewis could write on theology without using theological language. He used common language.

2. The second element which made him a good communicator was that *his arguments always appealed to commonsense.* He was a brilliant debater but, at heart, he was always appealing to commonsense. For example, in attacking Bultmann and his disciples who reduced most of the Gospels to myths and legends, Lewis says: ‘If he tells me something in a Gospel is a legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour: not how many years he has spent on that Gospel.’³⁵ That seems to me more than a brilliant argument. It is plain commonsense. The question is not, Is the man a good biblical scholar? but, Is he a good literary scholar? Has he made a study of myths and legends so that he recognises them immediately wherever they appear? That seems to me to be plain commonsense.

Lewis was a good communicator because he used common language and appealed to commonsense. I want to make two other observations in this appraisal.

34 *Mere Christianity*, p. 151.

35 *Christian Reflections*, p. 154.

His Awareness of the Modern World

Malcolm Muggeridge says somewhere, 'Mother Teresa never reads the newspapers, never watches television, and never listens to the radio, so she has a pretty good idea of what's going on in the world'. Lewis has the reputation of never reading the newspapers but he certainly knew what was going on in the world. He was a realist who knew his own heart and therefore knew the hearts of others. While the media concentrates on the transient and ephemeral, Christians should set their minds on eternal realities, the way human beings, culture and societies are moving away or towards God. Lewis said something about this in his inaugural address at Cambridge when he became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature. He spoke of the 'unchristening' of the West. He points out: 'A post-Christian man is not a Pagan: you might as well think that a married woman recovers her virginity by divorce. The post-Christian is cut off from the Christian past and therefore doubly from the Pagan past.'³⁶

This is why modern humanity has no sense of sin, truth and little awareness of God. As Lewis argued, the pagan and the Christian have more in common with one another than either have with the post-Christian. So he was prophetic in 'showing the worlding the world'. He was also prophetic in another sense when he has Screwtape boast: 'In the last generation we have promoted the construction of a "historic Jesus" on liberal and humanitarian lines; we are now putting forward a new "historic Jesus" on Marxian, catastrophic, and revolutionary lines.'³⁷ That was written in 1942 – long before liberation theology and the bigamous marriage of Christianity and Marxism. Lewis was very much aware of the modern world.

His Awareness of the Next World

In most of his writings, Lewis is aware of an eternal dimension. He saw people – and this world – in a relationship to eternity. So he recognised that we could begin to experience heaven or hell. He wrote: 'I think earth, if chosen instead of heaven, will turn out to have been all along, only a region of hell: and earth, if put second to heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of heaven itself.'³⁸ This means he saw all life as in direct relationship with God and the life, or death, to come. As he put it. 'There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.'³⁹

36 *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 10.

37 *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 117.

38 *The Great Divorce*, p. 8.

39 *Christian Reflections*, p. 33.

C. S. Lewis was heavenly minded and therefore had much to teach this world. He was a good communicator who knew he had citizenship of two worlds. I want to add one final comment in this brief appraisal. Some critics have seen a conflict between reason and imagination in his works. It has been suggested that he started off with reason but later turned more and more to imagination. I am not sure there is a dichotomy here.

Reason and imagination are gifts from the same hand. Then, while it is true that it took imagination to picture Narnia and the science fiction worlds, it took reason to write them.

It seems to me that both reason and imagination are necessary for apologetics; Lewis had both. I suspect the sad truth is that, for many Christians, one of these faculties is missing.

Influence

What has been the influence of C. S. Lewis? He died over twenty-five years ago. The sales of his books are now between one and two million each year. It has been estimated that at least half of the sales of the Narnia Chronicles are to students and adults. All this must be some influence on Christian thinking.

I believe he is influential, but more on individuals than movements. Charles Colson, Nixon's 'hatchet-man' during the Watergate scandal, tells that it was through reading *Mere Christianity* that he first had a sense of sin which led to his conversion. Even more surprising is the story of Kenneth Tynan. He was one of the leaders of the sexual revolution in the Sixties, and the first man proudly to use a four-letter obscenity on television. He was the driving force behind the all-nude, all-sex show *Oh! Calcutta*. Lewis was his tutor at Oxford and, although Tynan never became a Christian, Lewis, and Lewis' God, haunted Tynan all his life. On 4th April 1970 Tynan wrote in his journal, 'I read *That Hideous Strength* and once more the old tug reasserts itself – a tug of genuine war against my recent self. How thrilling he makes goodness seem – how tangible and radiant!'⁴⁰ Then, his biographer tells us, 'the shades of C. S. Lewis and sin dissolved and he decided to write an erotic screenplay'.

Four years later Tynan read *The Problem of Pain* and wrote: 'As ever, I respond to his powerful suggestion that feelings of guilt and shame are not conditioned by the world in which we live but are real apprehensions of the standards obtaining in an eternal world.'⁴¹ Sadly, as far as we know, Tynan died unrepentant. In his final illness

40 K. Tynan, *Kenneth Tynan: Biography* (London, 1987), p. 308.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

he confessed to his wife that he was tired but afraid to sleep because of his fear of death.

Lewis, the tutor and Christian apologist, must have influenced many such as Tynan. His influence on individuals must have been very strong. Over the past year I have asked many Christians if they found Lewis influential. Rather to my surprise they all answered in much the same way and it could be summed up in one word 'confidence'. In their youth, in college or work, they had discovered Lewis and he had given them confidence in the gospel. He helped them see it was a reasonable faith. He offered an alternative to unthinking 'fundamentalism' or theological liberalism.

His Influence On Modern Evangelicalism

This is difficult to quantify. I am not familiar with the Anglican scene. But I suspect that here also his influence has been on individuals rather than movements. I say this knowing, of course, that movements are dependent on individuals. There is one area where I think he is not so influential. Lewis saw this planet as 'enemy occupied territory' which we, under God, must reclaim. In this area – the social and cultural dimensions of the gospel – I believe that Francis Schaeffer has been much more influential than Lewis. I think this was because Schaeffer had a theology – Calvinism – which gave a base to develop a valid critique and approach to working out the gospel in our culture and society.

But this is no criticism of Lewis; I do not think this was his calling. I see him as a Christian apologist. He was called, and I believe sought, to create a climate where the gospel could be more easily preached. Indeed he suggested:

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.⁴²

Lewis was the arguer – few, if any, better. Is it possible that, in the providence of God, Lewis was the one sent to undermine intellectual prejudices and open the way for the preachers? Is it fanciful to suggest that the growth of evangelism in the past thirty years owes more to C. S. Lewis than is generally recognised? Perhaps he was the voice crying in the wasteland preparing the way. I know of no way of proving that idea but suspect it is worth considering. One day, when all questions will be answered, we will know.

I must end by saying one more thing about the influence of Lewis. I regret he has not been more influential among conservative

42 *Timeless at Heart*, p. 25.

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Evangelicals in at least two areas. I would like to see his influence affecting our apologetic language. Where are the books and papers we can give to unbelievers to make them take Christianity seriously? We tend – and I too stand guilty here – to write books for one another. Then I would like to see his influence on works of fiction and fantasy. It is a simple but potent means of propagating the faith and, in Lewis's own words, 'smuggling theology into the readers minds'.

As I have said, I began with suspicions of Lewis but end with admiration. Lewis wrote the funeral oration for Dorothy L. Sayers and ended it by saying, 'Let us thank the Author who invented her'. Having read, and re-read the works of C. S. Lewis, I thank the Author who invented him.