C.S. Lewis: His Enduring Legacy

A Christian For All Men and A Man For All Seasons

There was a time not too long ago when nearly half of the Christians I enjoyed regular fellowship with, not only knew who C.S. Lewis was, but had actually read at least one of his books. Lewis represented for us a means by which we could enter into some of the deepest theological and philosophical discussions imaginable without possessing a degree in either theology or philosophy. Lewis's writing spoke to children, soldiers, Oxford professors, believers and unbelievers alike. His inviting, conversational tone in writing made him one of the first authors that I can say with some confidence I truly know.

Today, approximately 18 years after my first encounter with Lewis, I know people who have read him, and still others who have heard of him, but far too many who do not read him, nor recommend him to their friends. Without going into a discussion about the shift in our society from being text-driven to media-driven, I would like to make a case for the need to read Lewis, and to recommend him to our friends, both believers and unbelievers. In this essay I will discuss some of his major works and recommend some of my personal favorites that I believe you will enjoy reading.

One reason I recommend Lewis is that, given the extremely diverse society we live in today, the church is in profound need of a person of integrity and knowledge who can speak to as many different groups as possible. Lewis was, and remains, one of the best men for this task. He was born in 1898 and died in 1963. The story of his early life is one of conversion

from hard core intellectual atheism to Christianity, and then to one of the great champions of the Christian faith in this century. He was an Oxford professor whose range of writings included theology, ethics, philosophy, literary criticism, science fiction, children's stories, imaginative literature, and much more. There are very few areas of concern in which Lewis did not have something say, and he always said it with both wit and sensitivity.

Those who have never read Lewis can begin with one of the many volumes of collected essays on theology, philosophy, and cultural issues. *God in the Dock*, with 48 essays, is an excellent place to start. One will encounter titles such as "What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ," where Lewis says that we must either accept or reject the gospel, but we cannot explain it away. Other essays have titles such as "The Laws of Nature" or "Religion and Science." One of my favorites in this collection is entitled "We Have No Right to Happiness," in which Lewis warns us that the continual pursuit of happiness as an ultimate goal will result in an unnatural affection for something that will eventually sweep us away.

In a small collection entitled *The World's Last Night and Other Essays*, one will find titles such as "The Efficacy of Prayer" and "Good Work and Good Works." A larger volume entitled *The Seeing Eye* has the wonderful essays "Christianity and Culture" and "The Poison of Subjectivism." These volumes of essays should provide an excellent introduction to Lewis, and help the new reader understand why he is one of the most beloved Christian writers of our time.

Mere Christianity

We have been discussing the importance of reading the works of C.S. Lewis and have urged those who are not familiar with his works to begin with one of the collections of essays such as *God In The Dock, The World's Last Night*, or *The Seeing Eye*.

These essays are an excellent place to start, but it is in *Mere Christianity* that Lewis details what he saw as the essentials of the faith. All of Lewis's writings have a common theme: a reasonable and thorough faith which is capable of reaching everyone from the most highly educated to the simplest common man on the street. Whether it is the Narnia books for children, the science- fiction trilogy, the essays on theology and philosophy, or the technical works on miracles and the problem of pain, Lewis is committed to a rational and well thought-out faith. There was no easy faith for the Oxford professor, and Lewis would have nothing to do with a religion that was not grounded in both history and fact.

Originally aired as "The Broadcast Talks" in the early forties, *Mere Christianity* has an almost conversational tone to it. This is one of the interesting features that first attracted me to Lewis. It's as if one were sitting down to tea and having a discussion with him; he is continually anticipating, and answering, the questions that his imaginary interlocutor might have. It must be remembered that Lewis is not arguing for a specific denominational faith in this work. Rather, he is attempting to raise the basic tenets of the Christian faith for discussion, acceptance, or even rejection. Lewis says that if one is hesitating between two Christian "denominations," one will not learn from reading this book whether he or she ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic.(1) The faith Lewis is outlining is mere, or basic, Christianity.

Many objections can be, and have been, made to this ecumenical approach. However, this is also the strength of Lewis, and one which I believe is especially relevant for the modern, pluralistic times we live in. Lewis went so far in the ecumenical aspect of this work that he sent the original transcripts for *Mere Christianity* to four clergymen: an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic. They all had helpful advice, and all said they could live with

the brand of Christianity that Lewis was detailing as “mere” Christianity.(2) This is a remarkable response which might be difficult to reproduce today.

In the first of the three books, or chapters, Lewis discusses the natural moral law found in all men. He argues that this natural understanding of right and wrong is a clue as to the nature of the universe and its Creator. In the second of the three books, Lewis outlines the basics of the Christian faith. It is here that the reader encounters the “mere” Christianity of the title. Finally, in book three, Lewis discusses the behavior which one should rightly expect from the believer. Some of the topics he discusses are sexual morality, marriage, forgiveness, charity, hope, and faith. Lewis takes the ideas from the three chapters on the law of human nature and develops that beautifully into the beliefs and behavior one should expect from Christians. *Mere Christianity* also provides an excellent introduction to Lewis at his best, and is a foundation text for understanding his work.

The Space Trilogy

The space trilogy is remarkable as both a good work of science fiction, and a great work of imaginative theology. Lewis’s science fiction is a sophisticated and highly developed fantasy dealing with the differences between natural and supernatural philosophy, original sin and temptation, as well as the perennial struggle between good and evil.

Out of The Silent Planet, published in 1938, is the first volume in the series. The silent planet, Earth, is so named because it has been cut off from beatific language as a result of sin.(3) In this initial book, we are introduced to many of the characters who will be used in the following volumes. Elwin Ransom, often taken to be a development of Lewis himself, is a philologist from Cambridge University who is kidnapped while on a walking holiday in the Midlands and taken to Malacandra, or Mars, by two evil men named Devine and

Weston.

Perelandra, the second volume in the series, was published in 1943, and is my personal favorite in the space or science fiction trilogy. Perelandra, or Venus, is a paradisiacal world full of floating and fixed islands and a green-fleshed Adam and Eve who live in a pre-fallen universe. This unfallen state of existence is perfectly symbolized in the relationship between "The Green Lady," as Eve is called, her husband, and the animal and fish life of the planet. This is a harmonious picture of a world where the natural and spiritual co-exist in beautiful perfection. In the original garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Perelandra, the Green Lady and her husband are forbidden to be on the fixed land after sunset. One of the most interesting features in Perelandra is the naivete of the Green Lady and her husband. They live in an unfallen world, and therefore are unaware of the consequences following willful disobedience. Perelandra is a stunning fictional treatment about the nature of obedience and man's fallen nature.

That Hideous Strength, published in 1945, is the third and final installment in the trilogy. In this volume, the action is once again set on earth, the silent planet, and Lewis shows the reader that the result of continual and willful sin is the destruction of the individual, and the propagation of evil on a worldwide scale. As a study of evil, *That Hideous Strength* shows how the wicked sow the seeds of their own destruction.(4)

The brillance of the space trilogy is that Lewis is able to reverse the perceptions found in the science-fiction of his day and counter that with a theological lesson woven into the fabric of fiction. Lewis understood the ability of fiction to capture the imagination of the reader and thus its ability to be used as a vehicle to raise serious theological concerns. He once said, "Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into

people's minds under the cover of romance without their knowing it." Those who thought that C.S. Lewis was primarily an author of theological and philosophical works will find a refreshing change of pace in the space trilogy.

The Problem of Pain and *A Grief Observed*

Now, let's continue our discussion by looking at two works by C.S. Lewis which deal with the problem of evil and suffering. We should begin our discussion by stating that the problem of pain and suffering, or the problem of evil, as it is often referred to, is one of the oldest and strongest objections against the Christian faith. Briefly, the problem of evil runs as follows: If God is all powerful, all knowing, and all good, He should know about the plight of man, He should care about our situation, and He should rid the universe of pain and suffering.

The Problem of Pain, published in 1940, is specifically dedicated to the intellectual problems raised by evil and suffering. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis begins by discussing God's omnipotence and characteristic goodness. By beginning with God's omnipotence, or His unlimited power, Lewis addresses the first charge in the problem of evil, namely that God may in fact be unable to rid the universe of evil. Here Lewis simply states that one need not infer from the existence of an omnipotent God and the existence of evil that God is unable to do something about it. Lewis advances several options; such as God may be using the evil to work out His plan among men; He may be ridding the universe of evil and we cannot see the end; or most importantly, evil is a necessary condition of the relationship between God and His creatures if they are to have a free will.

Again, when addressing the problem of God's goodness and His willingness to help out His creation, Lewis simply argues that one need not, and in fact cannot, come to the conclusion that God is not good based on the available data. We, as finite

creatures, argues Lewis, are in no position to draw these kinds of conclusions. There are many perfectly logical explanations for the coexistence of evil and an all-powerful and all-good God. Subsequent chapters in *The Problem of Pain* deal with human wickedness, the fall of man, human pain, animal pain, and heaven and hell.

Twenty years after the publication of The Problem of Pain, in 1961, and just two years before his death at the age of 65, Lewis published a very small work entitled *A Grief Observed*. Whereas *The Problem of Pain* is a theoretical treatment of the problem of evil and suffering, *A Grief Observed* is the pragmatic working out of the problem of evil.

In April of 1956, C.S. Lewis, a 57-year-old dedicated bachelor, married Joy Davidman, an American poet with two young children. Lewis and Davidman enjoyed four years of blissful marriage and were intensely happy together. Joy died of cancer in 1960 at the age of 45. Her death shattered Lewis, and his pilgrimage through the process of bereavement resulted in his writing *A Grief Observed*. When reading this work, one will see Lewis at his most tender moments. He discusses their relationship, his struggles through her illness, his doubts after her death, and most importantly his intense efforts to come to grips with death and dying. A Grief Observed shows that Lewis had both emotional and intellectual depth. Any Christian would benefit from reading this small and extremely accessible work.

The Screwtape Letters and *The Great Divorce*

In this discussion we have sought to inform you of the wide range of subjects that Lewis addressed in his writing. In the process we have attempted to direct you to those books and essays that would (1) heighten your desire to become acquainted with his works, or (2) stimulate you to continue

reading them. At this point we will look at one of the most widely read of Lewis's books, *The Screwtape Letters*, and another less read, but related work, *The Great Divorce*.

The Screwtape Letters, first published in 1942, is one of the most straightforward and pointed works about hell and demonic activity that Lewis ever penned. The book is a satire about damnation and the efforts of demons to influence men. The "letters" are correspondence between a senior demon named Screwtape, who has centuries of experience in the art of tempting humans, and his younger nephew, Wormwood. The younger demon is a fresh graduate from The Tempters Training College and is on his first assignment. His task involves attempting to block, by any means necessary, a certain individual from becoming a Christian.

Lewis's audience is allowed to read the correspondence between these two demons, whose greatest desire is to facilitate the downfall and ultimate damnation of human beings. One is able actually to enter into a kind of "psychology of damnation" and see how the forces of evil operate in men's lives.

The Great Divorce, written just three years later in 1945, deals with heaven and hell and continues the satirical and comedic style of *The Screwtape Letters*. In his story Lewis speaks in the first person and is in the midst of a dream about a bus ride to heaven. The story opens in hell, where Lewis is preparing to leave with several people who are permanent residents in hell. Lewis meets people in various stages of damnation, much like Dante's *Inferno,* all of whom appear to have chosen their eternal residence freely. The story is a contrast between the "solid" people of the heavenly realm and the transparent ghost-like people of hell. The less real inhabitants of hell cannot participate in, or endure, the realness of heaven. The analogy illustrates the difficulty the unregenerate have in even understanding the things of God. Do not be fooled by the satirical nature of *The Great Divorce* or *The Screwtape Letters*, for both contain an abundance of

theology. Issues concerning salvation, damnation, heaven, hell, the free will of men, and the practical matters of the Christian faith are all present in these two volumes.

In concluding this discussion, I would first like to urge anyone who is not familiar with the works of C.S. Lewis to take the time to become acquainted with him. He is one of the most beloved and original Christian writers of this century. Secondly, to those who have read Lewis, and enjoyed him in the past, please recommend this wonderful author to your Christian friends. Lastly, and most importantly, I strongly urge anyone who has a friend who is an unbeliever to use a work such as Mere Christianity, or a collection of essays such as God in the Dock, as introductions to an ecumenical and eloquent apologist for the Christian faith.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillian, 1943). (Originally aired in three parts as "The Broadcast Talks," p. 6.)

2. Ibid., p. 8.

3. Colin Duriez, *The C.S. Lewis Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to His Life, Thought and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1990), p. 199.

4. Ibid., p. 200.

©1998 Probe Ministries.

Related Articles:

- C.S. Lewis, the BBC, and *Mere Christianity* [Michael Gleghorn]
- C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy [Michael Gleghorn]
- Lessons From C.S. Lewis [Rick Wade]