

# C.S. Lewis & the Role of Christian Literature

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This is a very different message from our normal biblical exposition-type messages here at Bethel. For the past many years, it has been our practice around the anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church (October 31, 1517), to reflect on and teach the church history story of how we got here. Why? We must know where we came from so that we have a sense of how we got here, and then discern where we should be going. Church history helps us know our place. It also places our little story in the grander story of what God is doing. In it we see how God used ordinary people to do extraordinary things. It causes us to consider the possibility that if we are faithful in our story, God might use us too. "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*" (Hebrews 13:7)

I am going to talk about C.S. Lewis and the larger role that Christian authors and Christian literature have played in the story of God's Church.

## Literature and the Christian Story

Christianity from the beginning was a written faith. God himself is an author. God wrote a book. We call it the Bible. One of our core doctrines is the inspiration of Scripture—that God so directed the writers of Scripture as they wrote that their writings are simultaneously the word of men and the perfect word of God.

Jesus Himself is called *The Word* (John 1:1). He is revelation from God. The story of Jesus is recorded in writing by his apostles or their associates. The apostle Paul wrote lengthy doctrinal and personal letters. John and Luke also were prolific writers of biblical literature.

Have you ever thought about the Bible itself as a work of art? An inspired piece of literature? There are so many different genres of writing in the Bible. God must like literature and he certainly likes us reading his book.

After the apostolic age, Christian writing and literature continues to dominate the Christian story. Men like Irenaeus, Polycarp, Tertullian, and Origen wrote extensively; mostly about Christian doctrine. As the early heresies Arianism and Pelagianism reared their ugly heads, men like Athanasius and Augustine wrote and wrote and wrote to defend Christian truth.



By far the most influential moment in the story of Christian literature actually wasn't a book or writing at all. The Guttenberg Press in 1450 (see picture at left) allowed for moveable type and mass printing. Guess the first thing printed on the Guttenberg Press? The Bible.

The Reformation began in the next century and the pens of Luther and Calvin and others filled Europe with books and pamphlets of Christian teaching. Not only did they write, but the church people read. They read, and they read. They read some more. The Christian faith became a reading faith.

Why is reading so wonderful? Reading itself is a kind of spiritual experience. When I read, I am taken out of my body and mind and I enter the world and perspective of others. I see what they see and I think what they think. In reading, I am meeting other people's best and highest thoughts which shape and sharpen my own. Reading is like peeking in other people's windows on a nighttime walk, only they invite you to look. You suddenly see into their world and ideas. Reading takes humility. It requires hospitality to the ideas, sufferings, celebrations, and thoughts of others.

I want to encourage you to read. No Christians in the history of the church have had more good literature to read. One Kindle account gives you access to millions of books. Start with your Bible. As your curiosity and desire to learn grows, expand that reading. Half the challenge of being a reader is learning to read the right things. There is so much trash out there which is a complete waste of time and brain space. Read books and articles that will change you, equip you, and help you. This may or may not be overtly Christian writing, but a good reading diet will include a lot of that.

### Clive Staples "Jack" Lewis (1898-1963)

There is a popular ad campaign that tries to describe *the Most Interesting Man in the world*. He is interesting because he is good at everything and apparently only drinks one kind of beverage. C.S. Lewis (see picture at right) is one of the most interesting men in history. Surprisingly interesting for a man who lived the cloistered existence of an Oxford and Cambridge Professor of Medieval Literature. Before you think, *that dude sounds boring already*, here are a few interesting things about his life:



- **World War 1 veteran:** He fought and was injured in war. His experiences in trench warfare in France greatly impacted him.
- **World War 2:** He was a unique hero in England as his radio addresses were broadcast to the nation during the Nazi bombings of England. These addresses were widely admired. They were compiled in one volume entitled *Mere Christianity*, one of his greatest works.



- **Front cover of Time Magazine** in 1947 (see pic to left)
- **World Class Scholar:** In his field of literature, he was the world expert. You don't teach at Oxford and Cambridge without a world class mind. Lewis had it.
- **Author** of numerous books translated into 30 languages with sales in excess of 200 million copies.
- **Love Story:** He was a single man until age 57. All great love stories involve bachelor Christian men marrying slightly later in life. His love story is very different but his marriage to Joy Gresham was the stuff of movies, literally. In 1992, his

marriage to Joy was portrayed in the major motion picture *Shadowlands* (see pic to right) starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. Say what you want, but when your marriage is turned into a Hollywood movie, you are an interesting person.





- **Friendships/The Inklings:** His friends called him Jack. Lewis had a great capacity for friendship. He loved to laugh and tell stories. His most famous friends were a group of fellow professors who would meet at *The Eagle and Child* pub in Oxford. They were known as the *Inklings* (see pic to the left). Most famous among them was J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien is world renowned to this day as the author of ***The Lord of Rings*** and ***The***

***Hobbit***. Tolkien credited Lewis' encouragement as the single greatest influence on those amazing books. Remember that when you go see *Hobbit 3*.

- **The Chronicles of Narnia:** Lewis is most famous as the author of children's literature. (See pictures of books below)



*The Chronicles of Narnia* have sold over 100 million copies and spawned three recent Hollywood movies (see movie posters below).



The books ought to be required reading for every family of children in our church. Don't just watch the movies, read the books. Read them aloud to your children. Adults, you will get captured by them too.



- **Westminster Abby Honor:** C.S. Lewis died within an hour of the moment President Kennedy was shot. Kennedy's death grabbed the headlines but Lewis' death was honored a year ago on November 22. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, they laid a plaque in Westminster Abbey's Poets corner, England's highest place of honor (see picture at left).

I was able to visit the grave of C.S. Lewis (see picture at right). I did an etching of his grave while I was there. If you'd like a C.S. Lewis experience, Wheaton College built a center dedicated to C.S. Lewis called the Wade Center. It is a small museum and a visit there would make a very enjoyable day trip excursion for you.



If Lewis was in the audience and hearing such praise, I do believe he would say in a very British way, *Poppycock!* And from another perspective of his life that assessment is true. Lewis' life is the stuff of movies, but like all great men, his life is filled with complications and pain. His mother died when he was a boy. He had a terrible relationship with his father and the dysfunction of that relationship would haunt him. As a boy he was sent to a boarding school. He had a horrible experience there and his hatred for the headmaster would stay with him nearly all his life. Now his story might be sounding a little more like ours.

Growing up, Lewis dealt with many vices including sexual ones and an honest biography will talk about those. During WWI, he promised his best soldier friend Paddy Moore that if Paddy died, Lewis would look after his mother. Paddy did die and when the war was done, Lewis took into his home Paddy's mom, 20 years his senior. Lewis and Mrs. Moore had a workable but weird relationship that seemed to waver between romantic love and motherly care.

Before we throw stones here, Lewis' Christian faith didn't appear until his 30s. Before that he was a dedicated atheist. In his own words, he was "very angry at God for not existing."

His life changed dramatically when, through the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien and others, Lewis began to see the Christian story as the true one which all the other great stories merely resemble. Again, in his words,

"You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. 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." (C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, p. 266)

His conversion came in stages but it would dramatically change him.

We would not agree with all his particular positions on things. Yet, Lewis stands along other giants in Christian history for his defense of Christianity and his wonderful use of imagery and imagination to draw people into the Christian vision of reality. I'd like to highlight three contributions of C.S. Lewis which have meant the most in my life.

## There is nothing “mere” about Christianity

This is a play on words as one of his most famous books is called *Mere Christianity*. That book is a basic defense of Christian teaching. He doesn't mean *mere* as in simple, he means *mere* as in basic Christianity. Christianity distilled down to its essential core. It is one reason people from different branches of Christianity all embrace Lewis. He had a way of saying things that appeal broadly. This past summer I attended a C.S. Lewis conference and was amazed at the ecclesiastical diversity of the crowd. You name it, they were represented. All of them inspired by Lewis' ability to take grand Christian themes and make them accessible and understandable, indeed believable.

He used many different kinds of literature to tell the Christian story. Science Fiction:



Human suffering. Children's literature. Nonfiction. Fanciful writings like *Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*. Not all his books were overtly Christian. He wrote scholarly works as well. But there is an echo throughout his writings, that Christianity is the great and grand truth and story of all stories. "The Chronicles of Narnia resonate strongly with the basic human intuition that our own story is part of something grander – which, once grasped, allows us to see our situation in a new and more meaningful way." (Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, p. 279) "Somehow what Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything." (Owen Barfield)

Take a moment and consider this famous statement by Lewis, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, "Is Theology Poetry?" p. 92) These kinds of statements shook up the British. They had long ago relegated faith and religion and Christianity to the closet, or I should say, the wardrobe. You could have faith, just don't bring it out into the open; especially into the hallowed halls of Oxford. The greatest offense in those days was to be a Christian who actually believed that stuff.

Then along came an Oxford scholar who opened the wardrobe to children and adults. Christianity for Lewis was not to be hidden but was a truth too wonderful *not* to be described and ultimately enjoyed.

Is it hard to see why Lewis resonates today? Why 50 years after his death, his books are still selling like hotcakes? Secular culture wants God and faith kept in the closet, I mean wardrobe. But God doesn't fit in closets. He fills the whole universe.

- "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1)
- "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31)
- "The whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3)
- "That in everything [Christ] might be preeminent." (Colossians 1:18)
- "For from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be glory forever." (Romans 11:36)

This is essentially what Lewis means in "by it I see everything else." Christianity is an all-encompassing worldview. A transcendent story that is no myth but actually true. Lewis didn't invent seeing all truth as God's truth, but for England and millions of others, he opened the doors to the wardrobe and let a kind of lion of truth out for all to see.

Is this grand vision of the great story of God needed today? How do you see the world? Through what lens are you looking?

### **Imagination as a portal to gospel truth**

Who imagines two demons talking about Christian faith as a great book idea? Who imagines people from hell on a tour of heaven but deciding they don't belong there? Who imagines fawns, talking beavers, and children in an alternative world as a good Children's book series? C.S. Lewis, that's who. Lewis used brilliant creativity and writing to appeal not just to the mind but to the imagination and the heart.

What Lewis used are *windows* of truth. If you think about a window, windows are real objects that allow other things to be seen. You can try this at home. Stand in front of a window and look at the window itself. You might see dust or streaks but windows have their own qualities. There is a reality to them. But if you change your focus slightly, rather than seeing the window, you see through the window to something beyond it.

Lewis' writings were windows. Lots of people read his science fiction or even attend *Narnia* movies and they stare at the window itself. That's an amazing window. That's amazing literature. That's great writing.

But there is a reality to be seen through the window. What do you see? Aslan the Lion, but then somehow through Aslan another reality comes into view. Jesus. The Lion who sacrificed himself for a traitor. The Savior who died for sinners. This combined with my final point is what makes Lewis so profound.

### **Human longings leading us to God**

"If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 136-137)

Who here doesn't know the sense of this? Unfulfilled longings? Lewis, better than anyone, took those longings and used them to draw people toward Christian truth. He showed how the secular vision of life was ultimately empty of meaning and put forward the Christian faith as the real story.

Our vision as a church must be the same. Young people, we want you to see the Christian truth as so much more beautiful and desirable than the rubbish pop culture forces on you. The Christian sexual ethic and view of marriage is pure and lovely. The Christian vision of

art and music and friendship and learning is more noble and good. The Christian worldview provides somewhere for your longings to go which will satisfy not just in this life but also in the life to come.

Here is where Lewis has blessed me so much: seeing the best this life has to offer as merely shadows of ultimate reality. My longings and yearnings speak to me of another place, an ultimate pleasure, an ultimate person—the real world and the real joy yet to come. Here is how the last book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* ends, with Aslan escorting the children from old Narnia to new Narnia.

“And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. 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.” (C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, p.228)

How does that sound to you? Wouldn't it be awesome if there was a new and better Narnia? A place to live happily ever after? A place so wonderful that the best of old Narnia only hinted at how great the new Narnia would be? Sound like anything? Are you looking at the window or through the window to the greater truth? Thank you, C.S. Lewis. And thank you, God for him.

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