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C.S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume I

A Collection of Essays Presented at

The First

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ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands

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The Evangelistic Vision of C. S. Lewis

By Angus J.L. Menuge

1. Introduction

Anyone familiar with Lewis's works knows that evangelism was a strand of central significance. Lewis himself said that "[m]ost of my books are evangelistic, addressed to *tous exo* [those outside]."¹ Nor was this an incidental characteristic of his writings: Lewis thought that the salvation of human souls was the Christian's highest calling, "the real business of life."² Yet it seemed to me that Lewis's contributions to evangelism had never been given the focused, in-depth study which they deserved. This was a major motivation for the new work I edited, *C.S. Lewis Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*.³ Incredible as it may seem, the upcoming Centenary celebrations were not a factor. I had no inkling of these events when the project began, and when I first heard of them, could not understand why the term "centenary" was used for someone who had died in 1963, wholly unaware that it signified his birth! But God's wisdom is wiser than man's and it is hard to ignore the providential timing of the publication all the same. My hope is that others find the work as worthy a testament to Lewis and the Gospel as I firmly believe it to

be. Today's talk is only an outline of the book. It is a survey of some treasure chests, with occasional glimpses of the riches within, but the real gems are in those chests, not this paper.

In my overall design for the book, I was determined to avoid some deficiencies to which collections of essays are typically prone: while there may be individually excellent contributions, they are not organized into distinct categories and, aside from the major topic, there are no explicit, overarching themes to bind the work into a coherent unity. Therefore at the very outset of the project, I identified four main areas of research, and (coincidentally) four unifying themes, which acted as top-down constraints on the various contributions.

2. Main Areas of the Book

2.1 *The Motivation: The Influence and Potential of Lewis's Evangelism.*

It no doubt seems obvious that Lewis's life and works have had, and continue to have, a powerful evangelistic influence. Perhaps for that very reason, the evidence for the nature

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and extent of that influence has seldom been documented. Yet without such evidence there seems little point in a book on Lewis's contributions to evangelism. The many explanations of Lewis's evangelistic appeal ring hollow if we cannot first substantiate what that appeal was and is. Thus the first section of the book motivates all the rest by analyzing the influence and potential of Lewis's evangelism.

It is well known that the Attenborough movie *Shadowlands* prompted a resurgence of interest in Lewis's life and increased sales of books by and about Lewis. But did the movie actually lead to serious contemplation of Christianity, spiritual recovery or even conversion? And, if it sometimes had such good effects, were there also harmful consequences of viewing the movie without independent study of the literature? In a painstaking and balanced study, Wayne Martindale sets about answering these questions. He provides substantial evidence that *Shadowlands* has had a powerful and largely beneficial influence. Many have been brought closer to Christ by this film. And Douglas Gresham, Lewis's stepson, and the only living witness of many of the real events the film is based on, has emphasized the film's emotional accuracy.

These facts are remarkable when placed side by side with several negative features of the production. The film's director, Bill Nicholson, is an ex-atheist, now agnostic. The actor who portrayed Lewis, Anthony Hopkins, did not do significant research on Lewis or seriously attempt to capture his emotions, commitments and character, because, "[a]cting is being yourself, really...I just learn the lines and show up."⁴ The film is full of factual inaccuracies, one of the most outrageous of which is the insinuation that Lewis, whose

mother died when he was nine, and who served in the front lines in the First World War, was a man whose life has been insulated from pain. Above all, the movie is fatally ambiguous and evasive about Lewis's faith.

As Bruce Edwards memorably put it, "A movie about Jack and Joy that downplays or ignores the centrality of Christ to their lives is analogous to scripting the life of Michael Jordan with little reference to basketball."⁵

From this perspective it is easy to see why Wayne Martindale entitled his chapter "*Shadowlands: Inadvertent Evangelism*": God has used a most unlikely instrument to bring people to His kingdom. And yet, how characteristic this is of God. Lewis compared his own aptness for evangelism with that of Balaam's donkey. God delights in using the weak and the flawed as instruments of His grace so that we do not forget who is responsible for the increase. It is often said that "countless" people have been brought to Christ by the example and works of Lewis, but difficult as it is to quantify matters which can only be certain for God, this is a poor excuse for not documenting the evidence that is humanly available. Philip Ryken has done a remarkable job of pulling together various sources of evidence which not only give us a clearer picture of the extent of Lewis's influence, but also correct misconceptions we may have had about the types of influence.

The Lewis who emerges from Ryken's analysis was a strikingly humble man, keenly aware of the limitations of his own gifts. He was largely incapable of the highly personal, emotional approach of the stereotypical evangelist of revivalist cast, nor did he consider himself a preacher of the Gospel. Yet all the same he found some niches which other Christians, and even clergy, were not adequately defending. As Joel Heck rightly

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emphasizes in a later chapter, one of Lewis's main aims was to prepare his hearers for the Gospel by undermining their resistance and convicting them of the reality of their sin. Lewis was best at removing stumbling blocks, helping people along the way to faith through his books and personal correspondence. For example, a number of contributors document Lewis's role in the conversion of such notable figures as Charles Colson, C.E.M. Joad, Os Guinness, Elton Trueblood and Sheldon Vanauken. While Lewis may have found the personal approach impossible face-to-face, he was able to build an extraordinary intimacy with his readers, through the strikingly honest and engaging style of his writing, using his own experience of overcoming obstacles to faith, and exposing his own vulnerabilities, to help others in similar plight. Yet surprisingly, Ryken makes a good case that Lewis's greatest influence was not in the conversion of non-Christians, significant through that role was, but in helping those who are already Christian to remain faithful. Lewis was a great "external" evangelist, defending the fold from corrupt versions of Christianity and the ever present temptations of the *Zeitgeist*.

Yet Ryken's excellent study is largely historical, and some might say that Lewis's works are no longer relevant in the era of postmodernism. Does Lewis's work continue to have potential for a society floundering in moral relativism? A society distrustful of authority, and uncertain not only about what the meaning of life might be, but about whether life has a meaning at all?

Reed Jolley shows that Lewis's unmistakable genuineness and honesty cut through the modernism/postmodernism divide. Generation Xers are tired of the hypocritical and evasive behavior of many in their parents' generation and find Lewis to be a welcome

island of integrity and authenticity. Lewis was equipped with the clarity of thought and logical skill to make his case to those still amenable to reason, yet could also communicate truth through symbolic narratives for those who reject "logocentric" thinking as a mask for oppressive power.

This latter ability of Lewis is pursued in greater depth by Gene Edward Veith in a chapter which shows how Lewis anticipated and employed literary styles which are now deemed "postmodern" in his imaginative presentation of the Gospel. Much is now made of "levels of fictionality," "artistic defamiliarization" and "magical realism." Lewis may not have used these terms but he knew how to implement the techniques in his writing. A striking case in point is Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which employs a vision within a dream, within a dream, within yet another layer, Absolute Truth, the nemesis of the postmodern relativist wrapped up in postmodern clothing!

2.2 *The Explanation: Why Was Lewis Such an Effective Evangelist?*

Having established the power of Lewis's evangelism, the next section seeks to explain the source of this power, insofar as it is humanly ascertainable. The first task is to understand Lewis the man. What sort of influences affected this pilgrim's regress to his lost faith? And what was it about that journey that prepared him so well to be an "apostle to the skeptics," as he was dubbed by Chad Walsh? Corbin Carnell gives a beautiful answer to the first question, emphasizing the central significance of three strands which were only woven together by Lewis's conversion to Christianity: reason, longing and the Moral Law. I address the second question by way of an extended comparison between

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Lewis and St. Paul. I argue that even the most unfortunate things which happened to Lewis as a child and as an atheistic young man were a preparation for his role as evangelist. His grief, his snobbery, his pessimism, his intellectual objections to Christianity, all helped him identify with the lost and the Christian of weak faith, much as the seemingly insuperable obstacles to Paul's conversion made him all the more effective an evangelist when he became a Christian.

The second task is to understand the appeal of Lewis's presentation of the Gospel to those outside the fold. Part of this appeal stems from Lewis's profound grasp of the incarnational use of language. Spiritual and emotional truths are only feebly conveyed by explicitly spiritual and emotional language—hence the insipid appeal of some devotional writing. A more effective approach is to use concrete images as vessels for those truths. It is less effective to say that a man is sad than to say that a single tear fell from the bleak expanse of his staring eyes. It is less effective to describe Heaven as better than earth, than to compare these shadowlands with a world so solid we cannot bear to walk on the grass and which makes us seem like vaporous ghosts. Recall that at the funeral of Princess Diana, the point at which many felt their grief most acutely was when Elton John used the image of a candle in the wind to symbolize Diana's significance and appeal. Lewis also knew that the direct approach to evangelism was often less effective than indirect methods, that instead of inviting people to "Come to Jesus," it is more powerful to reveal through concrete images how He has already come to us. These profoundly important matters are pursued by Michael Ward.

Another aspect of Lewis's broad appeal was his focus on "mere Christianity."

Although Lewis certainly had some firm, denominationally specific views, his public presentation of Christianity emphasized the core doctrines on which orthodox Christians largely agree. This was not a bland ecumenicism, a superficial unity obtained by evacuating Christianity of all real content. Nor was it supposed to be yet another denomination. Rather Lewis was following the great church tradition of formulating a by no means insipid core of creedal statements (as in the Nicene creed), robust enough to exclude heresy and the various accommodationist dilutions of Christianity, yet central enough to build consensus among orthodox believers. Lewis never suggested that Christianity should be diluted to avoid disagreement, or that the various denominations should abandon their confessional positions, but he did think that doctrinal arguments should be pursued only between Christians and were obstacles to the effective presentation of the gospel to those on the outside.

The motivation for a "mere Christianity" was Lewis's sense of the urgency of evangelism in a world of eternal beings whose eternal destiny is influenced by our every action. He also saw the need to fight the inevitable tendency of the "inner sanctum" to become "an inner ring," an institution which does not merely exclude (as orthodox Christianity does) but which derives its whole meaning and purpose from doing so. These matters are pursued by Patrick Ferry, a church historian and the new President of Concordia University Wisconsin.

At the same time, Lewis was very perceptive about the nature of his audience. He was not so naive as to think that unbelievers are a homogeneous group so that only one approach to evangelism would be effective for all of them. It was often claimed

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in Lewis's day that society had become basically pagan. Lewis, by contrast, thought that it was not pagan enough, for he viewed pagans as amenable to spiritual reality and imminently convertible to Christ. But most "moderns" were in the much worse condition of "post-Christian" materialism, in fundamental denial of the supernatural and hence altogether lacking a sense of holiness.

Since Lewis's day there has been a resurgence of paganism via New Age religions and (I will add) various accommodationist versions of Christianity whose practitioners seem either unaware of, or unrepentant about, the paganism implicit in the multiculturalist and radical feminist thought which they have uncritically embraced. Yet there are still many who remain in the post-Christian elements. The greatness of Lewis is that his corpus includes works which address the concerns of both groups, the supreme example being his masterpiece, *Till We Have Faces*. This claim is carefully substantiated by Jon Balsbaugh.

2.3. *The Technique: Making Christianity Plausible.*

As quite a few commentators on Lewis have noted, Lewis's greatest strength was as a translator of theology, someone who could take the abstract creeds, confessions and doctrines of Christianity and convey them effectively through concrete images. Several questions focus on this method. First, why did he employ it? What was it about his audience which made a direct presentation of the Gospel less effective than it had been in the past? To answer this question, George Musacchio undertakes a careful analysis of the modernist worldview which held Lewis's audience in its enchanting embrace. Musacchio examines the transition that led from the medieval

worldview to Enlightenment reason, empiricism, scientism, logical positivism and life-force philosophy. Musacchio's is a brilliant piece of stage-setting which explains exactly why Lewis pursued the approach he did.

Second, how did Lewis communicate with such an audience? As Joel Heck argues, Lewis responded to the modernist evasion of sin with *Praeparatio Evangelica*. For, as Lewis realized, "[i]t would have been inept to preach forgiveness and a Saviour to those who did not know they were in need of either."⁶ Before a sheep will welcome the shepherd, he must be convinced he is lost and cannot find his way alone. In this, as Heck points out, Lewis is following the method of John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the Gospel, making "straight in the wilderness a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40: 3).

Third, what were the methods which Lewis used to translate theology, and to which doctrines did he apply them? Francis Rossow provides a systematic answer showing doctrine by doctrine how Lewis applied his art, and arguing for the potency of the approach. Steven Mueller follows up with a highly focused study, drawn from his forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, of Lewis's use of theological translation to present Christological truths.^{2.4} *The Argument: Defending the Faith.*

Translation is such a subtle and non-combative approach to evangelism that one might get the impression that Lewis was a mild-mannered evangelist. This would be to grasp only a part of the truth. Like his own creation, Aslan, Lewis was capable of both a gentle and playful aspect, and a stern, war-like countenance. He often claimed that he had

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failed to acquire the usual social graces: perhaps this was another way of saying that he was not a tame man! When James Como first heard of Lewis's militant apologetics, he asked, "Could it be?" Could a man who so unashamedly expressed his Christian beliefs not be laughed at as a fool, scorned as a zealot, or patronized as an eccentric? Could he not only be taken seriously but also, without apology, put the enemy to flight from the very center of his own strength, the university?"⁷ The answer, of course, was "Yes." Lewis not only took on the anti-Christian influences of his own time, but also foresaw the final unfolding of the ideas of Nietzsche, Freud, the Marxists and many other "debunkers" in postmodern skepticism.

Among the most important of Lewis's apologetic weapons was his "Argument from Desire," an argument in the tradition of Ecclesiastes, Augustine and Pascal, that human beings contain an absence, an incompleteness, a thirst for something other and outer, that no earthly object can satisfy, and which therefore points beyond this world to another. Lewis called this longing "joy," or less misleadingly, "*sehnsucht*," and used it to appeal to the romantic side of our nature. Drawing on his Th.D. thesis, Douglas Hyatt examines the origin of this argument in Lewis's own conversion and his formulation of it in various works. The argument takes a rationalist atheist off his guard by revealing a vulnerability that all humans have, and by showing the poverty of this-worldly attempts to heal it.

Although his written apologetics are better known, it would be wrong to suppose that Lewis lacked the courage to present the Christian case in public debate. Week after week, he would brave the lion's den of the Oxford Socratic Club, a club whose express

purpose was to hear and answer the true objections of intellectual atheists and agnostics of the highest caliber. Lewis, the club's president, was relied upon to give the Christian case, and had to face the risk, and sometimes the reality, of being worsted in public. Christopher Mitchell, the current Director of the Wade Center, examines this neglected area of Lewis's work. Amongst other jewels, there is a balanced re-assessment of the real significance of the Lewis-Anscombe debate, which reveals deeper issues than have hitherto been brought to light.

In Lewis's own pilgrimage to faith, the problem of evil was one of the dragons he found hardest to slay, and he continued to struggle with it as a Christian. Lewis was aware that a fundamental obstacle to Christianity was the tendency of humans to evade a confrontation with their own evil, a tendency exacerbated by moral relativism. The logical conclusion is people who see themselves as the measure of all things, who view themselves as the final judge, and who put God in the dock. Jerry Root explores how Lewis approaches this problem, disarmingly admitting that he, Lewis, is a part of the problem, and leading the reader to see his or her own complicity in sin. Root also explores Lewis's theodicy in *The Problem of Pain*, and shows a Lewis who is reasonable, compassionate, and very much a fellow sufferer.

Even more disturbing than a denial of evil is the postmodern repudiation of truth itself, something that Lewis could see on the horizon. Lewis's apologetics include several arguments for the existence of truth, and *The Abolition of Man* can be read as a preemptive refutation of many of the tenets of postmodernism, especially its subjectivism about judgments and its cultural relativism.

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Yet Lewis knew that logical argument would be useless for those who rejected reason, and who believed only in irrational persuasion and the exertion of power. For many people, Lewis sensed, conventional apologetics were less effective than a sort of symbolic narrative which brought ideas to life and revealed, rather than argued, their reality. As already noted, Lewis's approach to such "narrative evangelism" itself employed many of the literary techniques now termed postmodern. The irony is that Lewis himself learned many of these techniques from writers like Dante and Spenser: what most undermines the chronological snobbery implicit in the very term "post-modern," is that so many of the prized techniques of postmodern literature are *pre-modern*! I remember a professor of ancient philosophy once told me that what was most disarming about Plato was that whenever one thought one had fought ones way through the philosophical jungle into uncharted territory, there was Plato, waiting for you. A similar sentiment applies to Lewis, a veritable hound of Heaven, and the seemingly relentless attempts of postmodernists to run away from the truth.

3. Unifying Themes

Certain key themes recur throughout the book. Let me conclude with a word about each of these.

3.1 *Diversity.*

Lewis appealed and still does appeal, to a remarkably wide audience, and, as the contributors show, this was because he communicated at various levels (from child to academic expert) and in many genres. To

borrow a phrase of Rossow's, itself a variation on biblical parable, Lewis took the old wine of the Gospel and clothed it in a startling variety of new and attractive wineskins.

3.2 *Integrity.*

Walter Hooper described Lewis as one of the most thoroughly converted people he had ever known. When Lewis became a Christian, it was not a phase or a character trait but a transformation of every aspect of his life and work. It is not just in his popular apologetics, but in his scholarly works, that one sees the Christian influence. And his private acts of charity and correspondence confirm the same authentic transformation. Despite all this, Lewis liked to remind himself that it pleased God to use a donkey to convert the prophet.

3.3 *Prophecy.*

Lewis had an uncanny ability to know where ideas would lead, foreseeing obstacles to Christianity which only materialized or became acute after his death, in particular the varieties of contemporary relativism. And yet part of what makes Lewis so prophetic is his grasp of timeless truths, which do not fundamentally change but are merely manifested in superficially different ways, deceiving and gratifying the chronological snob in us all until we unmask the familiar enduring issue.

3.4 *Timelessness.*

It is a remarkable thing that works by C. S. Lewis written during or just after the Second World War continue to make a powerful and direct appeal to students born at least a decade

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after Lewis's death. It is not that Lewis's idiom is consonant with contemporary slang. Lewis wins no prize for political correctness (thank God). Rather, like many of the truly great writers he had veritably devoured, Lewis managed to focus on themes of enduring significance for the human condition. And chief among these were our complicity in sin, our need for salvation, and the truth of the Gospel.

Table and Other Reminiscences. Second Edition. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992.

Notes

¹Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," 181.

²Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," 14.

³Menuge, Angus J.L. ed., *C.S. Lewis Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997).

⁴Hopkins quoted in Martindale, "Shadowlands: Inadvertent Evangelism," 46.

⁵Edwards quoted in Martindale, "Shadowlands: Inadvertent Evangelism," 45.

⁶Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," 181.

⁷Como, "Introduction: Within the Realm of Plenitude," xxii.

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Como, James T. *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast*