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C.S. Lewis, Apologist

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

C.S. Lewis, Apologist

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I think Gaius and Titius may have honestly misunderstood the pressing educational need of the moment. They see the world around them swayed by emotional propaganda—they have learned from tradition that youth is sentimental—and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments . . . a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

C.S. Lewis wrote to his priest confidant, in a collection now known as The Latin Letters, that he felt, having reached his 50s, he had written all he had in him to say; that the present period of his life was the beginning of the end of his productive life. So he determined to go back to what he knew best, children's stories. A few years ago, nearing the completion of my doctoral work in Lewis's apologetics and about the same age, I had similar feelings. Nevertheless, C.S. Lewis continued to be an encouragement to me. As a Presbyterian Minister, I have been teaching adults and preaching in the church for over 25 years, and I have recently entered the Department of Religious Studies at the University of New Mexico, feeling honored to be teaching Lewis's apologetics in both arenas. In doing so I have found a whole new generation of students eager to learn how C.S. Lewis translates the Christian faith. I share Lewis's passion to try to break down intellectual barriers to the Christian faith, for this is no less a calling today than it was in the time he first wrote advice for doing apologetics.

In this paper, I want to remind us of Lewis's gifted balancing of reason and imagination as he translates the Christian faith. I will also review Lewis's principles for doing apologetics (that is, participating in the exercise of giving a reasoned defense of the Christian faith), with the primary focus being his defense of miracle, or the supernatural, since this was his starting point. His commitment to the supernatural aspect of Christianity formed the very center of his theology, especially with regard to his critique of the naturalistic worldview, still the most prevailing secular worldview of our day. I will also affirm the importance and relevance of Lewis's

approach to doing apologetics in our own post-modern culture, even though he was writing in the sunset of the modern age. I am encouraged, in that during the most recent semester in my classes there have been "aha" moments for two very different individuals who upon hearing Lewis's words read have finally understood central truths of the faith they had struggled with for years.

One of Lewis's great gifts was his ability to appeal to both mind and heart, addressing the problem of God in both modernity and now post-modernity. Dr. Bruce Edwards, our keynote speaker at the last colloquium here at Taylor University, says it beautifully in his essay "A Thoroughly Converted Man: C.S. Lewis in the Public Square" in The Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness. He writes, "In Lewis we find a profound integration: an imagination married to reason and transformed by the revelation of the person of Christ . . . This thoroughly converted man offered the academic and the Christian world a scholarship that incarnates the ancient faith, and does so in the most disarming yet natural ways." (Mills 29) Christopher Mitchell wrote of Lewis that he wanted "to prepare the mind and imagination for the Christian vision." (5) A translation of the Christian faith characterized by these qualities makes C.S. Lewis particularly attractive in a climate of at least perceived heavy-handedness on the part of some Christian evangelists.

One of the advantages we have as fully entrenched post-moderns is that we are witnessing a renewed interest in the mystical, angelic, and/or spiritual world, and our mentor apologist may once again become central as an effective translator of Christian orthodoxy.

“Spirituality” is one of our culture’s favorite words; yet as Lewis would quickly agree, spirituality without the Incarnation of Jesus Christ at the center is a dangerous spirituality indeed. Therefore, we need Lewis’s apologetic guidance more than ever.

As I see it, the most pressing apologetic issue of the moment is that people don’t “get it.” The secular world, and some of the Christian church without realizing it, has fallen into the naturalistic premise that human beings and not God are the apex of the natural world, and thus God is regarded not as Lord but as a kind of benevolent landlord to be called upon in an emergency, but not the One to whom we are responsible to love and serve. Bypassing (or rejecting) the God of Revelation in Jesus Christ, people hold themselves distant from the God who is present with us and loves us. Consumerist materialism aids and abets this fear of intimacy and accountability. This naturalistic worldview, evolving since the Enlightenment of the 18th century toward an ever greater secular hostility to God, allows one to hold at bay the personal God who desires to forgive and reconcile human beings to himself, the God who is present among us and will not abandon his creatures. Father John Courtney Murray in his profound little book The Problem of God lays out the cultural landscape that has led us to the post-modern problem of what he labels “the will to atheism” in secular culture, and a rationalistic Christianity in the church. Thus, entering into the psychologically risky business of awakening the soul, the apologist does well to embrace Lewis’s balanced understanding of the needs of both mind and heart.

Lewis said this (bifurcation) is very understandable in people who do not have revelation, for whom Christianity is not a supernatural faith. He knew this from his own experience, moving over the years from atheism, to theism, and finally with the help of his friend and colleague J.R.R. Tolkien, to submission to the Christian God. In the Narnia tales Lewis calls us into an imaginative mode which allows us the freedom to come or go. Just as children are less shy to talk with animals and puppets than with adults, so adults may find it less threatening to enter the spiritual world through the wardrobe.

Lesslie Newbigin affirms in his book The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society that the imagination is at work, however, not only in the literary and theological mind but also in the heart and mind of the scientist. If this is so, how does the apologist re-orient the scientist’s imagination to God rather than solely to natural phenomena? How does the apologist appeal to the naturalistically-formed mind of the youthful materialist of the twenty-first century? What does the apologist have to say to today’s Christian mothers who cannot say why a liturgical statement in one of their children’s Berenstain Bears books, “Nature is all there is, ever was, or ever will be,” is antithetical to the Christian

faith. As one Christian education leader asked, “How do we wake these people up?”

That is also my question. How do we wake people up? Interestingly, the church in New Mexico consists of people from one end of the philosophical spectrum to the other, from the nuclear physicists of Los Alamos Labs who sit next to me in a choral group in Santa Fe, to the moms who teach Sunday School in the mainline churches I have pastored, to the Buddhist salon owner who cuts my hair every two months, to mature Christian adults in my classes and pews. How do we talk to them about the Christian God as the One and Only God unique among all other religions? And teach them to talk to others? How do we help them reconcile their heads and hearts, and heal the schism between spirit and matter, between intellect and imagination. How do we move from a “salad bar Christianity,” as Charles Colson called it (Christianity Today, 80) to a worldview which embodies an understanding of the Christian faith. More than any other apologist I know of, C.S. Lewis effectively communicates across all these categories and cultural barriers, from the housewife to the nuclear physicist.

Lewis was right when he said that in all his conversations about Christianity he would insist on being uncompromising that Christianity is a supernatural faith. This is a first principle of apologetics for Lewis. Supernaturalism sets Christianity apart from all other religions. It is his key argument, upon which all other arguments are based.

Everyone enters a discussion with some presuppositions. Many do not state them clearly, even if they are aware of them. Lewis does—a legacy from his tutor W. T. Kirkpatrick. He says simply and firmly that to exclude the supernatural is to cease to be Christian. This is his number one principle of apologetics. We are probably all familiar with his two greatest visions of the supernatural character of the Christian faith; one in his essay “The Grand Miracle” in his book Miracles, and his reasoned argument for the claims of Jesus Christ in Mere Christianity.

Second, whatever one wants to “defend,” Lewis says, one must draw boundaries around it, beyond which it would become something different from what is being defended. Having established that boundaries of definition and clarity are required in a defense of a doctrine, Lewis calls to account those who go beyond the boundaries; for example, challenging priests in one of his talks for claiming their titles as priests while dishonestly espousing other than central Christian doctrines. He took liberal theologians heavily to task for this. The supernatural faith Lewis espouses is characterized by the “faith preached by the Apostles, attested by the Martyrs, embodied by the creeds, expounded by the Fathers.” (90) Whatever any one of us may think about God or man, our thinking as apologists, he says, is to be guided by orthodox Christianity, and it is not our business to defend our or

anyone else's *opinions*. The apologist must always distinguish between his personal opinion and God's.

Close on the heels of this, however, comes a third principle of apologetics which is that we must keep up with current thinking on a subject, so as to be able to answer the questions it poses to us with real Christian answers. He encourages young people to go into their chosen professions in various subjects, so we can have "more little books by Christians on other subjects" with a latent Christian message, rather than "more little books about Christianity." (92) Following the same line of thinking, he says, "Our faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if, whenever we read an elementary book on Geology . . . we found its implications were Hindu, that would shake us." (93)

Another principle of Lewis's is that it is our business to present what is timeless, but in contemporary language. It reminds me of something one of my earliest adult Sunday School teachers at Menlo Park Presbyterian said after reading the third chapter of Titus: "In other words, God don't make no junk!" This startling use of contemporary slang made an indelible impression. Of course, these are words Lewis himself would never have used. Instead, he would write: "All this time the Lion's song, and his stately prowl, to and fro, backwards and forwards, was going on . . . When a line of dark firs sprung up on a ridge . . . they were connected with a series of deep, prolonged notes which the Lion had sung a second before. And when he burst into a rapid series of light notes, . . . primroses suddenly appeared in every direction. Thus . . . when you listened to his song you *heard* the things he was making up: when you looked round you, you *saw* them. This was so exciting there was no time to be afraid." (The Magician's Nephew, ch. 9) The profound theological insight into creation is made wondrous in its childlike simplicity. We enjoy his uncanny ability to write or speak in the language of his audience in a different way in his letters to Mary, a hypochondriac American woman with whom Lewis corresponded over many years. In these letters we find a thoughtful and sensitive personal give and take filled with orthodox Christian theology. From simple letters to sophisticated essays, Lewis models for us the attempt to understand and sympathize with his audience.

In his essay "The Funeral of a Great Myth" (Christian Reflections 89) Lewis demolishes brilliantly the power of the Myth of Developmentalism in popular evolutionary theory. But at the end of the argument, he reminds the reader, sympathizing with the desire to embrace such a myth: "It is our painful duty to wake the world from an enchantment." (93). Even though he has debunked the myth, he does not leave his opponent crushed, but tries to find common ground with him. He writes, "In the meantime, we must treat the Myth with respect. It was all (on a certain level) nonsense: but a man would be a dull dog if he could not feel the thrill and charm of it." (93) Because the Myth of

Developmentalism is an offshoot of a true scientific theory of Evolution, Lewis enters with sympathy into the argument, but then invites us to consider the true Evolution:

People ask when the next step in evolution—the step to something beyond man—will happen. But on the Christian view, it has happened already. In Christ a new kind of man appeared: and the new kind of life which began in Him is to be put into us. The Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it. (Mere Christianity, Bk 2, ch. 5)

Recently, after reading this passage in one of my classes a parishioner who is a scientist exclaimed: "That is the coolest thing I have ever heard!"

For Lewis, the divinity of Christ must be upheld even before addressing and defending the existence of God. Lewis observed that many arguers on the subject of the Incarnation would begin with the idea that Jesus was a "great human teacher" who was deified by his misguided followers. Lewis says we must not only drive home Jesus's own words and claims about himself (which of course he does brilliantly in Mere Christianity) but that we must not neglect the historicity of the scriptures—the Gospels.

Another point is that you would have to regard the accounts of the Man as being legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that the Gospels are not legend. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view, they are clumsy; they don't work up to things properly. There are no conversations that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence. The authors write things simply because they had seen them. The strangest story of all is the story of the Resurrection. Something perfectly new in the history of the Universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The Resurrection narratives record how a totally new mode of being has arisen in the Universe. Something new had appeared in the Universe: as new as the first coming of organic life. ("What Are We To Make of Jesus Christ," God in the Dock 157-160)

Next, Lewis challenges the apologist to keep before the audience the question of Truth. Here is the greatest challenge to the post-modern mind. People think we recommend Christianity because it is *good*, not because it is *true*. We have to keep coming back to Truth over and over, he challenges.

Finally, and once again, Lewis urges that we are never to water down Christianity by excluding the supernatural. “There must be no pretense that you can have it with the Supernatural left out.” It is *the* one religion from which we cannot separate the miraculous. “You must frankly argue for Supernaturalism from the very outset.” (99) He writes:

The question is . . . What are we to make of Jesus Christ? You must accept or reject the Story. The things he says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, ‘This is the truth about the Universe. This is the way you ought to go,’ but He says, ‘I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life.’ He says, ‘No man can reach absolute reality, except through me. Try to retain your own life and you will be inevitably ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.’ If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from Me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off. If you put yourself first you will be last. Come to Me, everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out, I can do that. I am Re-birth, I am Life. Eat Me, drink Me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole Universe.’ That is the issue. (157-160)

In conclusion, C.S. Lewis has bequeathed to us wise principles for doing apologetics in our own time. He addresses the central topics one must defend as orthodox Christianity, and he urges stands on which there must be no compromise as an apologist., while balancing his appeal with both reason and imagination. Having laid out brilliant and winsome arguments, however, Lewis urges the apologist to keep sight of what must always be finally uppermost in our minds and hearts: “. . . (W)e apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the Reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself. That also is why we need one another’s continual help—*oremus pro invicem*.” (“Christian Apologetics,” God in the Dock 103)

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