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Donald T. Williams  
Toccoa Falls College

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# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IX**

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

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Upland, Indiana

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## **Cartographer of the Divine: C.S. Lewis as *Doctor Ecclesiae***

Donald T. Williams  
Toccoa Falls College

# Cartographer of the Divine: C.S. Lewis as *Doctor Ecclesiae*

Donald T. Williams  
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## INTRODUCTION:

When George Sayer's first meeting with his new Oxford tutor C. S. Lewis ended, another Oxford faculty member named J. R. R. Tolkien was waiting to see Lewis next. How did the new fresher get on with Lewis, Tolkien wanted to know. Rather well, Sayer figured, adding that he thought Lewis was going to make quite an interesting mentor. "Interesting?" Tolkien replied. "Yes, he's certainly that. You'll never get to the bottom of him" (Sayer xx).

This essay is not going to get to the bottom of Lewis either. It mainly deals with Lewis's theology, only one of many aspects of his rich and fertile thought. It won't even get to the bottom of that. It will, though, try to indicate why Lewis matters, not just as a Christian fantasy writer and apologist, but as a *theologian*, a teacher of the church.

Lewis's theology is, somewhat surprisingly, a relatively neglected aspect of his influence. There is only one book currently on the market that tries to survey Lewis's theology as a whole (Vaus), and it consists almost entirely of summary (albeit accurate), with relatively little analysis or critique. Other book-length studies focus on Lewis's approach to only one doctrine (e.g. Christensen, bibliology; Payne, pneumatology; Brazier, Christology), or one area (e.g., apologetics, Purtil, Burson and Walls, Markos), or one idea (e.g. Reppert, the

argument from reason). We do not yet have a book that looks at Lewis's presentation of Christian doctrine as a unified whole and asks what are its strengths and weaknesses as a guide to biblical faith. That is the hole I hope eventually to try to fill.

It is a strange hole to find in Lewis studies. For while he was not a professional theologian, Lewis might well have gotten more Christian doctrinal content into more heads than anyone who was a professional theologian in his day or since. He saw himself as a "translator," putting abstruse theological ideas back into the language of the people because the professional theologians had forgotten that these truths were *for* the people of God. He said, with excessive self-deprecation, "If the 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" ("Rejoinder" 183). The place was there, and we may be glad for the way Lewis filled it.

Lewis then may be the most important *amateur* theologian ever. Many people (including famously Charles Colson) testify to having been brought to Christ by Lewis's writings, and many more to having been preserved in the faith by discovering him in a period of doubt and questioning. The "Broadcast Talks" which became *Mere Christianity* made Lewis the second most

recognizable voice on the BBC in the 1940's (after Winston Churchill), and his influence has only grown. Half a century after his death, almost all his books are still in print (those which briefly go out tend to cycle back in), and his popularity, especially with American Evangelicals, shows no signs of fading.

As an evangelist (indirectly), an apologist, an expounder, and an incarnater in fiction of the faith, Lewis was one of the most imaginatively winsome and logically forceful ambassadors for Christianity we have seen. For that very reason it behooves us to cultivate a critically sound judgment about his influence. What is the theology that lies behind the popular apologetics, the Narnia books, and the Space Trilogy? How biblical is it? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Where does Lewis succeed in explaining and portraying the truth about Christ, and where in those presentations should we wary or withhold our judgment? Those are all questions that need to be answered. We will try to explain why in the following pages.

### THE LIFE:

Who was this man who became the most important amateur theologian in the history of the church? The outlines of his life are well known. C. S. Lewis was born in 1898 in Northern Ireland. He lost his mother to cancer as a young lad and was sent to a series of horrible boarding schools where he lost the nominal faith of his childhood. He was tutored by William T. Kirkpatrick, who taught him logic, classical languages, and an uncompromising love of debate and loyalty to truth. He served in the trenches of World War I and was wounded in action. He took a triple first at Oxford, in classics, philosophy, and English. While there his reading and his friends undermined his atheism (the story is told in full in *Surprised by Joy*), and he reluctantly became a theist and then a Christian. He became tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he became known as a Christian apologist, founded with

J. R. R. Tolkien the writers group The Inklings, and was president of the Socratic Club, devoted to debates between Christians and atheists. He became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. At both schools he wrote literary scholarship that is still read today. He married Joy Davidman and lost her to cancer, inspiring a play and movie very loosely based on their love story. He wrote the Narnia books, one of the most popular series of children's books of all time, and one of the most enjoyed by adults as well as children. He died on November 22, 1963, the same day President Kennedy was shot.

The story is told in detail elsewhere (best by Green and Hooper, by Sayer, and by Lewis himself in *Surprised by Joy*). What interests us here is the consistent manifestation in it of two traits which rarely appear in such strength in the same person, and which in combination are what make Lewis a theologian still worthy of our attention half a century after his death, despite his lack of formal training in that field. They were a fertile imagination alive to the beauty and mystery of life, along with a sharp logical mind capable of deep critical analysis. It was precisely this combination that, in his atheist phase, would not let him rest content in his unbelief. He writes in his autobiography of the frustration of believing only in atoms in motion while caring only about gods and heroes and the great myths (*SBJ* 174). A lesser man might have just given up on the gods and myths and become cynical. Lewis could not. He wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves on 23 May 1918:

Faeries must be in the woods  
Or the satyr's merry broods,  
Tritons in the summer sea,  
Else how could the dead things be  
Half so lovely as they are? . . .

Atoms dead could never thus  
Move the human heart of us,  
Unless the beauty that we see  
Part of endless beauty be. (*L* 1:373)

“Atoms dead could never thus / Move the human heart of us.” Lewis saw a contradiction in the philosophy he had accepted—not yet a contradiction in its logic (that would come later), but a contradiction between his reductionistic, materialist philosophy and life itself. It would take him some time to realize how to resolve that impasse, with many false starts. He wrote to Greeves on 29 May 1918, “The conviction is gaining ground on me that after all Spirit does exist. . . . I fancy there is Something right outside time & place, which did not create matter as the Christians say, but is matter’s great enemy: and that Beauty is the call of the spirit in that something to the spirit in us” (*L* 1:374). The full Christian resolution would be some time in coming. But when it came it would come in the form precisely of a healing of the troubling dichotomy: He would write his brother, Warnie, on 24 Oct. 1931 that William Law’s *Appeal to All that Doubt or Disbelieve* is “one of those rare works which make you say of Christianity, ‘Here is the very thing you like in poetry and the romances, only this time it’s true’” (2:5).

Poetry . . . true. Yes.

The thing to see here is that it was the dual impulse to both imagination and reason, plus the compulsion to find some kind of unity between them that would not be in conflict with life as we actually experience it, that drove Lewis long before he concluded that the answer to this problem is found in Christ.

We can see it coming already: rational apologetics that is full of apt analogy that could only come from the imagination, and imaginary worlds of haunting beauty that contain as integral components set pieces of logical reasoning like Puddleglum’s refutation of the Green Witch. We step from one to the other seamlessly. And that is why Lewis’s theology matters: it is a theology for a Christian life that refuses to be reduced either to cold reason or passionate emotion, and also refuses to compromise either to get the other. With whatever flaws we may discover it to have, it is a theology that flows from the drive to wholeness. Its ability to lead us in

the direction of wholeness is a significant reason why we are still reading it. And it is the reason why we should also want to study it.

## THE STUDY AND ITS DIFFICULTIES:

The task we have set before us, a critical study of Lewis’s theology, is not an easy one. One might think it would be, given the admirable clarity of Lewis’s prose and the aptness of his analogies. But a few difficulties arise to complicate things.

### A. Polarization

The first is that, ironically given his commitment to “mere” Christianity, Lewis is a surprisingly polarizing force. It is hard to get an objective handle on him. He has attracted on the one hand an almost idolatrous kind of admiration from a certain kind of Evangelical and been the subject of writings from that group that can only be called hagiography. In reaction to this, on the other hand, one finds a certain kind of scholar who thinks he will get instant academic “street cred” if he can find fault with Lewis. He gets almost canonized by the one group and sometimes glibly patronized by the other.

Meanwhile, people of almost every theological persuasion—fundamentalist, Evangelical, neo-orthodox, liberal, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox—want to enlist Lewis on their “side.” One can read tortured attempts by all these groups to claim that Lewis was really one of them—or would have been had he just lived a bit longer! Emotions get involved pretty quickly in some of these turf battles because there is genuinely a lot at stake. This situation alerts us to the danger that many people are more interested in *using* Lewis than in truly understanding him. It is a real temptation because where Lewis is really an ally, he is a formidable one. I will try to resist the temptation to make Lewis more of a conservative Evangelical Protestant (to give full disclosure about my own position)

than he really was. He is often an ally of that camp, as it rightly perceives—but not always. To honor Lewis, in other words, we have first to honor truth.

## B. Fiction

A second difficulty arises from the fact that Lewis's most popular books, and among his most theologically influential, are fiction. They are fiction, but they are not (except for *The Pilgrim's Regress*) allegory, despite many careless statements by Lewis's readers to the contrary. An allegory is a work of symbolic fiction in which there is a fairly simple correspondence between items or characters in the story and what they represent in the "real" world. (I know there are more sophisticated allegories in which the relationships are not *that* simple—but I'm giving a rough definition here to make a point.) For example, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the characters have names like "Mr. Worldly Wise Man" or "Faithful." It is not hard to tell what they represent, and their words and actions are intended as direct illustrations of the concepts that they picture. One is on pretty safe ground then talking about Bunyan's theology based on *Pilgrim's Progress*. But Lewis's fictional writings are mostly not like that. Aslan is not simply Christ; he is Christ as he *might* have been *if* God had created a world of talking animals and been incarnated there.

Lewis referred to the things that happen in Narnia or the Space Trilogy as "supposals" as distinguished from "allegories." He explained to Edward T. Dell in a letter of 4 Feb. 1949, "You must not confuse my romances with my theses. In the latter I state and argue a creed. In the former, much is merely supposed for the sake of the story" (L, 2:914). Similarly, he wrote to a Fifth-Grade Class in Maryland on 24 May 1954:

You are mistaken when you think that everything in the book "represents" something in this

world. Things do that in *Pilgrim's Progress* but I'm not writing in that way. I did not say to myself "Let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia": I said, "Let us *suppose* that there were a land like Narnia and that the son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would happen." (3:479-80; cf. 3:1004; emphasis in the original)

In the same vein, Lewis wrote to Tony Pollock on 3 May 1954: "Behind my own stories there are no 'facts' at all, tho' I hope there are truths. That is, they may be regarded as imaginative hypotheses illustrating what I believe to be theological truths" (L 3:465).

The most important passage for understanding the relation of the fiction to Lewis's theological beliefs may be this one:

I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought that the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. . . . But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? ("Sometimes" 37)

The fiction then is relevant to understanding Lewis's theology; there is theology there, sneaking past watchful dragons to appear in potency. But one has to be careful about deriving theology from fiction. On the one hand, the children learn to know Aslan in Narnia so that they might learn his other name here. "There I have another name. You must learn to know me by that

name. This was the very reason you were brought into Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little you may know me better there” (VDT 270). Therefore, we are intended to see parallels between Aslan (or Maleldil) and Christ. But we cannot assume that any given detail in the stories necessarily carries a doctrinal meaning. Rather, we should expect the parallels to be on the level of major motifs: incarnation, sacrifice, substitution, etc. As Lewis reminds us, “The only moral [or doctrinal lesson] that is of any value is that which arises inevitably from the whole cast of the author’s mind” (“Three Ways” 33). We want to know the theology that lies behind Narnia and the Field of Arbol. But if Lewis gave us an accurate description of what he was doing, we should expect first to find it *taught* it in expository works like *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*, and then see it *illustrated* by Narnia and the Space Trilogy. And his description was accurate, for it is consistent with the nature of the kind of fiction he wrote.

### C. “Mere” Christianity

A third complication arises from Lewis’s strategy of focusing only on what he called “mere Christianity.” In the book of that name he deliberately tries to avoid giving any advice to people who are hesitating between two “rooms” of the “house” of Christianity; he only wants to get them into the “hall.” (He does tell them to look for truth rather than nice paneling or a charismatic doorkeeper, but gives no guidance as to which room best fits that criterion.) This is a strategy he tried to follow in all of his writing and public speaking on behalf of the faith. As he wrote to Edward T. Dell on 29 April 1963, “A great deal of my utility has depended on my having kept out of all dog-fights between professing schools of ‘Christian’ thought” (L 3:1425).

My point here is not to criticize Lewis for this strategy. It was what he took to be his calling, and he was certainly right that it contributed in significant ways to his usefulness. It has its advantages, and I follow

it in some circumstances myself. But it does present some challenges for those wishing to study Lewis’s theology. For Christian doctrine is not just a random set of unrelated propositions, but an integrated whole in which every part is related to every other part and all find their center in the very character of the God who revealed Himself in Christ to the Prophets and the Apostles. To leave something out because it is controversial or thought (by some) not to be central, is not necessarily just to leave something out; the omission might have an unintended effect on what is left in. And while many denominational differences are indeed over tragically peripheral matters, not all are. Some on both sides have thought that some of the questions at issue between Protestants and the Church of Rome, for example, go right to the heart of what the Gospel is.

Lewis’s “mere Christian” stance then was both an asset and a liability to his ministry, and both sides of that equation need to be taken into account. It is something we must remember in evaluating his teaching. One of the problems it creates is that it opened up space for speculation by those who would like to enlist Lewis as allies for their own traditions. Fortunately, he sometimes allowed himself in private correspondence to take positions he would not have taken publicly, and we can use these moments to fill in gaps in the picture. They not only serve to eliminate certain unfruitful speculations; they can also provide context that illuminates his public theology at certain points. Thus the new expanded three-volume edition of Lewis’s letters is indispensable to anyone who wishes to get a complete view of Lewis’s thinking.

### D. Volume

Another challenge is the sheer volume of Lewis’s writing. Popular apologetics, fiction, poetry, works of literary scholarship, letters, volumes of essays collected by Walter Hooper—there are well over forty books all

told, and none of them irrelevant. For Lewis's mind, and consequently his work, was all of a piece. His friend and fellow Inkling Owen Barfield said that the unity of Lewis's thought came from a quality Barfield called "presence of mind." By this he meant that "somehow what [Lewis] thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything" (qtd. in Edwards, *Pineapple* 2). He did not expound Christian doctrine in his literary scholarship, but his views there were informed by the same Christian world view that he expounded directly elsewhere. When we add to that the fact that he was often commenting on Christian writers, trying to win a sympathetic hearing for writers like Milton, for example, we realize that there is nothing in his body of writing so technical or obscure that it might not contain something relevant to our topic. One of the fringe benefits of this study then will be the way in which it illustrates the truth of Barfield's claim.

## CONCLUSION:

By calling C. S. Lewis an "amateur" theologian I do not mean to imply that he was not a good one or in any way an unimportant one. The word should be taken in its etymological sense of one who does something, not for a living, but for the *love* of it. Love for God, love for God's truth, love for God's people: apart from these loves, no one should presume to handle sacred things. In this sense, all the laity should be theologians and all the clergy amateurs.

That Lewis had the right loves for the job is evident. His love of God helped him to keep himself out of the center and Christ in it. He wrote to Mary Margaret McCaslin on 2 Aug. 1954, "I'm shocked to hear that your friends think of following *me*. I wanted them to follow Christ. But they'll get over this confusion soon, I trust" (L 3:501). His love of the truth made him value faithfulness: "If any parts of the book are 'original,' in the sense of being novel or unorthodox, they are so against my will and as a result of my

ignorance" (*Problem* viii). His love of God's people sent him to the BBC and to many RAF camps during the Second World War and made him work hard at the task of "translation." His love of good English didn't hurt either. He wrote to Jocelyn Gibb on 11 July 1959:

So many people, when they begin "research," lose all desire, and presently all power, of writing clear, sharp, and unambiguous English. Hold onto your finite transitive verb, your concrete nouns, and the muscles of the language (*but, though, for, because*, etc.). The more abstract the subject, the more our language shd. avoid all unnecessary abstraction. (L 3:1069)

All these loves, combined with the drive for the integration of reason and imagination we discussed above, contributed to Lewis's greatness as a writer and as a theologian. I think they also helped him see clearly what is at stake in our theology:

Here is a door, behind which, according to some people, the secret of the universe is waiting for you. Either that's true, or it isn't. And if it isn't, then what the door really conceals is simply the greatest fraud, the most colossal "sell" on record. Isn't it obviously the job of every man (that is a man and not a rabbit) to try to find out which, and then to devote his full energies either to serving this tremendous secret or to exposing and destroying this gigantic humbug? ("Man or Rabbit" 111-12)

Lewis so devoted his energies, and he can help us to do so too.

I've been talking throughout this essay about why we should care about Lewis as a theologian and care about his theology. Perhaps I can best sum it up by applying to him words he wrote about John Milton. For

in the final analysis, we only honor Lewis's memory to the extent that we do not really care that these ideas were Lewis's. We will only please his departed spirit if we care about them to the extent that they are *true*. And so I think he would be pleased if we see him as a guide who can point beyond himself, as Beatrice did for Dante, and as Milton did for Lewis himself:

We are summoned not to hear what one particular man thought and felt about the Fall, but to take part, under his leadership, in a great mimetic dance of all Christendom, ourselves soaring and ruining from Heaven, ourselves enacting Hell and Paradise, the Fall and the repentance. (PPL 60).

In that spirit, let us begin.

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**Donald T. Williams** holds a BA in English from Taylor University, an M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a PhD in Medieval and Renaissance Literature from the University of Georgia. He is the author of nine books: *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), *The Disciple's Prayer* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1999), *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), *Credo: An Exposition of the Nicene Creed* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), *The Devil's Dictionary of the Christian Faith* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), *Stars Through the Clouds: The Collected Poetry of Donald T. Williams* (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2011), *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012), *Reflections from Plato's Cave: Essays in Evangelical Philosophy* (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012), and (with Jim Prothero), *Gaining a Face: The Romanticism of C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar's Press, 2013). He has also contributed essays, poems, and reviews to such journals as *National Review*, *Christianity Today*, *Touchstone*, *Modern Reformation*, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *Philosophia Christi*, *Theology Today*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Mythlore*, *SEVEN: An Anglo-American Review*, *Christian Educator's Journal*, *Preaching*, and *Christian Research Journal*. An ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America with many years of pastoral experience, he has spent several summers training local pastors for Church Planting International in East Africa and India, and currently serves as R. A. Forrest Scholar and Professor of English at Toccoa Falls College in the hills of NE Georgia. Material on literature, theology, the Inklings, and other topics can be found at his website, <http://doulomen.tripod.com>. He blogs at [www.lanternhollowpress.com](http://www.lanternhollowpress.com).