

Was C.S. Lewis an Evangelical?

Fellowship Meeting, Sunday, March 30, 2003

Taught by Pastor David Silversides

First of all, why look at C.S. Lewis? Why look at C.S. Lewis? Why bother? The extent to which you are aware of the name of C.S. Lewis does no doubt vary greatly. Some would be very aware of the influence. And for others perhaps, the name C.S. Lewis is no more than a name that they are vaguely aware of. They've heard of him somewhere and don't know much about him at all. But it has to be said that he has had and still has a considerable influence. There are a number of C.S. Lewis societies. There is a C.S. Lewis Institute in the United States, for example. Dr. Lindsley of that Institute says, "A recent poll of *Christianity Today* readers found that the one book other than the Bible that has most influenced their lives was C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. C.S. Lewis's popularity shows no sign of waning; if anything, it is increasing."

Nearer to home, Cecil Andrews of Take Heed Ministries has recently drawn attention to Derek Bingham's personal crusade to promote C.S. Lewis' writings and that Derek Bingham says of C.S. Lewis that he is the greatest Christian writer. And so we do need to look at what C.S. Lewis believed. That his writings have been instrumental in causing people to think about Christianity. In some cases perhaps they have been a link in a process that has ultimately led to their conversion to Christ; we do not need to dispute that. This does not, however, mean that we should assume that C.S. Lewis was overall sound in the faith.

Secondly, who was C.S. Lewis? Who was he? Clive Staples Lewis (he was always known as "Jack"), but his actual name was Clive Staples Lewis. He was born in Belfast (Northern Ireland) on the 29th of November 1898 of Anglican parents. He brother Warren was 3 years older. And their much-loved mother died when C.S. Lewis was nearly 10. The boys were sent to school at Watford, which Lewis referred to as Belsen. The headmaster was cruel and incompetent and was later certified insane. He was then sent to Campbell College in Belfast. He delighted in Nordic and Icelandic saga, Greek mythology, and so on. Even in his early years, he had a great interest in mythology and fantasy, reading far beyond his years in these things. In 1914, he left school to be privately tutored with W.T. Kirkpatrick. He went up to University College, Oxford, graduating in 1918, and became a philosophy tutor at University College in 1924. And in 1925, he was elected a fellow of Magdalen College. He was a tutor in English language and literature for 29 years and then became professor of medieval and renaissance literature at Cambridge.

What he regards as his conversion can be divided into two stages. In 1929 he changed from atheism to theism. That is, instead of denying that there is a God, he admitted there was a God. And this he did most reluctantly. He says in his autobiographical book *Surprised by Joy*: "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. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing—the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms."

He says that but he seems to think he was accepted but he had only become a theist—believing that there was a God. At this point he did not claim to be a Christian. He had long talks with his friend, J.R.R. Tolkien, who was a Roman Catholic and the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien was an Oxford graduate. And also another man Owen Barfield who was a theosophist.

He professed Christianity in 1931, having become convinced of the incarnation—that the Lord Jesus was God become man, that Jesus Christ was the son of God. He dates his conversion to a time when he traveled to Whipsnade Zoo, in the side car of his brother's motorcycle. He says, "When I set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and, when I reached the zoo, I did."

He was a star attraction at Oxford University—large numbers of students attending his lectures. His literary output was prolific. His interest in mythology continued, and the place of imagination shows in most of his writings. And the sheer range of his writings is staggering. He wrote a great deal, of course, about English literature. He wrote poetry. And he wrote defense, philosophical defenses, of what he regarded as the core doctrine of Christianity. He also did so by way of mythical allegory. So, on the one hand, he defended Christianity from a philosophical point of view; and, at other times, he defended it by use of myth and allegory. And he wrote for children the *Chronicles of Narnia*. And, of course, the best known of these is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

He died in 1968, the same day actually that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Thirdly, what did he believe? What did he believe? After he professed to be a Christian, what did C.S. Lewis believe?

Positively, he professed to believe what he called "the core doctrines of Christianity." He believed in a supernatural Christianity. He defended the idea of miracles. He opposed the radical, liberal bishops like John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich. Some of you may remember his name. He wrote a book called *Honest to God*, which was utterly liberal and totally heretical. C.S. Lewis did not at all agree with men like Robinson.

Let me give an example of some of the perception that he had. This is from a work called *The Great Divorce*. The setting is a ghastly fantasy of a conversation beyond this world between a spirit and a ghost. The latter who had become a bishop. The setting is fantastic, and indeed we would have serious questions about it. But you get some idea of Lewis's ability to perceive how people thought.

The spirit is saying to the ghost who is meant to have been a bishop, "But don't you know you went there because you are an apostate?"

"Are you serious, Dick?"

"Perfectly."

"This is worse than I expected. Do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions? Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that those opinions were mistaken. Do you really think there are no sins of intellect?"

This is the reply: "There are indeed, Dick. There is hidebound prejudice, and intellectual dishonesty, and timidity, and stagnation. But honest opinions fearlessly followed—they are not

sins.”

Then, the other: “I know we used to talk that way. I did it too until the end of my life when I became what you call narrow. It all turns on what are honest opinions.”

And the bishop: “Mine certainly were. They were not only honest but heroic. I asserted them fearlessly. When the doctrine of the Resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk.”

The response, “What risk? What was at all likely to come of it except what actually came—popularity, sales for your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric?”

“Dick, this is unworthy of you. What are you suggesting?”

“Friend, I am not suggesting at all. You see, I know now. Let us be frank. Our opinions were not honestly come by. We simply found ourselves in contact with a certain current of ideas and plunged into it because it seemed modern and successful. At College, you know, we just started automatically writing the kind of essays that got good marks and saying the kind of things that won applause. When, in our whole lives, did we honestly face, in solitude, the one question on which all turned: whether after all the Supernatural might not in fact occur? When did we put up one moment’s real resistance to the loss of our faith?”

Response, “If this is meant to be a sketch of the genesis of liberal theology in general, I reply that it is a mere libel. Do you suggest that men like...”

And then the other interrupts: “I have nothing to do with any generality. Nor with any man but me and you. Oh, as you love your own soul, remember. You know that you and I were playing with loaded dice. We didn’t want the other to be true. We were afraid of crude salvationism, afraid of a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid (above all) of real spiritual fears and hopes.”

Answer: “I’m far from denying that young men may make mistakes. They may well be influenced by current fashions of thoughts. But it’s not a question of how the opinions are formed. The point is that they were honest opinions, sincerely expressed.”

This is the answer: “Of course. Having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, unpraying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the Faith. Just in the same way, a jealous man, drifting and unresisting, reaches a point at which he believes lies about his best friend: a drunkard reaches a point at which (for the moment) he actually believes that another glass will do him no harm. The beliefs are sincere in the sense that they do occur as psychological events in the man’s mind. If that’s what you mean by sincerity, they are sincere, and so were ours. But errors which are sincere in that sense are not innocent.”

Now, that’s a long quotation, but it gives you some idea (even though the fantastic certainly is deplorable) of Lewis’s ability to understand how people thought. He understood very clearly

how the liberal clergy and bishops came to their views; he understood that it was not honest thought at all. And you can have an admiration for his ability to see through the sham of radical liberalism. He was then a man of considerable perception as to how people thought and why. And he refused to become a Roman Catholic, despite his close friendship with Tolkien, who tried for years to persuade him to become one.

Now, negatively, **was he an evangelical?** Well, he didn't claim to be. He says, "I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, not especially high, nor especially low, nor especially anything else."

And he did hold serious error. **First, he rejected man's total depravity.** In his work on *The Problem of Pain*, he states this quite categorically. And so in chapter 6 he says, "Christianity demands only that we set right a misdirection of our nature." So he did not believe in total depravity. And this no doubt accounts for his view of the place of reason.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said of him, "Because C.S. Lewis was essentially a philosopher, his view of salvation was defective in two key respects. First, he believed and taught that one could reason oneself into Christianity. Secondly, he was an opponent of the substitutionary and penal theory of the atonement." So he rejected total depravity.

Secondly, **he did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.** He did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. In his work *The Problem of Pain*, he says, "Having isolated what I conceive to be the true import of the doctrine that man is fallen, let us now consider the doctrine in itself. The story in Genesis is a story (full of the deepest suggestion) about a magic apple of knowledge; but in the developed doctrine the inherent magic of the apple has quite dropped out of sight, and the story is simply one of disobedience. I have the deepest respect even for Pagan myths, still more for myths in Holy Scripture."

Then, in his work called *God in the Dock*, he says this: "The Old Testament contains fabulous elements. The New Testament consists mostly of teaching, not of narrative at all: but where it is narrative, it is, in my opinion, historical. As to the fabulous element in the Old Testament, I very much doubt if you would be wise to chuck it out. What you get is something coming gradually into focus. First you get, scattered through the heathen religions all over the world – but still quite vague and mythical – the idea of a god who is killed and broken and then comes to life again. No one knows where he is supposed to have lived and died; he's not historical. Then you get the Old Testament. Religious ideas get a bit more focused. Everything is now connected with a particular nation. And it comes still more into focus as it goes on. Jonah and the Whale, Noah and his Ark, are fabulous; but the Court history of King David is probably as reliable as the Court history of Louis XIV. Then, in the New Testament the thing really happens. The dying god really appears – as a historical Person, living in a definite place and time. If we could sort out all the fabulous elements in the earlier stages and separate them from the historical ones, I think we might lose an essential part of the whole process. That is my own idea."

So he didn't believe in the authority of Scripture or the reliability of the Old Testament particularly.

Then, again he says of the Psalms, in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*: “As for the element of bargaining in the Psalms, “do this, and I will praise you.” That silly dash of paganism certainly existed. The flame does not ascend pure from the altar. But the impurities are not its essence.” And so on.

Then again in the same work he says, “Descending lower, we find a somewhat similar difficulty with Saint Paul. I cannot be the only reader who has wondered why God having given him so many gifts withheld from him (what to us would seem so necessary for the first Christian theologian) that of lucidity and orderly exposition.”

“Thus, on three levels, in appropriate degrees, we meet the same refusal of what we might have thought best for us—in the Word Himself, in the Apostle of the Gentiles, in Scripture as a whole. Since this is what God has done, this we must conclude, was best. It may be that what we should have like would have been fatal to us if granted. It may be indispensable that Our Lord’s teaching, by that elusiveness (to our systematizing intellect), should demand a response from the whole man, should make it so clear that there is no question of learning a subject but of steeping ourselves in a Personality, acquiring a new outlook and temper, breathing a new atmosphere, suffering Him, in His own way, to rebuild in us the defaced image of Himself. So in St. Paul.”

“Perhaps the sort of works I should wish him to have written would have been useless. The crabbedness, the appearance of inconsequence and even of sophistry, the turbulent mixture of petty detail, personal complaint, practical advice, and lyrical rapture, finally let through what matters more than ideas—a whole Christian life in operation—better say, Christ Himself operating in a man’s life.”

So you see that he did not reverence the Scriptures as being the word of God.

And this is one more quote:

“The origin of animal suffering could be traced, by earlier generations, to the Fall of man—the whole world was infected by the uncreating rebellion of Adam. This is now impossible, for we have good reason to believe that animals existed long before men. Carnivorousness, with all that it entails, is older than humanity. Now it is impossible at this point not to remember a certain sacred story which, though never included in the creeds, has been widely believed in the Church and seems to be implied in several Dominical [that’s Christ’s], Pauline, and Johannine utterances [the writings of Paul and John]—I mean the story that man was not the first creature to be rebel against the Creator, but that some older and mightier being long since became apostate and is now the emperor of darkness and (significantly) the Lord of this world.”

Lewis did not believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures by any stretch of the imagination.

He did believe in **prayers for the dead**. So in his work *Letters to Malcolm*: “Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are

dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him?”

In his work *A Grief Observed*, after the death of his wife, he refers again to prayers for the dead. But in that book he seems almost in despair.

He believed in **purgatory**. Again, in *Letters to Malcolm*, he said this: “But don’t we believe that God has already done and is already doing all that he can for the living. What more should we ask? Yet we are told to ask. “‘Yes,’ it will be answered, ‘but the living are still on the road. Further trials, developments, possibilities of error, await them. But the saved have been made perfect. They have finished the course. To pray for them presupposes that progress and difficulty are still possible. In fact, you are bringing in something like purgatory.’”

“Well, I suppose I am. Though even in Heaven some perpetual increase of beatitude, reached by a continually more ecstatic self-surrender, without the possibility of failure but not perhaps without its own arduous and exertions—for delight also has its severities and steep ascents, as lovers know—might be supposed. But I won’t press, or guess, that side for the moment. I believe in Purgatory.”

“Mind you... the Reformers had good reasons for throwing doubt on the Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory as that Romish doctrine had then become. I don’t mean merely the commercial standard. If you turn from Dante’s *Purgatorio* to the 16th century, you will be appalled by the degradation...”

Then, I jump to another point. “The right view returns magnificently in Newman’s *Dream*. There, if I remember it rightly, the saved soul, at the very foot of the throne, begs to be taken away and cleansed. It cannot bear for a moment longer “With its darkness to affront that light.” Religion has reclaimed Purgatory.”

“Our souls *demand* Purgatory, don’t they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, “It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy”? Should we not reply, “With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I’d *rather* be cleaned first.”

He believed in purgatory, and he believed in purgatory largely because he obviously doesn’t believe that the souls of believers are perfected in holiness at death. So he did believe in purgatory.

He also believed in **the invocation of saints**, or was prepared to believe in it. So in his book *God in the Dock*, he says, “The question then becomes how far we can infer propriety of devotion from propriety of invocation? I accept the authority of the Benedicite for the propriety of *invoking* saints. But if I thence infer the propriety of devotions to saints, will not an argument force me to approve devotion to stars, frosts, and whales?”

He is saying he accepts invocation of saints and the authority of the Benedicite, which is found in the prayer book service of modern prayer, the original source of which is the song of the three holy children in the apocrypha.

He also indicates **belief that all are ultimately saved**. He says, "A most astonishing misconception has long dominated the modern mind on the subject of St. Paul. It is to this effect—that Jesus preached a kindly and simple religion (found in the gospels), and that St. Paul afterwards corrupted [it] into a cruel and complicated religion (found in the epistles). This is really quite untenable."

You see, there, he is quite correctly opposing one of the tenets of liberalism. The supposed contradiction between the gospel and the epistles. But then listen to what he says. His own position is far removed from orthodoxy. He says, "All the most terrifying texts come from the mouth of Our Lord: all the texts on which we can base such warrant as we have for hoping that all men will be saved come from St. Paul."

He can see the nonsense of the radical liberals, but his answer isn't Biblical orthodoxy. There is this sort of tragic ability to see through the radical liberal bishops and their ideas, but what he puts in its place is not evangelical, Biblical orthodoxy.

And so we find again the idea that all are ultimately saved. Quote, "For my own part, I have sometimes told my audience that the only two things really worth considering are Christianity and Hinduism. (Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies. Real Paganism is dead. All that was best in Judaism and Platonism survives in Christianity.) There isn't really, for an adult mind, this infinite variety of religions to consider. We may divide religions, as we do soups, into "thick" and "clear." By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of Thick religions. By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are Clear religions. Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfill this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfills it imperfectly. The Clear religion of the Brahmin hermit in the jungle and the Thick religion of the neighbouring temple go on *side by side*. The Brahmin hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshipper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be Clear: I have to be Thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion."

So he believed that Christianity is the truest religion. But he obviously believed that Christianity had much in common with other religions, that it was simply the purest form of it.

So was C.S. Lewis an evangelical? Well, the answer is no, absolutely no. He was not an evangelical. He did not believe in an infallible Bible. He did not believe in the doctrines of

justification by faith in Christ alone, and so on. He did believe some orthodox doctrines, but he denied others.

It is not possible to believe that a man who believes that Scripture can be wrong, who believes in purgatory, who believe in the invocation of saints, who imagines that everyone might be saved in the end, and so on. You cannot call that man an evangelical.

Fourthly, **why is C.S. Lewis so popular?** Some reasons are obvious. Firstly, his powers of expression and communication. His fast reading, his powerful imagination, meant that he had a tremendous ability to make a point readable and instantly understandable. He has an illustration for everything, and you know exactly what he said. And he is easy to read. So there is no need to deny that he was a man of great ability. That's one reason.

But another reason is the churches' weakness and vulnerability. Lewis makes vast concessions, indeed, more than concessions. His whole approach is based on the neutrality, the supposed neutrality, of human reason. Reason comes first; Scripture second.

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 1 & 2: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

There the apostle Paul is saying that he refused to behave like an original thinker, a philosopher. He had a great mind—no doubt about that—but he says I didn't come as a philosopher claiming to be giving you my original thoughts. He says, I came as a preacher declaring a message that was given by God. That's why the Greeks were offended. They wanted a philosopher, a profound thinker who would give them thoughts of his own. But he wouldn't. He said, I preached Christ crucified—preaching, heralding a message from God.

Lewis endeavors to *prove* Christianity. And in so doing preached man's reason as neutral, which it isn't. Despite all his insights into the way people think—and some of them are very perceptive, he still denied total depravity. For example, in that first quotation, the way a liberal bishop ends up as a liberal bishop, you would think surely he'd believe in total depravity, seeking to understand the way it works, but he didn't. He believed that man could be honest and upright with himself with truth.

And so the churches' weakness and vulnerability—and I am talking about the evangelical churches—there is a tendency to want Lewis's philosophical approach—"this will do the job, this will prove it, this will convince people."

Then also, there is the desire to have "big names" on our side. A desire to have big names on our side. . . . The desire to have somebody important, to be able to say "he's one of us." Whether it is a philosopher like C.S. Lewis, or a pop singer like Cliff Richard, or a football manager like the now forgotten Glen Hoddle. Christians want to think we can point to some well-known person and say he's one of us, he believes what we believe. And that this will impress people. And so they pick people who profess something vaguely like Christianity and they exalt them.

But when God really saves, as He sometimes does the wise, and the mighty, and the noble of the this world, then we should rejoice. “Not many wise, not many noble, not many mighty are called.” He didn’t say none. And when they are, we rejoice. And if they maintain a good confession, and exercise a powerful influence from their position of standing amongst men without compromise, we rejoice even more. But let us not unbelievably scrabble to cling to someone as an evangelical, when he clearly isn’t.

Isn’t that what happens. The church scrabbles in a rather undignified manner to convince themselves that someone is an evangelical because someone is important. Lewis was important, but he wasn’t an evangelical. He was a clever man, a man with amazing skills and abilities, but he should not be looked to as our finest Christian writer. Not at all! He should not be looked to as a trustworthy teacher of the truth.

A Roman Catholic professor, Robert Kreeft, at a conference on C.S. Lewis called “C.S. Lewis—A Millennial Assessment” recalls how the participants at this conference---Roman Catholics, Church of England, Eastern Orthodox, etc., cheered as someone suggested that C.S. Lewis provided part of the common ground of agreement between them all. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Church of England. Of course, he does. There is nothing distinctly evangelical in C.S. Lewis.

We might be impressed with some of his argumentation in points. We may like to read when he is tearing to pieces the radical liberals, which he does rather nicely. But he is not an evangelical. And so the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox—they are happy with him, too.

So he should not be seen as a teacher of the truth. And, above all, young Christians should emphatically not be directed to C.S. Lewis’s writings. I have been horrified at this happening, and it does happen. Young converts, people who have professed the faith, and novices in the faith—and people give them C.S. Lewis. How to convince someone; it is unbelievable!

If young Christians want help in understanding the Scriptures, let them listen to faithful ministers of the word expounding the Scriptures. And let them read the writings of past and present teachers who even though not famous were nonetheless faithful. What young Christians need is not teaching from famous, unsound men, but teaching from the Scriptures from sound men, whether they are famous or whether they are obscure and unheard of, men who fulfill the words of 1 Timothy 4:6: “If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained.”