The Christian Commitment: C. S. Lewis and the Defense of Doctrine

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Wm. Clayton Kimball

Latter-day Saints are often surprised when they read C. S. Lewis. But it is the shock of delight and the pleasure of recognition which produces the surprise. Here is an Oxford professor who strikes home again and again on matters of doctrine which, in this age of rapid theological retreat, we have come to feel are uniquely "Mormon." But Lewis insisted that he wrote only about those doctrines which were common to *all* Christians—mere Christianity—and sought to defend this common ground against all attack. The results, however, went far beyond defense.

> The Lewis who has cleared the ground by his controversial argument admits his readers to a mental world of great richness, great vigour and clarity, and in every corner illuminated by his Christian belief. You cannot read Lewis and tell yourself that Christianity has no important moral bearings, that it gives no coherence to the whole picture of existence, that it offers no criteria for the decision of human choices, that it is no source of strength or delight, no effective object of loyalty.[1]

Whether he was writing on the Christian life, dealing with literary scholarship, creating enchantment through children's stories or fascination through adult fiction, Lewis never left the context of Christianity. He felt no need to compromise and always fought and debated on his own ground.[2] We find, then, what seems almost implausible: an Oxford don who believed in a literal second coming and a literal devil, but, more important still, a man who understood the problems and frustrations that accompany the Christian quest.

> Sometimes, Lord, one is tempted to say that if you wanted us to behave like the lilies of the field you might have given us an organization more like theirs. But that, I suppose, is just your grand experiment. Or no: not an experiment, for you have no need to find things out. Rather, your great enterprise. To make an organism which is also a spirit, to make that terrible oxymoron, a "spiritual animal". To take a poor primate, a beast with nerve-endings all over it, a creature with a stomach that wants to be filled, a breeding animal that wants its mate, and say, "Now get on with it. Become a god."[3]

Lewis was no metaphysician, but he refused to put up with the ontological bullying implicit (and often explicit) in the modern assaults on Christian orthodoxy, whether from within or without. He constantly sought to expose what he called the "chronological snobbery" of our time:

"the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."[4] For Lewis, as for G. K. Chesterton, Christianity even when watered down is hot enough to boil all modern society to rags."[5] But he had no time for a watered-down or "liberal" Christianity.

> A "liberal" Christianity which considers itself free to alter the Faith whenever the Faith looks perplexing or repellent *must* be completely stagnant. Progress is made only into a *resisting* material.[6]

Lewis was caught up in the romance of orthodoxy and all of his writings are drenched with the "quality of the real universe, the divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic reality in which we all live." We "feel in our face the sweet air blowing from 'the land of righteousness'"[7] when we enter "the Christian World of C. S. Lewis."[8]

It was one of Lewis's contentions as a literary scholar that, generally speaking, the biographical details of an artist's life were of less importance and less value in understanding his work than the work itself.[9] And he was very specific about why he had written his own books.

> I wrote the books I should have liked to read. That's always been my reason for writing. People won't write the books I want, so I have to do it for myself: no rot about "self-expression".[10]

But, since Lewis lived the doctrines as well as he defended them, an acquaintance with some of the significant aspects of his life can deepen our appreciation of his work.

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1898. His education was in the classical tradition, and by the time he entered Oxford University he was already at home in several languages. He learned the art of logical argument so thoroughly from the tutor who guided his preparation for an Oxford scholarship that for the rest of his life no one could put him down in debate, even if the stronger argument was not on his side.[11] He read so widely and deeply that few, if any, of his professorial peers could match his breadth in knowledge of literature. His acceptance at Oxford came concurrently with his entry into the British army. He took his training at the university (a delightful "boot camp") and soon left for the trenches in France. His military interlude was cut short when he was wounded in action.

Returning to school after the war, Lewis took "firsts" in every area for which he read and, upon finishing his formal studies in 1924, began his academic career teaching philosophy at Oxford. After one year he was selected to a fellowship in English, and this appointment occupied the bulk of his working life for nearly thirty years. He remained at Oxford until 1954 when he moved over to Cambridge University to occupy a new chair in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, which chair he resigned shortly before he died. His death passed nearly unnoticed, occurring as it did on 22 November 1963.

In his early teens Lewis had rejected his inherited Anglican faith and embraced a mild form of atheism; but during his university and early professorial years he came gradually to the conclusion that Christianity was the only viable explanation of the ultimate questions of life. This commitment to the Christian gospel, which began with his intellect, soon spread throughout his life to inform and illuminate his imagination and, indeed, all his behavior. "Lewis struck me as the most thoroughly *converted* man I ever met. Christianity was never for him a separate department of life. . . ."[12]

With the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942, Lewis gained worldwide attention as an articulate defender of Christian orthodoxy. As he continued to write book after book on Christian subjects he attracted a vast group of admirers, many of whom corresponded with him seeking advice about their personal problems as well as information about things he had written. The following letter is a brief but characteristic example of the latter. It was written to a woman in Salt Lake City shortly after the death of Lewis's wife.[13]

> Dear Mrs. Garrett 12 Sept 1960
>
> As you see from the book the whole lesson of my life has been that no "methods of stimulation" are of any lasting use. They are indeed like drugs—a stronger dose is needed each time and soon no possible dose is effective. We must not bother about thrills at all. *Do* the present duty—*bear* the present pain—*enjoy* the present pleasure—and leave emotions and "experiences" to look after themselves. That's the programme, isn't it?
>
> With all good wishes,
>
> Yours sincerely
> C. S. Lewis

Although letter writing became an unwelcome task of major proportions in his life, Lewis was unfailing in the compassion and courtesy which guided his replies. Chad Walsh notes that he was "a genuine pastoral counsellor via the postal system to many fellow pilgrims."[14] The book of his letters which W. H. Lewis, his older brother, collected and published several years ago gives the reader great insight into the man. The final letter in the collection was "very characteristic of his last days" and shows his warmth.

> Thanks for your note. Yes, autumn is really the best of the seasons; and I'm not sure that old age isn't the best part of life. But of course, like autumn, it doesn't *last.*[15]

In the letters, Lewis appears even more clearly as a man who was totally committed to Christianity. His excitement with literature, his delight in good friends, and his practice of true charity emerge on every page. One comes to realize the diversity of his interests and, even more, to appreciate the richness of his symbolic universe. The insights which made his books important to the many made each letter important to the recipient. No professional theologian has filled such a calling in our time.

The Purgatorial Perspective

Most people come to Lewis through *Screwtape,* and the book's popularity is not without reason. It purports to be a series of letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his "nephew" Wormwood, who has just been posted to his first "temptership" on earth. Adopting the purgatorial perspective of Screwtape giving devilish advice to Wormwood, Lewis highlights the dilemma and drama of a soul trying to enter into the Christian life.

In the introduction to the 1962 edition of the book, he comments on the public reaction to the work and on his own feeling for it. Of all the questions which have been asked him since its first publication,

> The commonest question is whether I really "believe in the Devil." . . . The proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God and, as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good angels, but their nature is depraved. *Devil* is the opposite of *angel* only as Bad Man is the opposite of Good Man. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael.[16]

Any theologically literate Latter-day Saint will find this statement most remarkable—especially coming from a non-Mormon. Lewis goes on to say,

> I believe this not in the sense that it is part of my creed, but in the sense that it is one of my opinions. My religion would not be in ruins if this opinion were shown to be false.[17]

After trying to sort out some of the elements in his reading which influenced his use of the device of devilish letters, he comments on the source of his insights into human foibles and weaknesses.

> Some have paid me an undeserved compliment by supposing that my *Letters* were the ripe fruit of many years' study in moral and ascetic theology. They forgot that there is an equally reliable, though less creditable, way of learning how temptation works. "My heart"—I need no other's—"showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly."[18]

As we shall see, this is a major component in Lewis's religious writing and probably the source of his effectiveness in reaching the hearts as well as the minds of his readers.

Each of the letters concentrates on one aspect of Christian life and points to the difficulties encountered in trying to live the doctrines of Christ. The work is full of epigrammatic gems which concentrate paragraphs of extensive exposition into a few sentences.

> He [God—the Enemy] wants men to be concerned with what they do. Our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them.
>
> Once you have made the World an end, and faith a means, you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing.
>
> It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.
>
> You see, it is so hard for these creatures to persevere. The routine of adversity, the gradual decay of youthful loves and youthful hopes, the quiet despair (hardly felt as pain) of ever overcoming the chronic temptations with which we have again and again defeated them, the drabness which we create in their lives, and the inarticulate resentment with which we teach them to respond to it—all this provides admirable opportunities of wearing out a soul by attrition.

Each reader has his favorite letter, depending upon the problem that troubles him most. *Screwtape* is a book diabolic in form, but celestial in effect. The man who cannot use it as a mirror is a man who has not lifted himself to the level of self-knowledge, a man for whom repentance has no meaning because he has never acknowledged his sins nor correctly named the ills of all men.

The Uses of Argument

In most of his other theological books, Lewis usually takes one particular problem or question and develops it at length. Some of his titles indicate the subjects he considers: *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *Miracles* (1947), *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), *The Four Loves* (1960), *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964). Each of these books is rewarding; one seldom will find better books, regardless of the subject. And as aids to the living of the Christian life they are always notable and frequently major classics in religious writing.

Lewis was often at his best in the essay and sermon. Collections of these are published in various books, and there is some duplication between them. The principal books of religious essays include *The Weight of Glory* (1949), *The World's Last Night (1960), Christian Reflections (1967),* and *God in the Dock* (1970). Falling more or less in this category is the most comprehensive of Lewis's books, *Mere Christianity* (1952), which is made up of a series of talks he gave over the BBC during the Second World War. The chapters are brief and very basic explanations of the doctrines common to all traditional Christians. About the only place where a Latter-day Saint would depart completely from what Lewis says comes in the final section.

Here he tries to explain and defend the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. He makes the best of an impossible task, and it is doubtful that the trinitarian mystery could ever receive a clearer or more appealing presentation.

There is no way to indicate the richness of all these works. One example must serve, and it must be acknowledged from the start that Lewis, like all good writers, is better than any summary of him.[19] In a sermon entitled "Learning in Wartime,"[20] Lewis presents an argument which might be of greater interest to readers of this journal than to the typical man on the street. By following the course of his sermon one can get the flavor of Lewis's use of formal argument to present Christian doctrine. The occasion which gave rise to the sermon was the outbreak of war in the autumn of 1939. The immediate audience is made up of scholars and students.

The opening question is fairly simple: "What business do scholars have pursuing their profession in the midst of a great war when their work does not directly aid the war effort?" Is this not a form of fiddling while Rome burns?

> . . . to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell. You must forgive me the crude monosyllable. I know that many wiser and better Christians than I in these days do not like to mention heaven and hell even in a pulpit. I know, too, that nearly all the references to this subject in the New Testament come from a single source. But then that source is Our Lord Himself. People will tell you it is St. Paul, but it is untrue. These overwhelming doctrines are dominical. They are not really removable from the teaching of Christ or of his Church. If we do not really believe them, our presence in this church is great tomfoolery. If we do, we must sometime overcome our spiritual prudery and mention them.

The question which a war presents is only a variation of the general question every Christian must ask himself at any time: "How can I spend time on any academic or professional concern when each of us is advancing either to heaven or to hell?" Lewis believes that we must view every calamity that befalls us in the proper perspective.

> . . . war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun. We are mistaken when we compare war with "normal life." Life has never been normal.

Plausible reasons have always existed for putting off cultural activities. But men, by nature, seek beauty and knowledge in the face of disaster. So we are still faced by the question: "How can I be so frivolous and selfish as to think about anything but the salvation of human souls?" While Lewis feels that "our whole life can, and indeed must, become religious," it does not become so in the sense implied by this question. We cannot separate our daily activities into sacred and secular categories and then purge the secular areas from our lives. Even if this were desirable, it is not going to happen. If a person seeks to suspend his intellectual and aesthetic activity because of a crisis like a war, the end result would only be to substitute a worse cultural life for a better.

> If you don't read good books, you will read bad ones. If you don't go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally. If you reject aesthetic satisfactions, you will fall into sensual satisfactions.

Neither the claims of war nor the claims of religion will remove from our lives the daily activities which form the basis of our existence. However, the things we might do in our lives—such as learning life-saving—cannot be ends in themselves, but should have another end in sight. That is, they cannot be pursued single-mindedly. "The rescue of drowning men is, then, a duty worth dying for, but not worth living for."

> A man may have to die for our country: but no man must, in any exclusive sense, live for his country. He who surrenders himself without reservation to the temporal claims of a nation, or a party, or a class is rendering to Caesar that which, of all things, most emphatically belongs to God: himself.

"Religion" cannot occupy our whole life in the sense of excluding commonplace things, although in another sense it *must* occupy the whole of life. God's claim on us is total and we can only refuse it or begin to try to grant it. There is no middle ground. But the proper living of the gospel does not exclude normal human activities. They will continue, but with a new end: "Whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

> All our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest; and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not. Christianity does not simply replace our natural life and substitute a new one: it is rather a new organization which exploits, to its own supernatural ends, these natural materials.

We must be careful to avoid the conceit that cultural or intellectual activities are, in and of themselves, meritorious—"as though scholars and poets were intrinsically more pleasing to God than scavengers and bootblacks."

> The work of a Beethoven, and the work of a charwoman, become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly "as to the Lord." This does not, of course, mean that it is for anyone a mere toss-up whether he should sweep rooms or compose symphonies. A mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow. . . [it would seem] that the life which we . . . can best lead to the glory of God at present is the learned life.

> The intellectual life is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us. Of course, it will be so only so long as we keep the impulse pure and disinterested. That is the great difficulty. . . we may come to love knowledge—*our* knowing—more than the thing known: to delight, not in the exercise of our talents but in the fact that they are ours, or even in the reputation they bring us. Every success in the scholar's life increases the danger. If it becomes irresistible, he must give up his scholarly work. The time for plucking out the right eye has arrived.

Cultural life will exist whether good Christians participate in it or not. If we are not prepared to defend our position, if "intellectuals" do not come to the defense of the faith, this betrays the uneducated and lays them open to the attacks of evil men. "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered." The learned or intellectual life, thus, for some becomes a duty. It becomes our offering to God, and it is our way of serving our brethren.

Returning to the immediate problem which the war has posed, Lewis presents three mental exercises or answers which can be used to overcome the three great enemies of scholars (and all men) in crisis situations.

The first enemy is excitement. We must realize that war has not really raised up a new enemy but only aggravated an old one. There are constantly rivals to one's work, and war deserves no special notice.

> If we let ourselves, we shall always be waiting for some distraction or other to end before we can really get down to our work. The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavourable. Favourable conditions never come.

The second enemy is frustration, the feeling that we will not have time to finish our work. Again, there is a way of dealing with this problem. We should cultivate the attitude of

> . . . leaving futurity in God's hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to Him or not. Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. . . . It is only our *daily* bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received.

The third enemy is fear. War threatens us with death and pain. But there is no question of death or life for any of us—only a question of this death or that. What does war do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent: 100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased. War *does* force us to remember death. War makes it more real, and that should be regarded as a blessing.

> We see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have all along been living, and must come to terms with it. If we had foolish un-Christian hopes about human culture, they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a

> heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.

With that observation Lewis concludes his argument. One must be impressed by the sheer common sense of his approach to the problems of Christian living. In all of his works you find "a radiant and utterly real quality hard to find in other twentieth-century writings."[21] No matter what he wrote, Lewis sought to present the truth of the matter as he understood it. Indeed, this was the core of his witness.

> The great difficulty is to get modern audiences to realize that you are preaching Christianity solely and simply because you happen to think it *true;* they always suppose you are preaching it because you like it or think it good for society or something of that sort.[22]

The Defense of Doctrine

A comparative question is often raised about Lewis. Why is he so effective in presenting his message when so many Christian writers are so mediocre? His obvious brilliance is not a sufficient answer. Many brilliant men are also very confused. Part of the answer is that Lewis had a clear idea of what he was trying to accomplish as a Christian writer, and he knew the problems facing any defender of the doctrines. However, the apparent ease with which he handles religious problems did not come naturally to him at first.

> I don't wonder that you got fogged in *Pilgrim's Regress.* It was my first religious book, and I didn't know then how to make things easy.[23]

Despite his intellectual credentials, Lewis considered his greatest task to be reaching the average man, indeed what one of his less charitable colleagues called the "educationally unwashed." During the Second World War he often spoke over the BBC on religious topics, and was a frequent visitor to air bases and army barracks where he conducted many discussions. This experience gave him a fresh insight into the problem of religious language.

> When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving fellow-countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was therefore simply that of a *translator*—one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that the unscholarly people would attend to and could understand. . . .[24]

This was the real test:

> Any fool can write *learned* language. The vernacular is the real test. If you can't turn your faith into it, then either you don't understand it or you don't believe it.[25]

By stressing an approach which would appeal to unscholarly people, Lewis did not abandon scholars, nor anyone else for that matter. In one article he made a list of theological terms which he claimed meant a different thing to the average man than to the theologian. He maintained that as long as the theologian persisted in using technical language, the people would not respond.[26]

> One thing at least is sure. 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.[27]

Because of his common touch and seemingly effortless style, some pedants (both theological and literary) criticized Lewis for being "lightweight"—or even frivolous at times. When asked once about this he replied that

> Some people write heavily, some write lightly. I prefer the light approach because I believe there is a great deal of false reverence about. There is too much solemnity and intensity in dealing with sacred matters; too much speaking in holy tones. . . . There is a difference between a private and devotional life and a corporate one. Solemnity is proper in church, but things that are proper in church are not necessarily proper outside, and vice versa. For example, I can say a prayer while washing my teeth, but that does not mean I should wash my teeth in church.[28]

Whether you consider his style to be light or magisterial, there is no doubt that Lewis was one of the great stylists of the English language in this century. His colleague and friend, Nevill Coghill, once asked him

> whether he had to make ten or twenty drafts (as I have to) of anything he wished to print. No, he said, he just made a rough copy, then corrected it and made a fair copy: and that was it. The gift of phrase was instantaneous in him, and that must partly account for his huge output; but there was a plentitude of mind as well as a swiftness of phrase to help him; he never put a nib wrong.[29]

In various places he offers advice on "how to write" which illuminates his own art. Here is a concise example.

> The way for a person to develope a style is (a) to know exactly what he wants to say, and (b) to be sure he is saying exactly that. The reader, we must remember, does not start by knowing what we mean. If our words are ambiguous, our meaning will escape him. I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate open to the left or the right the readers will most certainly go into it.[30]

The special affliction of religious writing is that bad writers think that their subject matter guarantees communication with the reader. (They also seldom know they are bad writers.) Lewis touches on this problem as he concludes his enchanting discussion of medieval literature and the conceptual universe which lay behind it. He admits that the most typical vice of the literature of that time is "sheer, unabashed, prolonged dulness."

> One sees how the belief in a world of built-in significance encourages this. The writer feels everything to be so interesting in itself that there is no need for him to make it so. The story, however badly told, will still be worth telling; the truths, however badly stated, still worth stating. He expects the subject to do for him nearly everything he ought to do himself. Outside literature we can still see this state of mind at work. On the lowest intellectual level, people who find any one subject entirely engrossing are apt to think that any reference to it, of whatever quality, must have some value. Pious people on that level appear to think that the quotation of any scriptural text, or any line from a hymn, or even any noise made by a harmonium, is an edifying sermon or a cogent apologetic.[31]

Lewis was never guilty of letting the subject do his work for him. He is constantly at the reader's side urging him on. Even in his professional works there is no question that a real person is speaking. What many writers consider to be a proper 'scholarly detachment," he recognized as being too often a sort of scholarly disinterest—a lack of concern for the reader. Even less impressive for Lewis were writers who sought constantly to be on the crest of the latest wave of fashion, especially of religious fashion.

> Our business is to present that which is timeless. . . in the particular language of our own age. The bad preacher does exactly the opposite: he takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out in the traditional language of Christianity. . . . [Y]our teaching must be timeless at its heart and wear a modern dress.[32]

As he sought to present the doctrines of traditional Christianity, Lewis brought all of his immense talent as a writer to bear on the problems he discussed. In book after book he sought "to make things easy" for his reader. But this *never* meant compromising the doctrines. They were timeless and unchanging. It meant, rather, presenting the message of the gospel in a way which would slip through the almost unconscious assumptions built up by the secularism of the modern world—the barnacles of disbelief which encrust the mind and mute its sensitivity to spiritual stimulation. He sought to touch the source of belief in each reader.

In the introduction to a book on the state of Christianity in Britain,[33] Lewis noted that the author had established one major reason for the decline of religious belief. It lay in the simple fact that Christianity was not being presented to the youth of the country as a viable alternative. "There is nothing in the nature of the younger generation which incapacitates them for receiving Christianity. If any one is prepared to tell them, they are apparently ready to hear."[34]

Lewis was doing his best to "tell them." But the greatest obstacle he faced in trying to get people to pay honest attention to the Christian message was that

> A sense of sin is almost totally lacking. . . . We address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else's fault—the Capitalists', the Governments', the Nazis', the Generals' etc. . . .[35]

He felt that in order to understand the importance of Christianity each person had to face himself and his own situation in the world. As soon as a man becomes aware of God as God and of himself as self, the primary choice has to be made between God and self. All men are sinners, and each man must acknowledge that fact before Christianity becomes relevant to him. The problem is one of having to convince people they are sick before the cure can be preached. While the essential key is the sense of sin, Lewis was less sure of the best way to employ it.

> I cannot offer you a water-tight technique for awakening the sense of sin. I can only say that, in my experience, if one begins from the sin that has been one's own chief problem during the past week, one is very often surprised at the way this shaft goes home. But whatever method we use, our continual effort must be to get their mind away from public affairs and "crime" and bring them down to brass tacks—to the whole network of spite, greed, envy, unfairness and conceit in the lives of "ordinary decent people" like themselves (and ourselves).[36]

It is in this effort that Lewis excels. He was constantly aware that a good preacher will preach out of his own experience: for while each man is unique, each man must overcome very similar obstacles. In his presentation and defense of the doctrines of Christianity, Lewis repeatedly emphasized practical application rather than theoretical justification. Thus, his appeal is not curtailed by doctrinal differences. It was Lewis's contention that a man's theology was less important than the condition of his spirit and his attitude toward God.

The Uses of Imagination

Austin Fatter has noted that Lewis's great value as a Christian writer was his "many-sidedness."[37] Despite the fact that he wrote in many different modes, Lewis maintained that they were all the outcome of a single perception.

> The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. It was he who made me first attempt (with little success) to be a poet. It was he who, in response to the poetry of others, made me a critic, and, in defense of that

> response, sometimes a critical controversialist. It was he who. . . led me to embody my religious belief in symbolical or mythopoeic forms, ranging from *Screwtape* to a kind of theologised science-fiction. And it was of course he who has brought me, in the last few years, to write the series of Narnian stories for children; not asking what children want and then endeavouring to adapt myself (this was not needed) but because the fairy tale was the genre best fitted for what I wanted to say. . . .[38]

It can be argued that these imaginative works will be the most enduring of all that Lewis wrote. Owen Barfield, Lewis's lifelong friend, felt that the novel *Till We Have Faces* was "the most muscular and powerful product of [his] imagination."[39] However, the book never has sold well and remains the secret delight of those who happen upon it by chance or design.

In the early 1940s, Lewis published three books—the "theologised science-fiction" to which he refers above—*Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra,* and *That Hideous Strength.* This "space trilogy" was the product of an attempt "to redeem for genuinely imaginative purposes the form popularly known. . . as 'science-fiction'. . . .[40] In making such an attempt, he also created an ideal for all other writers in this genre. While the three books are loosely connected by plot, they are bound together by the mythopoeic symbols and background they share. Stella Gibbons noted that Lewis, as a writer of imaginative fiction, "had superb authority"—something which is missing in most contemporary fiction.[41] There is little if any "science" in this fiction. He draws, rather, on his knowledge and love of medieval literature for his cosmology, as well as for what can only be a private joke in the second book.

At one point he quotes a reputed authority, one "Natvilicius," "as a starting point for future investigation" on the subject of his *eldila* (roughly, angels).[42] There is a curious resemblance between this Latin authority and the pseudonym Lewis often used when he published his poetry: Nat Whilk—Anglo-Saxon for "I know not whom."[43] This adds little to the story, but it reveals the enjoyment of the author in creating imaginative worlds.

One reader wrote to Lewis inquiring about some of the symbols used in the trilogy.

> The VII Bears and the Atlantean Circle are pure inventions of my own, filling the same purpose in the narrative that "noises off" wd. in a stage play. Numinor is a misspelling of Numenor which, like the "true West" is a fragment from a vast private mythology invented by Professor J. R. R. Tolkien. At the same time we all hoped that a good deal of the mythology would soon become public through a romance which the Professor was then contemplating. Since then the hope has receded. . . .[44]

While this was written in 1952, the time period referred to was about ten years earlier. It was not until 1956 when, due in large part to Lewis's urgings and encouragement, if not downright insistence, Tolkien did publish the "romance," *The Lord of the Rings.* The friendship between these two men was of long standing. Lewis revealed in his autobiography that Tolkien was one of the two men most instrumental in his return to Christianity in the late 1920s.[45] For many years they met with a few other close friends almost weekly and read to each other from their "works in progress." A constant fixture of these sessions was a chapter or two of Tolkien's "new Hobbit." *Screwtape* is dedicated to Tolkien, and the two scholars once contemplated a book together. However, Lewis correctly predicted the result.

> My book with Tolkien—any book in collaboration with that great, but dilatory and unmethodical man—is dated I fear to appear on the Greek Calends.[46]

There is an underlying harmony between *The Lord of the Rings* and the Lewis trilogy. Although on the surface they are very different works, at a deeper level they are based on the same conception of imaginative fiction as well as on what G. K. Chesterton called "the ethics of elfland."[47] Lewis often recommended Tolkien's work to his correspondents as an excellent "mouthwash for the imagination,"[48] a delightful way to clear out the bad taste (in both senses) created by so much of contemporary fiction and fantasy. The recommendation is equally valid for Lewis's own works.

Lewis enjoyed playing with language, inventing new words by sound, and all of his fiction bears the imprint of this play.

> I am always playing with syllables and fitting them together (purely by ear) to see if I can hatch up new words that please me. I want them to have an emotional, not intellectual, suggestiveness; the heaviness of *glund* for as huge a planet as Jupiter, the vibrating, tintillating quality of *virtrilbia* for the subtlety of Mercury, the liquidity. . . of Maleldil.[49]

A discussion of Lewis's fiction must concentrate on his craft because there is no way to convey the sheer delight of the books themselves. Whose imagination is not kindled by a chapter about how "They Have Pulled Down Deep Heaven on Their Heads"?[50] The atmosphere of desperate courage, of wild romance, of great deeds done in the face of hopeless odds infuses all of Lewis's fictional works. These qualities become most poignant and most pronounced in the chronicles of Narnia, the series of seven children's books he wrote in the early 1950s. Here, as was ever the case, he was writing the books he wished he could have read. But this was *why* he wrote his books, not *how.* Lewis's fiction always began when he "saw" pictures.

> . . . in a certain sense, I have never exactly "made" a story. With me the process is much more like bird-watching than like either talking or building. I see pictures. Some of these pictures have a common flavour, almost a common smell, which groups them together. Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining themselves up. If you were very lucky (I have never been as lucky as all that) a whole set might join themselves so consistently that there you had a complete story: without doing anything yourself. But more often

> (in my experience always) there are gaps. Then at last you have to do some deliberate inventing, have to contrive reasons why these characters should be in these various places doing these various things. I have no idea whether this is the usual way of writing stories, still less whether it is the best. It is the only one I know: images always come first.[51]

The reason a story became a children's story and not something else was simply

> . . . because a children's story is the best art form for something you have to say; just as a composer might write a Dead March not because there was a public funeral in view but because certain musical ideas that had occurred to him went best into that form.[52]

Narnia is a "secondary creation,"[53] a world which touches our own only through magic. It is not the scene of Christian allegory, although the various books are clearly Christian in substance. It is the working out of a supposition.

> What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in *that* world as He actually has done in ours?[54]

In Narnia, the "Christ" is a great Lion—Aslan. At the end of the fourth book, some of the human children who were drawn into Narnia by magic are preparing to leave, and they ask Aslan when they might return.

> "Dearest," said Aslan very gently, "you and your brother will never come back to Narnia."
>
> "Oh, Aslan!!" said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices.
>
> "You are too old, children," said Aslan, "and you must begin to come close to your own world now."
>
> "It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's you. We shan't meet you there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"
>
> "But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan. "Are—are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.
>
> "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a while, you may know me better there."[55]

Such is the purpose of the entire series of books.

These books, which are now published in paper as well as hardback in the United States, are good beyond hope for the parent who seeks something with which to baptize his child's imagination. They embody the very quality Lewis himself first felt in the writings of his mentor, George MacDonald. "I should have been shocked in my teens if anyone had told me that what I learned to love in *Phantastes* [a fantasy by MacDonald] was goodness."[56] Lewis repaid his debt to MacDonald many times over with the Narnia tales.

Lewis and Latter-day Saints

Someone like C. S. Lewis does not appear very often either in the world of letters or the world of lay theologians. Anyone sincerely interested in communicating the gospel message effectively can learn much from him. But Lewis was more than a good Christian writer. He was a good Christian. A review of one of Lewis's books in this journal made the point that Latter-day Saints need not to go to him to learn *what* to believe. But we can turn to him to learn how to be better Christians.[57] A critical reader can find many points of doctrine wherein he differs from us. But we must not hold Lewis guilty for not having the insights that come from modern Revelation, and these differences in doctrine do not diminish his power as an articulate ally in the cause of Christian decency. We sometimes forget that there are pearls of great price not produced in our own oyster beds. Despite his reliance on traditional Christian doctrines, Lewis remains an author who is without peer in his effective advocacy of many elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of the pleasures of reading non-Mormon writers comes from the sense of intimacy which occurs when our theological outlook is confirmed and well expressed. After reading Lewis, most Latter-day Saints can hardly believe he had no contact with the Church, especially with the Book of Mormon. I have been told of at least one person who sent him a Book of Mormon and of another who sent him selected passages from the same scripture. There may have been others. It would be fascinating to learn that he replied to such an approach, but to date I have no knowledge of such a reply.

However, a search through the entire body of Lewis's works for indications of some knowledge of the Church produces some probable references. None of them could be called sympathetic. It may well be that the references are not to the Church, but it is easy to see the possibility. Lewis was almost fanatically private in his personal life. One of his students has written that in the entire experience he had with Lewis as his tutor, Lewis never attempted to "push" his Christianity on his pupil. If there were Christian elements in the literature they were studying, Lewis would explain them and move on.[58] He likely would not have taken much pleasure in a missionary contact. He felt that "'Mind one's own business' is a good rule in religion as in other things. . . ."[59]

The following two passages from the *Letters* indicate that someone who was perhaps in contact with the Church wrote to Lewis and sought his advice. In both cases the answers are inconclusive.

> It is right and inevitable that we shd. be much concerned about the salvation of those we love. But we must be careful not to expect or demand that their salvation shd. conform to some ready-made pattern of our own. Some Protestant sects have gone very wrong about this. They have a whole programme of conversion etc. marked out, the same for everyone, and will not believe that anyone can be saved who doesn't go through it "just so".[60]

(Both letters were written to the same person.)

> I am afraid I am not going to be much help about all the religious bodies mentioned in your letter of March 2nd. I have always in my books been concerned simply to put forward "mere" Christianity, and am no guide on these (most regrettable) "interdenominational" questions. I. do however strongly object to the tyrannic and unscriptural insolence of anything that calls itself a Church and makes teetotalism a condition of membership.[61]

One need not take that final statement lying down and it is certainly fair to remind Lewis of one of his most important insights.

> . . .the doctrines which one finds easy are the doctrines which give Christian sanction to truths you already knew. The new truth which you do not know and which you need must, in the very nature of things, be hidden precisely in the doctrines you least like and least understand. . . .[62]

Or, as he put it elsewhere:

> If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know.[63]

The only explicit reference in his writings comes in an essay Lewis wrote concerning the "impact of the Authorized Version" of the Bible on English literature.

> The influence may show itself in architectonics. . . Very few English writers have undergone an influence of that sort from any book of the Bible. Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy* and the *Book of Mormon* are perhaps instances.[64]

I have found nothing else in his works which would indicate his contact with the Church was more than casual and unattentive.

Lewis's defense of Christian orthodoxy is naturally attractive to those who hold the same beliefs. And the response generated by his insights into Christian living may be explained in his own words.

> That indeed seems to be one of the magical laws of the very creation in which we live; that the thing we know already, the thing we have said to ourselves a hundred times, when said by *someone else* becomes suddenly operative. It is a part of C.[harles] Williams' doctrine, isn't it?—that no one can paddle his own canoe but everyone can paddle someone else's. . . .[65]

Lewis instructs us so well in the behavioral realities of Christian life that rationalization becomes less and less easy. But there is far more than a comfortable confirmation of our own doctrines and more than just another reminder that we do not live as we know we should.

One result of reading Lewis is that he sends his readers constantly back to the Bible. That was the only scripture he recognized, but he was able, because of his classical training, to read it more perceptively than most Christians today. This ability was the source of many of his insights. In a world beset by burgeoning immorality, Lewis's argument for chastity comes directly from the Bible, but comes with the power of a fresh insight others have missed.

> Now the second reason [for Chastity] involves the whole Christian view of sex. It is all contained in Christ's saying, that two shall be "one flesh". He says nothing about two who "married for love"; the mere fact of marriage *at all*—however it came about—sets up the "one flesh". There is a terrible comment on this in I. Cor. VI:16: "he that is joined to an harlot is one flesh". You see? Apparently if Christianity is true, the mere fact of sexual intercourse sets up between human beings a relation which has, so to speak, transcendental repercussions. . . .[66]

Lewis constantly argues for the acceptance of "the universal laws which underlie our spiritual order," for "a spiritual ecology in which the laws and principles enunciated by Jesus Christ are intertwined."[67] And he generally does not appeal for long to people who are not also students of the scriptures. Whether scriptural literacy is a precondition or whether he compels scriptural confrontation is not important. The result is.

It is unlikely, therefore, that Lewis could become a "fad" as did Tolkien for a while through the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings.* Lewis demands too much of his reader for casual attention to suffice. In all that he wrote he sought no compromise with reality. He knew that making assertions about the most ultimate facts is a high-risk kind of activity, and yet he believed and affirmed without qualification that the claims of Christianity provide the only true account of the world. Any honest man, he felt, when confronted with them, could only seek to "know the doctrine."[68] Lewis was able to deal with fundamentals without being fundamentalistic. He sought to revive Christian belief in the minds of men without being revivalistic. In this disposable age of paper plates and paper philosophies which are good for one use only, Lewis insisted that all things had to be tested spiritually, rationally, and experientially before an honest man could give allegiance to them. He believed that Christianity met every test.

Latter-day Saints can affirm that it is a pleasure and a challenge to be instructed by Lewis. All of his works are touched with the light of Christ and infused with his yearning for God. All that he wrote was written to the glory of the Lord, and his position is never in doubt.

> I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.[69]

So it was with him, and so it must be with us.

Tony Kimball is assistant professor of government at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. He is a doctoral candidate at Harvard. One of his special fields of interest is C. S. Lewis.

1. Austin Farrer, "The Christian Apologist," in *Light on C. S. Lewis,* ed. by Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), pp. 26–27. This book contains the most complete bibliography of Lewis's works published. Walter Hooper is responsible for the work and it is found between pp. 120–148. (Hereinafter this book will be referred to as *Light.)*

2. Owen Barfield, "Introduction," in *Light,* p. xix.

3. C S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), p. 57.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p. 207.

5. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1950), p. 218.

6. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 91. (Hereinafter this book will be referred to simply as *God in the Dock.*)

7. C. S. Lewis, *George Macdonald: An Anthology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin Books, 1962), p. 27. (Preface by Lewis and 365 brief excerpts from the works of Macdonald.)

8. This is the title of an introduction to Lewis's religious works by Clyde S. Kilby (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

9. See *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). This is a series of essays by E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis.

10. Roger Lancelyn Green, *C.S. Lewis* (London: The Bodley Head, 1963), p. 9.

11. *Light,* pp. 26, 71, 72, 76, 84.

12. *God in the Dock,* p. 12. This is Walter Hooper's observation.

13. I express deepest thanks to Mrs. Ray Garrett for her kind permission to publish this letter. Mrs. Garrett cannot recall the precise question she asked Lewis, but she wrote to him after reading *Surprised by Joy.*

14. Chad Walsh, "Impact on America," in *Light,* p. 116.

15. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis,* ed. with a memoir, by W. H. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1966), p. 308. (Hereinafter referred to as *Letters.)*

16. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), p. vii. (Paperback edition.)

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.,* p. xiii.

19. The best collection of brief passages is *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis,* Clyde S. Kilby, ed., (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968).

20. C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-time," in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), pp. 43–54.

21. *Light,* p. 116.

22. *God in the Dock,* pp. 90–91.

23. *Letters,* p. 248.
24. *God in the Dock,* p. 183.
25. *Ibid.,* p. 338.
26. *Ibid.,* pp. 89–103.
27. *Ibid.,* p. 183.
28. *Ibid.,* p. 259.
29. *Light,* p. 64.
30. *God in the Dock,* p. 259.
31. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964), pp. 204–205.
32. *God in the Dock,* pp. 93–94.
33. B. G. Sandhurst, *How Heathen is Britain?* (London: Collins, 1946).
34. *God in the Dock,* p.115.
35. *Ibid.,* p. 95.
36. *Ibid.,* p. 96.
37. *Light,* pp. 25, 26.
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40. *Letters,* p. 295.
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44. *Letters,* pp. 244–245.
45. *Surprised by Joy,* p. 216.
46. *Letters,* p. 222.
47. *Orthodoxy,* pp. 81–118.
48. *Letters,* p. 279.
49. *Ibid.,* p. 284.
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51. C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories,* ed. by Waiter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), pp. 32–33.
52. *Ibid.,* p. 23.
53. See J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams,* ed. by C. S. Lewis (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p. 60.
54. *Letters,* p. 283.
55. C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 209.
56. *George Macdonald,* p. 27.
57. Elouise Bell, "Book Review," [of *Christian Reflections] Brigham Young University Studies* IX (Winter 1969) p. 222.
58. John Lawlor, "The Tutor and the Scholar," in *Light,* p. 72.
59. *Letters,* p. 268.
60. *Ibid.,* p. 261.
61. *Ibid.,* p. 262.
62. *God in the Dock,* p. 91.
63. *The Weight of Glory,* p. 7.

64. C. S. Lewis, "The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version," in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969)(ed. by Walter Hooper), p. 136.

65. *Letters,* p. 236.

66. *Ibid.,* p. 184.

67. Neal A. Maxwell, "For the Power is in Them. . . ." (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1970), p. 1.

68. See the excellent argument in "Man or Rabbit?" in *God in the Dock,* p. 108.

69. C. S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *They Asked for a Paper* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), p. 165.