

## Bearing the Weight of Glory *The cost of C.S. Lewis's witness*

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What is it that motivated C.S. Lewis, a comfortable academic with more than enough to do, to direct so much of his time writing and speaking towards the conversion of the unbelieving of the world? What made him sacrifice not only the regard of many of his colleagues but his own academic advancement to defend the faith? The answer will no doubt appear quite obvious once it is stated. But since it says something important about Lewis and something quite profound about the human drama viewed through the lenses of the Christian faith, and because I do not recall anyone having yet called specific attention to the connection I propose (though some have hinted at it),<sup>1</sup> it seems appropriate to present the matter here.



Christopher Mitchell

To state the case most plainly, the vividness by which Lewis perceived the potential eternal destinies of every man and woman compelled him to direct a great part of his energies towards the saving of souls. Lewis perceived evangelism to be his lay vocation, and the means by which he expressed this evangelistic impulse were through his writing and speaking. The particulars of his ministry are generally well known. However, a summary of them in the context of his life will be necessary in order to appreciate the significance of his motivation.

Lewis's bent toward evangelism began to assert itself within the first year of his conversion in 1931.<sup>2</sup> He "felt it was the duty of every Christian," observed Owen Barfield, "to go out into the world and try to save souls."<sup>3</sup> In an essay on "Christianity and Culture" Lewis stated plainly that "The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying him, the salvation of the human soul, is the real business of life," and in another

place admitted that most of his books were "evangelistic."<sup>4</sup> Speaking of the fundamental difference between the Christian's and the unbeliever's approach to literature, and by extension to any of the great works of human culture, Lewis said without qualification, that "the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world."<sup>5</sup>

His vision for employing his own fiction as a means of evangelizing came quite unexpectedly and quite early. When in 1939 Lewis became aware that most of the reviewers of his book *Out of the Silent Planet* failed to recognize its Christian theology, the idea struck him that the Gospel could be "smuggled into people's minds" by means of fiction.<sup>6</sup> It was a vision he sustained throughout his career. Less than six months before he died, in answer to the question, asked by an American evangelical: "Would you say that the aim of...your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?", he replied, "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view."<sup>7</sup>

Lewis, whose literary output was enormous, has been aptly called a "literary evangelist."<sup>8</sup> Before his death in 1963, he wrote forty books and edited three. Since his death, nearly a dozen volumes of his essays have been published. In addition, he wrote thousands of letters (many of them published). Add to his writing (most of which was evangelistic) his speaking, praying and discipling,<sup>9</sup> and one begins to sense Lewis's enormous drive to save souls.

It is important to notice, however, as Michael Ward has recently pointed out, that Lewis's brand of evangelism never involved the kind of direct appeal that bids people to "come to Jesus."<sup>10</sup> Lewis saw himself not so much a reaper of souls, but one who prepares the soil, sows the seed, and weeds out what hinders growth. His job, as he understood it, was on the one hand to seek to break down the intellectual prejudices

to Christianity by detecting and exposing the fallacies of current objections to belief in such a way as to make faith in Christianity intellectually plausible, and on the other to prepare the mind and imagination to receive the Christian vision.

His evangelistic genius was not in his ability to inspire faith (this he flatly disavowed), but to maintain an atmosphere where faith could be possible — rationally and imaginatively plausible — and where it could grow and even thrive. He was happy to prepare the way for those who were gifted to reap what had been sown — who could successfully bring the direct appeal to the heart.

The well-known preacher Stephen Olford tells of an experience he had with Lewis during a “This is Life” crusade, held in London, when he found himself on the same platform as Lewis. Lewis spoke first, brilliantly arguing, according to Olford, the case for Christianity before an audience of approximately 3,000. Following Lewis, Olford picked up on a motif that came through Lewis’s message and used it to lead into his own message and ultimately to an invitation for an open commitment to Christ. After the meeting, Olford remembers Lewis coming right up to him, shaking his hand and saying, “That was so impressive and effective. Thank you for that.” “I hope you didn’t mind my taking up on what you said,” replied Olford. “No,” said Lewis, “That was magnificent!”<sup>11</sup>

Lewis’s prominence as a representative of the Christian faith began initially in 1940 with the publication of his book *The Problem of Pain*, rose in 1941 as a result of his series of broadcast talks over the BBC, and reached new heights with the publication of *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942. Other avenues for speaking of the faith included such diverse settings as talks to Britain’s RAF, the weekly meeting of the Oxford University Socratic Club, Christian groups on university campuses, and the occasional sermon.

### *A Hated Man*

Lewis’s evangelistic impulse not only brought him public acclaim, but also created tensions and hostility among friends and colleagues. Owen Barfield, who was one of Lewis’s closest friends, honestly admits that Lewis’s zeal for the conversion of the unbeliever bothered, even embarrassed him at times.<sup>12</sup> He could appreciate Lewis’s faith as a private matter, but found it difficult to accept his determination to take it public with the aim of converting others.

Barfield was not alone. The amount of ridicule and scorn it fostered among his non-Christian colleagues was especially virulent. His theological books and his standing as a Christian apologist which made him much loved also spawned a great amount of ill-feeling. According to Harry Blamires, Lewis was acutely sensitive to

the fact. He recalls that Lewis once told him with great feeling, “You don’t know how I’m hated.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the reasons for this hatred is that Lewis’s use of his training as a scholar in the work of Christian apologetics was viewed by many of his colleagues as a form of prostitution. In an attempt to explain to Walter Hooper the reason for Lewis’s unpopularity among so many dons in Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien observed: “In Oxford, you are forgiven for writing only two kinds of books. You may write books on your own subject whatever that is, literature, or science, or history. And you may write detective stories because all dons at some time get the flu, and they have to have something to read in bed. But what you are *not* forgiven is writing popular works, such as Jack did on theology, and *especially* if they win international success as his did.”<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s work on a popular level, which appealed to vast audiences outside the University defied academic protocol. “In the eyes of some,” says Blamires, “he was using a donnish knowledge to mesmerize the innocent masses with dialectical conjuring tricks.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he chose to express his faith in the vernacular rather than in the language of the scholar. Although he did so in order that he might make the faith accessible to all, this was viewed by many in the University as a thing not proper to his profession. Besides, it was thought that a professor of English Literature should teach literature, not theology. It appears that Lewis’s growing fame as an amateur theologian contributed to his being twice passed over for appointments to much-coveted Chairs in English Literature at his University despite his scholarly claim to the appointments. Some certainly objected to his Christianity in itself, but apparently also suspected, along with perhaps even some sympathetic colleagues, that his commitment to the salvation of human souls would not allow him the time to fulfill the duties and responsibilities the position would require.<sup>16</sup>

Lewis was himself, however, clearly uncomfortable with the publicity his success brought. As early as 1941 he was already feeling the sting of hostility and the crush of popularity. Responding to a point made by Dom Bede Griffith in a letter in October of this year concerning his growing public persona, he acknowledges the growing tension within himself: “As for retiring into ‘private life,’ while feeling *very* strongly the evil of publicity, I don’t see how one can. God is my witness I don’t *look* for engagements.”<sup>17</sup>

A particularly burdensome outcome of this growing popularity was the ever increasing amount of correspondence he felt obliged to answer. One of the reasons Lewis chose to terminate the radio broadcast talks was that he could not face the increase in the number of letters that would certainly be generated if he didn’t.<sup>18</sup> Already he was spending countless hours

responding to the correspondence he was receiving. When describing, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, what he considered the perfect day, he made a special point of noting that an essential element of the happy life was that one “would have almost no mail and never dread the postman’s knock.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet the number of letters continued to increase as the years went on. There was a time, Lewis told a young correspondent in 1956, when he was apt to delay responding to letters. But that was when there were fewer of them. “[N]ow that I have such a lot to write,” he said, “I’ve just got to do them all at once, first thing in the morning.”<sup>20</sup> For, unlike many in his position, Lewis felt a commitment to answer every letter that required a personal response. (His brother Warren, who in 1943 took on the role of secretary for his brother, routinely answered those letters not requiring Lewis’s personal attention.) Although there were moments when he complained about his vast correspondence, he continued the practice to the end of his life. A letter dated March 26, 1963, just a few months before his death, provides a vivid picture of both his reluctance and commitment to letter writing. The letter is addressed to Hugh, a young man and the eldest of eight children who had been corresponding with Lewis since 1954: “Don’t get any more girls to write to me,” he wrote, “unless they really need any help I might be able to give. I have too many letters already.”<sup>21</sup>

#### *Lewis’s Evangelistic Drive*

Now here is the question: *Why* did Lewis willingly persist in the kind of evangelistic activity that created obvious tensions and hardships in his personal and professional life and that increased an already heavy work load?<sup>22</sup> He did not have to do so. He could have easily avoided such problems and still lived an active and fruitful, enormously fruitful, Christian life. Admittedly, no single factor can account for Lewis’s actions at any given moment, and certainly in the case of his commitment to evangelize several other factors could be suggested. For example, in one place he explained his passionate and forceful defense of the Christian faith in terms of Donne’s maxim, “‘The heresies that men leave are hated most.’ The things I assert most vigorously are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet I would propose that the primary driving force behind his evangelical impulse is best summed up by his conviction that “there are no *ordinary* people.”<sup>24</sup> The line comes near the conclusion of his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” which was preached in Oxford at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin on June 8, 1941. Coming when it did, just about the time his ministry as a herald and defender of the Christian faith was taking off, the sermon may reasonably be

assumed to express an early fundamental and guiding conviction. The sermon’s beauty, force, and clarity seem to suggest this as well.

Lewis began the sermon with the startling assertion that “if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desire not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us,... We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>25</sup>

He went on to argue that there is reason to believe that such infinite joy does in fact exist – indeed our deepest longings suggest it is so. At the moment, however, we all are on the wrong side of the door, leaving us with two possibilities: we can choose to be “left utterly and absolutely *outside* – repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored” or “we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged.” But to *get in* we must choose to follow Jesus Christ who has opened the way and who invites us to follow him inside. We have a choice. “We walk every day,” said Lewis, “on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities.” Consequently it is hardly possible, he concluded in the crowning paragraph of the sermon, to think too often or too deeply about my neighbor’s potential glory.

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour’s glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal,...But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”<sup>26</sup>

#### *A Burden of Glory*

Why was Lewis willing to sacrifice his own pleasure and comfort, risk alienating friends and colleagues, and jeopardize possible career opportunities? Because of the enormous magnitude and weight of the possible eternal destinies of human beings: “[A] weight

or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain."<sup>27</sup> According to Tolkien, Lewis knew the price of such popularity, he knew he would be hated, yet "he was driven to write popular works of theology because of his *conscience*."<sup>28</sup> Lewis was convinced that one of these two destinies was true for all humanity, and it compelled him to make the saving of souls the chief end of his earthly labors.<sup>29</sup> To put it most plainly, Lewis preached what he believed, and practiced what he preached. As he said to Dom Bede Griffith in the same year he delivered this sermon, "I don't see how one can" do otherwise.

This is not to say that Lewis never struggled with his commitment (he would have been happy to have avoided the public notoriety), nor that he felt himself more saintly than other Christians who did not share his sense of urgency in the matter. Rather, he simply did not see that *he* had a choice. The possibilities were plainly too momentous to be ignored. But Lewis did not do the work of evangelism simply out of a feeling of duty either. It was for him also a labor of love.

Dorothy L. Sayers gave memorable tribute to this side of Lewis's evangelistic person in a letter addressed to him in May 1943. Sayers had herself by this time become quite well known in Britain for her creative and effective presentation and defense of orthodox Christianity. And like Lewis she had attracted a growing number of correspondents who wrote to her about religious concerns. Speaking of one particular pesky atheist, she wrote Lewis:

Meanwhile, I am left with the Atheist on my hands. I do not want him. I have no use for him. I have no missionary zeal at all. God is behaving with His usual outrageous lack of scruple....If he reads any of the books I have recommended, he will write me long and disorderly letters about them. It will go on for years. I cannot bear it. Two of the books are yours—I only hope they will rouse him to fury. Then I shall hand him over to you. You like souls. I don't.<sup>30</sup>

Sayers recognized that Lewis "liked souls" in a way she did not. In other words, viewed from the perspective of eternity, he worked sacrificially and without complaint for what he understood to be the soul's ultimate good. This is not to say that he liked all the people with whom he associated. Lewis was, as are the rest of us, possessed of a particular social disposition. Although he was typically pleasant and courteous to all those with whom he had contact, he maintained that his temperament was such that he tended to shy away from the company of others beyond the close circle of friends he maintained in and near Oxford. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that Lewis did not always like people, he valued them enough to risk

directing his unique talents and the majority of his energies toward their spiritual good.<sup>31</sup>

"But heaven forbid we should work in the spirit of prigs and Stoics," Lewis declared, writing of the ultimate purpose of love in his book *The Four Loves*. "While we hack and prune we know very well that what we are hacking and pruning is big with a splendour and vitality which our rational will could never of itself have supplied. To liberate that splendour, to let it become fully what it is trying to be, to have tall trees instead of scrubby tangles, and sweet apples instead of crabs, is part of our purpose."<sup>32</sup> In his fiction, theology, apologetics and correspondence Lewis can be seen hacking and pruning with the hope that his efforts might be used to produce "everlasting splendours."

I am reminded of the vision expressed by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: "we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Although Lewis never refers to this text in "The Weight of Glory," its spirit and truth pervade the work, and all his work.

Lewis longed above all else for the unseen things of which this life offers only shadows, for that weight of glory which the Lord Christ won for the human race. And knowing the extraordinary nature of every human person, Lewis longed for and labored for their glory as well.

- 1 See for example, Patrick T. Ferry's fine essay, "Mere Christianity Because There Are No Mere Mortals: Reaching Beyond the Inner Ring," *C.S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, edited by Angus Menuge (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1997), pp. 169-90, where he suggests that the motive behind Lewis's sermon, "The Weight of Glory," unites Lewis's idea of 'mere Christianity' to evangelism.
- 2 George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 138.
- 3 Oral History Interview, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, July 19 & 20, 1984, for the Marion E. Wade Center, p. 61.
- 4 "Christianity and Culture," *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), p. 14; "Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 181. According to the poet and novelist John Wain, who had been one of Lewis's students, "Lewis used to quote with approval general Booth's remark to Kipling: 'Young man, if I could win one soul for God by — by playing the tambourine with my toes, I'd do it.' Lewis did plenty of playing the tambourine with his toes, to the distress of some of the refined souls with whom he was surrounded at Oxford." "A Great Clerke," in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (Harcourt Brace/Harvest Books, 1992), p. 69.
- 5 "Christianity and Literature," in *Christian Reflections*, p. 10. Similarly, he wrote in the midst of a sharp argument against T.S.

- Eliot, that "I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial." *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (Oxford University Press/Galaxy Books, 1961), p. 9.
- 6 Letter to Sister Penelope, July 9, 1939, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Revised and Enlarged Edition, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), p. 322. It is not the purpose of this essay to go into how Lewis dealt with the problem of communicating traditional Christian content by using modern literary forms such as fantasy. Those interested in this aspect will find help in Doris T. Myers, *C.S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1994) and in Meredith Veldman's treatment of the subject in *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-80* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
  - 7 "Cross-Examination," *God in the Dock*, p. 262.
  - 8 Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Essential C.S. Lewis* (New York: Colliers/Macmillan, 1988), p. 8.
  - 9 Philip Ryken has nicely summarized the various aspects of Lewis's ministry of evangelism under teaching, writing, praying, and discipling in, "Winsome Evangelist: The Influence of C.S. Lewis," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, pp. 55-78.
  - 10 Michael Ward, "Escape to Wallaby Wood: Lewis's Depictions of Conversion," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, p. 143.
  - 11 Oral History Interview with Stephen F. Olford, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Oxford, England, July 26, 1985, for the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, pp. 6-7. Lewis said that his predominately intellectual approach in evangelism was due to the limitation of his own gifts. However, he was very sensitive to and appreciative of what he called the more emotional and more "pneumatic" kind of appeal which he had seen "work wonders on a modern audience." "Where God gives the gift, the 'foolishness of preaching' is still mighty. But best of all is a team of two: one to deliver the preliminary intellectual barrage, and the other to follow up with a direct attack on the heart "Modern Man and his Categories of Thought," in *Present Concerns*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Pub., 1986), p. 66.
  - 12 Oral History Interview, conducted by Lyle W. Dorsett, Kent, England, November 19, 1983, for the Marion E. Wade Center, p. 9.
  - 13 Harry Blamires, "Against the Stream: C.S. Lewis and the Literary Scene," *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre*, vol. 1 (1983), p. 16. A.N. Wilson wrote that the *Oxford History of English Literature*, published in 1954, "established Lewis as a giant among pygmies of the Oxford English Faculty, which made their failure to promote him to a professorship all the more surprising." *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (W.W. Norton, 1990), pp. 244-45.
  - 14 Quoted in a letter from Walter Hooper to Christopher W. Mitchell, February 8, 1998. Lewis himself noted that having written imaginative books was used against a writer if he then wrote theology or literary criticism. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 185.
  - 15 Blamires, "Against the Stream," p. 17.
  - 16 Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 65.
  - 17 *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, p. 369., Lewis "was a rare case of the don who is forced into the limelight by the demands of his own conscience," noted Wain. "I believe he would never have bothered to court the mass public at all had he not seen it as his duty to defend the Christian faith...against the hostility or indifference that surrounded it." "A Great Clerke," p. 69. Lewis observed: "If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now — not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground — would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen." Quoted from "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), p. 28.
  - 18 Sayer, *Jack*, p. 170.
  - 19 *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1984), p. 143. Walter Hooper states that if all the extant letters of Lewis were published today the entire collection would run to at least a half dozen volumes.
  - 20 *Letters to Children*, edited by Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead (New York: Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 60.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 106f.
  - 22 Lewis typically had a heavy tutorial load each term, frequently lectured, and was often occupied in the afternoons with domestic duties at home. See "Memoir of C.S. Lewis," by W.H. Lewis in *Letters to C.S. Lewis*, p. 37.
  - 23 *Surprised By Joy*, p. 213.
  - 24 "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses*, p. 19.
  - 25 *Ibid.* pp. 3-4.
  - 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
  - 28 Quoted in a letter from Walter Hooper to Christopher W. Mitchell, February 8, 1998.
  - 29 Patrick Ferry does a compelling job of linking this idea with Lewis's notion of "Mere Christianity": "A respectful regard for the glory of eternity finally must overcome factionalism for the benefit of those who are still outside the faith....As long as there are people who are numbered among those who comprise the communion of saints, the *una sanctu* remains in need of a 'mere' Christianity — because, as C.S. Lewis reminds us, there is no such thing as a 'mere' mortal." "Mere Christianity Because There Are No Mere Mortals," *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*, pp. 170-71.
  - 30 *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Volume 2, chosen and edited by Barbara Reynolds and published by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society (Cambridge: Carole Green Publishing, 1997), p. 413. Sayers is having a bit of fun at her own expense here, for as Barbara Reynolds notes, Sayers continued the correspondence for at least another year and even permitted the Atheist to call on her twice (n. 8, p. 413).
  - 31 Once again, Patrick Ferry's treatment of the connection between Lewis's concept of "mere Christianity" and his idea of the "weight of glory" provides a compelling illustration of this point. One further qualification is in order. I do not mean to leave the impression that Lewis's ministry was limited to the written word. See for example his brother Warren's estimate of Lewis's sense of charity in *Memoirs of C.S. Lewis, Letters of C.S. Lewis*, pp. 41-42.
  - 32 *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988), pp. 117-18.
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