

GRACE IN THE ARTS

**C. S. LEWIS’S THEOLOGY:  
SOMEWHERE BETWEEN RANSOM AND REEPICHEEP**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Would you like to pretend that you haven't just read the title above and to try your hand at a trivia quiz? Here goes. Who was the gentleman who:

- was converted to Christianity while riding to the zoo in a sidecar of his brother's motorcycle?
- had his Christianity affirmed by Dr. Bob Jones but questioned by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones(!)?
- would never have been a professor if the entrance math exam (which he failed to pass twice) hadn't been conveniently dropped as a requirement?
- taught at colleges spelled with one letter's difference-Magdalen and Magdalene?
- smoked at least sixty cigarettes a day-between pipes?
- lived in the same house for thirty years with a woman to whom he wasn't married?
- had tiffs with the other leading Anglican literary critic of his time (T. S. Eliot)?
- had as his longest lifetime friend a homosexual (Arthur Greeves)?
- died the same day as President John F. Kennedy?

This composite trivia quiz does not sound like the personality profile of a candidate for the "evangelical of the year." Then again, modern conservatives probably wouldn't have picked three murderers (or accomplices to murder), such as Moses, David, and Paul were, to have authored nineteen books of God's inspired Word! In light of this, it's rather amusing that C. S. Lewis-so much read by evangelicals-would probably be turned away from many of their churches if he were an aspiring pastoral candidate.

In the subtitle for my article, I placed Lewis: "Somewhere between Ransom and Reepicheep." These two Rs are characters in Lewis's fiction. The fictional Dr. Elwin Ransom is a Cambridge philologist (as Lewis was) whose first name has the same letters (except the substitution of an "n" for an "s") as Lewis's last name. Ransom appears in Lewis's space trilogy as the Christian character whose chosen role is to save the world. Another of Lewis's fictional characters, Reepicheep, appears in his *Narnia* series. Reepicheep, an oversized mouse with a needle-like sword, possesses chutzpah disproportionate to his mousely size. Therefore, I raise the question: did Lewis see himself as Ransom or Reepicheep-or a bit of both? Was he the chosen apologist of the age, whose role was to save the planet (like Ransom) or was he merely a minor critter with an oversized sense of the daredevil, taking on all comers (like Reepicheep)?

Lewis's friend, clergyman Austen Farrer, asserted: "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...." Lewis became a Christianized version of movie swordsman Errol Flynn with his apologetics swordplay. Like

Robert Louis Stevenson's swordsman in *Kidnapped*, Alan Breck Stewart, he was (to borrow Austen Farrer's image) "a bonny fighter." Lewis's long-term friend Owen Barfield noted that Lewis's former student John Lawlor had reported that in Lewis's presence he felt like he was "wielding a peashooter against a howitzer." John Beversluis called Lewis "the 20th century's foremost defender of the faith." Lewis's apologetics was so barbed because his learning was so encyclopedic. William Empson believed Lewis "was the best read man of his generation, one who read everything and remembered everything he read." Lewis was reputedly Oxford's most popular lecturer for many years. By 1978 Macmillan had "published more than fourteen million copies of Lewis' books."

Biographical sources are particularly rich for Lewis since many of his friends wrote biographies about him. Lewis's father left a "mass of diaries, letters, and papers" and Lewis's brother, Warnie, spent "several years typing the 3,563 pages that make up the eleven volumes of Lewis Papers...which cover the years 1850-1930." In addition, there is the "million-word diary of Warnie Lewis" and Lewis's extensive correspondence, including close to 300 letters interchanged with lifetime friend Arthur Greeves.

## **II. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Riding in the upper story of the family omnibus of C. S. Lewis's chromosomes was a paternal great grandfather, Joseph, a Methodist minister, and a maternal great grandfather, Rev. Hugh Hamilton, who had been Bishop of Ossuary in Ireland. Lewis's maternal grandfather, Rev. Thomas Hamilton, was an Anglican chaplain in Rome and rector of St. Mark's Anglican Church in Dundela. With all this religious genetic baggage, it is surprising that C. S. Lewis's own father and mother were rather nominal Anglicans.

Lewis's mother, who died of cancer when he was only eight years old, had graduated from Queen's College in Belfast, Ireland with first-class honors in logic and second-class honors in mathematics. Lewis described his father, Albert, as "almost without rival the best raconteur [or storyteller] I have ever heard..." However, as with Fyodr Dostoevsky and Robert Louis Stevenson and their fathers, Jack's (C. S. Lewis's lifelong nickname) relationship with his father was always strained. Albert was a Belfast court police lawyer.

After Jack's mother died, he increasingly bonded with his brother, Warnie. As an adult, Warnie became a noted British major, was a member of the Inklings group, wrote seven books on seventeenth-century France, and, sadly, was subject to alcoholic binges.

Both Lewis and his wife-to-be were precocious learners. Jack "knew both Greek and Latin by the age of six." By ten years old he had read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, Joy Davidman had "read H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* at age eight and promptly announced her atheism." Though Lewis's childhood home was not especially happy or religious, he was taken to St. John's Anglican Church twice each Sunday where, he reported, "I here heard the doctrines of Christianity...taught by men who obviously believed them."

Jack attended four different boys' schools from 1908 to 1914 and presented a bleak picture of them in his autobiography. He became a young atheist and owned up to sexual immorality on one occasion.

From 1914 to 1917 Jack studied privately (to prepare for Oxford) with his father's former college headmaster, W. T. Kirkpatrick (affectionately known as the "Great Knock"). Young Lewis expected Kirkpatrick to be maudlin like his father, but was jolted upon their initial meeting by the atheist Kirkpatrick's rigorous grilling in logic over the most mundane matters. Three years of logical dueling left an indelible impression upon the malleable mind of Lewis, the future apologist. During that time Jack "found that he could think in Greek." Little wonder, since practically all Jack did for three years was to translate the Greek and Latin classics under Kirkpatrick's tutelage. Kirkpatrick reported to Jack's father (September 16, 1915): "He is the most brilliant translator of Greek plays I have ever met," and (on April 7, 1916): "He has read more classics than any boy I ever had-or indeed I might add than any I ever heard of..."

Also during his younger years, Jack formed a lifelong friendship with Arthur Greeves, due to their mutual interest in "northernness" or Norse mythology. Greeves's harsh father was of a strict Plymouth Brethren background. Ironically, Lewis and Greeves later crisscrossed in their theological thinking. Whereas Lewis moved from atheism to Christianity, Greeves shifted from conservative Christianity on through Unitarianism, Bahai, and Quakerism.

Jack's entrance to Oxford University was interrupted by World War I, in which he was wounded with shrapnel and once (to his relief) found sixty German soldiers emerging from the fog with their hands up surrendering to him. Before entering battle, Jack had compacted with his friend Paddy Moore that if Paddy should die, he would assume responsibility for Paddy's mother (and sister). As a result, the forty-five-year-old Mrs. Moore moved in with eighteen-year-old Jack. Her daughter, Maureen, was then eleven. Virtually all Lewis biographers agree that young Jack had a romantic crush on Mrs. Moore-though only the warts-on biographer A. N. Wilson concludes that theirs was an explicitly sexual relationship. For thirty years they occupied the same house, and when senility forced her to enter a nursing home, Jack visited her each day for a year until she died.

Lewis failed the entrance math exam to Oxford twice, but it was then waived for returning soldiers. At University College, the oldest of the thirty Oxford colleges, Lewis graduated with honors in Greek and Latin classics, English literature, and philosophy.

On October 12, 1916, Lewis penned his position in a letter to Arthur Greeves: "I think that I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best. All religions, i.e., all mythologies...are merely man's own invention-Christ as much as Loki. In every age the educated and thinking [people] have stood outside [religion]."

Slowly Lewis's view shifted. On June 3, 1918, he again wrote Greeves: "I believe in no God, least of all in one that would punish me for the 'lusts of the flesh'; but I do believe that I have in me a spirit, a chip, shall we say, of universal spirit..."

In addition to his reading of George MacDonald, Lewis seemed to be surrounded with Christian influence at Oxford. Owen Barfield, a lawyer, would later become an anthroposophist. Nevill Coghill (“clearly the most intelligent and best-informed man in that class...a Christian”) was later to become Merton Professor of English at Oxford. Hugo Dyson was an Anglican. J. R. R. Tolkien, a Roman Catholic, taught Anglo-Saxon at Oxford.

From 1925 to 1954 C. S. Lewis was a tutor and lecturer at Magdalen College at Oxford. Lewis lost four different professorships while at Oxford, and so in 1954 he moved to take the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at rival Magdalene College at Cambridge University, where he remained until 1963.

During those middle years, Lewis was to write of his ideological safari: “My own progress had been from ‘popular realism’ [atheism] to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity.”

On December 21, 1929, Lewis—upon reading John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*—wrote: “I...am still finding more and more the element of truth in the old beliefs [that] I feel I cannot dismiss... There must be something in it; only what?” In this pre-conversion period Lewis wrote: “I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt.” As a result, in 1929 Lewis was converted to theism. He journaled of that experience: “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,” but this conversion “was only to Theism. I knew nothing about the Incarnation.”

Lewis’s autobiography zeroes in primarily upon his conversion to theism (in 1929) rather than on his conversion to Christ (in 1931). In fact, his Christian conversion almost seems anticlimactic.

That his views had not settled into concrete is apparent from his letter of January 9, 1930 to Arthur Greeves: “In spite of all my recent changes of view, I am...inclined to think that you can only get what you call ‘Christ’ out of the Gospels by...slurring over a great deal.” In a letter of January 30, 1930 to Greeves, he “attribute[d] everything to the grace of God...” On March 21, 1930 Lewis wrote to A. K. Hamilton Jenkin that what he held “is not precisely Christianity, though it may turn out that way in the end.” During this period Lewis was attending the morning university chapels. By January 10, 1931 his brother “was beginning to think the religious view of things was after all true.”

The critical change came in September of 1931. The night of September 19, Lewis walked and talked (until around 4 a.m.) with J. R. R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson about myth and Christianity. Hugo Dyson’s “main point was that Christianity works for the believer. The believer is put at peace and freed from his sins.”

On September 28, 1931, at age thirty-two, Lewis was “riding to the Whipsnade zoo in the sidecar of Warren’s motorcycle. ‘When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.’” According to 1 John 5:1 and 5, all those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God are “born of God.” To Arthur Greeves on October 1, 1931, Lewis wrote: “I have just passed from believing in God to definitely believing in Christ-in Christianity.”

From June 1930 to August 1931 he'd been reading Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God*, Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation*, William Inge's *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion*, Richard Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, and others. In December of that year Lewis began "communicating," that is, taking communion in his local Headington (Anglican) church.

Lewis's fame as a Christian did not emerge until his BBC radio broadcasts (which later developed into the book *Mere Christianity*) and his 1942 publication of *Screwtape Letters*. About the same time students founded the Oxford University Socratic Club for Christians, agnostics, and atheists to have discussions, and Lewis served as president of the club for twenty-two years.

One highly significant Socratic Club debate occurred on February 2, 1948. Lewis had a debate with a woman-Elizabeth Anscombe, a Roman Catholic philosopher who would later be professor of philosophy at Cambridge University. Anscombe's position was opposed to that of Lewis's chapter 3 in his book *Miracles*, namely, that "Naturalism is Self-refuting." "The meeting is said to have been the most exciting and dramatic the Socratic [Club] has ever seen." John Beversluis observed, "Although hardcore [Lewis] loyalists disagree, the unanimous consensus of those actually present was that Anscombe had won hands down..." George Sayer, Lewis's former student and friend, asserted that Lewis told him: "I can never write another book of that sort" [as *Miracles*] "and he never did. He also never wrote another [distinctly] theological book [except *Reflections on the Psalms*]." Any analyst who is a gender equalitarian can easily point to at least fifty references in Lewis's fifty-something books where his traditionalist views on gender would be offensive (at best) to an equalitarian; some would think him a misogynist. The blow to Lewis's ego at being defeated philosophically and publicly by a woman would have proven psychologically very difficult for him.

In light of his known views on the issue of gender, it seems all the more ironic that when Lewis was fifty-eight he married a woman who was ultra-outspoken. Joy Davidman was an intellectual American Jewess (an ex-Communist) with practically a photographic memory. She entered college at age fourteen, graduated at nineteen in 1934, and got her master's degree from Columbia University in 1935 after three semesters. By age twenty-four she had authored a book of poetry. However, her marriage to Bill Gresham proved disastrous, since he was an alcoholic, physically abusive, and a womanizer. After her divorce, she and her two young sons wound up on the doorstep of C. S. Lewis in Oxford in 1952.

To protect her from being extradited back to America and the abusive Gresham, she and Lewis underwent a civil marriage in 1956. (Later Bill told Joy-despite his profession of Christianity: "I am not a Christian and will probably never be one since I cannot...accept ["the basic doctrines"]...")

In 1957 when it became apparent that Joy had cancer, she and Lewis underwent a religious marriage ceremony and she moved into his home. At that hospital bedside wedding, Reverend Peter Bide prayed for her healing, and her cancer went into remarkable remission for several years. In 1960 Joy "died at peace with God." Lewis himself died in 1963 on the same day as President Kennedy and Aldous Huxley.

### III. BOOKS

Lewis penned over fifty books, some of them compiled posthumously. There are seventeen biblical, theological, and philosophically related works, fourteen works of literary criticism, twenty of a more imaginative literary nature (including seven children's books, four science fiction thrillers, and four books of poetry-two of these penned as a youthful atheist), and three compilations of his letters.

His close friend Walter Hooper claimed that Lewis "was a failed poet," presumably because Lewis's early ambition was to become a poet and because T. S. Eliot (whose poetry Lewis strongly disliked) proved to be a successful poet. England's two most famous Christian literary critics of their epoch never hit it off-despite the fact that their mutual friend, writer Charles Williams, got them together for an experimental lunch (which failed).

Lewis's first two books of atheistical poetry were published under a pseudonym-Clive Hamilton (his first name and his mother's maiden name). Interestingly, even his first book written as an unbeliever borrowed a biblical title-*Spirits in Bondage* (1919), a phrase suggested by 1 Peter 3:19.

Two years after his Christian conversion, Lewis transformed his philosophical and experiential journey into an allegory-*The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). His first intellectual volume, *The Allegory of Love* (1936) is considered by some to be "his greatest scholarly book." It earned Lewis the Hawthornden Prize and was the catalyst for his most meaningful male friendship with Charles Williams.

From 1938 to 1945 he was engaged in publishing his space fantasy in a trilogy. The first two books land the reader on Mars and Venus (under other names). Regarding the second of the trio Richard Cunningham said: "*Perelandra* is the most hauntingly beautiful and theologically important of the [space travel] trilogy." The last and bleakest of the trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, had its theological counterpart in his 1943 *The Abolition of Man*. Concerning this last volume Peter Kreeft wrote: "*The Abolition of Man* contains the most important and enlightening single statement about our civilization that I have ever read..."

*The Screwtape Letters* (1942) proved Lewis's most popular seller. The seven-book Narnia series was also perennially popular, though Lewis was hurt by J. R. R. Tolkien's negative criticism of it. The final book in the series, *The Last Battle*, won the Carnegie medal in 1956.

Lewis's most massive volume was *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1954). He frequently abbreviated it OHEL since it was one of the multi volume set entitled the "Oxford History of English Literature." A. N. Wilson appropriately appraised the tome by saying that it "must rank as about the most entertaining work of criticism ever written."

*Surprised by Joy* (no sure relation to his wife's name) was his autobiography, written eight years prior to his wife's death. Lewis considered the allegorical *Till We Have Faces* (1956) his best

book. At least fifteen of his books were released after his death. Kathryn Lindskoog questioned the authenticity of *The Dark Tower and Other Stories* (1977).

#### **IV. THEOLOGICAL SURVEY**

Friends accused Lewis of a ruffled dress and a somewhat ruffled theology too. In explanation, Clyde Kilby wrote: “It is not correct to say that Lewis has a ‘theology,’ if by that term is meant a systematic, all-embracing complex like that of John Calvin or Karl Barth.” Yet, as Elizabeth Elliot wrote in a 1982 interview for *Discipleship Journal*, Lewis claimed he was no theologian, “but he was. He covered the whole field of theology in popular, understandable language.”

Not only did Lewis dress in a ruffled theology (like the rather unsystematic John Wesley), but he was somewhat like quicksilver in that he was difficult to pin down or classify. In *Mere Christianity* he professed to be promulgating only the beliefs which all orthodox Christians commonly hold. As a Christian supernaturalist he once observed “how much more one has in common with a *real* Jew or Muslim than with a wretched liberalizing, occidentalized specimen of the same category.”

In two of his books he acknowledged accepting “the Nicene or Athanasian creed.” Nevertheless, Lewis appeared as “an unorthodox champion of orthodoxy.” Below we will survey Lewis’s treatment of the salient subjects of the traditional theological categories.

##### ***A. The Bible***

Naturally one who espouses Darwin’s theory of human biology forces a different view of some parts of the Bible than the traditionally accepted evangelical viewpoint. This was the case with Lewis.

On the positive side, Lewis owned: “The Scriptures come before me as a book claiming divine inspiration.” Also he wrote that “all Holy Scripture [including even the imprecatory psalms] is in some sense-though not all parts of it in the same sense-the word of God.”

The following statement would seem to categorize Lewis as neo-orthodox in his understanding of the Bible: “Naivete, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed [from the pages of the Bible]. The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God...”

In his books Lewis amplified on his understanding of the Bible’s inspiration: “The earliest stratum of the Old Testament contains many truths in a form which I take to be legendary, or even mythical...things like Noah’s Ark or the sun standing still upon Ajalon,” while in the New Testament “history reigns supreme.” Elsewhere he wrote, “The first chapters of Genesis, no doubt, give the story in the form of a folktale...” Referring to the notion that “every sentence of the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth,” Lewis admitted: “This I do not hold, any more than St. Jerome did when he said that Moses described Creation ‘after the manner of a popular poet’ (as we should say, mythically) or than Calvin did when he doubted whether the



story of Job were history or fiction.” Again, Lewis penned: “The Old Testament contains fabulous elements” which would include “Jonah and the Whale, Noah and his Ark,...but the Court history of King David is probably as reliable [historically] as the Court history of Louis XIV.”

Lewis appraised the New Testament documents as falling in the realm of authentic history-and so at this point he was anti-Bultmannian. He opined: “As a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are, they are not legends.” In another context he reiterated: “I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths.” Elsewhere Lewis stated that finding “a ‘historical Jesus’ totally different from the figure in the Synoptic tradition...I confess is a mode of ‘research’ I heartily distrust.”

Not only did Lewis widen his view of inspiration to include Old Testament myths, but he also allowed for the “inspiration” of later extra-biblical material. He once wrote (in a May 7, 1959 letter) to Clyde Kilby: “If every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights, then all true and edifying writings, whether in Scripture or not, must be *in some sense* inspired.” With reference to the writing of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Bunyan said: “It came,” and Lewis remarked: “*It came*. I doubt if we shall ever know more of the process called ‘inspiration’ than those two monosyllables tell us.”

After researching such preceding material, Edgar Boss concluded: “Lewis does not accept the plenary verbal theory of Inspiration.” Similarly, Lewis analyst Richard Cunningham deduced: “Lewis did not believe in the infallibility or the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures.” Michael Christensen’s conclusion differs when he says that Lewis’s “example proved that one can be a dedicated evangelical, accept the full authority of Scripture, yet disbelieve in inerrancy.” Of course, in order to buy Christensen’s conclusion one would have to present a formulated definition of what constitutes an “evangelical.”

### ***B. God and His Work***

Because Lewis adhered to the traditional orthodox view of God (though he always managed to derive fresh insights from it), we will pause only briefly on this subject. Though *Out of the Silent Planet* is fictional, Lewis was representing his own view when he commented: “There was one God [according to the hrossa or inhabitants of the planet Malacandra]...[who] made and still ruled the world.” In arguing for monotheism as over against dualism, Lewis affirmed: “You cannot accept two conditioned and mutually independent beings as the self-grounded, self-comprehending Absolute.”

Lewis subscribed not only to the unity of God but also to the Trinity. He wrote: “In God’s dimension...you find a being who is three persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube.”

On the subject of divine predestination, Lewis’s views come through his fiction in the mouth of Dr. Ransom who held: “Predestination and [human] freedom were apparently identical. He could no longer see any meaning in the many arguments he had heard on this subject.” (Later we will see that Lewis would be classified as Arminian.)

In the matter of God's creation, Lewis had no difficulty in being committed to theistic evolution. Lewis called man "the highest of the animals." He also acknowledged: "If by saying that man rose from brutality you mean simply that man is physically descended from animals, I have no objection." Elsewhere he said: "What difficulties I have about evolution are not religious...."

Lewis made the following distinction: "Evolutionism is something quite different from Evolution as the biologists understand it." Concerning the former, Lewis stated: "In my opinion the modern concept of Progress or Evolution (as popularly defined) is simply a myth, supported by no evidence whatever." Consequently, while he denied uniformitarian evolution as an inevitable theory of all human development, Lewis declared, "I am assuming that Darwinian biology is correct." Obviously theistic evolution is not considered kosher by many evangelicals, though such Bible scholars as A. T. Robertson, B. B. Warfield, and Augustus Strong either espoused it or did not rule it out as a live possibility.

### *C. Christ*

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis referred to "Christ, the Man who was God." In *The Problem of Pain* he spoke of "the Incarnate God" and the Son "co-eternal with the Father." In *The Weight of Glory* Lewis mentioned "the humanity of Christ" and "His deity." The liberal scholar Norman Pittenger blamed Lewis "for believing that Jesus claimed deity because the fourth Gospel says He did," to which Lewis replied: "I think that Jesus Christ is (in fact) the Son of God." To Arthur Greeves (December 26, 1945) Lewis wrote that at Bethlehem "God became man."

One of the sad realities is that as a young man, Arthur Greeves had adopted the Christian view and Lewis the atheistic one. Later Greeves wandered through Unitarianism and other quagmires. Lewis replied to his letter (December 11, 1949): "Your doctrine, under its old name of Arianism, was given a...very full run for its money. But it didn't last." Lewis asked his friend, "If [Christ] was not God, who or what was He?" He concluded: "The doctrine of Christ's divinity seems to me not something stuck on...but something that peeps out at every point [of the New Testament] so that you have to unravel the whole web to get rid of it...and if you take away the Godhead of Christ, what is Christianity all about?" In *Mere Christianity* Lewis includes his belief in "the Virgin Birth of Christ."

Lewis also tackled an explanation of what is commonly called "the eternal generation of the Son." He wrote: "One of the creeds says that Christ is the Son of God 'begotten, not created'...[which] has nothing to do with the fact that when Christ was born on the earth as a man, that man was the son of a virgin." Rather, "what God begets is God." This negative explanation clarifies somewhat but is not overly helpful. Elsewhere he penned that "the one begets and the other is begotten. The Father's relation to the Son is not the same as the Son's relation to the Father." Christ as "Son," Lewis observed, "cannot mean that He stands to God [the Father] in the very same physical and temporal relation which exists between offspring and male parent in the animal world;" this doctrine involves a "harmonious relation involving homogeneity." The normally ingenious and down-to-earth Lewis left his readers in the complicated and heady realms of theological disquisition on this doctrine, but (let's face it) who has ever heard a clearly illustrated exposition of it from a pulpit? In one more attempt Lewis

declared: “The Son exists because the Father exists; but there never was a time before the Father produced the Son.” Lewis would probably have done better to steer clear of this subject altogether.

Two other of Lewis’s Christological opinions are interesting. In speaking of the *kenosis* (Philippians 2:7) he stated: “I certainly think that Christ, in the flesh, was not omniscient-if only because a human brain could not, presumably be the vehicle of omniscient consciousness....” In another comment, bearing upon John 3:13, Lewis claimed “Christ’s divine nature never left [heaven] and never returned to it.” For one who never claimed to be a theologian, Lewis certainly managed to involve himself in some intricate theological twine. Nevertheless, he was emphatic about retaining the full deity and humanity of Christ as addressed in the early Christian creeds.

Lewis exquisitely represented Christ in His death and resurrection under the image of the lion Aslan in the Narnia series. There Aslan is villainously killed, but comes back to life again. It is a lovely metaphor in fantasy form.

#### ***D. Humanity and Sin***

On the matter of human will, Lewis wrote: “God willed the free will of men and angels in spite of His knowledge that it could lead in some cases to sin and thence to suffering: i.e., He thought freedom worth creating even at that price.” In his radio broadcast Lewis indicated that God “gave [humans] free will. He gave them free will because a world of mere automata could never love...”

Lewis once argued: “The infinite value of each human soul is not a Christian doctrine. God did not die for man because of some value perceived in him. He loved us not because we are lovable, but because He is love.”

On the subject of human sin, Green and Hooper comment that “many find it difficult to accept Lewis’s belief in a literal...fall of man and his fundamentalist doctrine of original sin...” While Lewis did hold to a serious doctrine of sin, one wonders if the preceding two authors have overstated their case by attaching the qualifiers “literal” and “fundamentalist” to their assessment, since Lewis did regard Genesis 3 mythically. He wrote: “The Fall consisted in Disobedience”...while the Fall *consisted in* Disobedience, it *resulted*, like Satan’s [fall], *from Pride...*” As Dr. Ransom, the Christian in *Perelandra*, pictorially put it: “We are all a bent race.” On a broader canvas Lewis brush-stroked: “A sound theory of value demands...that good should be the tree and evil the ivy. Evil has...its parasitic existence.”

Concerning the doctrine of “total depravity,” Lewis wrote: “I disbelieve that doctrine.” Yet he may have misunderstood the nature of the doctrine due to its nomenclature, for in the same section he wrote that “we all sin” and are “in some respects a horror to God” and “vile.” Indeed, in his radio broadcasts he told thousands of listeners: “The first step [for us] is to create, or recover, a sense of guilt.”

### ***E. Angels, the Devil, and Demons***

Lewis was quite traditional here as he stated: “No reference to the Devil or devils [demons] is included in any Christian Creeds, and it is possible to be a Christian without believing in them. [However,] I do believe such beings exist...” Elsewhere Lewis reported:

I do...believe in devils [or demons]. That is to say, I believe in angels and I believe that some of them, by 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 [I think the term “constitution” might be better than “nature”] from good angels, but their nature is depraved. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite not of God but of Michael.

In other words, Satan is inferior to God; there is no true dualism.

### ***F. Salvation***

#### **1. Substitutionary Atonement**

Since *JOTGES* was conceived in response to a concern over soteriology, we will spend considerable space here. In commenting upon his friend Charles Williams’s poem, Lewis offered this commentary: “The Atonement was a Substitution, just as Anselm said: ‘All salvation, everywhere and at all time,...is vicarious.’” This, however, appears to be Williams’s view rather than Lewis’s.

In *The Allegory of Love* Lewis referred to a poem whose “theology turns on a crudely substitutional view of the Atonement.” In *Mere Christianity* Lewis indicated that he did not accept the substitutionary view of atonement.

Arthur Greeves’s cousin, Sir Lucius O’Brien, claimed that the atonement was not taught in the Gospels. Lewis countered that the atonement must have been an integral part of Christ’s teaching because “the Apostles...did teach this doctrine in His name *immediately* after His death.”

Unless Lewis altered his opinion in later years, it would appear that he saw some difference between vicarious and substitutionary atonement, for he wrote: “In the Incarnation we get...this idea of vicariousness of one person profiting by the earning of another person. In its highest form that is the very center of Christianity.” Lewis’s apparent devaluing of substitution led Edgar Boss to conclude that Lewis held “the Example Theory [of the Atonement] with a very important modification. Mr. Lewis is a supernaturalist, while the Example Theory is usually held by Naturalists.” However, I do not think Lewis would have wished to be so neatly pigeonholed into that single category. For him this was the bottom line: “Christ’s death redeemed man from sin, but I can make nothing of the theories as to how!”

#### **2. Justification by Faith**

Two analysts of very different stripes articulated one major weakness in the expression of Lewis's soteriology. A. N. Wilson asserted: "If the mark of a reborn evangelical is a devotion to the Epistles of Paul and, in particular, to the doctrine of Justification by Faith, then there can have been few Christian converts less evangelical than Lewis." In fact, the Methodist minister who reviewed *Mere Christianity* claimed that the book "does not really mention...the central Christian doctrine of Justification by Faith." From the other end of the theological spectrum, J. I. Packer spoke of Lewis's "failure ever to mention justification by faith when speaking of the forgiveness of sins, and his apparent hospitality to baptismal regeneration...."

### 3. Salvation by Grace

Readers of this journal will nonetheless rejoice in Lewis's emphasis on the doctrine of *grace*. In *Reflections on the Psalms* he summarized: "We are all in the same boat. We must all pin our hopes on the mercy of God and the work of Christ, not on our own goodness." In another context Lewis declared: "We are saved by grace...In our flesh dwells no good thing." In his allegory *The Great Divorce*, Lewis describes a man who wants only his "rights," and who has "done my best all my life" and now exclaims, "I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity." A former earthling responds to him: "Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought." In *Studies in Words* Lewis referred to "'we humans in our natural condition,' i.e., unless or until touched by [God's] grace" or "untransformed...human nature."

In his radio broadcasts Lewis remarked:

I think everyone who has some vague belief in God, until he becomes a Christian, has the idea of an exam or of a bargain in his mind. The first result of real Christianity is to blow that idea into bits...God has been waiting for the moment at which you discover that there is no question of earning a passing mark in this exam or putting Him in your debts.

Later Lewis said that such an awakened individual "discovers his bankruptcy" and so says to God: "You must do this. I can't." He elaborated: "Christ offers [us] something for nothing...." In connection with good works he stated: "[You are] not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already."

Probably Lewis's finest statement on salvation by grace was formulated in the longest book he ever wrote, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. He said:

On the Protestant view one could not, and by God's mercy, expiate one's sins. Like an accepted lover, he feels that he has done nothing, and never could have done anything to deserve such astonishing happiness. All the initiative has been on God's side, all has been free, unbounded grace. His own puny and ridiculous efforts would be as helpless to retain the joy as they would have been to achieve it in the first place. Bliss is not for sale, cannot be earned, "Works" have no "merit," though of course faith, inevitably, even unconsciously, flows out into works of love at once. He is not saved because he does works of love; he does

works of love because he is saved. It is faith alone that has saved him; faith bestowed by sheer gift.

While the exegete might wish to finesse the preceding statement somewhat (for example, making it more objective and not so experiential, as in “happiness,” “joy,” “bliss”), certainly Lewis’s most lengthy explication of salvation by grace through faith falls clearly under the rubric of the orthodox Protestant understanding of salvation.

#### **4. Conditions of Salvation**

Another strategic question to ask is: What condition or conditions does Lewis prescribe for receiving the gift of salvation? In his radio broadcast he averred: A Christian “puts all his trust in Christ.” In the lengthy quotation above (footnote 117) Lewis stated: “It is faith alone that has saved him; faith bestowed by sheer gift.”

In an interview with *Decision* magazine’s Shirwood Wirt, Lewis indicated: “It is not enough to want to get rid of one’s sins. We also need to believe in the One who saves us from our sins. Not only do we need to recognize that we are sinners; we need to believe in a Savior who takes away sins.” Wirt then asked Lewis if he “made a decision at the time of [his] conversion.” Lewis answered that at that time he felt he “was the object rather than the subject.”

William Luther White summarized: “Lewis repeatedly made the point that...salvation comes as a result of faith in God’s grace, not as the product of human moral effort.” In a broadcast Lewis stated: “The business of becoming a son of God...has been done for us. Humanity is already ‘saved’ in principle. We individuals have to appropriate that salvation. But the really tough work—the bit we could not have done for ourselves—has been done for us. We have not got to try to climb up into spiritual life by our own efforts.” Lewis was asked in an open session: “Can’t you lead a good life without believing in Christianity?” To this he replied that Christianity “will teach you that in fact you can’t be ‘good’ (not for twenty-four hours) on your own moral efforts...we cannot do it...”

In another open session on April 18, 1944, a factory worker who apparently thought Lewis was unclear said, “We don’t qualify for heaven by practice, but salvation is obtained at the Cross. We do nothing to obtain it...” Lewis rejoined as follows:

The controversy about faith and works is one that has gone on for a very long time, and it is a highly technical matter. I personally rely on the paradoxical text: “Work out your own salvation...for it is God that worketh in you.” It looks as if in one sense we do nothing; and in another case we do a damned lot...and you must have [salvation] in you before you can work it out.

If we had only the preceding statements, subscribers to this journal could probably feel fairly at ease with Lewis’s soteriology. In other places, however, he mentions other conditions besides believing, uses different terminology, or is just plain murky. As a sampling of the murky approach in the April 18, 1944 open session, someone asked him: “How can I find God?” Instead

of replying with something on the order of Acts 16:31, Lewis answered, “People find God if they consciously seek from Him the right attitude.” Later he added that all people “were created to be in a certain relationship to God” and “God wants to give you a real and eternal happiness.” While Lewis’s answers to the worker weren’t anti-biblical, they seem unduly vague.

In other contexts Lewis asked readers: “Will you...repent and believe?” (as the narrator was speaking to an apostate Episcopalian bishop). On the radio he announced: “Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness.” When Lewis’s fictional, demonized scientist *on another planet*, Weston (the Un-man), writhes against another demonic attack upon him, the Christian Dr. Ransom orders him: “Repent your sins.” (In the last two statements there is no mention of believing in Christ for salvation.)

Lewis said that repentance “is not something God demands of you before He will take you back...; it is simply a description of what going back is like.” As Lewis put it so colorfully, repentance calls us to move “full speed astern.” He also depicted repentance as a self-surrender. In another place Lewis proclaimed: “The guilt is washed out...by repentance and the blood of Christ.”

On one of his radio broadcasts Lewis declared: “There are three things that spread the Christ life to us: baptism, belief, and...the Lord’s Supper.” His meaning and his order of arrangement of the items are unclear.

Even more baffling is this notation in Lewis’s anthology of quotes from George MacDonald: “I am sometimes almost terrified at the scope of the demands made upon me, at the perfection of self-abandonment required of me; yet outside of such absoluteness can be no salvation.” Indeed, if an “absoluteness” of “perfection” is required of us, who then can be saved? In a literary context Lewis wrote confusingly that Vergil the pagan poet “cannot have had Christian faith, hope, and charity without which no man can be saved.” These kinds of statements would certainly be mystifying to the biblically untutored.

On the question of “Can one lose salvation?” Lewis has to be categorized as an Arminian for his answer would be “yes.” Screwtape’s role, say Lewis’s biographers, was “to secure the damnation of a young man who has just become a Christian.” In *The Last Battle* Susan is “of her own free will ‘no longer a friend of Narnia’ [that is, a believer]. Lewis is taking into consideration the fact that many people drift into apostasy.” Even Dr. Ransom, a committed Christian in the trilogy, realizes that “everlasting unrest...might be my destination.” After John (in *The Pilgrim’s Regress* allegory) is “converted,” he is informed by his Guide: “You all know that security is a mortal’s greatest enemy.”

In one article Lewis quoted some from the fourth-century Athanasian Creed: “Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” Lewis commented:

The author...is not talking about unbelievers, but about deserters; not about those who have never heard of Christ, nor even those who have misunderstood and refused to accept Him;

but those who have...really believed, then allowed themselves...to be drawn away into sub-Christian mode of thought.

Naturally this Arminianism did not yield much “blessed assurance.” Even though his wife-at her death-said, “I am at peace with God,” Lewis labored: “they tell me she is at peace. What makes them so sure of this? Why are they so sure that all anguish ends with death?”

As an Arminian Lewis espoused an unlimited atonement. In *The Great Divorce* he observed: “All may be saved if they so choose” (which included people on the bus ride from hell). To his old friend Greeves he wrote, “About half of [*Beyond Personality*] is taken up with the...doctrine...that all men can become sons of God....”

## 5. The Fate of Moral Non-Christians

Beyond the parameters of traditional Arminianism, however, Lewis expected that some non-Christians would be saved. “Though all salvation is through Jesus, we need not conclude that He cannot save those who have not explicitly accepted Him in this life.” On the radio he announced: “We do know that no [one] can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”

In the children’s Narnia series, the lion Aslan is Lewis’s Christ-figure. In *The Last Battle* deceivers say: “[The god] Tash and Aslan are only two different names for You Know Who.” Later they use the hybrid or compound name Tashlan to make their point. At the end of this last book in the Narnia series one of the outsiders, a Calorman named Emeth (which is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for “truth”), who has been a life-long worshiper of Tash, approaches Aslan. To this Tash-server Aslan says, “Son, thou art welcome.” Emeth counters, “I am no son of Thine but a servant of Tash.” Aslan rejoins: “All the service thou hast done to Tash, I account as service done to me.” This is a clear indicator that for Lewis the non Christ-worshiper may be received into heaven. Similarly, in another fictional setting, Jane Studdock, an unbeliever, says to Ransom the Pendragon: “I know nothing of Maleldil [the Christ-figure]. But I place myself in obedience to you.” To her acknowledgment Ransom replies:

It is enough for the present. This is the courtesy of Deep Heaven that when you mean well, He always takes you to have meant better than you know. It will not be for always. He is very jealous. He will have you for no one but Himself in the end. But for tonight, it is enough.

This issue raises the question of Christianity in relation to other world religions. Lewis said: “I couldn’t believe that 999 religions were completely false and the remaining one true.” Similarly he stated: “We are not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all religions is consummated and perfected.” Kathryn Lindskoog wrote: “Lewis expressed hope that many true seekers like Akhenaton and Plato, who never had a chance to find Christ in this life, will find Him in the next one.”



## ***G. The Church***

Lewis was an Anglican Christian who sought to preserve what he considered the common core of centrist Christianity. His late-in-life secretary (an Anglican-become-Roman Catholic) recalled: “I remember the first (and only) time I mentioned ‘low’ and ‘high’ churchmanship in [his] presence. He looked at me as though I had offered him poison. ‘We must *never* discuss that,’ he said....”

### **1. Baptism and Communion**

J. I. Packer felt that Lewis bordered on espousing baptismal regeneration even though this is not a prominent strand in his fifty-plus books. Lewis did attach special significance to Communion in his writings. In answer to a factory worker, Lewis commented: “If there is anything in the teaching of the New Testament which is in the nature of a command, it is that you are obligated to take the Sacrament and you can’t do it without going to Church.” In the same vein Lewis preached: “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object present to your senses.” In regard to the preceding sentence A. N. Wilson concluded that Lewis “clearly had a full belief in the Eucharistic Presence” or he wouldn’t have made such an assertion.

When Jack and Warnie were out walking one day, they passed a church sign that declared that “the Blessed Sacrament...should be treated with ‘special reverence.’” Over lunch the two brothers argued about this. Warnie said if one was a Roman Catholic, then “the aumbry contains our Lord and...even prostration is hardly reverence enough.” However, if one is Anglican, then it “contains but a wafer and a little wine, and why in front of that should one show any greater reverence than in any other part of the church?” Jack sought to find a middle ground between the two views.

To the less sacramentally minded, Lewis acknowledged that he got “on no better with those who tell me that the elements are mere bread and mere wine, used symbolically to remind me of the death of Christ.” Rather, he thought: “Here is big medicine and strong magic.” Elsewhere he owned: “My ideas about the sacrament would probably be called ‘magical’ by a good many modern theologians.”

### **2. Confessing Sins to a Priest**

Only some years after conversion did Lewis make auricular confession to an Anglican priest. He wrote (on October 24, 1940) that “the decision was the hardest I have ever made...” From that time on he made regular confession to a priest.

## ***H. Last Things***

Richard Cunningham summarized Lewis’s eschatology by observing that he believed in “purgatory, heaven, hell, the second coming, the resurrection of the body, and the judgment.” As

a young atheist Lewis wrote (on October 18, 1916) that he could do without “a bogey who is prepared to torture me forever and ever if I should fail in coming up short to an almost impossible ideal. As to the immortality of the soul, ...I neither believe nor disbelieve...” Early after his conversion experience he thought very little of an afterlife and rewards.

Praying for the dead and a concept of purgatory pretty well go hand in hand. Lewis “emphatically believed in praying for the dead.” He prayed for his wife after she died. He thought that John Henry Newman had the right idea-that saved souls before God’s throne would ask to be thoroughly cleansed. Consequently, this necessitated a purgatory, though not as in a medieval doctrine of torture. In this way there would exist “Purgatory (for souls already saved) or...Limbo (for souls already lost).” A television interviewer pointed out to Lewis that he “believe[d] in Purgatory.” To this Lewis returned: “But not the *Romish* doctrine.” (The Anglican view is found in Article XXII of *The Book of Common Prayer*). Lewis likened purgatory to sitting in a dentist’s chair, saying: “I’d *rather* be cleaned first.” Of course, most evangelicals believe this viewpoint founders upon the perfect purgation which has already transpired in the crosswork of Christ (Hebrews 1:3; 9:15; 10:2, 10-12, 17-18).

Concerning Lewis on the Second Coming, William Luther White said: “Edgar Boss attributes to Lewis the belief that ‘Jesus is literally, personally coming again.’ ...However, I am unable to find in Lewis anything to support this apparent fundamentalist position.” But the *prima facie* reading of Lewis certainly makes it sound as if he champions an orthodox view of Christ’s Second Coming. Kathryn Lindskoog asserted: “Lewis found it impossible to retain our belief in the divinity of Christ and the truth of our Christian revelation if we abandon...the promised, and threatened, Return [of Christ].”

Lewis wrote illuminatingly of the wonders of heaven. He also spoke about hell. In one of his last published stories (disputed by Kathryn Lindskoog as to its authorship) Lewis had Dr. Elwin Ransom assert: “A man can’t be *taken* to hell, or *sent* to hell; you can only get there on your own steam.” This is in line with Lewis’s Arminian soteriology, as when he remarked: “The doors of hell are locked on the inside.” Yet when Lewis depicted hell fictionally in *The Great Divorce*, only one of the bus riders visiting heaven preferred to stay there; all else preferred their misery.

To Arthur Greeves he wrote:

About Hell. All I have ever said is that the N. T. plainly implies the possibility of some being finally left in ‘the outer darkness.’ Whether this means...being left to a purely mental state...or whether there is still some sort of environment, something you could call a world or a reality, I would never pretend to know.

Also Lewis clarified his opinion when he penned: “Whether this eternal fixity [of hell] implies endless duration-or duration at all-we cannot say.” Therefore, once more Lewis’s view cannot be labeled typically evangelical.

## ***I. Evaluation and Conclusion***

Predictability was not the trademark of C. S. Lewis. Nor was his an assembly-line theology. The liberal scholars of his day regarded him as a mousely Reepicheep in his attack upon their “assured results” of biblical criticism. Yet, because of his denial of biblical inerrancy, conservatives could not regard him as their knightly Dr. Ransom. When it came to New Testament historicity, Lewis siphoned off of his own expertise in the field of literary criticism to deny the Bultmannians free reign (or rein). Similarly his popularity as a BBC speaker and in spiraling book sales (especially children’s fantasies!) made him unpopular with some scholarly colleagues in the Oxbridge world.

Lewis navigated well within the orbit of orthodoxy when it came to regarding God as a trinity and Christ as deity. Here he stood in sync with the historic position of Christians since antiquity. Not only did he embrace the full supernaturalness of the Father and Son (while commenting only rarely upon the Spirit), but he accepted the bonafide existence of angels, demons, and Satan as invisible, supernatural personalities.

He refused to confine himself to one stated formulation of an Atonement theory, and he was Arminian on the extent of the Atonement and the question of whether salvation could be lost. Ironically, while he believed some Christians could lose their salvation, he believed some non-Christians could receive their final salvation.

As a member in good standing of the Anglican Church, Lewis accepted an Anglican position on purgatory and prayers for the dead, as well as practicing auricular confession of sins. He believed in a substantive reality to heaven and hell but was agnostic about matters such as the precise dimension and duration of hell.

While Lewis was not known for personal evangelism (for example, many of his students went through years of tutoring from him without ever learning that he was a Christian), ironically he became one of the most renowned international defenders of the Christian faith through his writings. Even when we disagree with some of his theological tenets, we are better off for his having forced us to grapple with his immense intellect. Like the local Christian congregation at Corinth, C. S. Lewis came up with some aberrant views and engaged in some heavy drinking, but he was never dull and the world has never been the same.

**Endnotes** (*missing in source document*)