

# Not a Tame Writer

## A LOOK AT THE OTHER SIDE OF C. S. LEWIS

Midway through *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, three of the Pevensie children—Lucy, Susan, and Peter—are taken by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver to see Aslan, the great lion of Narnia. The closer they get, the more nervous the children become. Finally, Susan asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is “safe,” adding that, “I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“Safe?” Mr. Beaver replies. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

The same could be said for Aslan’s creator, C. S. Lewis. Lewis, whose books have sold more than 100 million copies, has become a kind of favorite uncle to millions of children and adults alike.

But Lewis, like his most famous creation, is not safe. Never one to suffer fools when he was alive, Lewis remains a potent critic of Christian practices. His *Screwtape Letters*, a fictional series of epistles from a senior devil, Screwtape, to a younger one on how to tempt human beings, sound remarkably contemporary (despite Lewis’s use of “man” for human). In *Screwtape* and his essays and nonfiction books, Lewis uses his pen instead of a lion’s claws to expose our weaknesses, tear holes in our pretenses, and point out what God expects of us. He may not be safe, but what Lewis has to say is good for us.

### The same old thing

One of the devil’s best weapons, Lewis wrote in *Screwtape*, is the “horror of the

Same Old Thing.” But take a look at most church marketing, and most of it plays on that fear.

Hip church websites, billboards, brochures, and even commercials offer a “new and improved,” “relevant” Christianity—free of “boring sermons” and “outdated music.” Postmodern or emergent churches offer a “new kind of Christianity,” more authentic than the brand offered by suburban megachurches. Both, Lewis says, risk playing right into the devil’s hands.

“Surely you know,” writes Screwtape, “that if a man can’t be cured of church going, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that ‘suits’ him best, until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches.”

For Lewis, the practice of church shopping undermines Christian formation. Differences in worship practices ought to be opportunities for charity—that is, giving up what pleases us for the sake of others. Instead, to Screwtape’s great pleasure, minor differences become sources of church dissension.

“The real fun,” Screwtape writes, “is working up hatred between those who say ‘mass’ and those who say ‘holy communion’ when neither party could possibly state the difference between, say, Hooker’s doctrine and Thomas Aquinas’s, in any form which would hold water for five minutes. And the purely indifferent things—candles and clothes and what not—are an admirable ground for our activities.”

While church marketing—telling

people about a congregation and its activities—can be vital work, it can easily turn Christians into fickle consumers, ready to leave the moment a church fails to meet their needs. Searching for a “suitable” church also makes Christians into critics, when God wants us to be pupils, writes Lewis.

What God wants, writes Lewis, “is an attitude which may, indeed, be critical in the sense of rejecting what is false or unhelpful, but which is wholly uncritical in the sense that it does not appraise—does not waste time thinking about what it rejects....”

Who knows what Lewis would have made of the worship wars that pit contemporary praise songs and guitars against hymns and organs. There are only two kinds of “blessed” church music, he wrote in *Christian Reflections*. The first is when a priest or organist of “trained and delicate” musical tastes offers “humbler and coarser fare” to their congregation, in hopes of bringing them “closer to God.”

The other comes when a congregation “humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music” they do not appreciate “in the belief that it somehow glorifies God.” In both cases, “Church Music will have been a means of grace; not the music they have liked, but the music they have disliked. They have both offered, sacrificed their tastes in the fullest sense.”

### God as a means to an end

During the 2004 elections, candidates everywhere seemed to get religion. John

Kerry quoted from the book of James that “faith without works is dead,” while George Bush relied on “wonder working power.” Jerry Falwell and Jim Wallis argued over whether God was a Republican or a Democrat.

Politicians and believers alike can be tempted to see faith as just another tool to win elections. But that, says Lewis, is another of the devil’s snares. “Once you have made the world the end and faith a means,” Lewis’s tempter writes, “you have almost won your man, and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes, and crusades matter more to him than prayer and sacraments and charity, he is ours—and the more religious on those terms the more securely ours.”

Lewis believed that Christians ought to act on their faith in order to make society reflect the values of the kingdom of God. But he was aware of the temptation to make political goals—whether it is creating a “family values” culture or a “just society”—into an idol.

“The thing to do is to get a man to first demand social justice as a thing which the Enemy demands,” Screwtape says, “and then work him on the stage for which he values Christianity because it may produce social justice. For the Enemy will not be used as convenience.”

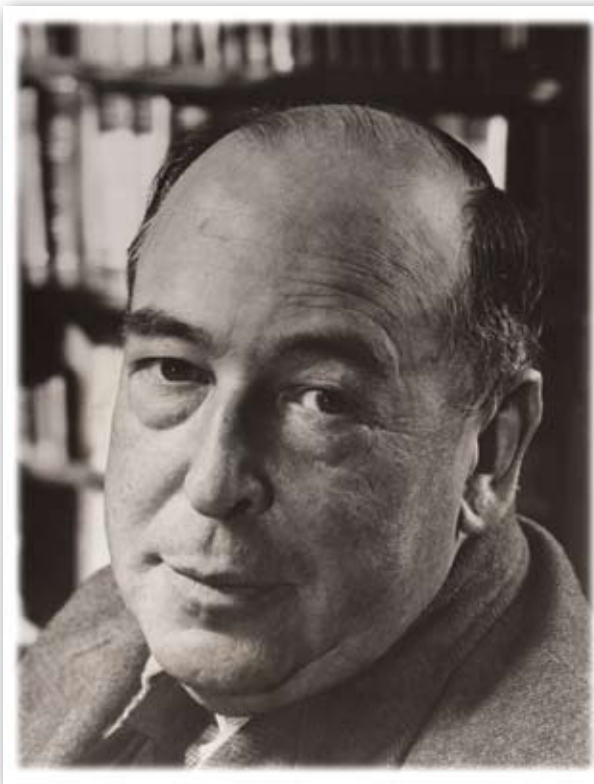
### Clarity above all

People who can write “readable books about religion are almost as rare as saints,” proclaimed *Time* magazine in January 1944. “One such rarity is the Oxford don, Clive Staples Lewis.”

When it come to writing about Christianity, Lewis “did not hedge his bets” as many people do today, says Christopher Mitchell, a Lewis scholar. “He was not trying to be clever,” Mitchell says. “He was not trying to engage in a non-offensive way or leave

some measure of ambiguity. He was not concerned about putting people off. He was concerned about communicating as clearly and as forcefully as he could what Christians really do say, and then defending it.”

Lewis’s straightforward approach to



the faith drew the ire of many of his academic colleagues. His friend J.R.R. Tolkien reprimanded him for writing about theology, when he was neither a theologian nor an ordained minister. Lewis replied that when theologians and ministers wrote theology books that lay people could read, he’d stop doing it. For Lewis, both clarity and truth telling were essential. Hiding behind jargon or theological obfuscation was unacceptable.

“Any fool can write in learned language,” Lewis once told his assistant, Walter Hooper. “The vernacular is the real test. If you can’t put your faith into it, then either you don’t understand it, or you don’t believe it.”

### The reality of heaven

Perhaps the greatest challenge that Lewis offers to modern Christians is this: he believed in the eternal worth of every human being, and that the life

to come was more real than our present life on earth. Those beliefs shaped his actions. Despite his literary success, Lewis maintained a simple life. He gave away two-thirds of his income from writing to charity, and never surrounded himself with the trappings of a world famous author. In fact, he believed that after his death, his writings would fade away; and worried about what that would mean for his brother Warnie, whom Lewis supported for most of his life.

He made time for other people, because doing so was more important than any other task he had. Almost everyone who wrote to Lewis received a personal reply. This letter writing came on top of his teaching at Oxford; his care for Mrs. Moore (the older woman he lived with for most of his adult life), and later for his wife, Joy Davidman Gresham; and his own creative efforts (from 1936 to 1956, he wrote twenty-four books).

Why did Lewis do this? Because, as he explained in an essay entitled “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis believed that every person he met was sacred. There was nothing safe or commonplace about them. Even the most dull or unpleasant person, he believed, had an eternal destiny, either as “a creature, which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror, such as you now meet, if at all, only in nightmares.”

“There are no ordinary people,” Lewis wrote. “You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”

“Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself,” Lewis closed by saying, “your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.” □

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