

Was C. S. Lewis an Evangelical?

Fellowship Meeting

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Consider this evening, was C. S. Lewis an Evangelical? Was C. S. Lewis an Evangelical? First of all, why look at C. S. Lewis? Why look at C. S. Lewis? Why bother? The extent to which you are aware of the name of C. S. Lewis will no doubt vary greatly. Some will be very aware of his influence, and others perhaps the name C. S. Lewis is no more than a name that they are vaguely aware of; they've heard it somewhere and don't know much about him at all. But it has to be said that he has had and still has a considerable influence. There are a number of C. S. Lewis societies and there is a C. S. Lewis Institute in the United States, for example. One Dr. Linsley of that institute says, a recent poll of "Christianity Today" readers found that one book other than the Bible that has most influenced their lives was C. S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity."

C. S. Lewis' popularity shows no sign of waning. If anything, it is increasing. Nearer home, Cecil Andrews of Take Heed Ministries has recently drawn attention to Derek Bingham's personal crusade to promote C. S. Lewis's writings, and that Derek Bingham claims of C. S. Lewis that he is our greatest Christian writer. So we do need to look at what C. S. Lewis believed, that his writings have been instrumental in causing people to think about Christianity, and in some cases perhaps have been a link in a process that has ultimately led to their conversion to Christ, we do not need to dispute. This does not, however, mean that we should assume that C. S. Lewis was overall sound in the faith.

Secondly, who was C. S. Lewis? Who was he? Clive Staples Lewis, he was always known as Jack, but his actual name was Jack Lewis, but his name was Clive Staples Lewis, was born in Belfast on the 29th of November, 1898, of Anglican parents. His brother Warren was three years older and their much loved mother died when C. S. Lewis was nearly 10. The boys were sent to school at Watford which Lewis referred to as Belsen. The headmaster was cruel and incompetent and was later certified insane. He was then sent to Campbell College in Belfast. He delighted in Nordic and Icelandic saga, Greek mythology and so on. Even in his early years he had a great interest in mythology and fantasy, reading far beyond his years in these things. In 1914 he left school to be privately tutored under one W. T. Kirkpatrick in Surrey. He went up to University College Oxford, graduating in 1918, and became a philosophy tutor at University College

in 1924. And in 1925 he was elected a Fellow of Magdalen College. He was a tutor in English Language and Literature for 29 years, and then became Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge.

What he regards as his conversion can be divided into two stages. In 1929, he changed from atheism to theism, that is, instead of denying that there was a God, he admitted there was a God and this he did most reluctantly. He says in his autobiographical book, "Surprised by Joy," "I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed, perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing, the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms." Now he says that, but he seems to think he was accepted, but he'd only become a theist, a believer that there was a God; at this time he didn't claim to be a Christian. He had long talks with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, who was a Roman Catholic, and the author of "The Lord of the Rings." Tolkien was an Oxford don, and also another man, Owen Barfield, who was a theosophist. He professed Christianity in 1931, having become convinced of the incarnation that the Lord Jesus was God become man, that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. He dates his conversion to a time when he traveled to Whipsnade Zoo in the sidecar of his brother's motorcycle. He says, "When I set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when I reached the zoo, I did."

He was a star attraction at Oxford University, large numbers of students attending his lectures. His literary output was prolific. His interest in mythology continued, and the place of imagination shows in most of his writings, and the sheer range of his writings is staggering. He wrote a great deal, of course, about English literature. He wrote poetry, and he wrote defenses, philosophical defenses of what he regarded as the core doctrines of Christianity. He also did so by way of mythical allegory. So on the one hand he defended Christianity from a philosophical point of view, and at other times he defended it by use of myth and allegory. And he wrote for children, the "Chronicles of Narnia," and of course the best known of these is "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." He died in 1963, the same day actually that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

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

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

have been a bishop, "But don't you know you went there because you are an apostate? Are you serious, Dick? Perfectly. This is worse than I expected. Do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions, even assuming, for the sake of argument, that those opinions were mistaken? Do you really think there are no sins of intellect?" This is the reply, "There are indeed, Dick. There is high-bound prejudice, and intellectual dishonesty and timidity and stagnation, but honest opinions fearlessly followed, they are not sins." Then the other, "I know we used to talk that way, I did it too until the end of my life when I became what you call narrow. It all turns on what are honest opinions." Then the bishop, "Mine certainly were. They were not only honest but heroic. I asserted them fearlessly. When the doctrine of the resurrection ceased to commend itself to the critical faculties which God had given me, I openly rejected it. I preached my famous sermon. I defied the whole chapter. I took every risk." The response, "What risk? What was at all likely to come of it, except what actually came? Popularity, sales of your books, invitations, and finally a bishopric. Dick, this is unworthy of you. What are you suggesting? I am not suggesting at all. You see, I know now. Let us be frank. Our opinions were not honestly combined. We simply found ourselves in contact with a certain current of ideas and plunged into it because it seemed modern and successful. At college, you know, we just started automatically writing the kind of essays that got good marks and saying the kind of things that won applause. When, in our whole lives, did we honestly face, in solitude, the one question on which all turned, whether, after all, the supernatural might not in fact occur? When did we put up one moment's re-resistance to the loss of our faith?" Response, "If this is meant to be a sketch of the genesis of liberal theology in general, I reply that it is a mere libel. Do you suggest that men like," and then the other interrupts, "I have nothing to do with any generality, nor with any man but you and me. Oh, as you love your own soul, remember, you know that you and I were playing with loaded dice. We didn't want the other to be true. We were afraid of crude salvationism. afraid of a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid above all of real spiritual fears and hopes." Answer, "I'm far from denying that young men make mistakes. They may be influenced by current passions of thought, but it's not a question of how the opinions are formed. The point is that they were my honest opinions, sincerely expressed. Of course, having allowed," this is the answer, "Of course, having allowed oneself to drift, unresisting, un-praying, accepting every half-conscious solicitation from our desires, we reached a point where we no longer believed the faith just in the same way, a jealous man, drifting and unresisting, reaches a point at which he believes lies about his best friend, or a drunkard reaches a point at which, for the moment, he actually believes that another glass will do him no harm. The beliefs are sincere in the sense that they do occur as psychological events in the man's mind. If that's what you mean by sincerity, they are sincere and so are ours, but errors which are sincere in that sense are not innocent."

Now, that's a long quotation, but it gives you some idea, even though the fantastic sitting is deplorable, of Lewis's ability to understand how people thought. He understood very clearly how the liberal clergy and bishops came to their views. He understood that it wasn't honest thought at all and you can have an admiration for his ability to see through the sham of radical liberalism. He was then a man of considerable perception as to how

people thought and why, and he refused to become a Roman Catholic despite his close friendship with Tolkien who tried for years to persuade him to become one.

But, negatively, was he an evangelical? Well, he didn't claim to be. He says, "I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, not especially high, nor especially low, nor especially anything else." And he did hold serious errors. First, he rejected man's total depravity. In his work on "The Problem of Pain," he has a work called "The Problem of Pain," he states this quite categorically and so in chapter 6 he says, "Christianity demands only that we set right a misdirection of our nature." So he did not believe in total depravity and this no doubt accounts for his view of the place of reason. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of him, "Because C. S. Lewis was essentially a philosopher, his view of salvation was defective in two key respects. First, he believed and taught that one could reason oneself into Christianity. Secondly, he was an opponent of the substitutionary and penal theory of the atonement." So he rejected total depravity.

Secondly, he did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. He did not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. In his work "The Problem of Pain" he says, "Having isolated what I conceived to be the true import of the doctrine that man is fallen, let us now consider the doctrine in itself. The story in Genesis is a story full of deeper suggestions about a magic apple of knowledge, but in the developed doctrine, the inherent magic of the apple has quite dropped out of sight, and the story is simply one of disobedience. I have the deepest respect even for pagan myths, still more for myths in Holy Scripture." Then in his work called "God in the Dock," awful title, but he says this, "The Old Testament contains fabulous elements. The New Testament consists mostly of teaching, not of narrative at all, but where it is narrative, it is, in my opinion, historical. As to the fabulous element in the Old Testament, I very much doubt if you would be wise to chuck it out. What you get is something coming gradually into focus. First you get, scattered throughout the heathen religions all over the world, but still quite vague and mythical, the idea of a God who is killed and broken, and then comes to life again. No one knows where he is supposed to have lived and died. He is not historical. Then you get the Old Testament religious ideas get a bit more focused, everything is now connected with a particular nation, and it comes still more into focus as it goes on. Jonah and the whale, Noah and his ark are fabulous, but the court history of King David is probably as reliable as the court history of Louis XIV. Then, in the New Testament, the thing really happens, the dying God really appears as a historical person living in a definite place and time. If we could sort out all the fabulous elements in the earlier stages and separate them from the historical ones, I think we might lose an essential part of the whole process. That is my own idea."

So he didn't believe in the authority of Scripture or the reliability of the Old Testament particularly. Then again he says of the Psalms, in his work "Reflections on the Psalms," "As for the element of bargaining in the Psalms, 'Do this and I will praise you,' that silly dash of paganism certainly existed. The flame does not ascend pure from the altar, but the impurities are not its essence," and so on. Then again, in the same work, he says, "Descending lower, we find a somewhat similar difficulty with Saint Paul. I cannot be the only reader who has wondered why God, having given him so many gifts, withheld from him what would to us seem so necessary for the first Christian theologian, that of lucidity

and orderly exposition. Thus, on three levels, in appropriate degrees, we meet the same refusal of what we might have thought best for us, in the Word himself, in the apostle of the Gentiles, in Scripture as a whole. Since this is what God has done, this we must conclude was best. It may be that what we should have liked would have been fatal to us, if granted. It may be indispensable that our Lord's teaching, by that elusiveness to our systemizing intellect, should demand a response from the whole man, should make it so clear that there is no question of learning a subject but of steeping ourselves in a personality, acquiring a new outlook and temper, breathing a new atmosphere, suffering him in his own way to rebuild in us the defaced image of himself. So in St. Paul, perhaps the sort of works I should wish him to have written would have been useless. The crabbedness, the appearance of inconsequence and even of sophistry, the turbulent mixture of petty detail, personal complaint, practical advice and lyrical rapture, finally let through what matters more than ideas a whole Christian life in operation, better say Christ himself operating in a man's life."

So you see that he did not reverence the Scriptures as being the word of God. I'll just give one more quote, "The origin of animal suffering could be traced by earlier generations to the fall of man. The whole world was infected by the uncreating rebellion of Adam. This is now impossible, for we have good reason to believe that animals existed long before men, carnivorousness, with all that it entails, is older than humanity. Now it is impossible at this point not to remember a certain sacred story which, though never included in the creeds, has been widely believed in the Church and seems to be implied in several dominical," that's Christ the Lord speaking, "Pauline and Johannine utterances," that's the writings of Paul and John. "I mean the story that man was not the first creature to rebel against the Creator, but that some older and mightier, being long since became apostate and is now the emperor of darkness and significantly the Lord of this world."

You see he did not believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures by any stretch of the imagination. He did believe in prayers for the dead, so in his work "Letters to Malcolm," he says this, "Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would determine, and I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?" In his work "A Grief Observed" after the death of his wife, he refers again to prayers for the dead, but in that book he seems almost in despair.

He believed in purgatory. Again in "Letters to Malcolm" he says this, "But don't we believe that God has already done and is already doing all that he can for the living? What more should we ask? Yet we are told to ask. Yes, it will be answered but the living are still on the road, further trials, developments, possibilities of error await them. For the saved to be made perfect, they have finished the course, to pray for them presupposes that progress and difficulty are still possible. In fact, you are bringing in something like purgatory. Well, I suppose I am. Though even in heaven some perpetual increases of the attitude reached by a continually more ecstatic self-surrender without the possibility of failure, but not perhaps without its own ardors and exertions for delight also has its

severities and steeper sense, as lovers know, might be supposed. But I won't press or guess that side for the moment. I believe in purgatory. Mind you, the Reformers had good reasons for throwing doubt on the Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, as that Romish doctrine had then become. I don't mean merely the commercial scandal. If you turn from Dante's Purgatorio to the 16th century, you will be appalled by the degradation."

Then I'll jump to another point. "The right view returns magnificently in Newman's 'Dream.' There, if I remember rightly, the saved soul at the very foot of the throne begs to be taken away and cleansed. It cannot bear for a moment longer, 'With its darkness to affront that light.' Religion has reclaimed purgatory. Our souls demand purgatory, don't they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, 'It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy'? Should we not reply, 'With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I'd rather be cleaned first.'" He believed in purgatory and he believed in purgatory largely because he obviously doesn't believe that the souls of believers are perfected in holiness at death.

So he did believe in purgatory. He also believed in the invocation of saints, or was prepared to believe in it. So in his book "God in the Dock" he says, "The question then becomes how far we can infer propriety of devotion from propriety of invocation? I accept the authority of the Benedicite for the propriety of invoking saints but if I thence infer the propriety of devotions to saints will not an argument force me to approve devotions to stars, frosts and waves." He said he accepts invocation of saints and on the authority of the Benedicite, which is found in the prayer group service of morning prayer, the original source of which is the song of the three holy children in the Apocrypha.

He also indicates belief that all are ultimately saved. He says, "A most astonishing misconception has long dominated the modern mind on the subject of St. Paul. It is to this effect: that Jesus preached a kindly and simple religion (found in the Gospels) and that Paul afterward corrupted it into a cruel and complicated religion (found in the Epistles). This is really quite untenable." Now you see there, he's quite correctly opposing one of the tenets of liberalism, the contrast, the supposed contradiction between the gospels and the epistles but then listen to what he says, his own position is far removed from orthodoxy. He says, "All the most terrifying texts come from the mouth of our Lord; all the texts on which we can base such warrant as we have for hoping that all men will be saved come from St. Paul." So he can see the nonsense of the radical liberals, but his answer isn't biblical orthodoxy. You see, there's this sort of tragic ability to see through the radical liberal bishops and their writings but what he puts in its place is not evangelical, biblical orthodoxy.

And so we find again the idea that all are ultimately saved. Here, one quote is a little long, but it's the last one. "For my own part, I have sometimes told my audience that the only two things really worth considering are Christianity and Hinduism. (Islam is only the greatest of the Christian heresies, Buddhism only the greatest of the Hindu heresies. Real paganism is dead. All that was best in Judaism and Platonism survives in Christianity.) There isn't really, for an adult mind, this infinite variety of religions to

consider. We may divide religions, as we do soups, into 'thick' and 'clear.' By thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments: Africa is full of thick religions. By clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical, and universalizing: Stoicism, Buddhism, and the Ethical Church are clear religions. Now if there is a true religion, it must be both thick and clear: for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfill this condition are Hinduism and Christianity. But Hinduism fulfills it imperfectly. The clear religion of the Brahman hermit in the jungle and the thick religion of the neighboring temple go on side by side. The Brahman hermit doesn't bother about the temple prostitution nor the worshiper in the temple about the hermit's metaphysics. But Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition. It takes a convert from Central Africa and tells him to obey an enlightened universalist ethic: it takes a twentieth-century academic prig like me and tells me to go fasting to a mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord. The savage convert has to be clear: I have to be thick. That is how one knows one has come to the real religion." So he did not, he believed that Christianity was the truest religion but he obviously believed that Christianity had much in common with other religions, but it was simply the purest form of it.

So was C. S. Lewis an evangelical? Well, the answer is no. Absolutely no. He was not an evangelical. He did not believe in an infallible Bible. He did not believe in the doctrines of justification by faith in Christ alone and so on. He did believe some orthodox doctrines, but he denied others. It is not possible to believe that a man who believes that Scripture can be wrong, who believes in purgatory, who believes in the invocation of saints, who believes or imagines that everyone might be saved in the end and so on, you cannot call that man an evangelical.

Fourthly, why is C. S. Lewis so popular? Why is he so popular? Some reasons are obvious. Firstly, his powers of expression and communication. His vast reading, his powerful imagination meant that he had a tremendous ability to make a point readable and instantly understandable. He has an illustration for everything and you know exactly what he's saying and he is easy to read. And so there's no need to deny that he was a man of great ability. That's one reason but another reason is the church's weakness and vulnerability. The church's weakness and vulnerability. Lewis makes vast concessions, indeed more than concessions, his whole approach is based on the neutrality, the supposed neutrality of human reason. Reason comes first, Scripture second.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 1 and 2, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." There the Apostle Paul is saying that he refused to behave like an original thinker, a philosopher. He had a great mind, no doubt about that, but he says, "I didn't come as a philosopher claiming to be giving you my original thoughts, since I came as a preacher, declaring a message that was given by God." That's why the Greeks were offended. They wanted a philosopher, a profound thinker who would give them thoughts of their own but

he wouldn't. He says, "I preached Christ crucified," preaching, heralding a message from God.

Lewis endeavors to prove Christianity and in so doing, he treats man's reason as neutral, which he did. The amazing thing is that with all his insights into the way people think, and some of them are very perceptive, he still denied total depravity. With his grasp of the way, for example, in that first quotation, the way the liberal bishop ends up as a liberal bishop, you think surely he believes in total depravity. He seems to understand the way it works. But he didn't. He believed that man could be honest and upright in himself with truth. And so the church's weakness and vulnerability, and even the evangelical churches, there is a tendency to want Lewis's philosophical approach. "This will do the job. This will prove it. This will convince people." But then also there is the desire to have big names on our side. The desire to have big names on our side. True evangelical Christians, they feel under pressure. They're still a minority. It's the desire to have somebody important to be able to say, "He's one of us." Whether it's a philosopher like C. S. Lewis, a pop singer like Cliff Richards, or a football manager like the now forgotten Glenn Hoddle, Christians want to think they can point to some well-known name and say, "He's one of us. He believes what we believe," and that this will impress people, and so they take people who profess something vaguely like, you understand, vaguely like Christianity, and they seize on them but when God really saves, as he sometimes does, the wise and the mighty and the noble of this world, then we really should rejoice. Not many wise, not many noble, not many mighty of course, he didn't say none, and when they are, we rejoice, and if they maintain a good confession and exercise a powerful influence from their position of standing amongst men without compromise, we rejoice even more. But let us not unbelievably scabble to cling to someone as an evangelical when he clearly isn't.

Isn't that what happens? The church scabbles in a rather undignified manner to convince themselves that someone is an Evangelical because he's important. Lewis was important, but he wasn't an Evangelical. He was a clever man, a man of amazing skill and abilities, but he should not be looked to as our finest Christian writer, as Derek Bingham said. Not at all! He should not be looked to as a trustworthy teacher of the truth. A Roman Catholic professor, Peter Krecht, at a conference on C. S. Lewis, the millennial assessment, recalls, sorry, it was a conference on "C. S. Lewis - A Millennial Assessment," he recalls how the various participants, a large number of participants at this conference about C. S. Lewis, Roman Catholics, Church of England, Eastern Orthodox and so on, how they all cheered as someone suggested that C. S. Lewis provided part of the common ground of agreement between them all. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Church of England. Of course he did. There is nothing distinctly Evangelical in C. S. Lewis. We might be impressed with some of his argumentation at times. We may like to read when he's tearing to pieces the radical liberals, which he does very nicely, but he's not an Evangelical and so the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, they're happy with him too.

So he should not be seen as a teacher of the truth, and above all, young Christians should emphatically not be directed to C. S. Lewis's writings. I've been horrified at this

happening, and it does happen. Young converts, people who profess the faith, they're novices in the faith, and people give them C. S. Lewis. How to confuse someone, it's unbelievable. If young Christians want help in understanding the Scriptures, let them listen to faithful ministers of the word expanding the Scriptures and let them read the writings of past and present teachers who, even though not famous, were nonetheless faithful. What young Christians need is not teaching from famous unsound men, but teaching from the Scriptures from sound men, whether they're famous or whether they're obscure and unheard of, men who fulfill the words of 1 Timothy 4 verse 6, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained."