C.S. Lewis: More than a Man (or whatever)

He’s in our magazines, in our manuals, and some thirty times in our general conference talks. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), the prolific Christian apologist, novelist, scholar, broadcaster, amateur theologian, and devout Anglican,is often termed—perhaps only half-jokingly—our “thirteenth apostle.” The way church members talk affectionately about him (we all know someone who’s done his temple work), it seems almost like his calling and election have been made sure. Lewis’s faith, which he shares using his vivid imagination and inclusive theology, helps Latter-day Saints to relate to other faiths as well as reflect on our own.

**Biography**

Born in Belfast, Ireland, Clive Staples Lewis grew up with a rather distant relationship to Christianity. His parents took him to church every Sunday, but he felt no real attachment to religion. Lewis considered himself atheist before converting to Christianity in September 1931 while he was working as a Fellow in English Language at Magdalen College, Oxford.

After graduating from Oxford with three degrees (Greek and Latin literature, classical philosophy, and English language and literature), Lewis was eventually granted a fellowship at Magdalen College at Oxford. He went on to become a beloved Christian writer of essays, broadcasts, and fantasy novels. *Mere Christianity*, arguably his most popular apologetic work, began as a series of radio broadcasts that were later published as a book in 1952. He also wrote *Surprised by Joy*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Problem of Pain*, and other works.

**Christian Appeal**

I encountered Dr. Dan DeWitt, a Baptist pastor and the dean of Boyce College in Kentucky, through his blog, “Theolatte.” He writes, “C.S. Lewis is given rock star status among American evangelicals today.”[[1]](#endnote-1) It would appear that Latter-day Saints are not alone in their Lewis-mania. So why are so many Christians obsessed with Lewis? It could be the *mere* in *Mere Christianity*: in his writing, Lewis focuses more on living a Christian life than he does on ceremony and denomination-specific doctrines. It could also be the romanticism of his fantasy books or his dramatic conversion from atheism to Christianity. His change of heart was a result of a late-night discussion with his friends Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien followed a few days later by a trip to the Whipsnade Zoo. “When we set out [for the zoo] I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did . . . It was . . . like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Another possibility for his wide appeal is his apparent personableness—he answered almost all of the fan mail that he received.

Dr. Bruce Young, who teaches a class on C.S. Lewis at BYU, says that “[Lewis’s] mind is engaging” and that his writing is accessible to casual readers because of his conversational style. Lewis was known for using logic in his theological writing, which likely appeals especially to modern audiences who would otherwise not approach theology. In fact, Lewis has grown much more popular after his death than he ever was during his life. Dr. Robert Millet, a religion professor at BYU, says that Lewis had an uncanny knack for breaking down difficult ideas with analogies. For example, he once described the complete change a person must undergo to become a Christian in terms of grass and wheat: No matter how you groom the grass, you cannot grow wheat without uprooting the grass and planting wheat. Analogies such as this, along with his informal writing style, give Lewis’s writing appeal for audiences beyond religious scholars.

Dr. Young also attributes Lewis’s popularity to his imaginative works of fiction such as the *Chronicles of* *Narnia* series. These books, filled with fantasy and adventure, are popular with young and old readers alike. Deeper than that, many of Lewis’s fantasy works are in fact religious allegories, further demonstrating Lewis’s ability to break down large ideas with analogies. Aslan’s sacrifice and resurrection in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, for example, correlate in many ways to the Atonement. In a *Deseret News* article, James Jardine writes, “Lewis said it was primarily his imagination that laid the foundation of his faith.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Since his imagination led him to his faith, it seems natural that he would turn to fantasy as a way to express it. As Dr. Young puts it, “His fiction works are just vividly imaginative. They are filled with a certain kind of religious feeling that is very appealing, that makes spiritual things seem very real. That sort of feeling also comes into his nonfiction work.” Dr. DeWitt also writes of the timeless appeal of Lewis’s imaginative works. They provide another avenue for Christians who would be less likely to pick up one of Lewis’s more scholarly texts.

**An Inclusive Theology**

Latter-day Saints, who often struggle with being labeled unchristian, are attracted to Lewis’s inclusive theology. In his books, Lewis boils Christianity down to its most simple components so there is little to no denominational bias in his teachings. In *Mere Christianity*, he begins with a rational argument for the existence of a universal moral law. Later in the book he discusses the divinity of Christ and explains Christian virtues like prudence, fortitude, humility, charity, faith, and several others. He finishes with a defense of the Trinity doctrine. He hoped his books would help Christian readers discover the common ground between their different religions. This common ground encourages understanding, if not agreement, between the various denominations. For example, one of the common themes of Lewis’s theological writings is theosis, the concept that humans have the potential to become like God. Mormons who read his books will find they share this same belief with Lewis-fans from the Eastern Orthodox faith.

One reason for Lewis’s broad denominational appeal could be his definition of what it means to be a Christian. Lewis believed that since no one can see into anyone else’s mind or heart, we shouldn’t try to say who is or is not a Christian. In Dr. Millet’s introduction to *C.S. Lewis: The Man and His Message*, he describes “this breadth, this inclusiveness, this freshness and distinctiveness . . . which endear Lewis to many Latter-day Saints.”[[4]](#endnote-4) In other words, whether or not a person is a Christian is based more on what is in his or her heart rather than on specific points of doctrine.

**Criticisms of Lewis**

Some Latter-day Saints complain that we stretch Lewis to make him Mormon. Some of the ideas Lewis argues, such as purgatory and ex nihilo creation, do not remotely coincide with LDS beliefs. Even our beliefs on theosis don’t coincide quite in a way we might like. “Did he believe [theosis] the way we do?” says Dr. Millet. “Probably not. But in general, he believed it was something that Christians ought to take seriously.”

Critics have found certain themes in Lewis’s books that are distasteful to both Christians and non-Christians. Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, dismisses the *Narnia* books as racist and sexist. Commenting on gender roles in  *Narnia*, he says, “It is monumentally disparaging of girls and women.” He refers to Susan Pevensie, who is figuratively “sent to hell because she was getting interested in clothes and boys." He also calls the light versus dark theme in the series “blatantly racist.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Kyrie O’Connor of the *Houston Chronicle* points out that the descriptions of the Calormen in *The Horse and His Boy* sound like a negative portrayal of Arabs: [[6]](#endnote-6) they wear “long, dirty robes, and wooden shoes turned up at the toe, and turbans on their heads, and beards,” and they talk “very slowly about things that sounded dull.”[[7]](#endnote-7) J.K. Rowling has voiced complaints too. When she read the books as a child, she “got so caught up I didn’t think C.S. Lewis was especially preachy. Reading them now I find that his subliminal message isn't very subliminal at all.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

How should we feel about a racist, sexist man being quoted in general conference? It is helpful to understand that to some extent, Lewis was a product of his time, as we all are. We do not have to condone every one of his beliefs and prejudices in order to appreciate truth in his writing.

**Bridge Between Denominations**

Although Lewis was Anglican, many of his most ardent supporters are not. Dr. Young attributes this to the simplicity of Lewis’s message: his fervent belief and love of Christ.

In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, Lewis says that he does not want the book to create an entirely new denomination with his ideas. Rather, “it is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Dr. Young has witnessed how a shared appreciation of Lewis encourages inter-religious dialogue, mutual understanding, and lasting friendships. He recalls one experience when a group of evangelical Christians visited BYU from Biola University. “None of us converted each other, but it was kind of nice to know that we all liked C.S. Lewis.” On another occasion at a C.S. Lewis conference at Oxford University, he encountered an evangelical Christian who was skeptical of LDS beliefs. In an effort to find common ground, Young compared the situation to that of Emeth in Lewis’s *The Last Battle*. Emeth, though technically an enemy of Aslan, is saved at the end of the series because his heart is in the right place. “Lewis presents the idea in *The Last Battle* of Emeth, the good Calormene, who even though his theology is mistaken, his heart is really in touch with the truth,” Dr. Young says. The two certainly did not see eye to eye on many issues, just as Emeth did not believe in all of Aslan’s teachings. But regardless of who was right and who was wrong, “he [the evangelical] could accept me as a fellow believer in Christ.”

Dr. Millet had an almost identical experience at a C.S. Lewis conference in Illinois in 1998. At that conference he presented a paper entitled “The Theology of C.S. Lewis: A Latter-day Saint Perspective.” Since his audience was largely non-LDS, he admits being surprised that he was asked to present at the conference, but from his associations with Christians of other denominations, he ended up developing friendships through a mutual love of Lewis that have only grown stronger since the conference.

Dr. DeWitt says almost the same thing in slightly different words—we have Christ in common, to put his ideas simply. I thought it poignant, given this common ground, that he closed one of his emails to me with “your Baptist friend.”

**Finding Truth through Lewis**

Using Lewis as a bridge between different Christian religions opens up another debate: Why do Latter-day Saints seek for truth outside of their own faith if we have access to divine revelation? What does that say about our scriptures and other revelation? And if there is so much commonality between religions, should that change how we feel about our own? Not only that, but what does it mean to learn truth from a fantasy writer?

Dr. Young says, “[Lewis] helps us to think through some of our beliefs more clearly. [He] helps us to understand them more deeply.” We learn absolute *truth* from revelation, Dr. Young explains, but it by no means follows that we have an absolute *understanding* of that truth. Latter-day Saints are able to discern and understand truth when they seek “words of wisdom” out of “the best books” (D&C 88:118). The works of C.S. Lewis, with their logical approach to doctrine and simple testimony of Christ, could qualify as “words of wisdom.” Jardine comments on Lewis’s effect on young people especially: “Lewis’s description of his Christian faith—clear and compelling—has enriched the faith of many young Latter-day Saints as their education intersected with and sometimes challenged their beliefs.” Judging by the number of C.S. Lewis courses at universities across the country (Dr. DeWitt’s, Dr. Young’s, and many others), this is not a Latter-day Saint phenomenon either.

As Dr. Millet puts it, “We ought to be open to truth wherever it’s found,” and Lewis presents truth to Christians of every camp and of every age. He brings to light the common threads that unite all Christians and brings a fascination to theology that likely is a result of his dramatic conversion and his rich imagination. And, of course, as Dr. Young points out, Lewis is just “dang enjoyable” for Latter-day Saints, for evangelicals, for Orthodox Christians, and for every Christian in between.

As Lewis notes, each Christian has a preferred room, but all of us are in the same hallway.

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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   World, 1955, 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jardine,,

   *Deseret News,* November 22, 2013, [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Millet, () [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. O’Connor, Kyrie. “Lewis’ prejudices tarnish fifth ‘Narnia’ book.” Seattlepi.com.

   <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/books/article/Lewis-prejudices-tarnish-fifth-Narnia-book-1188939.php> (accessed November 18, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lewis, C.S. *The Horse and His Boy.* New York: HarperCollins, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lewis,,(), xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)