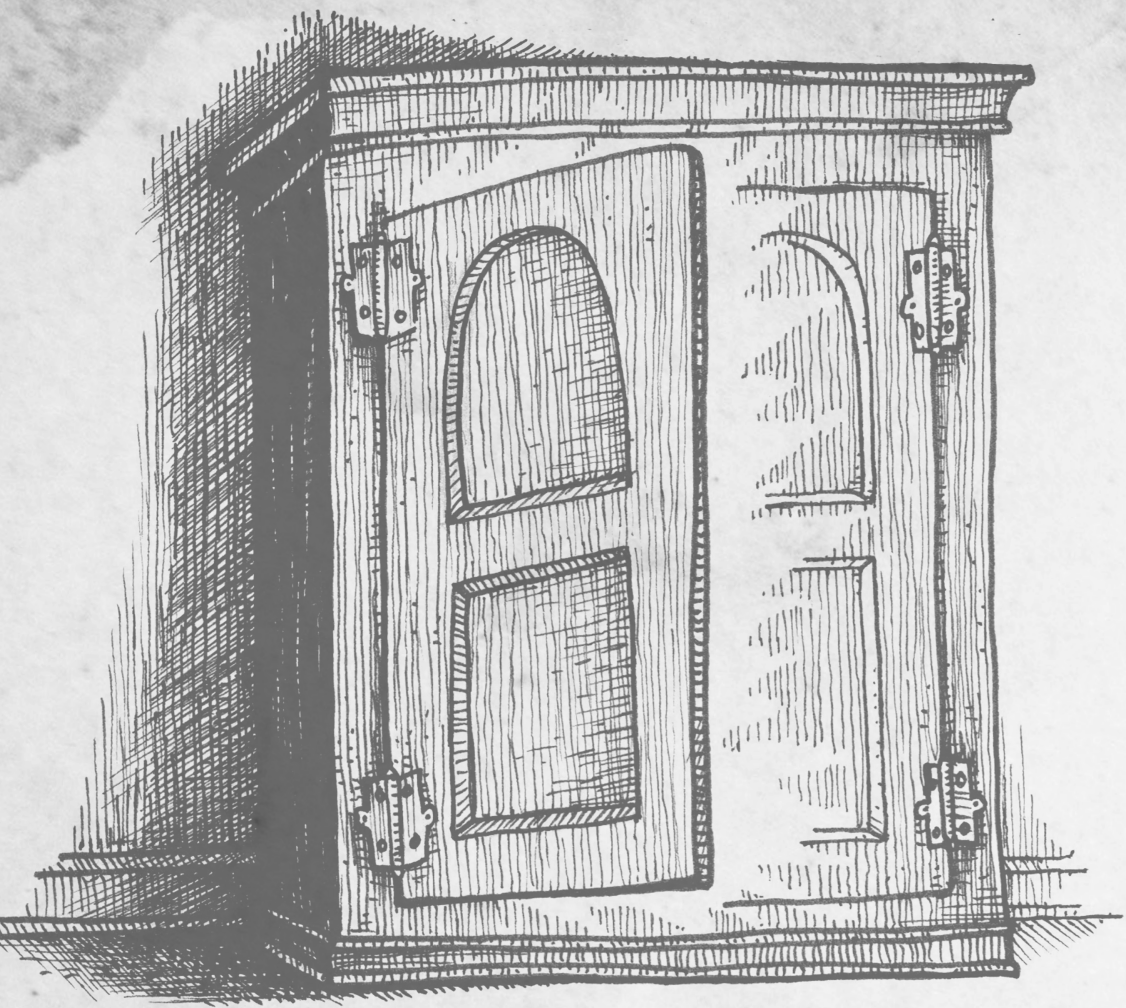


C. S. LEWIS

F O R B E G I N N E R S[®]



Introduction

C. S. LEWIS WAS THE GREATEST Christian apologist of the twentieth century.

But what is an apologist?

It is not someone who says, “I am sorry for the bad popes or for the Crusades or for the Spanish Inquisition.”

It is someone who presents a logical, rational defense of the Christian faith.

When Socrates was put on trial in 399 BC by the Athenian democracy for (supposedly) teaching foreign gods, corrupting the youth, and making the weaker argument the stronger, he gave a defense of his life and mission. Defense in Greek is “*apologia*,” and that is why we call the famous speech he gave The Apology. It was a great speech, but it didn’t end well. Socrates was declared guilty and sentenced to drink a lethal dose of hemlock. Apologies, it seems, don’t always convince their audience!

Like Socrates, the Christian apologist mounts a defense of what he believes and practices. His apology will typically include a logical, reason-based (as opposed to emotional, feeling-based) defense of such key Christian beliefs as the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, and the historical accuracy and authority of the Bible.

It also includes offering answers to some of the strongest arguments against Christianity:

- If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why is there suffering in the world?
- If God is all-good, why is there evil in the world?

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- How can there be only one way to God?
- How can a modern person believe in miracles that violate the laws of nature?
- Doesn't Darwinian evolution explain everything we see around us?

More generally, the Christian apologist defends Christianity as a consistent and coherent worldview that squares with human reason, history, and desire. It offers answers to every facet of our lives on Earth as well as to our questions about what happens after we die.

Here are some apologists from the past: Paul, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, Cardinal Newman, G. K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers. Here are some twentieth-century American apologists: Francis Schaeffer, Josh McDowell, Alvin Platinga, Peter Kreeft, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, Norman Geisler, Michael Behe, Gary Habermas, William Dembski, Lee Strobel, Chuck Colson, and Nancy Pearcey.

What makes Lewis unique as an apologist is the way he balanced so perfectly reason and imagination, logic and intuition, head and heart. In addition to writing such non-fiction apologetics books as *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Miracles*, he wrote eleven novels: the seven Chronicles of Narnia, a trilogy of science-fiction adventures, and a haunting retelling of an old myth



set in the ancient world. All eleven tell wonderful, captivating stories that stand on their own as fiction but that also support and bring to life the kinds of apologetical arguments he makes in his non-fiction. He also wrote two utterly unique works of fiction, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*, which offer a fresh, highly original take on sin and temptation, angels and devils, heaven and hell.

And that's not all. Lewis the apologist and novelist had a day job. He was a celebrated English professor at both Oxford and Cambridge who wrote works of literary criticism that are still famous today. Though these are not works of apologetics, they open up for modern readers the Christian worldview of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, the strong faith of Dante, Milton, and Bunyan, and the power of poetry and allegory to uncover a two-way traffic between heaven and Earth.

At this point, some of you may be saying to yourself: "I'm not a Christian, so why should I bother reading a Christian apologist like C. S. Lewis?" The answer is that Lewis was not a narrowly Christian writer who spoke in a condemning or preachy manner, but a profoundly human writer who spoke to people where they are.

First, though he was Anglican, he devoted himself to defending what he called "mere" Christianity: the central doctrines that *all* Christians, whatever their denomination, have traditionally accepted. Lewis

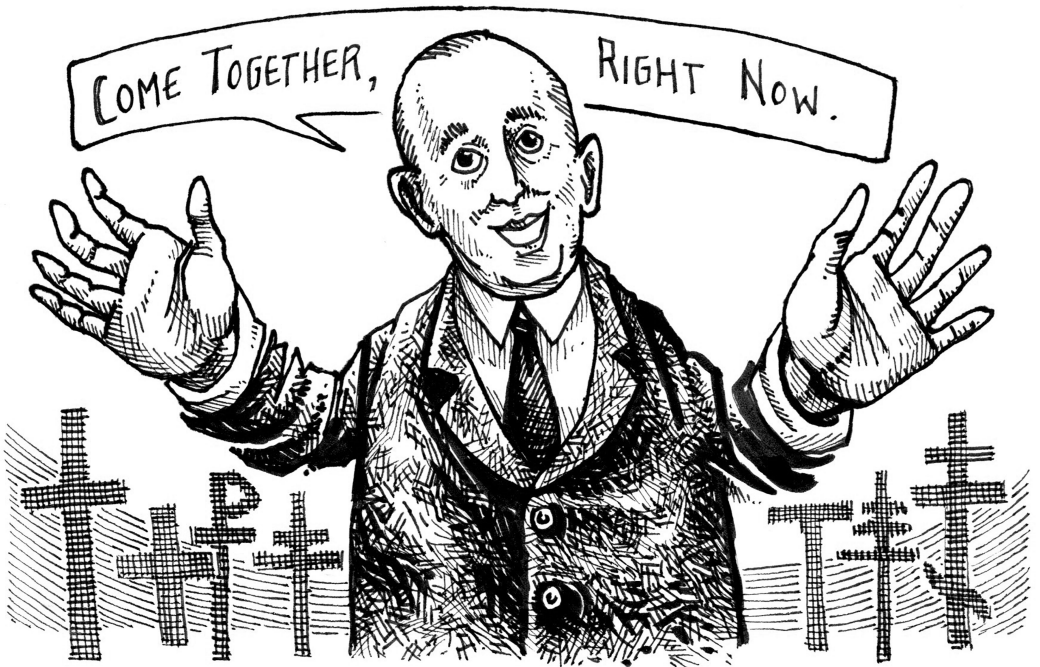


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took his focus off of the many issues that still divide Catholics and Orthodox, Baptists and Lutherans, Presbyterians and Pentecostals:

- The proper meaning of the Lord's Supper and the proper way to perform it.
- Whether people should be baptized as infants or adults and whether they should be dunked or sprinkled.
- What exact role the Virgin Mary and the saints should play in the life of the believer and the congregation.
- Whether the spiritual gift of tongues still exists and how it should be exercised.
- How to understand the role of the pope and of church hierarchy in general.
- When Christ will return and how Revelation should be properly interpreted.

Second, he always avoided technical, theological jargon. He spoke in layman terms, using sharp, clear metaphors. He never patronizes



or condescends, but treats his readers, whatever their background or educational level, as serious thinkers who are interested in the big questions of life.

Third, his ethical and psychological insights are so strong that even readers who do not believe in God will be entertained, instructed, and convicted by his deep exploration of human behavior and the human psyche. Just as non-Catholic (and non-Christian) readers have long thrilled to Dante's journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven, so readers of Lewis, whatever their faith, have enjoyed journeying with him to the magical land of Narnia and seeing our own world through his unique perspective.

Fourth, Lewis's works are not only informed by the Bible but by the entire Western tradition: Homer and Virgil, Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, Augustine and Aquinas, Dante and Milton, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Tennyson, Austen and Dickens. It is all there in Lewis, and it is all accessible and waiting to be dialogued and wrestled with. Lewis carried the entire tradition in his bones, and he allows us to experience it through him.

Fifth, living as we do in an age that tends to be dismissive of everything that came before us, Lewis had the humility to learn from the past: not just the Renaissance, but the Middle Ages and classical Greece and Rome as well. Lewis helps his modern readers to identify and break down what he called chronological snobbery, our deeply held but never challenged belief that the past was ignorant, dark, and superstitious.

Sixth, Lewis allows us to take a second look at things we think we know: certainly Christianity and the Middle Ages, but also poetry, history, democracy, prayer, sin, pain, friendship, love, miracles, outer space, myth, nature, beauty, faith, morality, the sexes, and so much more. He was what used to be called a man of letters, a public intellectual who meditated on the issues of his day and tried to put them in a wider, human context.

Seventh, his imagination was so strong that he never needed to be



original in the modern sense of the word. Everything Lewis wrote was grounded in the wisdom of the past while being invigorated by the concerns of today and the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of people living in a modern, scientific, technological age. That is what gives Lewis's books their at-once contemporary and permanent appeal.

If those seven points don't convince you, then I will leave you with this challenge. Read something three times in Aristotle or Augustine or Aquinas, and you will find you have forgotten most of it by next week; read it once in Lewis, and it will stay with you forever.

In the chapters that follow, I will first take a close look at the milestones in Lewis's life that helped him mature into the Christian, the professor, and the writer he became and then devote one chapter each to his most accessible books. In chapter three, I shall group together four of his academic-scholarly works that, though brilliant, are a bit technical for the average reader: *The Allegory of Love* (1936), *The Personal Heresy* (1939), *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), and *Studies in Words* (1960). I shall, however, devote full chapters to three of his academic works that have proven to be accessible and challenging for a non-academic audience: *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, *An Experiment in Criticism*, and *The Discarded Image*.

Although I shall not devote a chapter to his poetry, his letters, or his many collections of essays, I shall discuss his poems and letters in chapter one, and highlight some of his best essays when they overlap with the books discussed in chapters two through twenty-eight.

Now, throw open the wardrobes of your mind and your heart and be prepared to be enchanted, transported, and transformed.

