

C.S. Lewis: A Bridge to Rome

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“It is largely due to Lewis, an Anglican, that I converted to the Catholic Church...”¹

--Mark Brumley, President of RC Ignatius Press

“Lewis has been credited (or blamed) in recent years with setting numerous people on the road to Rome. Such Catholic converts have included many of the serious scholars and disciples of Lewis, some of whom knew him before he died...”²

--R.A. Benthall, Professor of Literature, Ave Maria College

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, N. Ireland in 1898 to Protestant parents and, for most of his adult life, was a Tutor at Oxford and a lecturer of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge. He wrote more than thirty books, and his most popular accomplishments include *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Mere Christianity*. At age 32, through the encouragement of his devout Roman Catholic friend and colleague, J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*), and after reading *The Everlasting Man* by Roman Catholic convert, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis converted to Christianity from atheism and returned to his Anglican roots where he remained until his death in 1963. Although Lewis never converted to Roman Catholicism, inwardly he leaned towards certain of its dogmas so that his colleagues considered him to be an *Anglo-Catholic*.

It is obvious, by the support given C.S. Lewis today by some conservative Christians, great ignorance exists about his life and beliefs. Therefore, we have included several pertinent quotations, individually cited, gleaned from both Lewis’s own writings, and those of his official biographers and personal friends, in order to enlighten and awaken. For, it is an indisputable fact that to those who seek reconciliation with Rome, C.S. Lewis is a bridge.

“Certainly the path he had taken to ‘mere Christianity’ was very largely the Roman road along which guides such as Chesterton and Tolkien, and Patmore and Dante and Newman had led him.”³ Patmore and Dante were Roman Catholic writers. Newman was an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism and subsequently became a Cardinal.

“After more than two decades in the [RC] Church, I have met or learned of scores of far more illustrious Catholic converts who likewise list Lewis on their spiritual resumes.”⁴

“When I converted [to Catholicism] in my teens, it was largely due to reading Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*...G.K. Chesterton and Lewis sort of guided me into the Catholic Church, even though Lewis wasn’t a Catholic.”⁵

¹ M. Brumley, *The Relevance and Challenge of C.S. Lewis*, (www.ignatiusinsight.com), Nov. 29, 2005.

² R.A. Benthall, Ave Maria College, Michigan quoted in *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* by Joseph Pearce, Ignatius Press, 2003, p.xv.

³ J. Pearce, *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p.41.

⁴ M. Brumley, *The Relevance and Challenge of C.S. Lewis*, (www.ignatiusinsight.com), Nov. 29, 2005.

⁵ R. Purtill, *C.S. Lewis’ Case for the Christian Faith*, (www.ignatiusinsight.com), 2005.

In 1952, C.S. Lewis published his theological work *Mere Christianity*, which originally began in 1942 as a three-part BBC radio broadcast. As the title suggests, Lewis focused on the mere or common ground he felt existed in Christianity and tried to restate a theology without controversy. The result is a generic Christianity that suits anyone anywhere who can in any way relate to God. Lewis bent over backwards trying to find common ground with all denominations, omitting any doctrine that may be deemed offensive. For this reason, Tolkien disparagingly labelled his friend “Everyman’s Theologian.” Even Mormons find his writings inoffensive.

“He [Lewis] is widely quoted from tried-and-true defenders of Mormon orthodoxy. It just shows the extraordinary acceptability and the usefulness of C.S. Lewis because, of course, most of what he says is perfectly acceptable to Mormons.”⁶

Mere Christianity has long been regarded a classic exposition of the Christian faith, yet oddly enough, not one Bible verse is quoted in the first half of the book and only three partial verses in the latter half with no Bible references in the entire book. How can we present Christianity without its foundation – the Word of God?

Mere Christianity is a compilation of four essays, transcripts that were sent to four clergymen to gauge their reaction with regard to its *common* ground.

“I tried to guard against this [putting forth his Anglican beliefs] by sending the original script of what is now Book II to four clergymen (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic) and asking for their criticism. The Methodist thought I had not said enough about Faith, and the Roman Catholic thought I had gone rather too far about the comparative unimportance of theories in explanation of the Atonement. Otherwise all five of us were agreed.”⁷

“You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic. This omission is intentional. There is no mystery about my position ...the best service I could do was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.”⁸

Regarding reunification, Lewis said that he “did at least succeed in presenting an agreed, or common, or central, or *mere* Christianity” and congratulated himself in having helped to bridge the “chasm” between Protestant denominations and Roman Catholicism.

“If I have not directly helped the cause of reunion, I have perhaps made it clear why we ought to be reunited.”⁹

“The time is always ripe for reunion. Divisions between Christians are a sin and a scandal and Christians ought at all times to be making contributions toward reunion...the result is that letters of agreement reach me from what are ordinarily regarded as the most

⁶ D. LeBlanc. Mere Mormonism. (*Christianity Today*, Feb. 7, 2000).

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.6-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

different kinds of Christians; for instance, I get letters from Jesuits, monks, nuns, also from Quakers and Welsh Dissenters, and so on.”¹⁰

In his quest for unity, Lewis had to muddy the waters of doctrinal distinction. For instance, in chapter 19 of his *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis suggests that the Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* [i.e., the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ], which takes place in the Mass, might be just as valid as the Protestant view of the Lord’s Supper as a memorial.

“There are three things that spread the Christ life to us: baptism, belief, and that mysterious action which different Christians call by different names – Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord’s Supper ... anyone who professes to teach you Christian doctrine will, in fact, tell you to use all three, and that is enough for our present purpose.”¹¹

“Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object to your senses.”¹²

Equating Mass [“Blessed Sacrament”] and the Lord’s Supper is not a light matter. In the 39 *Articles* of the Anglican Church, *Article 28* describes transubstantiation accordingly: “Transubstantiation...is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture.” *Article 31* describes the sacrifices of the Mass as “blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.” Godly men and women – among whom were notable Anglicans – were burned at the stake for refusing to accept this Roman Catholic Sacrament. Lewis’s casual equation is an affront to the many who gave their lives defending the Truth of God.

Joseph Pearce, the highly acclaimed RC biographer, takes Lewis’s position on the Mass one step further in his book *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church*, and concludes that Lewis believed that the sacraments play a part in salvation. “Immediately, therefore, Lewis is excluding the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* [faith alone] from the ‘merely Christian’” (Pearce 127). The Bible doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone without works cannot be undervalued in its supremacy. For Lewis to deviate here and espouse the sacraments in the work of salvation is a grave matter.

In 1945, Lewis published *The Great Divorce*, an allegory dealing with another Roman Catholic doctrine: Purgatory. To be fair, however, he did not claim to accept the full RC doctrine of Purgatory, but rather his own aberration:

“Death should not deprive people of a second chance...Lewis frankly admitted believing in Purgatory. To him it was a place for souls already saved but in need of purifying – purging. Lewis felt that our souls *demand* Purgatory. Who would want to enter heaven foul and dirty? Lewis thought of the dentist’s chair. ‘I hope that when the tooth of life is

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Grand Miracle, and Other Selected Essays on Theology and Ethics from God in the Dock*, (Random House, 1970), p. 35.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), pp. 108-09.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (London: HarperCollins, 1977), pp.109.

drawn and I am coming round, a voice will say, 'Rinse your mouth out with this.' This will be Purgatory."¹³

"Lewis could never accept the Roman Catholic practice of praying to the saints...however, he emphatically believed in praying for the dead. He believed that his prayers could somehow bless them. One must remember that Lewis believed in a temporary purgatory for the blessed dead as a kind of entryway to heaven."¹⁴

"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.' 'It may hurt, you know' – 'Even so, sir.'"¹⁵

"A further strong and enduring Anglo-Catholic influence on Lewis was his longstanding friendship with Sister Penelope of the Convent of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin."¹⁶

"As Lewis approached the end of his life there is little doubt that he was continuing the ascent towards the 'High Church' principles of Anglo-Catholicism. There is little doubt that the ascent was caused by his assent to those truly Catholic principles that represented not mere but more Christianity (Pearce 143). Believing that he was dying, his Anglo-Catholic friends arranged for an Anglican clergyman to administer extreme unction, or the last rites, the sacrament of anointing with oil when a patient is *in extremis*...this can be taken as Lewis's acceptance of the seventh and final sacrament of the Catholic Church."¹⁷

Walter Hooper, Lewis's personal friend and literary executor to the Lewis estate, was an Anglican clergyman until his conversion to Catholicism in 1988.¹⁸ When asked in 1994 whether Lewis would have become Catholic if he had lived longer, Hooper replied, "I think so." Hooper added that more and more Catholics are buying his books.¹⁹

"Lewis, it seems, has been abandoned by his own church but embraced by Catholics and evangelical Protestants...Since Lewis insisted on the sacraments and Creed as being necessary parts of 'mere Christianity', it is clear that Protestants have to reach beyond their own beliefs if they are to embrace fully the beliefs of Lewis."²⁰

Contrary to the opinion of the uninformed, the Roman Catholic Church and her doctrines remain unchanged. If you did not know that, you need to read her official documents such as *The*

¹³ K. Lindskoog, *C.S. Lewis: Mere Christian*, 4th ed., (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1997), p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.135 (based on Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm*, London: Collins, p. 15, 107-110).

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. (New York: Harcourt, 1963), pp.108-9.

¹⁶ J. Pearce, *C.S. Lewis and the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 132.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.167.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.167.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.168.

Council of Trent or *The New York Catechism*. These and other sources are readily available on the Internet. You will read things like this:

“Whosoever shall affirm that men are justified solely by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ...let him be accursed.”²¹

[Regarding the “immaculate” or “sinless” conception of Mary]

“The immunity from original sin was given to Mary by a singular exemption from a universal law through the same merits of Christ, by which other men are cleansed from sin through baptism.”²²

“Taken up to heaven she [Mary] did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us gifts of eternal salvation...Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.”²³

These and many other RC beliefs are the antitheses of the Word of God. Therefore, as Lewis downplayed the Mass and other Catholic doctrines in his quest for unity, he not only failed to warn Catholics of their perilous position, he rather did the cause of *Truth* much harm.

A final unrelated but yet disturbing fact is that Lewis did not believe in the total inerrancy of the Bible.

“Although Lewis never doubted the historicity of an account because the account was miraculous, he believed that Jonah’s whale [sic], Noah’s ark, and Job’s boils were probably inspired stories rather than factual history.”²⁴

“The Old Testament contains fabulous elements. As to the fabulous element in the Old Testament, I very much doubt if you would be wise to chuck it out. Jonah and the Whale [sic], Noah and his Ark, are fabulous; but the court history of King David is probably as reliable as the court history of Louis XIV.”²⁵

So why is Lewis so revered today by Evangelicals?

Considering Lewis’s evident Anglo-Catholic position and the current trend of tolerance among Evangelicals for Roman Catholicism – especially since the signing of the document *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* [ECT] in 1994 – it is not surprising that many Evangelicals today revere him as a foremost Christian thinker and philosopher. In an article commemorating the 100th anniversary of Lewis’ birth, J.I. Packer called him “our patron saint.” *Christianity Today* [Neo-Evangelical magazine] also reported that Lewis “has come to be the Aquinas, the Augustine, and the Aesop of contemporary Evangelicalism” (Sept. 7, 1998) and the “20th century’s greatest

²¹ *Council of Trent*, Section 6(www.enwikipedia.org/wiki/Council).

²² *Catholic Encyclopedia* (www.newadvent.org).

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 969 (www.vatican.va/archive/catechism.htm).

²⁴ K.Lindskoog, *C.S. Lewis: Mere Christian*, 4th ed., (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1997), p. 199.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Grand Miracle*, (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 32.

Christian apologist” (April 23, 2001). *Focus on the Family* made a similar claim in their November 2001 issue.

In 1993, *Christianity Today* suggested the reason for Lewis’s popularity among Evangelicals: “Lewis’s concentration on the main doctrines of the church [including the Roman Catholic church] coincided with evangelicals’ concern to avoid ecclesiastical separation.” Nicky Gumbel continues this ploy in his *Alpha Course*, where he quotes Lewis liberally. Given the theological climate of today, it is sad but not surprising.

What is surprising is that sincere, Bible-believing Christians can claim an affinity with C.S. Lewis, whose doctrine and associations are so evidently compromised. There can be only one explanation: there exists among Christians an alarming ignorance of basic Bible doctrine. Lewis himself admitted his own lack of knowledge in doctrine: “I should have been out of my depth in such waters: more in need of help myself than able to help others.”²⁶ Also, in the preface of *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis confessed how ill-qualified he was to attempt this theological work: “If any real theologian reads these pages he will very easily see that they are the work of a layman and an amateur...any theologian will see easily enough what, and how little, I have read.”²⁷ I wonder if Lewis would not cringe at his exaltation were he alive today.

Even from the early 1960’s, men like the late Dr. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones warned that Lewis had a defective view of salvation and was an opponent of the substitutionary and penal view of the atonement (*Christianity Today*, Dec. 20, 1963). Unfortunately, the Lewis-loyalty of some Christians overrides their willingness to admit his defective theology. Meanwhile, a whole generation has been infected, and the damage is great.

“Protestants who tend to equate Christianity with their Protestant version of it will find in Lewis no ally. Which brings us back to Lewis and Catholicism. It is a curious phenomenon, demanding explanation, that so many people influenced by Lewis...have embraced more than ‘mere Christianity’; they have become Catholics, crediting Lewis with helping them to cross the threshold.”²⁸

In conclusion, since the “mere” message of C.S. Lewis is able to confuse people to the extent that they actually convert to Catholicism, that in itself would suggest an urgent need for born-again Christians to wake up to the tragic reality that the Lewis message is hindering Roman Catholics from coming to Christ alone for salvation [John 14:6, Rom. 6:23, Eph. 2:8]. Even some fundamentalists are treading the same precarious ground, and the evident shift is nowhere seen more clearly than in the Christian seminaries and bookstores of our nations. Today, the market is full of writers following in the footsteps of C.S. Lewis. If Christians continue to set aside the solid foundation of the Word of *God* for the shifting sands of the philosophies of *men*, how will Roman Catholics and other needy people be rescued without the right lifeline?

Every Christian book and author needs to be measured against the yardstick of Scripture, for no matter how popular or convincing they may seem, “*if they speak not according to this word, it is*

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), p.7.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p.xii.

²⁸ M.Brumley, *The Relevance and Challenge of C.S. Lewis*, (www.ignatiusinsight.com), Nov. 29, 2005.

because there is no light in them.”²⁹ “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”³⁰

C.H. Spurgeon wisely said, “Those who compromise with Christ’s enemies may be reckoned with them.”³¹ We cannot accept the peripherals when the fundamentals are in error. May God grant us discernment in these confused times.

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth...”³²

²⁹ Isaiah 8:20

³⁰ Galatians 1:9

³¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *Faith’s Checkbook* (Chicago: Moody Press), June 12 entry.

³² II Timothy 4:3-4

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