

**An interview with C.S. Lewis
(1963)¹
Sherwood E. Wirt**



**CAMBRIDGE,
ENGLAND (ANS) --** *I drove to Cambridge, England, on May 7 [1963] to interview Mr. Clive Staples Lewis, author of *The Screwtape Letters* and one of the world's most brilliant and widely read Christian authors. I hoped to learn from him how*

young men and women could be encouraged to take up the defense of the faith through the written word.

It was quickly evident that this interview was going to be different from any that I had ever been granted. I found Mr. Lewis in a wing of the brick quadrangle at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, where he is professor of Medieval and Renaissance literature. I climbed a flight of narrow, incredibly worn wooden steps, knocked at an ancient wooden door with the simple designation, "Prof. Lewis," and was shown in by the housekeeper.

Passing through a simply furnished parlor, I came into a study that was quite Spartan in appearance. Professor Lewis was seated at a plain table upon which reposed an old-fashioned alarm clock and an old-fashioned inkwell. I was immediately warmed by his jovial smile and cordial manner as he rose to greet me; he seemed the classic, friendly, jolly Englishman. He indicated a straight-backed chair, then sat down, snug in his tweed jacket and two sweaters, and we were away.

Professor Lewis, if you had a young friend with some interest in writing on Christian subjects, how would you advise him to prepare himself?

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"I would say if a man is going to write on chemistry, he learns chemistry. The same is true of Christianity. But to speak of the craft itself, I would not know how to advise a man how to write. It is a matter of talent and interest. I believe he must be strongly moved if he is to become a writer. Writing is like a 'lust,' or like 'scratching when you itch.' Writing comes as a result of a very strong impulse, and when it does come, I for one must get it out."

Can you suggest an approach that would spark the creation of a body of Christian literature strong enough to influence our generation?

"There is no formula in these matters. I have no recipe, no tablets. Writers are trained in so many individual ways that it is not for us to prescribe. Scripture itself is not systematic; the New Testament shows the greatest variety. God has shown us that he can use any instrument. Balaam's ass, you remember, preached a very effective sermon in the midst of his 'hee-haws.'"

By this time the mettle of the man I was interviewing was evident. I decided to shift to more open ground.

A light touch has been characteristic of your writings, even when you are dealing with heavy theological themes. Would you say there is a key to the cultivation of such an attitude?

"I believe this is a matter of temperament. However, I was helped in achieving this attitude by my studies of the literary men of the Middle Ages, and by the writings of G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton, for example, was not afraid to combine serious Christian themes with buffoonery. In the same way the miracle plays of the Middle Ages would deal with a sacred subject such as the nativity of Christ, yet would combine it with a farce."

Should Christian writers, then, in your opinion, attempt to be funny?

"No. I think that forced jocularities on spiritual subjects are an abomination, and the attempts of some religious writers to be humorous are simply appalling. Some people write heavily, some write lightly. I prefer the light approach because I believe there is a great deal of false reverence about. There is too much solemnity and intensity in dealing with sacred matters; too much speaking in holy tones."

But is not solemnity proper and conducive to a sacred atmosphere?

"Yes and no. There is a difference between a

private devotional life and a corporate one. Solemnity is proper in church, but things that are proper in church are not necessarily proper outside, and vice versa. For example, I can say a prayer while washing my teeth, but that does not mean I should wash my teeth in church.”

What is your opinion of the kind of writing being done within the Christian church today?

“A great deal of what is being published by writers in the religious tradition is a scandal and is actually turning people away from the church. The liberal writers who are continually accommodating and whittling down the truth of the Gospel are responsible. I cannot understand how a man can appear in print claiming to disbelieve everything that he presupposes when he puts on the surplice. I feel it is a form of prostitution.”

What do you think of the controversial new book, *Honest to God*, by John Robinson, the bishop of Woolwich?

“I prefer being honest to being ‘honest to God.’”

What Christian writers have helped you?

“The contemporary book that has helped me the most is Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*. Others are Edwyn Bevan’s book, *Symbolism and Belief*, Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, and the plays of Dorothy Sayers.”

I believe it was Chesterton who was asked why he became a member of the church, and he replied, “To get rid of my sins.”

At this point I was surprised by the suddenness of Professor Lewis’ reply. “It is not enough to want to get rid of one’s sins,” he said. “We also need to believe in the One who saves us from our sins. Not only do we need to recognize that we are sinners; we need to believe in a Savior who takes away sin. Matthew Arnold once wrote, ‘Nor does the being hungry prove that we have bread.’ Because we know we are sinners, it does not follow that we are saved.”

In your book *Surprised by Joy*, you remark that you were brought into the faith kicking and struggling and resentful, with eyes darting in every direction looking for an escape. You suggest that you were compelled, as it were, to become a Christian. Do you feel that you made a decision at the time of your conversion?

“I would not put it that way. What I wrote in *Surprised by Joy* was that ‘before God closed in on me,

I was offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice.’ But I feel my decision was not so important. I was the object rather than the subject in this affair. I was decided upon. I was glad afterwards at the way it came out, but at the moment what I heard was God saying, ‘Put down your gun and we’ll talk.’”

That sounds to me as if you came to a very definite point of decision.

“Well, I would say that the most deeply compelled action is also the freest action. By that I mean, no part of you is outside the action. It is a paradox. I expressed it in *Surprised by Joy* by saying that I chose, yet it really did not seem possible to do the opposite.”

You wrote 20 years ago that “a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” Would you say your view of this matter has changed since then?

“I would say there is no substantial change.”

Would you say that the aim of Christian writing, including your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?

“That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in view. For example, I have just finished a book on prayer, an imaginary correspondence with someone who raises questions about difficulties in prayer.”

How can we foster the encounter of people with Jesus Christ?

“You can’t lay down any pattern for God. There are many different ways of bringing people into his Kingdom, even some ways that I specially dislike! I have therefore learned to be cautious in my judgment.

“But we can block it in many ways. As Christians we are tempted to make unnecessary concessions to those outside the faith. We give in too much. Now, I don’t mean that we should run the risk of making a nuisance of ourselves by witnessing at improper times, but there comes a time when we must show that we disagree. We must show our Christian colors, if we are

to be true to Jesus Christ. We cannot remain silent or concede everything away.

“There is a character in one of my children’s stories named Aslan, who says, ‘I never tell anyone any story except his own.’ I cannot speak for the way God deals with others; I only know how he deals with me personally. Of course, we are to pray for spiritual awakening, and in various ways we can do something toward it. But we must remember that neither Paul nor Apollos gives the increase. As Charles Williams once said, ‘The altar must often be built in one place so that the fire may come down in another place.’”

The hour and a half I spent with Mr. Clive Staples Lewis in his quarters at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, will remain a treasured memory. I found Professor Lewis in his modest establishment, surrounded by the historic atmosphere of the old university city, engaged in the quiet daily stint of teaching medieval classic literature. It was hard to realize that this unassuming man is probably the outstanding Christian literary figure of our age. I was prompted to say to him:

Professor Lewis, your writings have an unusual quality not often found in discussions of Christian themes. You write as though you enjoyed it.

“If I didn’t enjoy writing I wouldn’t continue to do it. Of all my books, there was only one I did not take pleasure in writing.”

Which one?

*The Screwtape Letters.*² They were dry and gritty going. At the time, I was thinking of objections to the Christian life, and decided to put them into the form, ‘That’s what the devil would say.’ But making goods ‘bad’ and bads ‘good’ gets to be fatiguing.”

How would you suggest a young Christian writer go about developing a style?

“The way for a person to develop a style is (a) to know exactly what he wants to say, and (b) to be sure he is saying exactly that. The reader, we must remember, does not start by knowing what we mean. If our words are ambiguous, our meaning will escape him. I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate open to the left

² *The Screwtape Letters*, Mr. Lewis’ most popular and widely read work, has gone into some 27 printings. It consists of a series of letters written by an official of “his Satanic Majesty’s Lowerarchy” to his nephew, who is a junior demon on earth. The letters seek to advise the nephew in ways to corrupt the faith of a human being who becomes a Christian.

or the right the readers will most certainly go into it.”

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit can speak to the world through Christian writers today?

“I prefer to make no judgment concerning a writer’s direct ‘illumination’ by the Holy Spirit. I have no way of knowing whether what is written is from heaven or not. I do believe that God is the Father of lights -- natural lights as well as spiritual lights (James 1:17). That is, God is not interested only in Christian writers as such. He is concerned with all kinds of writing. In the same way a sacred calling is not limited to ecclesiastical functions. The man who is weeding a field of turnips is also serving God.”

An American writer, Mr. Dewey Beegle, has stated that in his opinion the Isaac Watts hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” is more inspired by God than is the “Song of Solomon” in the Old Testament. What would be your view?

“The great saints and mystics of the church have felt just the opposite about it. They have found tremendous spiritual truth in the ‘Song of Solomon.’ There is a difference of levels here. The question of the canon is involved. Also we must remember that what is meat for a grown person might be unsuited to the palate of a child.”

How would you evaluate modern literary trends as exemplified by such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre?

I have read very little in this field. I am not a contemporary scholar. I am not even a scholar of the past, but I am a lover of the past.”

Do you believe that the use of filth and obscenity is necessary in order to establish a realistic atmosphere in contemporary literature?

“I do not. I treat this development as a symptom, a sign of a culture that has lost its faith. Moral collapse follows upon spiritual collapse. I look upon the immediate future with great apprehension.”

Do you feel, then, that modern culture is being de-Christianized?

“I cannot speak to the political aspects of the question, but I have some definite views about the de-Christianizing of the church. I believe that there are many accommodating preachers, and too many practitioners in the church who are not believers. Jesus Christ did not say, ‘Go into all the world and tell the world that it is quite right.’ The Gospel is something completely different. In fact, it is directly opposed to

the world.

“The case against Christianity that is made out in the world is quite strong. Every war, every shipwreck, every cancer case, every calamity, contributes to making a prima facie case against Christianity. It is not easy to be a believer in the face of this surface evidence. It calls for a strong faith in Jesus Christ.”

Do you approve of men such as Bryan Green and Billy Graham asking people to come to a point of decision regarding the Christian life? — “I had the pleasure of meeting Billy Graham once. We had dinner together during his visit to Cambridge University in 1955, while he was conducting a mission to students. I thought he was a very modest and a very sensible man, and I liked him very much indeed.

“In a civilization like ours, I feel that everyone has to come to terms with the claims of Jesus Christ upon his life, or else be guilty of inattention or of evading the question. In the Soviet Union it is different. Many people living in Russia today have never had to consider the claims of Christ because they have never heard of those claims. In the same way we who live in English-speaking countries have never really been forced to consider the claims, let us say, of Hinduism. But in our Western civilization we are obligated both morally and intellectually to come to grips with Jesus Christ; if we refuse to do so we are guilty of being bad philosophers and bad thinkers.”

What is your view of the daily discipline of the Christian life — the need for taking time to be alone with God?

“We have our New Testament regimental orders upon the subject. I would take it for granted that everyone who becomes a Christian would undertake this practice. It is enjoined upon us by our Lord; and since they are his commands, I believe in following them. It is always just possible that Jesus Christ meant what he said when he told us to seek the secret place and to close the door.”

Because Professor Lewis has written so extensively, both in fiction and nonfiction, about space travel (see his trilogy, Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra and That Hideous Strength), I was particularly interested in what he would have to say about the prospects for man’s future.

What do you think is going to happen in the next few years of history, Mr. Lewis?

“I have no way of knowing. My primary field is

the past. I travel with my back to the engine, and that makes it difficult when you try to steer. The world might stop in ten minutes; meanwhile, we are to go on doing our duty. The great thing is to be found at one’s post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.

“We have, of course, the assurance of the New Testament regarding events to come. I find it difficult to keep from laughing when I find people worrying about future destruction of some kind or other. Didn’t they know they were going to die anyway? Apparently not. My wife once asked a young woman friend whether she had ever thought of death, and she replied, ‘By the time I reach that age science will have done something about it!’”

Do you think there will be widespread travel in space?

“I look forward with horror to contact with the other inhabited planets, if there are such. We would only transport to them all of our sin and our acquisitiveness, and establish a new colonialism. I can’t bear to think of it. But if we on earth were to get right with God, of course, all would be changed. Once we find ourselves spiritually awakened, we can go to outer space and take the good things with us. That is quite a different matter.”



Sherwood Wirt