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## WHY CONSIDER C. S. LEWIS'S ARGUMENTS FOR CHRIST?



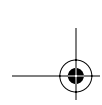
*One by one, coffee mugs in hand, people begin to drift toward the carpeted corner of the bookstore where John stands waiting. He gets a hollow feeling in his stomach and unconsciously puts his hand on the stack of books on the table beside him. Their solid feel boosts his confidence. The spine of each book bears the name of the same author: C. S. Lewis. John wonders who will come to this first meeting of a study group on the thinking of a mid-twentieth-century British writer.*



*John is not afraid that C. S. Lewis will be irrelevant to anyone who comes tonight. He knows that the works of Lewis hold something for everyone. But what unpredictable mix of people will this study group draw? Will they be familiar with Lewis's works? Perhaps some will have read his fiction series for children, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, while others will know him for his writings on Christian faith. To some he may be only a half-familiar name, somebody from J. R. R. Tolkien's inner circle.*

*"How many chairs do you think you'll need?" A store employee's voice breaks into John's musings. John hurries to help the clerk arrange a circle*





of chairs. Just in time—the first members of the group have arrived.

“Good evening and welcome to this initial meeting of our study group on C. S. Lewis.” John sounds more self-assured than he feels. “To help us get acquainted, please take one of these markers and write your first name on one of these sticky name tags.”

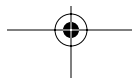
When everyone has found a seat and has affixed a name tag, John says, “I’m curious about why we’ve all decided to be here this evening. Who would like to tell us why you’re interested in the work and thought of C. S. Lewis?”

A woman who looks to be in her thirties immediately raises her hand and announces, “I’m Brenda.” She hardly needs to say it, because her name is written large and bold, crowding the edges of the sticker. Brenda wears loud-colored, offbeat clothing and large “artsy” jewelery. “I want to write children’s literature. Not sugary-sweet stuff, but stories that deal with the real world as kids experience it. I want to know how Lewis managed to write stories that speak to both children and adults.”

A man about Brenda’s age, but more conservative in appearance, speaks up. “My name is Simon and I’m an atheist.” Simon flicks a glance around the circle as if to see if anyone is shocked, but no one visibly reacts. “It bothers me that so many people today are being taken in by religion. I heard that this guy, Lewis, was once a hard-core atheist. I want to know how such a seemingly intelligent person was duped into believing in a God.”

A middle-aged woman raises her hand next and says firmly, “I’m Julia and I’m definitely not an atheist. I’ve been on a spiritual quest for several years. I don’t restrict myself to any one religion. I investigate all spiritual paths and draw on each for what best fits my life. I’m here to see what I can glean from C. S. Lewis’s brand of Christianity.”

Next to speak is a woman who appears the youngest of the group. “I consider myself a Christian,” she says. “I promised this friend of mine I’d come to this because she’s always telling me I need to think more about my





*faith. But to me, faith is a matter of feeling, not thinking. Oh, by the way, my name's Lenae."*

*The rest of the group remains silent, perhaps intimidated by the reasons of the four who have spoken. Then an older man says, "I'm Mike and I'm just here for the coffee," and everyone laughs. John takes a deep breath and goes into his introduction to C. S. Lewis.*

### WHO WAS C. S. LEWIS?

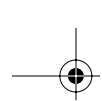
***In touch with real people.*** Like the members of John's study group, no doubt you have some degree of knowledge about Clive Staples Lewis, writer, teacher, thinker and above all Christian. Lewis was an Oxford professor who was born November 29, 1898, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He died November 22, 1963, the same day John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Because he was heard on regular BBC radio broadcasts during World War II, Lewis became well-known in Britain. It is said that he was the second best-known radio voice of that era; Winston Churchill was number one. Lewis received further exposure in America when he was pictured on the cover of *Time* magazine on September 8, 1947. The cover read: "Oxford's C. S. Lewis: His Heresy: Christianity."

Besides his many books defending and explaining his faith in Christ, Lewis also wrote fiction, science fiction, well-respected academic works in English literature, and poetry. Critics once predicted that Lewis's influence would diminish with time. Time has proven them wrong, and if anything, Lewis's popularity is growing. A recent poll of *Christianity Today* readers found that the book (other than the Bible) that has most influenced their lives was C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*.<sup>1</sup>

Films such as the BBC and Hollywood versions of *Shadowlands*



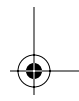
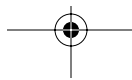


have revealed personal details of Lewis's life. The Hollywood version with Anthony Hopkins and Deborah Winger was especially emotionally powerful and was nominated for a couple of Academy Awards. While Lewis would likely be horrified to see his romance with Joy and his crushing grief at her death displayed on the silver screen, the films have nevertheless served as many people's entry point into the life and writing of C. S. Lewis. But even the popularity of these movies is easily dwarfed by the massive sales of a wide variety of his books.

What is the reason for the continuing popularity of one who to many is a relatively obscure English author? Lewis's unique combination of abilities set him apart from others. His gifts included an ability to combine story, imagination, metaphor and reason; the rhetorical skill to order his ideas clearly and persuasively; precision with words; and the empathy to understand people's deepest struggles, questions, and doubts. Better than many pastors and theologians, he was able to get in touch with the concerns of real people.

*An ardent atheist.* Apart from his fame and popularity, why should we give further consideration to Lewis's thought? One reason is that Lewis knew what it was like not to believe, because he struggled with many doubts along the way to faith. Since he was an ardent atheist until age thirty-one, his experience and education prepared him to understand firsthand the most common arguments against Christianity. Even after he came to belief in God, calling himself "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England,"<sup>2</sup> he took two years to sort out various competing religious claims, particularly between Eastern religious ideas (pantheism) and Christianity. Finally he became convinced of the truth of the Christian message.

Lewis's conversion to Christ was outwardly unspectacular. He describes a trip in the sidecar of a motorcycle on the way to the Whip-





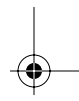
snade Zoo. When he left for the zoo, he did not believe that Christ was the Son of God; when he arrived at the zoo, he did believe that Christ was the Son of God. Otherwise nothing extraordinary had happened along the way.

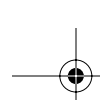
Lewis's first book, *Pilgrim's Regress*, is particularly valuable because it describes some of the dilemmas he faced on his spiritual journey. Much like Pilgrim in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Lewis's character, John, sets out on a quest. Rather than encountering generic temptations as in Bunyan's classic book, John meets characters who give philosophical alternatives to faith. Through this avenue Lewis highlights the arguments he himself had struggled with. He does not lightly dismiss crucial problems and obstacles to faith.

**A thorough scholar.** Lewis had an enormous breadth and depth of knowledge. His earlier studies gave him a mastery of philosophy, classics and literature. He accomplished the rare feat of getting three firsts at Oxford, including top honors in Greats and English. He lectured in philosophy for a year before he was elected a fellow in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925. Lewis taught there until 1954, when he was appointed professor of Medieval and Renaissance studies at Cambridge University. He mastered ancient, medieval, renaissance and reformation philosophy and literature. For example, his highly regarded book *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* took him sixteen years to write because he felt he had to read everything in English in the sixteenth century before he wrote the book. This was typical of his thoroughness.

Of course certain areas of study lay outside his area of specialty, as he often admitted, but he was very aware of the philosophical, religious and literary debates which led up to his own time.

**A debater.** Lewis was not only aware of past debates, but he also engaged in the current debates of his age, many of which laid the





groundwork for the controversies of our own time. For a number of years he served as an adviser and central voice at the Oxford Socratic Club. The group provided a forum for debate and discussion between leading advocates of Christianity and leading opponents of that belief (such as A. J. Ayer). Each meeting included a presentation of a paper or talk from one side or the other and then a response from the opposing side, followed by general discussion. C. S. Lewis was sometimes a presenter or respondent, but even if neither, he was invariably a significant presence in the later discussion.

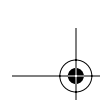
Austin Farrer, well-known philosopher and warden of Keble College, Oxford, maintains that Lewis's great value was his "many-sidedness" and that he was a "bonny fighter." When Farrer spoke at the Socratic Club, he often went with fear and trembling that he would not be adequate to the discussion that would follow. He wrote, "But there Lewis would be, sniffing the imminent battle and saying 'Aha!' at the sound of the trumpet. My anxieties rolled away. Whatever ineptitudes I might commit, he would maintain the cause; and nobody could put Lewis down."<sup>3</sup>

There is only one known exception to Lewis's formidable defense, and even the exception proves the rule. In one instance when one of his arguments in his book *Miracles* was questioned, he admitted it needed clarification, which was news, a shock to some of those present. He made the clarification in future editions of the book.

**Intellectual genius.** Many people who met Lewis can vouch for the quality of his intellect. He debated successfully with the best thinkers of the land because he had an almost instant recall of what he read. Lewis said that he was "cursed" with not being able to forget anything that he read.

Sometimes in his rooms at Oxford, Lewis would play a parlor game, asking a visitor to pull any book out of his extensive library





and read aloud a few lines. Lewis would then proceed to quote the rest of the poetry or prose verbatim for pages. For instance, Kenneth Tynan, who became a well-known English dramatist and critic, told of an encounter with Lewis during a tutorial at Oxford. Tynan said, "He had the most astonishing memory of any man I have ever known. In conversation I might have said to him, 'I read a marvelous medieval poem this morning and I particularly liked this line.' I would then quote the line. Lewis would usually go on to quote the rest of the page. It was astonishing.

"Once when I was invited to his rooms after dinner for a glass of beer, he played a game. He directed, 'Give me a number from one to forty.' I said, 'Thirty.'

"He acknowledged, 'Right, go to the thirtieth shelf in my library.' Then he said, 'Give me another number from one to twenty.'

"I answered, 'Fourteen.'

"He continued, 'Right. Get the fourteenth book off the shelf. Now let's have a number from one to one hundred.'

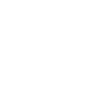
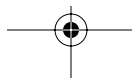
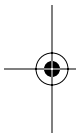
"I said, 'Forty-six.'

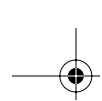
"Now turn to page forty-six. Pick a number from one to twenty-five for the line of the page.'

"I said, 'Six.'

"So,' he would say, 'read me that line.' He could always identify it—not only by identifying the book, but he was also usually able to quote the rest of the page. This is a gift. This is something you cannot learn. It was remarkable."<sup>4</sup>

Dean John Leyerle, professor of English at the University of Toronto, was another witness to Lewis's amazing memory. At a farewell dinner when Lewis left Oxford for Cambridge, Lewis commented to Richard Selig, an American Rhodes Scholar, "The difficulty is that I





remember everything I've ever read and bits pop up uninvited."

"Surely not everything you've ever read, Mr. Lewis?"

"Yes, everything, Selig, even the most boring texts."

By now the end of the table was silent and waiting to see if Selig would drop the matter, but he backed off very little. Selig got to his feet and went to the college library, which was open late in the term, and took out a volume of a long and little-read poem. He returned and opened the volume. He read a few lines. "'Stop!' said Lewis who lifted his eyes toward the ceiling and began to recite the poem in a rich and modulated public voice. He stopped after ten lines or so and looked at Selig, now very silent. Conversation was slow to resume at that end of the table."<sup>5</sup>

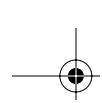
Such an all-inclusive memory, combined with vast rhetorical gifts, caused most Lewis critics to launch their disparaging remarks from a distance. The risk in a face-to-face encounter was too great.

***Lifelong friendships.*** C. S. Lewis was not just an ivory-tower scholar, all head and no heart. He had a warm, engaging personality, made deep, lifelong friendships, and possessed a lively sense of humor.

Lewis's stepson Douglas Gresham recalls that to be around Lewis was to be in the presence of laughter. His great sense of humor was one of the traits that most endeared him to his friends and acquaintances.<sup>6</sup>

Lewis made and kept many lifelong friends. Even when he became a believer in Christ, he did not walk away from his friends who now disagreed with him. For example, throughout his life he continued to correspond with his childhood friend Arthur Greeves. Greeves was a believer in Christ when Lewis was an atheist; later when Lewis became a believer, Greeves lost his earlier faith. Nevertheless Lewis continued to pour out his love for Arthur Greeves. That was his attitude toward other friends as well.





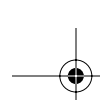
At Oxford Lewis was often surrounded by a group of friends who referred to themselves as the “Inklings.” They got together twice weekly, usually Tuesday mornings and Thursday evenings. The morning meetings were often at a local pub—the Eagle and Child—and the evening meetings in Lewis’s rooms at Magdalen College. Since there was no formal membership, many people attended over the years, but some of the regulars included Charles Williams, Warren Lewis (C. S. Lewis’s brother), and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Tolkien was instrumental in Lewis’s coming to faith in Christ. In 1927 Tolkien invited Lewis to join the Coalbiters Club, which focused on reading Icelandic myths. These and other regular meetings allowed Tolkien and Lewis (still an atheist at that time) to talk about issues related to faith. In 1929 Lewis embraced faith in God, and in 1931 he came to believe in Christ as the Son of God. Tolkien met with Lewis many times during this period and contributed greatly to Lewis’s spiritual quest. They remained close, lifelong friends.

The sharp clarity of Lewis’s thinking came partly from his constant interaction with world-class minds who showed him omissions in his perspective and sharpened his ability to put forward what he believed. Dr. Jim Houston (founder of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, and of the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C.) knew Lewis while both taught at Oxford. Dr. Houston writes:

What really gave Lewis his skill, I think, was that he went out of his way far more than the rest of his colleagues to share his writings with his friends. One of the things that give such quality to Lewis’s work is that his statements were like diamonds with many facets, coming no doubt from a good deal of discussion, of arguing together.<sup>7</sup>





**Powerful communicator.** C. S. Lewis was able to communicate powerfully not only in the written word but also in the spoken word. His lectures were always well-attended. When he preached at the University Church (St. Mary's) you had to get there early to get a seat. As he became more well-known, especially after his BBC addresses, he was in much demand as a speaker. During World War II he often spoke on Royal Air Force bases to soldiers flying hazardous duty. The average life span of pilots was thirteen trips across the English Channel before they were shot down or listed as missing in action. At one such base, Stuart Barton Babbage (later an author and vice president of a seminary) describes Lewis's talk given one evening:

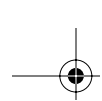
His style of speaking was personal rather than oratorical. He spoke earnestly and emphatically. In this address, we were, once again, made aware of his extraordinary feeling for words, of his rare ability to use exactly the right word in the right place, and of the endless fertility of his imagination. . . . Lewis had the gift of natural eloquence in abundant measure. Like the Roman orator of antiquity, he was eager to present his case, to plead its merits, and to demand a verdict.<sup>8</sup>

C. S. Lewis's "consummate skill" and combination of intellectual genius, breadth of learning, and powerful communication skills make him someone worth listening to, even if we, in the end, disagree with him.<sup>9</sup>

#### CLUES TO THE COSMOS

Like a great detective, C. S. Lewis helps us put together clues to the cosmos. Detective stories always offer clues that the hero pursues to find out "who done it?" Sometimes we can figure out who did the crime before someone like Sherlock Holmes does. More often we





miss certain clues or fail to see the implications of the ones we are given. Holmes might consider it all “elementary,” but the rest of us need Holmes’s help to put it all together.

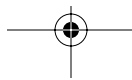
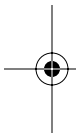
A person comes to believe, not when one thing seems to prove that faith is credible but when everything confirms the teachings of that faith. Lewis examined all of life, reason, imagination, experience and practice (personal and social) for clues to the cosmos. Lewis’s defense of his faith involved not simply a few isolated arguments but a comprehensive sense in which faith in Christ fits everything.

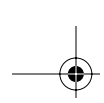
To use another analogy, have you ever searched for the right key to open a lock, trying every key on a ring crammed with keys of all shapes and sizes? The frustrating hunt resembles our search through various religious views we encounter. Does any one view fit better than any of the others? Is there one that unlocks the lock?

Lewis came to the conviction that Jesus Christ was the key to unlock the mysteries of life. He said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”<sup>10</sup>

So why should anyone—believer or nonbeliever—study C. S. Lewis’s case for Christ?

- Lewis’s writings have had a greater effect on believers in the latter part of the twentieth century than any book other than the Bible.
- He had a unique ability to combine reason and imagination.
- He was a committed unbeliever for many years, so he knows the arguments and the feelings against Christianity.
- His breadth of knowledge and his intellectual genius class him among the most brilliant people to have examined the Christian faith.





- His views were tested and refined by his interaction with top opponents of the faith in his day and with other deep thinkers whom he allowed to critique his work.
- His personal qualities made him one who was capable of warmth, loyal friendship and laughter. His writings engage but never try to coerce.

At this point you may ask, Why should I read a book *about* C. S. Lewis? Why not read Lewis himself? Good question! If you have not read *Mere Christianity* and you are inclined to do so, put this book down immediately and begin. *Mere Christianity* is a great introduction to Lewis's thought and is one of his most accessible and helpful books. I hope that this study will not be a substitute for reading Lewis but, rather, that it will encourage you to begin the journey.



#### NOT AN INFALLIBLE GURU

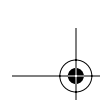
*As John's overview of Lewis winds down, Brenda shoots up her hand and comments sharply, "You make it sound like Lewis could do no wrong. Didn't he have any detractors?"*

*"Of course," John replies. "Lewis had many critics, and he still does today. When he presented classic beliefs about Christ, he got intensely negative reactions from atheists"—John glances toward Simon, who smiles a little—"and even from other Christians less confident of the truth of their faith."*

*Brenda persists, "So who were those critics? What were some of the holes they punched in his arguments?"*

*"Well, a couple in modern times have been philosopher John Beversluis and biographer A. N. Wilson. I don't think their criticisms hurt C. S. Lewis's case for Christ, and there have been a number of solid responses to what they wrote."*





Mike interrupts, "Hey, aren't we getting ahead of things? How can we talk about criticisms of Lewis until we know what he believed in the first place?"

"I thought you were just here for the coffee," Lenae points out.

John smiles and says, "You know, Mike's right. Before we can intelligently decide whether we agree with Lewis, we need to be sure we understand what he believed and how he got there."

Lenae looks genuinely puzzled. "What does it matter whether we agree with him? If his religion worked for him, then it was valid for him. Doesn't mean it has to be valid for you or me or any of us."

"Hang onto that thought, Lenae," John advises. "I guarantee we'll be talking about that question later. For now, let's take a look at Lewis's spiritual journey."

Julia speaks up. "OK, but only as long as you don't try to make him into some kind of infallible guru."

"No chance of that, Julia," John assures her. "C. S. Lewis was just as flawed and human as the rest of us. The obstacles to faith which he struggled over are not so different from the ones we face. Let's talk about them."

