

Introduction

Many evangelical Christians today are having a love affair with C. S. Lewis. He has been described as “the most popular theologian in the English-speaking world”¹ and compared to Elvis Presley as a superstar to evangelicals.² On college campuses Lewis’ writings have been raised close to the level of canon. Bob Fryling, the executive director of InterVarsity Press described Lewis this way: “Outside of the Scriptures themselves, Lewis is probably the greatest authority and example of a thoughtful Christian faith.”³ Given the evangelical meaning of church as a community of confessing believers in Jesus Christ, organized under qualified leadership, who gather regularly for instruction, worship, fellowship, and ministry, and who practice the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper,⁴ one might reasonably ask if Lewis’ views of church are the same. Perhaps even more germane, is it likely that C. S. Lewis, so beloved by evangelicals for his writings and defense of the gospel, would himself consider today’s contemporary church a place where he would personally worship?

Purpose of the Church: Where the Unchurched Discovers Christ

One fashionable view of church today among evangelicals is that it is the place where today’s uncommitted but spiritually searching person might attend to learn the truths of Christianity. The mission of this author’s own church is to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. C. S. Lewis might have scoffed at such a concept for he did not discover Christ in church. He described his own views of church attendance in his early years as

¹ Mary Michael, "Our Love Affair with C S Lewis : Why does this bookish, beer-drinking Anglican grip the American imagination?" *Christianity Today*, 25 October 1993, 34-36.

² Bob Smietana, “C. S. Lewis superstar: how a reserved British intellectual with a checkered pedigree became a rock star for evangelicals,” *Christianity Today*, December 2005, 28-32.

³ *Ibid*, 32.

⁴ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 353.

a “merely symbolical and provisional practice.”⁵ In fact, when one reads of Lewis’ conversion and its relationship with the church, he or she might conclude that Lewis became a Christian in spite of the church. He writes⁶:

Though I liked clergymen as I liked bears, I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo. It was, to begin with, a kind of collective; a wearisome “get together” affair. I couldn’t yet see how a concern of that sort should have anything to do with one’s spiritual life. To me, religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters. And then the fussy, time-wasting botheration of it all! the bells, the crowds, the umbrellas, the notices, the bustle, the perpetual arranging and organizing.

While the strategy of many contemporary churches today may be to introduce Christ to the non-Christian, with Lewis it was the other way around. He became convinced of the truths of Christianity through his own private, intellectual pursuit.⁷ And then, once he came to believe in the real, active and personal God of the Bible, Christ introduced Lewis to the church. Lewis took communion for the first time as an adult on Christmas Day, 1931 at the age of thirty-three.⁸ His first steps back into the church were not filled with elation. “In spite of his distaste for ‘frills,’ he saw church-going as something one did out of obedience.”⁹ But Lewis did nothing half heartedly. Once he transitioned his thinking from God in the theistic sense to the personal God of Christianity, he dutifully attended church with regular attendance at Holy Trinity

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, in *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), 128.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 114-132.

⁸ Wallace A. C. Williams, “C. S. Lewis: Spiritual Disciplines for Mere Christians,” in *For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality*, ed. Timothy George and Alister McGrath (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 190.

⁹ Ibid, 138.

Headington as well as the daily participation in morning devotions in Magdalen College Chapel.¹⁰

So why do so many evangelicals embrace Lewis? Both, it would seem, have the “personal” in common when it comes to their faith. While many church members outside of evangelical circles emphasize the institutional side of the church, many Christians within the evangelical church as well as C. S. Lewis view the Christ faith through the lens of personal relationship with the second person of the Trinity. Wesley Kort pointedly notes both the similarities and differences of Lewis to the church. “Lewis, a smoking, alcohol-drinking British academic without strong doctrines of biblical authority or the Holy Spirit, seems exotic in relation to American evangelical culture and theology... We should note that Lewis, like evangelicals, did not position himself primarily within or in defense of the church but spoke from and to a more personally oriented and construed faith.”¹¹

However, even though Lewis’ own personal experience of salvation began outside the church, he later stated that the church has no other purpose other than to draw men to Christ. He wrote that if the church did not do that, “all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.”¹² Most modern evangelicals agree with this purpose.

Beyond Attendance: Membership and Denominations

As Lewis matured within his faith, did his views of church attendance also change? Did he view church as only required duty or did he gain a more positive perspective? Lewis’ self

¹⁰ Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 151.

¹¹ Wesley A. Kort, *C. S. Lewis: Then and Now* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper One, 2002), 159.

description would lead one to believe that his own opinion of the value of church sharply increased while his own arrogance sharply diminished.¹³

As I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.

Two observations from Lewis' second chapter of *The Screwtape Letters* provide valuable insight into both Lewis' initial notion of church as well as his later concept. The senior devil writes to his nephew shortly after "the patient" has first become a Christian: "Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a churchman."¹⁴ Could this have hinted at Lewis' own initial impressions as a churchman? However, consider also this statement from the same chapter of *The Screwtape Letters*, which demonstrate Lewis' more mature vision of the church. "One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners."¹⁵ Clearly Lewis saw the church as greater than a single location or a single denomination, limited neither by geography nor by theology.

Lewis professes himself to be an ordinary layman of the Church of England,¹⁶ but in his apologetic work, *Mere Christianity*, he provides a glimpse into his views of denominationalism stating that he offers "no help to anyone who is hesitating between two Christian

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, in *The Quotable Lewis*, ed. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 105.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper One, 2002), 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 188.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 6.

‘denominations.’”¹⁷ He describes the church as a long hallway with many doors, each of which open into a different denomination. All Christians belong to the grand church spread through all time and space (the hallway), but each should also choose for himself or herself the “true door.” He never claims the Anglican Church to be the true door. But he does provide advice on the choosing:¹⁸

In plain language, the question should never be: ‘Do I like that kind of service?’ but ‘Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?’ When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors.

Such openness of viewpoint regarding the distinctive doctrines of the dissimilar denominations may seem odd for someone who wrote so much about Christianity, but then Lewis never claimed to be a professional. He stated that he would never have written books on the defense of the Christian faith if the clergy had shown any inclination to do it.¹⁹ So it is understandable that he would be much more concerned with the centrality of “mere” orthodox Christian theology.

Indeed the primary dividing line in his view of theology of the church was what united the Evangelical with the Anglo-Catholic against others, “between religion with supernaturalism and salvationism and all watered-down modernist versions.”²⁰ Lewis promoted a Christianity which professed Biblical miracles as historic truth, and therefore with profound and relevant impact on lives today. Lewis referred to the “chill factor” the moment he brought up the supernatural and saving God. “But the temperature drops as soon as you mention a God who has

¹⁷ Ibid, 5-6.

¹⁸ Ibid, 11.

¹⁹ Jacobs, 199.

²⁰ Will Vaus, *Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 168.

purpose and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character.”²¹

As a result Lewis was comfortable with denominational distinctions. While he differed with the Roman Catholic Church on several doctrinal positions,²² he nonetheless enjoyed his friendship with Tolkien, a Catholic, in the early years of their association²³ and also took great pleasure in his many letters to Sister Penelope, a nun at the Anglican Convent of St. Mary the Virgin in Wantage, England. He “enjoyed a long and meaningful correspondence with her and thought of her as his ‘elder sister’ in the faith.”²⁴ Without question, Lewis could be fairly described as Catholic-friendly, with extended correspondence worldwide.²⁵ He also bridged the gap between ‘High Church’ on the one hand, with weekly attendance at his parish church, and ‘Low Church’ on the other hand, with weekday morning attendance at his college chapel.²⁶

Obviously Lewis saw diversity within the broader church as a reflection of the richness of the diversity of God Himself. He wrote in his letter to the imaginary Malcolm, “It takes all sorts to make a world; or a church. This may be even truer of a church. If grace perfects nature it must expand all our natures into the full richness of the diversity which God intended when He made them, and Heaven will display far more variety than Hell.”²⁷ For this reason, Lewis could not fathom searching for a local church, where he would find other people with similar social

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper One, 2002), 372-373.

²² Vaus, 170.

²³ Jacobs, 140, 143. See also Wilson, 108, 116-119, 125-126.

²⁴ Jacobs, 215.

²⁵ Ralph E. MacKenzie, “Why Some Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic,” *Christian Apologetics Journal Volume 4* (Spring 2005): 13.

²⁶ Wilson, 137-138.

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, in *The Quotable Lewis*, ed. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 106.

and economic circumstances. Describing Lewis' attitude and habit, Dorsett writes: "One should attend one's local parish, and not seek an alternative worship community."²⁸

The Church as Necessary for Spiritual Formation

Lewis believed in the importance of the church for one's Christian growth. On multiple occasions he was asked questions by people about their Christian walk. Invariably Lewis would respond with the significance of finding and attending a local community of Christian faith. Lyle Dorsett, in his book *Seeking the Secret Place*, discovered counseling letters written back and forth over a period of 30 years between Lewis and a woman Dorsett named as Grace Jones. (This was not her real name.) Dorsett discovered that this widow was still living when he was researching his book in 1985. The Jones-Lewis correspondence gives great insight into how Lewis advised the needy soul.²⁹ At times he handed out tough love. "He kept pointing her to Jesus Christ and to the church, stressing that Jesus was her only hope and that she needed to be part of His body – His bride, the church."³⁰

Lewis' advice to Jones was not exceptional. Dorsett also examined the fourteen-year correspondence between Mrs. Van Deusen and Lewis, which began in 1949. At one point, Mrs. Van Deusen questioned the need to take communion or attend church on a weekly basis. Again, Lewis wasted no ink getting right to the point on communion: "Our Lord requires it. Regarding the church, service to the Lord is no substitute for gathering in a worshipful community."³¹ Lewis forcefully encouraged her that for the follower of Jesus Christ, there was no such thing as solitary religion. Community was required for spiritual growth.

²⁸ Lyle W. Dorsett, *Seeking the Secret Place: The Spiritual Formation of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 41.

²⁹ Ibid, 136.

³⁰ Ibid, 141.

³¹ Ibid, 152.

Liturgy and Music

What about the church service itself? Many contemporary churches today identify themselves by the type of services they hold. They are contemporary, with modern music and a relevant message, and most lack any kind of liturgy. What would Lewis have thought of this development? Would he have found his church home in such a contemporary church?

While he would have identified with the purpose of attracting people to Christ, Lewis would have been unlikely to have favored the development of this contemporary church model. “Lewis favored liturgy and read prayers over spontaneous ones. He was cautious of innovations and feared them as intrusions that stole attention from God.”³² Given such fear of innovation, it would be hard to conceive of Lewis welcoming the concept of a church service with no liturgy, a rock and roll music style of “worship and praise,” followed by a sermon, usually without communion. He desired for his only focus to be upon God and thought that any change in liturgy, let alone the elimination of it, would distract attention away from God. Lewis explained why any newness in the liturgy was distracting.³³

It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping... A still worse thing may happen. Novelty may fix our attention not even on the service but on the celebrant. You know what I mean. Try as one may to exclude it the question “What on earth is he up to now?” will intrude. It lays one’s devotion waste.

Lewis quipped, “The charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not Try experiments on my rats.”³⁴

From such a strong position favoring a little changed liturgy combined with Lewis’ keen intellect, one might erroneously conclude that Lewis made a study of the liturgy. Nothing could

³² Williams, 190.

³³ C. S. Lewis, “Liturgy,” in *The Joyful Christian: 127 Readings from C. S. Lewis* (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 80-81.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

be further from the truth. To Malcolm he writes, “There is no subject in the world (always excepting sport) on which I have less to say than liturgiology.”³⁵ Alan Bede Griffiths, a student of C. S. Lewis during the mid-1920s continued to correspond with Lewis during the early 1930s, when both men were seriously considering a new faith in Christ. Griffiths chose a different path for his new faith, becoming a Roman Catholic. However, they maintained their communication. Griffiths knew Lewis and his repulsion for liturgical debate well. In one of his last letters to Griffiths, written a year before he died, Lewis responded to Griffiths’ observations of the liturgy. “I cannot take an interest in liturgiology. I see very well that someone ought to feel it. But not, I feel, mine.”³⁶ Lewis saw such discussion about the liturgy as usurping its purpose. Lewis continued in his letter to Griffiths, “Indeed, for the laity I sometimes wonder if an interest in liturgiology is not rather a snare. Some people talk as if it were itself the Christian faith.”³⁷

Lewis not only wished for a fixed liturgy, but he preferred a church service without music.³⁸ Lewis particularly disliked the hymns sung in the Anglican Church. He described them as “fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music.”³⁹ He abhorred the church organ. With his dislike of hymnology and organ music, it would probably be wrong of today’s worship leader to conclude that he would have thought any more highly of contemporary church music. However, Lewis possessed an insight which remains applicable today. He believed there were two situations in which one could be blessed by church music. The first situation involved the highly trained

³⁵ Lewis, *Letters*, 399.

³⁶ Alan Bede Griffiths, “The Adventure of Faith,” in *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como (New York: McMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1979), 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Vaus, 175.

³⁹ Williams, 190.

musician providing a lower technical piece of music that could be more readily enjoyed by a less musically educated layman. The second situation involved the less musically educated layman accepting a more difficult or higher browed piece of music in the belief that it must bring glory to God. “To both, Church Music will have been a means of grace; not the music they have liked, but the music they have disliked. They have both offered, sacrificed, their taste in the fullest sense.”⁴⁰

Church Division and Reunion

Lewis usually focused his mind on mere Christianity, on those things that united the universal church, and not on those issues that divided it. He believed that the church’s “divisions should never be discussed except in the presence of those who have already come to believe that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son.”⁴¹ In another letter to Griffiths, Lewis wrote that he would have liked to see a reunion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, but that he could not see how such a thing would ever be possible.⁴² Interestingly, his reasons for continuing division were not anchored in the sin of one side or the other. Rather, he was impressed with the distinctive arguments of both sides. He wrote to his Catholic priest-friend, Don Giovanni Calabria:⁴³

But what would I think of your Thomas More or of our William Tyndale? All the writings of the one and all the writings of the other I have lately read right through. Both of them seem to me most saintly men and to have loved God with their whole heart: I am not worthy to undo the shoes of either of them. Nevertheless, they disagree and (what racks and astounds me) their disagreement

⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, “Church Music,” in *The Joyful Christian: 127 Readings from C. S. Lewis* (New York: McMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), 84.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 6.

⁴² Vaus, 171.

⁴³ C. S. Lewis, *Letters: C. S. Lewis / Don Giovanni Calabria*, in *The Quotable Lewis*, ed. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 106.

seems to me to spring not from their vices nor from their ignorance but rather from their virtues and the depths of their faith, so that the more they were at their best the more they were at variance.

With such a rational approach to the great division between the Roman church and his own, Lewis concluded that each churchman should, at the very least, pray for reunion.⁴⁴ Further, Lewis was not naïve enough to believe that all schisms were as well-intentioned as those argued by Thomas More and William Tyndale. For example, he believed the religious division in Northern Ireland was more political than religious.⁴⁵

Lewis argued that the true church could not actually be divided; though the evil one did all he could do to make it appear as though there were real divisions. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape writes: “The Church herself is, of course, heavily defended and we have never yet quite succeeded in giving her *all* the characteristics of a faction; but subordinate factions within her have often produced admirable results, from the parties of Paul and of Apollos at Corinth down to the High and Low parties in the Church of England.”⁴⁶

The Meaning of the Sacraments

The full exploration of this sub-topic could easily be the theme of another entire discussion. But as it relates to the original question of whether C. S. Lewis’ views of the sacraments would be different than today’s evangelical, the first broad brush of an answer would be that the views are similar. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “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.”⁴⁷ The evangelical

⁴⁴ Vaus, 171.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Screwtape*, 204.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 57-58.

would agree with Lewis on belief. And most non-Baptists would also agree with him about baptism. Lewis was baptized as an infant and never re-baptized as an adult. Not only did Lewis believe in infant baptism, he considered Baptists as an extreme Protestant sect.⁴⁸ Finally, Lewis believed neither in the transubstantiation view of the Eucharist nor in the memorial view of the Lord's Table.⁴⁹ For Lewis, the Eucharist was the central act of worship and the reason d'être for any church service. It was his practice later in life to take communion at least weekly. Most in today's evangelical community, especially those who consider theirs a contemporary worship-style church, would differ significantly with Lewis as to the centrality of the Eucharist.

Conclusion

This research paper began by acknowledging that today's evangelical Christian is having a love affair with C. S. Lewis. But as Lewis himself exclaims in *Mere Christianity*, "Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing."⁵⁰ Both the contemporary evangelical of today and the C. S. Lewis of fifty years ago would agree that the best and highest purpose of the church is to draw all people to Christ. Both would see the church as the community in which the Christ-follower will grow in relationship with Christ. And both would agree on the defense of the basic truths of Christianity. But Lewis would most likely part company with today's evangelical on the need for the liturgy, the centrality of the Eucharist, popular music styles of worship, the importance of preaching, and the familiar ease with which he connected with Roman Catholics. For this author, perhaps like many evangelicals, Lewis elucidates the basic beliefs of the Christian faith with such clarity and logic, even fascination, that one is tempted to consign the Lewis disparities as a mere triviality when compared with mere Christianity.

⁴⁸ Vaus, 191.

⁴⁹ Vaus, 194-195.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 93.