

God in the Dock:

C. S. Lewis as Public Theologian

Brian Edgar

Asbury Theological Seminary

In 1970 Walter Hooper, long-time friend and personal secretary to C. S. Lewis gathered together a collection of forty-eight of Lewis' essays and a dozen letters to newspapers and other journals. These were published in two forms, firstly as *Undeceptions: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, and then, in an expanded form as *God in the Dock: Essays in Theology and Ethics*.¹ In the essay from which the book gets this latter, final title Lewis writes about the way people see God as one accused of serious crimes against humanity. God is in the dock charged with allowing war, poverty and disease to exist. And many are ready to declare God guilty.

By taking this as the title for the whole collection Hooper presents Lewis as one who comes to speak on God's behalf. But precisely what role does Lewis take in this courtroom analogy? While it would be natural to see Lewis as God's *barrister*, speaking in defense of God, I suspect that Lewis himself would have been reluctant to adopt that description of his role. As he remarked elsewhere, defending God was as unnecessary as defending a lion! Consequently, I suspect that Lewis would have preferred to see himself with a different role, as a *witness* in the case against God. That is, as a character witness who simply gives testimony concerning what he knows about the accused. It is then up to others to decide on how they will respond to God's actions—and apparent inactions—in the world but only after giving serious consideration to the arguments and evidence that Lewis presents.

As he collects and presents this evidence Lewis is a model for every Christian believer. As 1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." This paper discusses the exemplary ministry that Lewis exercised as a witness for Christ in which he can be described, in four categories, as a *public theologian*, an *everyday intellectual*, a *cultural analyst* and a *thinking evangelist*.

Lewis as a public theologian

Lewis is a model of what we might call today a public theologian, someone willing to take theology and theological ways of thinking outside the four walls of the church and to see how it relates to the issues which face people in the world today. He was at home writing for a secular newspaper such as *The Guardian* as he was for writing for the *Church Times* or the journal *Theology*, perhaps even more so. He was very content to describe himself as an amateur theologian rather than a professional and as a layman rather than a member of clergy. Indeed, Stuart Barton Babbage, who worked with Lewis during the war in his work with the RAF, wrote that Lewis was 'emphatic that he was neither a professional theologian nor a clergyman. He was, he

¹ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

insisted, a 'mere Christian'.² It is a matter of great importance that Lewis directed his audience, his readers, students and friends, to a stance that integrated faith and life, vocation and confession. His life and career demonstrated the virtue of rejecting the split between the sacred and the secular, the public and the private that still operates so powerfully in our culture.

In October 1939, in the dark, earliest days of World War II, Lewis preached in Oxford on the topic *Learning in War Time*. He addressed the university students, many of them no doubt wondering if, given the war, they really ought to be there. He addressed two questions students entering university students might ask: How can a Christian think of study, of anything but saving souls? And, "with the world falling down about me, why should I even think about engaging further in an education or any scholarly pursuit?" Lewis' answer is an extended reflection on St. Paul's exhortation to the Colossians, "Whatever ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." In it he emphasised that Christianity does not exclude ordinary duties, ordinary lives. Sweeping rooms, writing symphonies and attending university are all to be offered to God and done to his glory.³

Lewis' own ministry was not sweeping rooms, or writing symphonies but it was, through writing and speaking, to exercise an evangelical ministry of the mind. It was, even more precisely, a ministry of public thinking. For Lewis what is true can never be only the product of private contemplation and certainly can never be relegated to the merely personal. Truth is derived as conviction specifically from participation in the public square and the dynamism of a public world where men and women may meet and can legitimately share, debate, and apprehend the truth. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a public, historical event, and reports of it must be believed or doubted on the basis of rational, historical grounds. Lewis denied that facts and values could be based on a personal epistemology (understanding of truth), or on personal religious conviction, or even on culturally specific truths. Or on anything that is not accessible to all.

In sharp contrast to this, our society is convinced that truth is relative. It is culturally condition. It is specific according to culture. It is personal and often private. And in the life of the church the personal dimension of faith has become all-important. A personal experience of Jesus is absolutely vital but if faith is controlled purely and only by one's personal experience then there is no control on it and no genuine experience of community. Individualism will reign and whatever I experience must be right. And therein lies one of today's problems for the church. Can we listen again to Lewis, for whom truth is essentially a *public* rather than a private matter?

Christian faith needs people who will think clearly in public and in such a way that great ideas can be understood and debated by ordinary people. Notice the success of the philosopher Alain de Botton whose books have become TV series. "The Consolations of Philosophy"⁴ sets out to refute the notion that good philosophy must be irrelevant and gathers together six great philosophers who were convinced of the power of philosophical insight to have practical effects on our lives. Socrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Montaigne, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are read for the light their work can shine on certain great universal problems,

² Stuart Barton Babbage, 'To the Royal Airforce' in Carolyn Keefe (ed), *C S Lewis: Speaker and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 96.

³ See C S Lewis, *Transpositions and other addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949).

⁴ Alain De Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

among them, unpopularity, poverty, inadequacy, lovelessness and timidity. The book amounts to a guide to wisdom - as well as to the practical utility of philosophy. This is a model for theology as well.

Some Christian theologians might well learn from the philosopher who takes some chairs into a busy public area with a sign, "Would you like to talk to a philosopher?" This leads to all kinds of conversations (often beginning with "what does a philosopher do?") about the serious issues of life and demands that they be conducted in simple, accessible language.

Lewis as an everyday intellectual

Although Lewis strongly defended the value of all ministries, whether sweeping rooms or writing symphonies, his own ministry was to exercise an *evangelical ministry of the mind*. His was a ministry of *thinking* because ideas are powerful. But the church today is more prone to be captivated by the pragmatic rather than the philosophical. If it works, do it. Indeed the church faces a number of challenges today – which, with help from Os Guinness,⁵ alliterate in the following way.

The first challenge is that of the efficiency of *the pragmatic*. That is, "if it works, do it"—whether in terms of church life, evangelism, worship or Christian education. To counter this it is important to develop the importance of serious philosophical thinking. The second challenge is that of the focus on *the personal*. This is an ecclesial version of the general cultural focus on what *I* need, and it needs to be countered by constant reminders of the public dimension of faith. The third challenge is *populism*, the tendency to focus on popular issues and middle-of-the-road solutions. Many very particular, difficult issues that confront our world are ignored. The fourth challenge is contemporary *pluralism*. This means stressing that everyone's opinion is equally right and leads to people to believe that the views of the eccentric and the amateur are as valid as those of the expert and the specialist. Attitudes to climate change and vaccinations are examples of this. Another challenge is the influence of *the pleasant*. There is a very natural tendency to be influenced, even seduced, by the pleasant and the comfortable. Christians, however, need to counter this with a recognition that the uncomfortable and the *prophetic* are often needed. Finally, there is the challenge of *Philistinism* which is evidenced in the way that there is very little serious engagement in the church with the arts (other than some very inoffensive but unchallenging music and digital presentations. If we want to continue the alliteration we might say that the church needs to pay more attention to the *pulchritudinous* (beautiful) and the *poetic*.

All of these challenges stop people thinking deeply. Lewis is an example of an important dimension of ministry that is needed today: the ministry of the intellect. Ideas are important, even if their influence works more slowly than many popular, pragmatic (and often short-lived) ideas. There is a story about a young man who, at university, was introduced to the world of philosophy. He really took to this study and found it exciting to think with them on the important matters of life. 'Why,' he asked his teachers, 'don't philosophers rule the world?' 'They do,' was the answer, '200 years after they're dead!'

Lewis was a public theologian who insisted that thinking was something for *everyone*, and not just for the elite, because thinking is a function of our humanity. Thinking is for ordinary people and he believed that the Christian faith was something that could be comprehended by everyone. To know the truth one need

⁵ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It* (Grand rapids: Baker, 1994).

not be part of an elite or the intelligentsia, one only needs to be to be human. Lewis also believed that if people were given the opportunity, that reason, rational, intelligent thinking could really help them. *The Pilgrim's Regress*—a book of allegorical fiction—is Lewis's personal revision of John Bunyan's 17th century novel, *Pilgrim's Progress*, recast with the politics, philosophy and aesthetic principals of the mid 20th century.⁶ It is the story of John traveling through the philosophical landscape of the day, dealing with the modern phoniness, hypocrisy and intellectual vacancy of the Christian church, communism, fascism, and various philosophical and artistic movements including idealism, pantheism, romanticism, obscurantism, and humanism, before finally arriving at traditional Christianity. At one point John is imprisoned by 'the Spirit of the Age' (*Zeitgeistheim*). He is rescued by a woman, called Reason, who slays the Spirit of the Age, and offers the prisoners freedom, and directs them towards salvation.

Lewis believed that reasonable thought could direct people towards God, Christ and salvation. Churches actually offer people all sorts of things: some specialise in offering extravagant worship experience while others offer intimacy or the warmth of community and friendship, while others offer release from addictions and other bondages. Along with this the church would do well to follow Lewis and offer reasonable, rational explanations which explode the myths, ideologies and philosophies of today, and put forward instead the very particular logic of the gospel: a gospel of grace and discipleship that challenges ordinary human thinking.

In 1944 Lewis was invited to speak at a gathering of workers at EMI. He answered any question on Christianity. Question 11 was, 'Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness?' Lewis' response was,

Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness? While it lasts, the religion of worshipping oneself. I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty years, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years, and is, more or less, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know. From the moral point of view it is very difficult! As perhaps you know I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel comfortable I certainly don't recommend Christianity. I am certain there must be a patent American article on the market which will suit you far better, but I can't give any advice on it.⁷

Many years before this Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) said "There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonourable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love."⁸ And that was Lewis.

Lewis as a cultural analyst

In 1943 Lewis published three addresses based on his Riddell Memorial Lectures at the University of Durham. They are subtitled, '*Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in*

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity Reason and Romanticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁷ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 58–59.

⁸ James W. Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life as a Christian Calling* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 216.

the Upper Forms of Schools'. There are three lectures with sixty-four pages of intense, writing. It sounds like something suitable for an educational seminar, and gives the impression of being "academic" in the worst sense of the word! It comes across as potentially boring and probably not as relevant compared with the issues he dealt with in many of his other writings. But Lewis, the cultural analyst, was able to see in school curricula trends that were central to the life of the nation. This was his address that became known as "The Abolition of Man" and it was a remarkably prescient piece of cultural analysis.

He began with an analysis of several real texts in use in schools at the time. School children analysing English texts were being taught that when someone says of a beautiful waterfall, "That is sublime" that there are not, in fact, making a statement about the waterfall, but a statement about their own feelings.⁹ This means that the waterfall is not actually beautiful—although one person may *think* it is—because the person thinking is the one who has created this notion of beauty, one that is not objectively found in the waterfall. They have a purely subjective notion of beauty. When rigorously pursued, Lewis pointed out, this mode of thinking eliminates objectivity altogether. But Lewis argued that we perceive some things to be beautiful because they *are* beautiful, not merely because we believe them to be so. Lewis objected to this deconstruction of language that involved the elimination of the objective and, ultimately, a denial of morality that led, said Lewis, to the abolition of man.

Lewis as a thinking evangelist

As Mark Noll says, 'In the end, the question of Christian thinking is a deeply spiritual question. What sort of God will we worship?'¹⁰ This is the ultimate question, the God question, and answers to all of the other questions are pointers towards understanding the kind of God that God is. Lewis claimed that most of his books were evangelistic and for Lewis *the evangelical task was mainly to keep people focused on the facts*. Whether in *Mere Christianity*, the Narnia series or any other of his writings he made people think, he did not merely entertain. And, despite any contrary view, the vast majority of people like to think. What puts them off from doing so are unnecessarily difficult language, an inability to see the point being made, arguments that do not deal with the critical issues and, especially, any failure to express great thoughts in simple and straightforward language.

The other title of God in the Dock is *Undeceptions* which a good description of his fundamental aim—to 'undeceive' people and to help them see clearly. In everything he wrote Lewis was a witness aiming to help people see Christ more clearly. In the final paragraph of the article entitled *God in the Dock* he pointed out his own limitations in doing this, and the need for others to be involved in the way that they could be: 'Finally, I must add that my own work has suffered very much from the incurable intellectualism of my approach. The simple, emotional appeal ('Come to Jesus') is still often successful. But those who, like myself, lack the gift for making it, had better not attempt it.'¹¹

Lewis was not known for other forms of more personal evangelism. Many of his students went through years of tutoring from him without ever learning that he was a Christian. Yet he became one of the most renowned international defenders of the Christian faith through his writings. That was his aim though, to

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 7–8.

¹⁰ Sire, *Habits of the Mind*, 207.

¹¹ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 244.

get people to Jesus. For Christ is truth, and truth is not merely intellectual. The truth is found in Jesus Christ who said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). Lewis was one who could clearly see the connection between public doctrine and personal holiness—both are aspects of truth. The mental life and the moral life go together. And at the heart of this is Jesus Christ.

In *God in the Dock* there is an essay entitled, "What are we to make of Jesus Christ?" This is a serious question that has, in a sense, a comic side. Asking this was, according to Lewis, like a fly deciding what it is going to do with an elephant!¹² For the real question is not what are we to make of Christ, but what is He to make of us?' In this essay he discusses the gospel story and, again, is concerned to keep people focused on the facts. 'What are we to make of Christ?' There is no question what we can make of him, *it is entirely a question of what he intends to make of us. You must accept or reject the story.*¹³ Lewis' work as a public theologian, an everyday intellectual and a cultural analyst were all utilised in the service of his fundamental ministry as an evangelist. He stands as an example for all those who seek to give a reasoned explanation of their faith in Jesus Christ.

¹² Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 156.

¹³ Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 160.