C.S. Lewis (1898–1963)  
Author, Christian Apologist, Oxford Don  
by Lyle Dorsett  
Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism, Beeson Divinity School

First-rate minds, and they were members of the Church of Ireland. Eclectic in their reading tastes, they purchased and read many books, and their love for the printed word was passed on to their children. Jack and Warren (his only sibling, three years his senior) were not only read to aloud and taught to read, they were encouraged to use the large family library.

In his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, C.S. Lewis recalled early memories of “endless books.” “There were books in the study, books in the dining room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the citrus-tern attic, books of all kinds,” he remembered, and none were off limits to him. On rainy days—and there were many in northern Ireland—he pulled volumes off the shelves and entered into worlds created by authors such as Conan Doyle, E. Nesbit, Mark Twain, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

After brother Warnie was sent off to boarding school in England, Jack became somewhat reclusive. He spent more time

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In March, the C.S. Lewis Institute celebrated the 30th anniversary of its founding at a banquet honoring the two co-founders, Jim Houston and Jim Hiskey. (See the photographs on p. 27.) Both men participated in a delightful interview during which they recalled some of their memories of the Institute’s earliest days as well as the three decades that followed.

One of the common notes sounded in their stories and recollections was the clear acknowledgement of God’s hand and power having worked through them and even in spite of them.

Prior to his helping to begin Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., Jim Houston was a professor at Oxford University. During his tenure he got to know Oxford don C.S. Lewis and participated in some of the same activities as Lewis. From his knowledge of the personality and nature of the now-famous author, Jim Houston once told an audience, “C.S. Lewis would have been terribly embarrassed by all the attention given him today.” He went on to explain that Lewis wanted to draw attention to Christ, not to himself.

This issue of Knowing & Doing contains more articles about our namesake than usual. Our 30th anniversary year also follows the release of the major motion picture based on Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and so awareness of C.S. Lewis and his writings has been elevated.

Yet, C.S. Lewis, for all of the benefit that his writings have brought to untold numbers of seekers and followers of Christ, is but a signpost pointing the way to the One who is worthy of all honor and praise. It is our prayer that this issue will help to further your love and knowledge of Him.
C.S. Lewis’s Obstacles to Faith
by Art Lindsley
C.S. Lewis Senior Fellow

This is an excerpt from the book C.S. Lewis’s Case for Christ (IVP – 2005) by Art Lindsley. It presents some of the obstacles that led to Lewis’s unbelief and points to some of his later writing that show how he overcame those difficulties. The subsequent chapters of Lindsley’s book deal one by one with how Lewis wrestled with these obstacles.

C.S. Lewis’s Pain in Early Life
Lewis had one sibling, Warren, who was three years older and with whom he remained friends all his life. Lewis’s earliest memories involve “endless books” in the study, dining room, cloakroom, bedrooms and piled as high as his shoulder in the attic. On the often-dreary days, time would be spent in reading and in imaginative games involving “dressed animals” and “knights in armor.” These were the subjects of Lewis’s first novel, Boxen, which he wrote at the age of twelve.

The most shattering event of Lewis’s early life was the death of his mother when he was nine years old. Lewis says in his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, “With my mother’s death all settled happiness disappeared from my life. There was much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis.” At this point he lost not only his mother but also, in effect, his father. Albert Lewis became emotionally withdrawn and decided to send both sons to boarding school, an experience that proved very difficult for both boys. Warren Lewis later wrote, “With his uncanny flair for making the wrong decision, my father had given us helpless children into the hands of a madman.” The boarding school’s headmaster, whom the students called “Oldie,” inflicted harsh punishment on those who failed their lessons. He was later declared insane, and the school was closed.

Problems with prayer. During this period Lewis attended church and attempted to take the Christian faith seriously. He tried to pray every night but developed what he describes as a “false conscience” about prayer. He had been told that it was not enough to say your prayers; you also had to think about what you were saying. As soon as he finished his prayers each night, he would ask himself, “Are you sure you were thinking about what you were saying?” The answer was inevitably no. Then he would say his prayers again, sometimes multiple times. The result was insomnia and nightly torment. Lewis wrote, “Had I pursued the same road much further, I think I should have gone mad.” Lewis later wrote about the difficulties of prayer in Letters to Malcolm.

Unbelief confirmed. At Chartres, a later boarding school, one of Lewis’s teachers introduced him to the occult. He also began to grapple with doubts about God, which rose from the problem of evil in the world and from what he perceived as the similarity between Christianity and paganism. In addition, he struggled with sexual temptation. The toxic combination of inner and outer pressures led to the loss of whatever faith he might have had. He had lost not only his faith but his virtue and simplicity. (Years later, after he came to faith in Christ, he rid himself of unchastity, atheism and the occult but remained subject to one acquired habit: smoking.)

Chronological snobbery. One factor that worked against faith in Lewis’s mind and heart was what he later called his “chronological snobbery.” By that he meant “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.” Lewis’s friend Owen Barfield helped Lewis dismantle his prejudice against old ideas by arguing that if an idea seems outdated, we must ask, “Why did it go out of date?” and “Was it ever refuted? (continued on page 4)
C.S. Lewis’s Obstacles to Faith

(continued from page 3)

(by whom, where, and how conclusively)?” Later in his life, Lewis directly and indirectly took on chronological snobbery.

Problem of evil. Lewis’s struggle with the problem of evil persisted until his conversion and even beyond. These lines from Lucretius echo Lewis’s own quandary:

Had God designed the world, it would not be
A world as frail and faulty as we see.⁶

While Lewis eventually arrived at an intellectual resolution of the difficulty, the emotional struggle continued, especially at the death of his wife, Joy. He describes his intellectual wrestling in The Problem of Pain, and his emotional struggle in A Grief Observed.

Parallel mythologies. At the time and place of Lewis’s education, classic Christianity was the dominant worldview. It was assumed that pagan religions and mythologies were interesting but false, while Christianity, though similar to them in many ways, was true. Lewis dared to wonder, on what grounds should Christianity be exempt from the verdict of “false”? Why was this religion—and this one alone—true?

The problem of similar mythologies remained an obstacle for Lewis right up until his conversion. As we will see later, a discussion with J.R.R. Tolkien was instrumental in resolving this conflict. Lewis later wrote about myth in a number of his nonfiction works and in one of his novels, Till We Have Faces.

Immersion in rationalism. When he was sixteen, Lewis was tutored by a brilliant teacher named W.T. Kirkpatrick. “Kirk,” or the “Great Knock” as he was also called, taught Lewis to analyze, think, write, and speak clearly and logically.

When they first met at the train station, young Jack (as he chose to call himself) commented to Kirk that he had not expected the wildness of the scenery of Surrey. “Stop,” said Kirk. “What do you mean by wildness and what grounds do you have for not expecting it?” As Jack attempted to answer, it became increasingly clear that he had no distinct idea about the word wildness and that “insofar as I had any idea at all, wildness was a singularly inept word.” “Do you not see,” concluded the Great Knock, “that your remark was meaningless?”

Thinking that the subject had been dropped, Jack proceeded to sulk. Never was he more mistaken. Kirk inquired about the basis of Jack’s expectations of the flora and geology of Surrey. Kirk concluded, “Do you not see then, that you had no right to have any opinion whatever on the subject?” It had never occurred to Jack that his thoughts needed to be based on anything.⁷

Such rigorous interrogation set the tone of his tutelage under Kirk, and it was of immeasurable benefit to Lewis. Much of the clarity of his writings, his careful choice of words, his well-considered arguments for the faith and his later tutorial style were shaped during this period. Lewis says: “My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished.”⁸ Some have said that Lewis wrote many of his later works with a sense that Kirk (although by that time dead) was looking over his shoulder.

Kirk was an atheist and a rationalist. Lewis called him nearly “a purely logical entity.” Although he never attacked religion in Jack’s presence, his rigorous rationalism (of the nineteenth-century type) reinforced and provided ammunition for Lewis’s unbelief. Kirk might have provided inspiration for such characters as Mr. Enlightenment in The Pilgrim’s Regress or McPhee in That Hideous Strength. Later, Lewis critiqued rationalism—now called modernism—in The Pilgrim’s Regress and in other writings.

Imagination versus reason. Loving literature as he did, Lewis was forced to consider the tension between his atheism and all the poetry and novels that wrestled with the questions of meaning, dignity, truth, goodness, beauty and immortality. He came to believe philosophically that the universe was a grim and meaningless place, yet in his imagination he yearned for the satisfaction of the deep human aspirations he found
Lewis identifies a time when his imagination was “baptized.” As one of his first steps in his journey to faith, Lewis identifies a time when his imagination was “baptized.” It occurred while he was reading a copy of George MacDonald’s Phantastes on a train ride. As he read, a “new quality” touched his life, what he described at first as a “bright shadow,” but later came to realize was “holiness.” That night his imagination was “baptized,” although, he says, “the rest of me not unnaturally took longer.”

Later Lewis came to see imagination as a key to the meaning of the cosmos. We will look at the prominent place of imagination in his view of life and see how his fiction, as much as his non-fiction, points to Christ.

Disbelief in miracles. During his atheist years Lewis simply assumed that miracles do not happen and that it would be naive and unsophisticated to think they do. He was shocked to learn that Neville Coghill and J.R.R. Tolkien, some of the most intelligent and best-informed people he knew, were supernaturals—that is, they believed that there is more to the universe than the natural world we see and experience. Even more stunning to Lewis was a fireside commentary of one of the most hard-boiled atheists he knew: that the “historicity of the gospels was really surprisingly good.” The atheist referred to pagan mythology of a “dying god” who rose again, then mused, “It almost looks as if it really happened once.” The impact of this statement on Lewis was immense. If this militant unbeliever, the “toughest of the toughs,” was not safe, where could Lewis turn? Was there no escape? Lewis was forced to reexamine his anti-supernatural assumptions. He later wrote about miracles in a number of his essays and in his book Miracles.

Obstacles Overcome
One by one, Lewis’s arguments against God were countered and his obstacles to faith were knocked down. Already his imagination had been “baptized” and his reason satisfied. He felt the “steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so desperately desired not to meet” until he came to believe in God and ultimately to believe in Christ as the Son of God.

In his writings Lewis does not develop his defense of faith in a systematic fashion. Rather he writes about the obstacles that once stood in the way of faith for him. The issues that stood in the way of his belief in God have also been stumbling blocks for many of his readers, which is one reason so many people from various backgrounds resonate with Lewis.

In summary, some of the factors that led Lewis into unbelief were
• early pain over the loss of his mother
• difficulties with prayer
• chronological snobbery
• the problem of evil in the world
• parallels between mythology and Christianity
• indoctrination into rationalism
• tension between reason and imagination
• disbelief in miracles.

Conclusion
For more information on Lewis’s biography, go to articles by Art Lindsley and Lyle Dorsett on Lewis’s life. For more on Lewis’s conversion, read Art Lindsley’s review of David Downing’s The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis’s Journey to Faith, or to the book itself.

Notes
4. Ibid., p. 70.
5. Ibid., pp. 207–8.
6. Ibid., p. 65.
8. Ibid., p. 148.
9. Ibid., p. 135.
10. Ibid., p. 181.
12. Ibid., p. 228.
Prayer, perhaps more than anything else, is a true test of a Christian’s devotion and intimacy with God. Its presence in a Christian’s life says it all. Its absence is the evidence of a merely theoretical framework of faith. So to try to enter into the understanding of Lewis’ prayer-life is an attempt to penetrate his very mind and spirit in the most intimate way. Can we do so without presumption? Is it speculative to try to do so? I knew Lewis personally, enough to have a clear impression of his personal faith in the years between 1946 and 1953, when we met in a group discussion that was held in the home that I shared with Nicholas Zernov, during those years. Zernov was then leader of the Society of St. Albans and St. Sergius. It was through him that I got to know Lewis.

While he was a witty raconteur and provocative debater, Lewis was essentially shy about his inner life, so it would be an impossible task to describe his prayer-life unless he had written significantly about prayer. But he made a substantial contribution to the theology of prayer. His last work, published posthumously, Letters to Malcolm, he completed in April 1963, just seven months before his death. It deals frankly with issues that he faced privately in prayer. His Reflections on the Psalms, published two years earlier, deal with his personal difficulties in reading the Psalms, and also his appreciation of the Christian liturgy of the Psalter. But Lewis was never enthusiastic about his own church life, which in the setting of college chapel was atypical of parish life. So his own focus upon prayer was more personal than corporate. Several of his essays, notably “Work and Prayer” and “The Efficacy of Prayer,” challenge us with specific issues of personal prayer. His autobiography, Surprised by Joy, and The Screwtape Letters also contain personal comments on prayer.

In my own encounters with Lewis, he never spoke about prayer. I did communicate once with him directly about the daily prayer meetings of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union where much prayer had been made for the conversion of Sheldon Vanauken, whose wife was active in our prayer-group. Indeed, I told Lewis of Sheldon’s conversion the day after it happened. But Lewis was never forthcoming about his own prayer life. A shy man, he was all the more sensitive to the Oxford atmosphere then prevailing, that you no more discussed religion too intimately than you talked about your kidneys. So he simply responded positively to Vanauken’s news as a confidant who expected it anyway.

Lewis suffered enough from the cynical reactions of some of his colleagues when his first religious books were published. For he, an English don, should not be dabbling in theology, much less getting cheap publicity in this way. To trespass into another academic discipline was questionable to say the least. So Lewis was very careful to introduce his own theological views modestly, though he did have the support of his friend Austin Farrar and other theologians when he did so. In his Reflections on the Psalms he begins, “I write as one amateur to another, talking about difficulties that I have met, or lights I have gained, reading the Psalms, with the hope this might at any rate interest and sometimes even help, other inexpert readers. I am ‘comparing notes,’ not presuming to instruct.” It is only now that some of us have wakened up to the fact that if all of life is carved up among the professions, so that there is likewise no room.

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To see if evening—any evening—would suggest
A patient etherized upon a table;
In vain. I simply wasn’t able.
To me each evening looked far more
Like the departure from a silent, yet
crowded shore
Of a ship whose freight with everything,
leaving behind
Gracefully, finally without farewells,
marooned mankind—
I’m like that odd man Wordsworth
knew, to whom
A primrose was a yellow primrose, one
whose doom
Kee-pers him for ever in the list of dunces,
Compelled to live on stock responses,
Making the poor best that I can
Of dull things...²

Lewis is admitting to us all that his spirituality, like his poetry, is prosaic, ordi-

nary, about the world around him. This down-to-earthness about him, is perhaps
the greatest impression he left upon me. Neo-platonism was anathema to Lewis. So
instead of saying “we must be spiritually regenerated,” he confesses, “we’re like eggs
at present. And you can’t go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We
must be hatched or go bad.”³ Thus his style is vivid, concrete, practical, empty of “gas,”
full of solid stuff. So too his faith is all for “sound doctrine,” not the woolly-minded-
ness of contemporaries he debated with, who wanted “religion without dogma.”
Growing up as a child in a “low” church milieu, he felt later that it did tend to be too
cosily living at ease in Zion,⁴ not the tough, realistic faith and prayer-life Lewis was to
develop later.

2. The Practical Realism of His Prayer-Life
Prayer is not something simply to talk
about. It is not even something we “do,”
for Lewis. “Saying one’s prayers” was for
Lewis only a small part of his experience of
prayer. “For many years after my conver-
sion,” he admits, “I never used any ready-
made forms except the Lord’s Prayer. In fact
I tried to pray without words at all—not to
verbalize the mental acts. Even in praying

(continued on page 8)
for others I believe I tended to avoid their names and substituted mental images of them. I still think that the prayer without words is the best—if one can really achieve it.”7 But we have to remember that our exercise of prayer is only effective as we take ourselves as we really are, and not idealize how we would like to be, and thus try and exercise an unrealistic form of expressing prayer. So Lewis had to learn himself, that “to pray successfully without words one needs to be at ‘the top of one’s form.’”8 Thinking that we can do always, what we can do on occasion, is an error that makes our prayers also unrealistic, and this Lewis had to discover, as we all must.

The practical rhythm of Lewis was simple enough each day. He would rise at about 7 a.m., take a walk, attend matins at 8 a.m. in college chapel, breakfast, and start tutorials at 9 a.m. Late in the afternoon he would make time for prayerful thought and contemplation, as he walked around the college grounds. Never would he recommend saying one’s prayers last thing at night. “No one in his senses if he has any power of ordering his own day, would reserve his chief prayers for bedtime—obviously the worst possible hour for any action which needs concentration. My own plan when hard pressed, is to seize any time, and place, however unsuitable, in preference to the last waking moment. On a day of travelling...I’d rather pray sitting in a crowded train than put it off till midnight when one reaches a hotel bedroom with aching back and dry throat, and one’s mind partly in a stupor and partly in a whirl.”9 In a letter to a friend in 1955, that is to say shortly after he had taken up his professorship at Cambridge, when he used to return home to Oxford at weekends, he said:

Oddly enough, the week-end journeys (to and from Cambridge) are no trouble at all. I find myself perfectly content in a slow train that crawls through green fields stopping at every station. Just because the service is so slow and therefore in most people’s eyes bad, these trains are almost empty—I get through a lot of reading and sometimes say my prayers. A solitary train journey I find quite excellent for this purpose.10

All this is consistent with Lewis’ earlier observations, that much of prayer is really a disposition of heart that is in tune with God’s presence in one’s life, so that the more our hearts are in tune with and obedient toward God, the less fuss do we need to make about how vocal and articulate we are in “saying our prayers”; provided, of course, that we do not succumb to merely having “warm feelings” or vaguely imaginative thoughts we mistake for real communion with God. This will always demand the most rigorous attentiveness and serious intent to be called real prayer.

3. His Natural, Simple, Unstructured Attitude to Prayer
As we have noted, Lewis was a private person, concealing his soul in the midst of convivial friendships. He remarked on one occasion that friends are not like lovers who look at each other, but in what they hold in common. So friendships were outward looking, not introspective for him. Several times he observes the importance of “looking at,” rather than looking “through” things. So he would never have analyzed his prayer-life as we are attempting to do. He would bury us in a loud guffaw of the absurdity of such action.

While still agnostic, in October 1929, Lewis read the Diary of an Old Soul by George MacDonald. “He seems to know everything,” Lewis confided to Greeves, “and I find my own experience in it constantly.”

My surgent thought shoots lark-like up to Thee,
Thou like the heaven art all about the lark.
Whatever I surmise or know in me,
Idea, or symbol on the dark,
Is living, working, thought-creating power
In Thee, the timeless Father of the hour. 
I am Thy book, Thy song—Thy child 
would be.\(^1\)

By the following summer term he had 
also perused The Practice of the Presence of 
God, by Brother Lawrence, and Centuries of 
Meditation by Thomas Traherne. By the 
following term he was attending 8 a.m. 
chapel regularly. But on Christmas Eve, 1930, 
he writes his friend Greeves, “I think the 
trouble with me is lack of faith. I have no 
rational ground for going back on the 
arguments that convinced me of God’s exis-
tence; but the irrational deadweight of my 
old sceptical habits, and the spirit of the 
age, and the cares of the day, steal away all 
my lively feelings of the truth; and often 
when I pray, I wonder if I am not posting 
letters to a non-existent address.”\(^1\) The 
reason for the remoteness of Lewis’ faith 
at that time was he was still a deist rather 
than a Christian. So after a long talk one 
night with Tolkien and Dyson in July 1931, 
Lewis wrote Greeves further: “I have just 
passed on from believing in God to defi-
nitely believing in Christ—in Christianity—my long talk with Dyson and Tolkien 
had a great deal to do with it.”\(^13\) Later that 
year he also read William Law’s Serious 
Call to a Devout and Holy Life. Lewis was 
now finding it meaningful to pray for his 
brother Warren in Shanghai. So he wrote 
to him at the end of 1931:

When you ask me to pray for you—I don’t 
know if you are serious, but the answer is 
yes, I do. It may not do you any good, but 
it does me a lot, for I cannot ask for any 
change to be made in you without finding 
that the very same needs to be made in 
me; which pulls me up also by putting us 
all in the same boat, checks any tendency 
to priggishness.\(^14\)

All this may seem to be biography 
about prayer rather than theology. But to 
Lewis the one was impossible without the 
other. To look at prayer in detachment from 
its exercise was inconceivable. And since 
most of one’s existence is usually pretty 
dull and routine stuff, one’s prayers are not 
exceptional either. Indeed, the more hon-
est we become with ourselves, the more 
“normal” our prayer life will be. As Lewis 
said early on in his BBC talks on Chris-
tian morality, at first Christianity seems 
to be all about rules and regulations, guilt 
and virtue, only to find its members are 
really living in another country. “Every 
one is filled full with what we would call 
goodness as a mirror is filled with light. 
But they don’t call it goodness. They don’t 
call it anything. They are not thinking of 
it. They are too busy looking at the source 
from which it comes.”\(^15\) So too, in prayer, 
Lewis sees that it should become so natural 
to the believer, that we do not make any 
fuss about it, but simply do it because that 
is the nature of the Christian life. Speaking 
about the struggles we may have in prayer, 
the distractions and dryness in our lives, 
he comments: “The disquieting thing is 
not simply that we skimp and begrudge 
the duty of prayer. The really disquieting 
thing is that it should have to be num-
bered among duties at all. For we believe 
that we were created to glorify God and 
enjoy Him forever. And if the few, the very 
few, minutes we now spend on intercourse 
with God are a burden to us rather than a 
delight, what then?...if we were perfected, 
prayer would not be a duty, it would be 
a delight.”\(^16\) Clearly our sins handicap us 
from the openness that prayer requires, 
while the unreality of the unseen realm 
of prayer only shows how distant we may 
be from God and his ways. Like friend-
ship with a dear friend, however, prayer is 
ever forced nor irksome. It grows as the 
relationship grows too.

4. Supplicatory Prayers for Others
Praying for his brother was perhaps the 
first step that Lewis made in supplication 
for many other people throughout the rest 
of his life. In the correspondence to an 
“American Lady,” begun in October 1950, 
we read Lewis promising again and again, 
“I will have you in my prayers,” “of course 
(continued on page 20)
S. Lewis did not live long by today’s standards. Dying before his sixty-fifth birthday, he nevertheless accomplished more in a relatively brief life than most men who are long-lived and obsessively ambitious. During his productive years this slightly rotund, tall, bespectacled man with red face, bald head, and tea-stained teeth, published almost forty books, nearly seventy poems, 125 essays and pamphlets, three dozen book reviews, and two short stories. This Belfast-born and Oxford-educated academician found time to edit or write prefaces to eleven volumes, and he taught full time—first at Oxford and later at Cambridge. He also preached thoughtful and inspired sermons, delivered lively, insightful lectures, gave popular radio talks, and maintained a voluminous correspondence. Although Professor Lewis was a bachelor until the last decade of his life, he always supported a houseful of people, and he devoted countless hours to counseling a stream of seekers who made pilgrimages to his house in search of spiritual advice and edification.

The range of C.S. Lewis’s interests is as remarkable as the quantity of his work. He wrote juvenile and adult fiction, literary history and criticism, as well as popular theology and apologetics. But he was more than prolific and far ranging—he was strikingly talented. Lewis’s fiction is enchanting and his scholarship is original. His Christian treatises are penetrating and instructive. A most notable venture into philosophy, The Abolition of Man, was selected as one of the “Great Books” by Mortimer J. Adler, and the bulk of his writing is still in print, widely read, and translated into many languages.

How do you write a biography of a brilliant man who mastered many subjects? Every biographer is confronted with the problem of selection. With C.S. Lewis, however, this normal difficulty assumes gargantuan proportions. A mid-life convert to Christianity, Lewis left us more than stacks of publications, he bequeathed thousands of letters that have survived. Besides two published autobiographical volumes, there are also family papers and diaries. Scores of personal reminiscences about C.S. Lewis—published and unpublished—are available to serious researchers. Furthermore, the secondary literature on this famous Christian is weighty, and there seems to be no end to master’s and doctoral theses on this celebrated Englishman. Plenty of Lewis’s relatives and friends are alive and able to assist a prospective author. And most of this famous man’s dwelling places and haunts are in good repair and available for exploration.

William Griffin, formerly a senior editor at Macmillan and now a freelance writer, has courageously waded into the massive reservoir of sources. Being associated with Lewis’s leading American publisher, Griffin knows there has long been a need for a
major biography of Lewis. Chad Walsh, an Episcopal priest and Professor of English Literature, wrote the first book on Lewis nearly forty years ago. Entitled C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics (1949), this is still an important book, but it is long out of print. The first full-scale biography did not appear until 1974. Entitled C.S. Lewis: A Biography, it was written by Roger Lancelyn Green (a talented and long-time friend of C.S. Lewis) and Walter Hooper (Lewis’s private secretary for a few weeks in 1963). This book is still useful and in print.

A dozen years later in 1986—nearly a quarter century after Lewis’s death—we finally have a new book on this century’s most widely quoted and profoundly influential English language Christian thinker and writer. Griffin’s book is called Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life. In 430 pages of text this clearly written and heavily documented book relies upon much of the recent scholarship, and all of the published primary sources which have become available since the Green and Hooper biography was published.

William Griffin has written a crisp and moving account, and he says he wrote it for Americans. Spelling has been Americanized, and many customs are explained for people innocent of British history and culture. The book is full of fascinating anecdotes, and the author retells many of the rich experiences of Lewis’s life. Although this book has no major thesis, Griffin does present evidence to bury once and for all time some of the tiresome debates about Lewis’s life. Griffin makes it clear that the Anglican layman’s marriage to the once-divorced Joy Davidman Gresham was normal and consummated. The biographer also demolishes the implications in John Beversluis’s book, C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion, and in the fictional film “Shadowlands,” that Lewis’s faith was seriously damaged if not lost over the death of his wife.

I eschew the use of “definitive” as a way of describing any biography, because a book that speaks to our times will seldom answer the questions of our children. Nevertheless, the question inevitably arises: if this book is not definitive, is it at least the standard biography for this generation? Put another way, will people interested in this phenomenally influential Ulsterman need to look elsewhere to learn what they crave to know about Lewis? Alas, yes.

There is not much new in this latest book on Lewis. But Griffin is to be commended for trying something original. Rather than writing a traditional biography, a selectively styled literary biography, a dangerously tricky spiritual biography, or the popular life and times, Griffin has chosen a fresh way. Avoiding preachiness, omniscience, and tedious digressions, he has opted to let C.S. Lewis do the talking.

C.S. Lewis: A Dramatic Life is unusual. In place of ordinary chapters, this medium-sized book contains nearly forty divisions—each one bearing the title of a year.

Because Griffin has decided to weave few of his own interpretations into the story, the text is laden with direct quotations. Since Lewis wrote little until 1927, the first chapter bears that date. Thirty-six subsequent chapters follow this one, concluding with 1963. Although Griffin allows us an occasional backward glance, he never carries the reader forward in time beyond the date of the chapter.

I was slightly annoyed when I first encountered those brief chapters with no theme or continuity except chronology and Lewis’s utterances in letters, books, sermons, essays, or lectures. But once I grew used to Griffin’s “camera-eye” technique (a style employed by John Dos Passos early in this century), I found it palatable—even savory. Griffin’s approach pleases because it is new and it keeps the reader focused on Lewis rather than the musings of the author.

Nevertheless, the drawbacks of this technique are significant. There is a one-dimensional quality to the book. Unless Lewis wrote about a person or topic, it is usually ignored. Few of the important people in his life are more than stick figures. And Lewis himself—because he

(continued on page 26)
The Uses of Fantasy

by Dr. David C. Downing
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Only a few years after the phenomenal success of the film trilogy based upon J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books are off to an equally promising start on the silver screen. Worldwide receipts for Disney/Walden Media’s adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* surpassed a half a billion dollars within three months of the film’s release, putting it on pace to become Disney’s highest-grossing live-action film ever (*Variety*, January 16, 2006).

Although these high-profile cinematic adaptations have revived interest in Tolkien’s and Lewis’s fantasy books published half a century ago, the film versions have also revived familiar criticisms about fantasy writing as a lightweight genre, best suited for children—or for adults who wish they had never grown up. In his review of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Elvis Mitchell in the *New York Times* (December 19, 2001) condescendingly described Tolkien’s classic work as “the most intimidating nerd/academic fantasy classic ever.” Mitchell’s words seem to echo those of critic Edmund Wilson, who dismissed Tolkien’s massive tale as “essentially a children’s book which has somehow gotten out of hand” (*The Nation*, April 14, 1956).

In the same way, recent reviews of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* echo comments by earlier critics about the Narnia books themselves. Charles McGrath (*New York Times*, November 13, 2005) concluded that Lewis’s children’s books are not really about portraying the author’s worldview, but more about his desire to escape. In this off-hand remark, McGrath repeats an oft-sounded theme in A.N. Wilson’s biography of Lewis: that the distinguished Oxford don and brilliant Christian apologist was actually a victim of the “Peter Pan syndrome,” a refusal to grow up and see the world as it really is (*C.S. Lewis*, New York: Norton, p. 26).

Although psychoanalysis has become all but extinct as a therapeutic science, it lives among reviewers and critics as a way of explaining why formidable intellects such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien insisted on creating fantasy stories. Apart from its glib psychology, the dismissive approach so often adopted by journalists also reveals a lamentable ignorance about the fantasy genre itself.

In middle-brow circles, fantasy has a bad name. Normal, well-adjusted adults are supposed to resign themselves to the real world. Fantasy is seen as the domain of children, the mentally disturbed, or the sexually frustrated. In literature too, fantasy is often associated with nursery stories, comic books, or teen-targeted movies. But when writers of the first order—Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence, Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, and Gabriel García Marquéz, to name a few—turn to fantasy as their genre of choice, it is time to ask why serious authors write fantasies and why serious readers turn to them for enjoyment and contemplation.

“The problem with the real world, frankly, is that it is the only one we have” (*FW* 3). This remark by Eric S. Rabkin sums up as well in one sentence what other critics have taken chapters to say: fantasy seems to begin as an itch in the imagination, a sense that what might be, or what could never be, enriches the meaning of what is.

In pop culture, the most spectacularly successful creators of comic book and film...
Apart from its glib psychology, the dismissive approach so often adopted by journalists also reveals a lamentable ignorance about the fantasy genre itself.

Heroes are those who know how to tap into the collective consciousness of their times. It is a commonplace of culture studies that Superman was created in the late ’30s not as a swaggering Ubermensch but as the friend of ordinary folks trying to make ends meet. The Lord of the Rings was first published in 1954, but did not become a cult classic until the mid-’60s, when a whole generation of young people responded to the adventures of a simple, down-to-earth fellow called upon to do battle with a vast, almost faceless, enemy seeking to control a mysterious, all-powerful new weapon. In recent years it has been the Harry Potter who becomes a wizard and Peter Parker—who becomes Spiderman—the schlemiel as superhero.

The basic contrast between the realistic and the fantastic is as old as storytelling itself. Plato distinguished between two types of imitation, the icastic, representing things that may be found in the real world, and the fantastic, things that exist only in imagination. The great philosopher was suspicious of literary creation, as something was one step removed from physical reality and two steps removed from the perfect world of Forms. Yet to illustrate his point, he resorted to one of the most famous of all literary creations, the parable of people living in a cave who only see the shadows of real things outside.

Contemporary critics tend to distinguish between two kinds of non-realist stories, science fiction and fantasy. They would classify works by Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Isaac Asimov in one category and works by Lewis Carroll, J.R.R. Tolkien, and J.K. Rowling in another. The general sense is that in science fiction extraordinary events are brought about by imagined but plausible technologies, whereas in fantasy the extraordinary is brought about by magic or enchantment. Thus, science fiction writers are obliged to explain time travel or the means of surviving in space, while fantasy writers may people their stories with wizards or talking animals without troubling themselves about how such things might come to be.

This distinction may have heuristic value, but it begins to break down when one considers actual texts by authors such as E.R. Eddison, Arthur C. Clarke, or Margaret Atwood. The more critics have tried to explain the difference between fantasy and science fiction, the more it seems a matter of emphasis rather than a clearly definable boundary. One might be able to conclude only that science fiction writers make more effort to make their imaginative worlds seems plausible according to the laws of nature as presently understood, whereas fantasy writers make less effort.

The most common charge against fantasy literature is that it is escapist, that it encourages a flight from reality. But C.S. Lewis responded that there are varieties of escapism. Children may be regaled by Peter Rabbit without wishing to become rabbits, but the “reality-based” story of the awkward novice who becomes the star athlete panders to a young reader’s actual fantasies and ambitions (SBJ 35).

Lewis’s friend and fellow fantasy writer, J.R.R. Tolkien, took his defense of fantasy a step further. In his classic essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien acknowledged that a basic purpose of fantasy is Escape, but he sees this as a method of recovering reality, not retreating from it. Sometimes a flight of fancy may be the very thing required to give us an overview of our own world. What Anaïs Nin said about all art is especially true of fantasy: “It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with, we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.” Thus the fantasy writer may offer what Kenneth Burke called “perspectives by incongruity,” making us view our own reality differently, not by casting a spell, but by breaking the spell of familiarity.

We can see this technique at work in Bernard Malamud’s classic tale “Angel Levine,” first published in 1958. “Angel Levine” is the story a Jewish tailor living in New York who endures a Job-like series of reverses: his business burns down, his son is killed in the war, his daughter runs (continued on page 14)
A fantasy may be constructed as a simile of the self, a way for the author to say, “This is what it feels like to be me.”

...off with a lout, his wife becomes terminally ill, and he himself suffers excruciating backaches. The tailor, named Manischevitz, calls out to God for relief and soon receives a visit from a black man in an ill-fitting suit who claims to be an angel on probation sent to help. Though the angel, named Alexander Levine, explains he was an observant Jew in life and sonorously recites a Hebrew prayer, Manischevitz just can’t believe that such an unprepossessing, not to mention wingless, character could be an angel sent from God, and so refuses any help. Levine is crestfallen and turns to leave, saying that if the poor tailor changes his mind, he can look him up in Harlem.

Soon afterwards Manischevitz sees Levine in a dream preening opalescent wings. His suffering unabated, the tailor finally decides in desperation to seek out the self-proclaimed angel in a part of the city he would usually never visit. On his first trip he sees Levine drinking in a honkytonk in the middle of the day and so turns back. But eventually he returns, overhears a conversation about how the spirit is an immaterial substance, invisible but embodied in things of every color, and he humbles himself before the slightly disheveled angel and asks for help. Levine bursts into tears, accepts Manischevitz’ apology, and then returns with him to the tailor’s apartment. Suddenly there is the sound of fluttering wings and Levine is gone. Manischevitz goes inside to discover his wife vigorous and well, busy tidying up what had seemed to be her deathbed. All he can offer her by way of explanation is “A wonderful thing, Fanny! Believe me, there are Jews everywhere.”

“Angel Levine” is both fantasy and parable, a tale about suffering but one with many comic elements. The last line of the story suggests that, even after his miraculous deliverance, Manischevitz is less amazed that Levine was an angel than that he was an observant Jew. Written in 1958, the story makes its point by indirectness, using otherworldly elements as a commentary on very real this-worldly attitudes.

Ursula Le Guin offers a similar mixture of fantasy and parable in her much-anthologized story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” first published in 1973. Omelas is a kind of fairy tale city, seen on the day of its magnificent Festival of Summer. The sunshine, the laughing children, the colorful banners and pleasure boats bobbing in the harbor make it seem a place of perfect happiness—as indeed it almost is. It is a city with no crime, violence, wars, or poverty. Its people need no king, no clergy, no ruling class, nor do they require any of the trappings of modernity—industrialism, advertising, mass media.

But the people of this near-utopia do have one terrible secret: all of their perfect happiness is built upon the terrible suffering of one child. By some devil’s bargain no one quite understands, city officials keep a feeble-minded child locked up in a cellar, fed only enough to stay alive, offered not even a kind word. When the children of Omelas reach an age of accountability, they are told about the child and some go to see it. After the first initial shock, most come to understand that their own happiness, and that of everyone they know, somehow depends upon the unhappiness of this one victim. And most eventually learn to make peace with this macabre arrangement.

But there are those who cannot make their peace. Some, upon first seeing the child, realize that they must leave the perfect city and take their chances elsewhere. Others, much older, may fall silent a day or two, speak to no one about their plans, but get up one morning and set their faces for the city’s gates. Not until the last paragraph of the story do we understand its title: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”

As in Malamud’s “Angel Levine,” Le Guin utilizes fantasy not as a means of escape but as a means of confrontation. When asked about her sources, Le Guin explained that she first encountered the idea of a society whose happiness rested upon the suffering of one poor soul in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, then later in an essay...
by philosopher William James. It is a conundrum for would-be Utilitarians, those content to define the Good as “the greatest good for the greatest number.” The story offers a *reductio ad absurden* critique of this easy formula, suggesting as well the lonely courage of naysayers in a largely self-satisfied society. As in Malamud, the genre of fantasy becomes an effective tool for both philosophical reflection and social commentary.

Sometimes a fantasy story may be as much about the person who created it as about those reading it. A fantasy may be constructed as a simile of the self, a way for the author to say, “This is what it feels like to be me.” In Franz Kafka’s classic tale “The Metamorphosis,” for example, one cannot help but ponder parallels between the writer and his protagonist. “The Metamorphosis” (1915) is the story of Gregor Samsa, who goes to bed one night a man and awakens the next day with mandibles. Building upon this bizarre premise, the narrative is surprisingly realistic. Transformed into a giant insect, Gregor must figure out how to roll off his back to get out of bed, how to turn the door key without hands, and what food to eat, having lost his taste for human victuals. Gregor spends very little time pondering what has happened to him, but worries instead if he is going to lose his job and how to get along with his family, especially his domineering father. At first everyone, especially Gregor’s sister, seems to be making strides in adjusting to Gregor’s transformation. But eventually his father loses his temper and pelts the man-sized bug with apples, damaging Gregor’s carapace and leading eventually to his death.

Since it was published in 1915 (originally as “Die Verwandlung”), “The Metamorphosis” has lent itself to all manner of interpretation—psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, and Existentialist—but at some level the story seems to be an expression of Kafka’s own sense of self. Like Gregor Samsa, Franz Kafka was unmarried and lived at home with his family; suffered from insomnia and weak lungs (he died of tuberculosis in 1924); disliked his mundane job; and felt intimidated and overpowered by his father. Kafka once composed a letter to his father (which he never sent) proclaiming, “My writing was all about you. All I did there, after all, was to complain about the things I couldn’t complain about on your breast” (SCC 204).

When asked by a friend about the similarities of the surnames Samsa and Kafka, the author explained that the story was not a confession, but a kind of indiscretion. Hearing the story described as “a terrible dream, a terrible conception,” Kafka replied, “The dream reveals the reality, which conceptions lags behind. That is the horror of life—the terror of art.” (IF 380.)

In its broadest sense, then, fantasy literature is not at all an escape from reality, but a way of presenting one’s own vision of reality. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., explains why two of his key characters, Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, are such avid readers of science fiction. He says that “they had both found life meaningless, because of what they had seen in the war.... So they were trying to reinvent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (101). Clearly, this is a religious or philosophical undertaking, a case of “Metaphysician, heal thyself.” Ursula Le Guin would probably agree with Vonnegut. As one critic has noted of her body of work, “For an atheist, Le Guin has spent an inordinate amount of time inventing religions and religious modes of feeling” (ULG 175).

It is interesting to note how many distinguished writers of science fiction—H.G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, Ursula Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut—are those without religious faith, while some of the most well-known creators of fantasy—Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Madeleine L’Engle—belong to communities of faith. (continued on page 26)
in books and an imaginary world of “dressed animals” and “knights in armor.” But he did more than read books, he wrote and illustrated his own stories as well.

If Warren Lewis’s exile across the Irish Sea to school in 1905 drove Jack further into himself and books, his mother’s death from cancer in 1908 made him even more withdrawn. Mrs. Lewis’s death came just three months prior to Jack’s tenth birthday, and the young man was hurt deeply by her passing. Not only did he lose a mother, his father never fully recovered from her death. For many years thereafter, both boys felt estranged from their father, and home life was never warm and satisfying again.

The death of Mrs. Lewis convinced young Jack that the God he encountered in church and in the Bible his mother gave him was, if not cruel, at least a vague abstraction. Four or five years later, by 1911 or 1912, and with the additional influence of a spiritually unorthodox board school matron, Lewis forsook Christianity and became an avowed atheist.

By autumn 1914 C.S. Lewis was somewhat adrift. He had lost his faith and his mother, and he felt alienated from his father. He was extremely close to his brother, but they saw one another only on holidays. A new friendship was beginning with a fellow student, Arthur Greeves, but it was interrupted in September when C.S. Lewis was sent to Great Bookham, Surrey, to be privately tutored by W.T. Kirkpatrick, a brilliant teacher and friend of Lewis’s father.

“The Great Knock,” as the Lewis family dubbed Mr. Kirkpatrick, had a profound effect upon the

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he was elected a fellow of Magdalen College, where he tutored in English language and literature. The next year his second volume of poetry, *Dymer*, was published under the name Clive Hamilton.

Alongside the generally self-centered life Lewis was leading, he demonstrated a loyal and generous nature. When his college roommate, Paddy Moore, was killed in World War I, Jack befriended Paddy’s mother, Mrs. Janie King Moore, and her adolescent daughter Maureen. Then in 1920, after completing his first degree, Lewis decided to share lodgings with them so that he could more carefully look out for their needs.

**Spiritual Awakening**

This gesture of kindness did more than help Mrs. Moore and Maureen; it got C.S. Lewis outside of himself and taught him patience. The association with the Moores also introduced him to Mrs. Moore’s brother, a combat veteran who suffered from a severe war-inflicted nervous disorder. This personal encounter apparently shook Lewis’s confidence in materialism, because a letter he wrote in 1923 to his friend Arthur Greeves suggests a slight spiritual awakening. It seems that the “Doc,” as the Moores and Lewis referred to him, came to stay with the trio for three weeks. During the visit “Doc” underwent an ordeal of extreme mental torture. After the attack, when the poor wretch was hospitalized, Lewis wrote to his friend that “Doc” had believed he was in Hell. He wore out his body in the “awful mental tortures,” and then died from heart failure—“unconscious at the end thank God.” Lewis concluded his observation by suggesting it is “a damned world—and we once thought we could be happy with books and music!”

The spiritual awakening continued, enhanced by reading books by George MacDonald and G.K. Chesterton. One MacDonald volume called *Phantastes* had a powerful impact on his thinking. “What it actually did to me,” wrote Lewis, “was to convert, even to baptize...my imagination.” At Oxford Lewis continued to read MacDonald, and he imbibed G.K. Chesterton as well. The latter author’s books, especially *The Everlasting Man*, raised serious questions about the young intellectual’s materialism.

While MacDonald and Chesterton were stirring Lewis’s thoughts, a close friend, Owen Barfield, with whom he spent much time during and after their student years, pounced on the logic of Jack Lewis’s atheism. Barfield became atheist, and then a Christian, and he frequently badgered Lewis about his materialism. So did Nevill Coghill, a fellow student and lifelong friend who was brilliant, yet was, to Lewis’s amazement, “a Christian and a thorough-going supernaturalist.”

Soon after joining the English faculty at Magdalen College, Lewis met two more Christians, Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien. These men became close friends of Lewis. He admired their brilliance and their logic. Soon Lewis recognized that most of his friends, like his favorite authors—MacDonald, Chesterton, Johnson, Spenser, and Milton—held to this Christian angle of vision which threatened his whole world view.

Gradually during the 1920s, two paths were converging in Lewis’s mind: one was reason, the other intuition. In 1929 these roads met, and C.S. Lewis surrendered and admitted that “God was God, and knelt and prayed.” Within two years the reluctant convert admitted that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—God Incarnate. With this revelation the Oxford don became a communicant in the Church of England.

**A New Life**

Christian history shows that when men and women meet Jesus, recognize His Nature, and then decide to trust and follow Him, they become strikingly different people. Those who convert—who turn around and obey Christ’s command to “follow me”—are clearly people with changed lives.

If evidence of conversion is a new life, C.S. Lewis was obviously a believer after 1931. Many changes were apparent. His life now had a purpose—to know and obey God. This came to fruition most demonstrably in his writing. Earlier efforts to become a poet were laid to rest. The new Christian devoted his talent and energy to writing prose that reflected his recently found faith. Within two years of his conversion Lewis published *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. This little volume opened a thirty-year stream of books on Christian apologetics and discipleship that became a lifelong avocation. Between 1933 and his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis wrote books—including the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Mere Christianity*—that nudged atheists and agnostics toward the faith, and encouraged and nurtured believers.
As a good steward and responsible professional, Lewis did not ignore his academic discipline. He wrote literary history and criticism such as *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition, Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. These books are still widely read and highly regarded.

Despite the large quantity and high quality of his academic publications, Lewis became known as a literary evangelist. The tone and impact of his theological and apologetical books help account for this reputation, as did his own assertion in a rejoinder to his critic, Dr. W.N. Pittenger, published in *The Christian Century*, November 26, 1958, where Lewis admitted that most of what he wrote “is evangelistic.”

**A Growing Reputation**

If Christianity altered Lewis’s writing habits, the publication of those books had a palpable effect on his personal life. First of all, the change was manifested in the mail. Once Lewis’s books became popular, which they did by the 1940s, he was inundated by letters. Because the famous author believed it was God’s will for him to answer most of this mail himself, and because he was convinced, as he said in “The Weight Of Glory,” that there are “no ordinary people,” he took time to write with care to each correspondent regardless of age, education, or place in society. This enterprise consumed many hours each week.

Furthermore, life with fame was laden with other pressures. There were numerous invitations to entertain guests, grant interviews, give lectures, and preach sermons. Writing, to be sure, is a lonely enterprise. This Lewis understood. And even though he felt called by God to write, he likewise felt it was required of him to counsel those who made the pilgrimage to The Kilns, his home on the edge of Oxford. Frequently he believed it was his calling to explain the Christian faith to people over BBC radio, and to the airmen at the RAF bases during World War II.

Preaching sermons, giving talks, and expressing his theological views over the radio throughout the United Kingdom bolstered Lewis’s reputation and increased his book sales. With these new circumstances came other changes—not the least being a marked upswing in annual income. Throughout the 1920s Lewis had been getting by on little money. During his student years his father provided an allowance, and Jack supplemented that in various ways. Nevertheless, money was always scarce. And when the young academician took on the responsibility for Mrs. Moore and her daughter, finances were always tight even with the regular tutorial stipend.

As book royalties mounted during the later 1940s, and continued to spiral upward thereafter, C.S. Lewis refused to upgrade his standard of living. Partly out of disdain for conspicuous living, but mostly out of commitment to Jesus Christ, he established a charitable fund for his royalty earnings.

Neither the extent nor the recipients of C.S. Lewis’s charity are fully known. Indeed, he made valiant efforts to conceal this information. It is known that he supported numerous impoverished families, and underwrote education fees for orphans and poor seminarians, and put monies into scores of charities and church ministries.

**A Late Marriage**

The outreach of Lewis’s books and the impact of his charity conspired to make still another significant change in his lifestyle. During the last decade of his earthly pilgrimage, Lewis’s world was invaded by an American woman and her two children. In autumn 1952 Joy Davidman Gresham, who had become a Christian partly because she read *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, visited her spiritual mentor in England. Soon thereafter her husband abandoned her for another woman. In the meantime the divorcée, a writer in her own right, moved to London with her two adolescent boys, David and Douglas.
It is common knowledge that Lewis’s “Christian” books caused so much disapproval that he was more than once passed over for a professorship at Oxford, with the honors going to men of lesser reputation.
The Prayer-Life of C.S. Lewis
(continued from page 9)

we’ll help each other in our prayers,” “let us continue to pray for each other,” “of course I have been praying for you daily, as always, but latterly have found myself doing so with much more concern.” On this last occasion, he narrates an event that was of special circumstance. He had felt one night with strong feeling how good it would be to hear from her with good news. “Then, as if by magic (indeed it is the whitest magic in the world) the letter comes today. Not (lest I should indulge in folly) that your relief had not occurred before my prayer, but as if, in tenderness for my puny faith, God moved me to pray with special earnestness just before He was going to give me the thing. How true that prayers are His prayers really: He speaks to Himself through us.”

Lewis was not prepared merely to hold that while petitionary prayer is expressing personal need before God, supplication is praying on behalf of others. Early on he had seen that to supplicate for others to be changed by prayer, implied the pray-er was also willing to see changes in his life as he prayed for others. But petition and supplication are also part of a greater, more mysterious reality of divine soliloquy, since God intends to be not merely “all” as pantheism declares, but “all in all.” If the Holy Spirit is the one who prompts us and gives us the gift of prayer itself, are we not in our supplications and petitions actually entering into divine soliloquy, to celebrate the sovereign good that God has intended for all his creatures? So Lewis quotes a poem he found in an old notebook, author unknown, to illustrate this.

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem
To be in speech with you,
Since but one voice is heard, it’s all a dream,
One talker aping two.
Sometimes it is, yet not as they
Conceive it. Rather, I
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say
But lo!, my springs are dry.

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake
The listener’s role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply
Nor can; thus, while we seem
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I
No dreamer, but thy dream.18

“Dream” does suggest pantheism, so Lewis adds, perhaps it is more accurate to call it rather “soliloquy.” In fact, Lewis sent Bede Griffiths this poem in 1938, to describe the growing convictions of what prayer meant in his life.19 For this reason, he worked over this poem several times.20

5. Prayer as Friendship with God
Perhaps many of us find that the growth of prayer is also associated with the cultivation of friendships. It is as if the relational quality of life that is nurtured and cultivated in personal friendships on the horizontal level of companionship assists us also to deepen friendship with God in prayer on the vertical level. This, then, is another trait of Lewis. He grew in prayer as he grew into friendships. Sometimes they were boon companionships, at other times they sprung from correspondence with strangers who became real friends, like “the American Lady.” Perhaps too, as Lewis leaned on confidants in his distresses, so he should reach out to others in their needs too. “Forgiveness,” he once said, “is another name for being forgiven.” This reciprocity explains perhaps the largesse he gave to others in his enormous correspondence, indicative of what he felt he received from his trust in God.

So at the outbreak of the war in 1939, he wrote to his old pupil and friend Bede Griffiths, “I was terrified to find how fearful I was by the crisis. Pray for me for courage.”21 Again he writes to him in 1954, “I had prayed hard for a couple of nights before that my faith might be strengthened. The response was immediate, and your book gave the finishing touch” (that is, The Golden
This, then, is another trait of Lewis. He grew in prayer as he grew into friendships.

6. Prayer-Life is Matured by Suffering

Perhaps in the meantime, Lewis began to think of what was involved symbolically in the change of locale from Magdalen College, Oxford, to Magdalene College, Cambridge. “My address will be Magdalene, so I remain under the same patroness,” he wrote to Sister Penelope on July 30, 1954. “This is nice because it saves ‘admin.’ readjustments in Heaven.” At the end of the year, he wrote to his friend Veto Gebbert, “I think I shall like Magdalene better than Magdalen.”

“but alas such a house for Him to visit!” Years before his brother had wistfully compared their own troubled household with that of the Dysons, where life seemed one long series of delightful picnics! So again Lewis wrote to Sister Penelope on January 3, 1945: “Pray for me, I am suffering incessant temptations to uncharitable thoughts at present; one of those black moods in which nearly all one’s friends seem to be selfish or even false. And how terrible that there should be even a kind of pleasure in thinking evil.”

Again, on June 5, 1951, Lewis wrote her “I especially need your prayers because I am (like the pilgrim in Bunyan) travelling across a plain called Ease! Everything without, and many things within, are marvelously well at present.”

It was at this time that he began to think of writing a book on prayer.

Perhaps it began to dawn upon him that he could not do this without more experience of its reality in his own life, for on February 15, 1954, Lewis wrote again to Sister Penelope, “I have had to abandon the book on prayer, it was clearly not for me.” He kept this postponement for the next nine years of his life, indeed to the year he died. But while he was writing it, his wife Joy Davidman commented how excited she was about his project, as perhaps one of the most important things Lewis would ever do.

(continued on page 22)
small college (a perfect cameo architecturally) and they’re so old-fashioned, pious, and gentle and conservative—unlike this leftist, atheist, cynical, hard-boiled, huge Magdalen” that had caused Lewis so much hurt.31

In a letter to Bede Griffiths on November 1st, he asked: “Has any theologian (perhaps dozens) allegorized St. Mary Magdalene’s act in the following way, which came to me like a flash of lightning the other day!...The precious alabaster box which we have to break over the holy feet is her heart. It seems so obvious, once one has thought of it.”32

So Lewis had come to see that prayer grows in the breaking of the human heart before God. His perhaps was broken since Oxford never recognized his worth to offer him a university professorship, and later still, it was broken again by the far more poignant grief of losing his wife in bereavement. Like all of us do, Lewis continued to struggle with God when,

By now I should be entering on the supreme stage
Of the whole walk, reserved for the late afternoon.
The heat was over now; the anxious mountains,
The airless valleys and the sun-baked rocks, behind me....33

Yet in June 18, 1962, he writes: “the plumbing often goes wrong....I need to be near a life-line.”34 Worse was to come.

After the loss of his wife, he asks the raw and naked question:

Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it even inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?35

In times of such bitter sorrow, Lewis admitted that “I am not in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him.”36

Of this we’re certain; no one who dared knock
At heaven’s door for earthly comfort found
Even a door—only smooth, endless rock,
And save the echo of his voice no sound.
It’s dangerous to listen; you’ll begin
To fancy that those echoes (hope can play Pitiful tricks) are answers from within:
Far better to turn, grimly sane away.

Heaven cannot thus, Earth cannot ever, give
The thing we want. We ask what isn’t there
And by our asking water and make live
That very part of love which must despair,
And die, and go down cold into the earth,
Before there’s talk of springtide and re-birth.37

Yes, this is perhaps one of the deepest experiences of prayer, to be able to say to our Heavenly Father, “Lord, not my will but thine be done.”

Lewis’ Theology of Prayer
If Lewis’ personal experience of prayer has these six traits—an earthy realism, a practical import, a natural and simple attitude, a strong supplicatory concern for others,
warm and honest expressions of friendships, and matured by suffering—how do these characteristics shape his theology of prayer? Perhaps two features he stressed most in his writings were: the problem of causality in prayer, and the nature of petitionary prayer. But like other human beings he had first to overcome morbid experiences of childhood before he could enter into a more truthful realism about the nature and exercise of prayer, so this we must consider as a necessary prelude.

A child tends to relate to God, as he relates with his parents. This correlation, unless corrected and healed, may persist, unconsciously so, throughout life. “My real life—or what memory reports as my real life—was increasingly one of solitude,” Lewis reports. He had bad dreams, “like a window opening on what was hardly less than Hell.” As a child of seven, he admits “solitude was nearly always at my command, somewhere in the garden, or somewhere in the house.... What drove me to write was the extreme manual clumsiness from which I suffered,” so that he hated sports. His early years he described as “living almost entirely in my imagination,” or at least “the imagination of those years now seems to me more important than anything else.” Then at the age of ten his mother died. He remembered what he had been taught, that prayer offered in faith would be an answer. Then when she died he shifted his ground to believe he now needed to believe in a miracle, seeing God merely as a Magician. It left him with theological confusion about God for years to come. All happiness left him, and like the solid continent of Atlantis that disappeared under the waves, “all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life...it was all sea and islands now.”

At boarding school later, Lewis says he began “seriously to pray and read my Bible and to attempt to obey my conscience.” But his slight alienation from his distanced father increased, and there was emotionally no solid ground for the child. Sometimes he would awake at night afraid that his only brother had slipped off with his father to America, and left him behind. His prayers became sheer acts of despair. Having said them at night, his conscience would whisper he had not said them properly enough, so he would try and try again until he fell asleep in frustration and lack of abiding assurance. A deepening pessimism eventually led him at university to decide he was an atheist, which for many has been the cold comfort of forgetting God in a conversion of relief. Perhaps the dread of frustrated prayers at night-time never fully left him, and the issues of a reasoning faith about prayer were colored perhaps as much from his early alienation as from his heightened intellectual search for the appropriate enquiry that would serve the logic of the mind, more than the rest of the heart. Perhaps Lewis’ cure was to rest in the presence of God, rather than be always enquiring about its appropriateness.

1. Lewis’ Emphasis upon “Festoonings in Prayer”

The bad situations of imagination and conscience that Lewis had placed himself in, as a child, explain perhaps the emphasis he placed later in life upon the importance of placing one’s self in what he called “prayerful situations,” or “festoonings.” Perhaps he learnt this from his own failures as a child to ever pray “properly” at all. Francis de Sales might also have helped him when he advises that in meditation, “place yourself in the presence of God.” In honest humility, Lewis also learnt to see that at prayer one is in a more “real” situation than ever one could be in the “real world.” Prayer is the struggle to come to grips with “rock-bottom realities.” Prayer, then is the struggle for the “real I” to meet with the reality of God. Prayer then is saying, “may it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.” This is the prayer that precedes all prayers. Then, as the great Iconoclast, God in his mercy (continued on page 24)
The Prayer-Life of C.S. Lewis

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may shatter all our false ideas and conceptions of him, that so hinder our real prayer in life.

Another area where “festoonings” of prayer are needed is in the realm of causality. Several times in his writings, Lewis recites the Pensées of Pascal: “God instituted prayer in order to lend his creatures the dignity of causality.” Lewis’ comment is that God perhaps “invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose.”42 For God has granted us the dignity of both work and prayer together. So a proper attitude to both is to pray as we work responsibly with the gifts that God has given to us, as well as to go on praying when we can work no more. Indeed, prayer is a stronger force than causality, not a weaker form. For if it “works” at all, it does so unlimited by space and time. Prayer then, is not a direct action over nature, it is action in co-operation with God, so we are most in harmony with God’s provident action when we are in prayer before him. Perhaps the post-Einsteinian worldview ahead of us, still little appreciated in Lewis’ day, now frees us from being so “hung up” with causality, as some of his contemporaries were, but neither is God. Our relationship with God in faith that pleases him, is therefore still the vital prayerful situation for all praying.

2. Lewis and Petitionary Prayer

Wisely then, Lewis argues that it is a wrong kind of question to ask, “Does prayer work?” It misleads us about the true nature of prayer. The quiet composure of heart before God rests in a relationship that is deeper, far deeper than words can ever express. This is where Lewis so clearly rested, and explains why so little need be said really about prayer. It is to be experienced rather than superficially talked about. At the same time Lewis honestly had difficulty with the apparently inconsistent character of petitions he noted in the gospels. For he observed two different types of prayer which appear inconsistent with each other.43 Type A is the prayer taught by our Lord: “Thy will be done.” In the light of the great submission of his passion, nothing can be asked for conditionally, only submissively so. It is asked in the Garden of Gethsemane, without any reservation whatever: “nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done.” Type B is the petition in faith, able to “move mountains,” to heal people, to remove blindness, and do much else. The apostle seems to advocate it when he urges us to “ask in faith, nothing doubting” (James 1:6-8).

Lewis asked many wise people about this apparent inconsistency and received no clear answer or solution. Hesitantly, Lewis suggested himself that until God has given us the faith to move mountains, it is perhaps to leave them alone, for he created them, and that is his business. Instead, it is advisable to concentrate more attention on Type A prayers, that indicate the surrender of self-will and self-love is more important than getting our own way, for we can easily misinterpret our perception of things in foolish, willful ways. Perhaps what Jesus actually did when he prayed submissively as he did on the night of his betrayal, was actually to identify himself with our weakness, so that even the certitude of the Father’s will was withdrawn from him, so that in his extreme humiliation, Jesus prayed as we tend to pray in our weakness. Our struggles may be, says Lewis, to even believe that God is a Listener, not just that he is an Enabler.

Thus Lewis remained modest, extremely so, about his prayer life. Perhaps nothing keeps us humbler than a healthy realism about the inadequacy of our personal relationship with God. Lewis knew times of dryness in his prayer life, what the medieval monks used to call accidie. He warns us wisely against viewing our prayer life in relation to our emotions. “Whenever they are attending to the Enemy Himself,” wrote Screwtape to his assistant Wormwood, “we are defeated.” The Devil’s advice to his evil apprentice is to distract their attention from God himself, to their feelings about God. “So when they ask for charity, let them also be deflected by having charitable feelings.
When they pray for courage, let them feel brave. When they seek forgiveness, divert them with feelings about forgiveness. Teach them to eliminate the value of each prayer by the success in producing the desired feeling. At all costs avoid the real nakedness of the soul before God in prayer. It is that, argued Screwtape, that is so deadly, of being in the living Presence of God himself.

These then, are some of the things Lewis teaches us by his life and honest reflections. They are home-spun, for the truth is always simple, if it is lived rather than being mere theory. As the primary language of the soul, prayer is like saying the alphabet. It may not appear very profound to describe, yet it is essential, the basis of all communication with God, that leads us forward into mysteries yet unknown and still to be experienced. In the mercy of God, he takes our childhood wounds and memories, to show us how deeply we need God, he takes our childhood wounds and still to be experienced. In the mercy of God, he leads us forward into mysteries yet unknown.

Notes
8. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 357.
23. Ibid., p. 428.
24. Ibid., p. 162.
25. Ibid., p. 181.
26. Ibid., pp. 181-182.
27. Ibid., p. 241.
28. Ibid., p. 316
29. Ibid., p. 324.
30. Ibid., p. 349.
31. Ibid., p. 356.
32. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
39. Ibid., pp. 15-18.
40. Ibid., p. 21.
41. Ibid., p. 34.
The Uses of Fantasy
(continued from page 15)

faith. It would seem that the former group, those more inclined toward rational explanations, see their fiction writing as a replacement for religion, while the latter, perhaps more accustomed to taking things on faith, see their fiction-writing as an expression of their religious views.

J.R.R. Tolkien went so far as to define fantasy writing as a form of worship, constructing imaginary worlds not for recreation, but as Re-creation, expressing the *imago Dei* within oneself. For Tolkien, fantasy was not one of the lower forms of literary expression, but rather one of the highest. His term for it was “Sub-Creation,” the god-like act of creating not just plots or people, but whole alternative worlds in which they may find a local habitation and a name (EP 67). And C.S. Lewis spoke for fantasy writers of philosophical persuasions when he commented on what is perhaps the most fundamental drive behind all literary fantasy: “No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realize the idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp... you must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit” (OS 12).

**Works Cited**


**Book Review: William Griffin’s Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life**

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deplored prolonged introspection and self-analysis—is never developed. Many events in his life are ignored, and we learn almost nothing about social and cultural factors that shaped his life, or the subtle developments of Lewis’s faith and personality. Finally we learn nothing about his range of influence at home and abroad, and we have no assessment of his contribution to Christian thought and behavior.

Some readers may find Griffin’s reticence to pass judgment and draw conclusions refreshing. With so many self-styled authorities lecturing to us today, it is pleasant to come to some of our own conclusions. This welcome respite notwithstanding, Lewis is one of the major figures of our century. He has and will continue to influence thousands of people of all ages. A man of his stature demands a major biography. We want a description of his life in all its variety; we want to explore his mind in all of its richness. We require, as well, at least a preliminary assessment of his contribution to Christendom.

In brief, despite the pleasure and usefulness many readers will derive from *C.S. Lewis: A Dramatic Life*, we still need someone to read and assimilate the prodigious range of primary sources relating to this remarkable Christian. If a major biography for our times is to be written, it must derive much of its strength from insights available through modern scholarship in the fields of history, literary criticism, and psychology. But until such a major book is available, William Griffin’s book will be read and discussed by the ever-growing throng of Lewis admirers.
C.S Lewis Institute Celebrates Its 30th Anniversary at the Annual Fundraising Banquet

An Evening to Remember

Banquet attendees listen intently as Jody Hassett interviews Institute co-founders Jim Houston and Jim Hiskey.

Jim Hiskey recalls the events leading to the founding of C.S. Lewis Institute in 1976.

C.S. Lewis Institute President Tom Tarrants and Board Chairman Kerry Knott present engraved glass bowls to Jim Hiskey and Jim Houston.

The bowls were engraved in England by the acclaimed engraver Philip Lawson Johnston. The inscription reads:

To
James M. Houston
James R. Hiskey
God’s servant
in the founding of the
C.S. Lewis Institute
30th Anniversary Celebration
March 23, 2006
For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 3:11

Chris Morris, Kristin Hansen, and Cherie Harder describe the benefits they have gained through their participation in the C.S. Lewis Fellows Program.

Jim Houston and Jim Hiskey are joined by some of the many men and women who have helped to establish and lead the Institute over its 30-year history.

Board Member Bruce Scott explains the need and privilege of supporting the work of C.S. Lewis Institute.

Banquet photographs courtesy of Gregg Rummel.
The World Is Far From Flat: 
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