

## Are the Chronicles of Narnia an Evangelistic Text?

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The Disney version of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is due for general release on December 9<sup>th</sup>. Many churches are treating this as an evangelistic event (much as they did with Chariots of Fire) and acting accordingly. My fear is that on the one hand we will go expecting the wrong thing and be disappointed, and that on the other hand we will miss what Lewis is actually trying to do (because it's not evangelism in the popular sense), and thus fail to benefit from the movie.

First, let me offer a definition of evangelism. In one sense I can't improve on J.I.Packer's 1961 definition of evangelism as "just preaching the Gospel." In teaching my students, however, I expand that definition in two directions: one is to say that "evangelism is those words which help people take steps towards faith in Jesus." In putting it that way, I am deliberately expanding Packer's definition of "preaching" to include *all* words whose intention is evangelistic, whether it's conversation, a Bible study, a word of testimony, or an evangelistic book—not just formal preaching. I'm also wanting to introduce the idea that evangelism is a process. There is some evidence, for example, that Canadians need to hear the Gospel nine times before they respond (I'm sure Americans get it much more quickly), and that the process of moving to a response takes on average 4 years.

Secondly, it is helpful to know something of C.S.Lewis' background. He grew up as an Anglican in Northern Ireland, was alternately bored and terrified by church, and by the age of thirteen declared himself an atheist, which he remained for fifteen years. During those years, however, he had what he later came to recognise as spiritual experiences, flashes of what he called "joy" which spoke to him of something beyond present material experience. These experiences came to him through the beauty of nature and through ancient mythology, particularly Norse mythology.

For years, he made no connection between his experiences of joy and Christianity, until he made friends with J.R.R.Tolkien, who argued that mythology contained glimpses of God's truth, and that all mythology pointed to Jesus Christ and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. As Lewis wrote later:

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.<sup>1</sup>

Once he had acknowledged that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, he started going to church again, and began to explore and write about his newfound faith. From that time on, he published on average one book per year till his death in 1963, from the academic (such as "The Allegory of Love") to popular theology ("The Screwtape Letters") to the fictional (Narnia and the science

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<sup>1</sup> "Myth Became Fact" in God in the Dock (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970), 166.

fiction trilogy), every one demonstrating a deep integration of his faith with his learning and his life.

So what did Lewis think about evangelism? He was ambivalent in his attitude to conventional evangelism. In an interview with Decision magazine in 1963 (six months before his death), he said, "There are many different ways of bringing people into His Kingdom, even some ways that I specially dislike."<sup>2</sup> Among other things, he clearly disliked evangelical jargon. When Sherwood Eliot Wirt asked him: "Would you say that the aim of Christian writing, including your own writing, is to bring about an encounter of the reader with Jesus Christ?" Lewis replied: "That is not my language, yet it is the purpose I have in mind."<sup>3</sup>

At Oxford, he was reluctant to identify with the OICCU, at that time the only evangelical student organisation at Oxford, and instead started his own student society, The Socratic Club, where Christian faith could be debated.<sup>4</sup> He did once address the OICCU on the topic "What is Christianity?" Lady Elizabeth Catherwood (daughter of Martyn Lloyd-Jones) called it "a really splendid, perfect talk." Yet when a student, probably feeling that Lewis had failed to close the deal, asked "If everything you're saying is true, what should we do about it?" Lewis replied, "God forbid that I should intervene in such a personal matter. Go and talk to your priest about that."<sup>5</sup> That's hardly a standard evangelistic response.

Yet Lewis had a high view of evangelism itself. He wrote: "The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorying him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life."<sup>6</sup> And for him, this was not merely a theory. He wrote in a letter in 1949:

I have two lists of names in my prayers, those for whose conversion I pray, and those for whose conversion I give thanks. The little trickle of transferences from List A to List B is a great comfort.<sup>7</sup>

He developed an understanding that different people with different gifts contribute different things to the process of evangelism. His contribution, he came to feel, was very specific. In a paper on apologetics, he said:

I turn now to the question of the actual attack. This may be either emotional or intellectual. If I speak only of the intellectual kind, that is not because I undervalue the other but because, *not having been given the gifts necessary for carrying it out*, I cannot give advice about it.<sup>8</sup>

He came to believe therefore that evangelism was best done by a team:

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<sup>2</sup> "Cross examination", in God in the Dock, 262.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Described in "The Founding of the Oxford Socratic Club", in God in the Dock, 126-128.

<sup>5</sup> Philip G. Ryken, "The Influence of C.S.Lewis" in C.S.Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands ed. Angus J.L Menuge (Wheaton: Cornerstone Books1997), 59. Ryken incorporates into his essay much unique testimony from those who knew Lewis personally. The original audio and video tapes are in the Marion Wade Center at Wheaton College.

<sup>6</sup> "Christianity and Culture" in Christian Reflections 14.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, June 27, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> "Christian Apologetics" (1945) in God in the Dock, 99. Italics mine.

I am not sure that the ideal missionary team ought not to consist of one who argues and one who (in the fullest sense of the word) preaches. Put up your arguer first to undermine their intellectual prejudices; then let the evangelist proper launch his appeal. I have seen this done with great success.<sup>9</sup>

He had seen it done because in at least two instances he was the “arguer.” When Lewis started doing lectures to the RAF during the Second World War, he worked with an English bishop, A.W. Goodwin-Hudson, to whom he said:

I wish I could do the heart-stuff . . . I can't. . . I wish I could. . . I wish I could press home to these boys how much they need Christ. . . You do the heart stuff and I'll do the head stuff.<sup>10</sup>

They agreed that Lewis would first of all do a 20-minute lecture presenting the rational case for Christianity, and Goodwin-Hudson would then follow up with the evangelistic appeal. Lewis adopted the same approach by teaming up with Stephen Olford for a crusade at Westminster Chapel in London.

As far as I know, Lewis never wrote about evangelism as a process. But clearly he sees himself as playing a part in the work of evangelism, though not the only part or necessarily the most important part. The way he understood his role was as preparation for the Gospel rather than the Gospel itself, “*preparatio evangelica* rather than *evangelium*”<sup>11</sup>

If this is how Lewis sees his own role as an evangelist—as an intellectual John the Baptist—there are nevertheless two distinct ways in his writing in which he fulfils this role. I am thinking of Mere Christianity and the Narnia stories.

Mere Christianity began life as a series of radio broadcasts on the BBC in 1941; these were followed by two other similar series'. They were finally published in the form in which we know them in 1952. At the beginning of the series, he wrote to Dr. James Welch, the producer of the series to explain what he was trying to do:

It seems to me that the New Testament, by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always assumes an audience who already believe in the law of Nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt. Hence if I give a series of talks I should mention Christianity only at the end, and would prefer not to unmask my battery till then.<sup>12</sup>

His intention, then, was to start where people are at—with humankind's innate sense of right and wrong—and to work back from there to the necessity of a lawgiver, and thence to a sense of sin (our failed responsibility to the lawgiver), and to a saviour from sin. It was a rational, logical, step by step approach, illustrated profusely with brilliant analogies and metaphors.

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<sup>9</sup> “Christian Apologetics”, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Ryken 60.

<sup>11</sup> Letters, May 15, 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Green and Hooper, C.S. Lewis: A Biography, 202

Although he said it was preparation for the Gospel—what Schaeffer would have called pre-evangelism—in fact it has been the means of countless people coming to faith—most famously, in our generation, Charles Colson.<sup>13</sup> Which is indicative, I think, of the fact that God is no respecter of our neat categories like evangelism and pre-evangelism. Some of what is intended as pre-evangelism actually brings people to faith; some that is intended to be directly evangelistic is for some people only early preparation for their conversion much later.

The Narnia series began in 1950 with the publication of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. This was two years before Mere Christianity, but six years after the last of the radio broadcasts. Whether or not Lewis was aware of it at first, the Narnia stories demonstrate a quite different approach to evangelism. They do not begin with an attempt to establish a sense of sinfulness. They do not argue in a linear fashion for the truth of Christianity. In fact they do not argue at all. After all, they are children's fantasies.

Perhaps then we are wrong to think of them as evangelistic. But Lewis' own words confirm his evangelistic intention:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. . . . [S]upposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis is concerned for people like himself who thought they knew Christianity, but had never really known or experienced its true nature. In his life, his experience of church on the one hand and his experience of the things that touched him most deeply on the other were totally different. It took many years before he came to realise (through Tolkien) that the thrill he found in mythology was not an end in itself but merely (to use his own image) a signpost pointing him for its fulfillment toward faith in Christ.<sup>15</sup> The mythology of Narnia, he felt, might provide a similar kind of signpost to point people to Christ.

Lewis is the master of metaphor, and it is not surprising that he gives another image for what he was doing in Narnia to his friend and biographer, George Sayer:

His idea, as he once explained to me, was to make it easier for children to accept Christianity when they met it later in life. He hoped they would be vaguely reminded of the somewhat similar stories that they had read and enjoyed years before. "I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child's imagination."<sup>16</sup>

The Gospel may not yet have reached their minds or their wills, but if their imagination has been captured by Narnian images of redemption, then when they hear the Gospel, it will resonate more readily because of that preparatory work done by Narnia.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Colson, Born Again, 113, 121.

<sup>14</sup> C.S.Lewis "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said", in Of This and Other Worlds (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1984), 73.

<sup>15</sup> C.S.Lewis, Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life, 190.

<sup>16</sup> George Sayer, Jack: A Life of C.S.Lewis 318 (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books 1988)

Thus Lewis is still John the Baptist, preparing the ground for the hearing of the Gospel, perhaps years later. Only now, unlike the Lewis of Mere Christianity, he is primarily trying to win the imagination, not the mind.

Not that evangelism was Lewis' initial motive for writing the Narnia stories. Indeed, he had no idea of even writing a series at first. He says that the images came first (the faun, the queen, the lion), then the fairy tale form, and only afterwards the theological realization of how the books might be helpful in evangelism.<sup>17</sup>

So what is there in the Chronicles that can be understood as evangelistic or pre-evangelistic? Barth says somewhere: "The best apologetics is a good dogmatics." If so, there is a wealth of good apologetics in the Chronicles, because behind Lewis the storyteller is Lewis the teacher, fleshing out almost every Christian doctrine. There are theologies of creation, the imago dei, the cultural mandate, and the fall; there is a Redeemer who dies because of sin and is raised again; there is a doctrine of the Spirit (the breath of Aslan); there are experiences of conversion, and lessons in repentance, faith, obedience and sanctification; there is an eschaton, an Armageddon, a heaven and a hell.

All that is lacking is an altar call—but Lewis has already told us he cannot do "the heart stuff." Yet it seems to me that, in spite of his words, Lewis is not simply baptizing readers' imaginations, preparing them for a future response. He hopes that people will respond to Jesus, both immediately and in the future.

Why do I say this? There are several occasions in the Chronicles when Lewis comes close to giving away the identity of Aslan. Maybe the clearest is at the end of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. There the children meet Aslan in the form of a lamb, who has prepared breakfast for them on an open fire in a beach. The children are about to return to our world, and Lucy is upset because they will be leaving Aslan behind. Aslan, however, reassures her: "But you shall meet me, dear one":

"Are—are you there too, sir?" said Edmund.

"I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. That was the very reason you were brought into Narnia, that by knowing me for a little, you may know me better there."<sup>18</sup>

Lewis' intention is that readers, having got to know Aslan in Narnia, should try to discover Aslan's "other name" in our world, and indeed that what they have learned about Aslan will help them in getting to know him in our world. Thus he does not seem surprised when a girl called Hila wrote to him about this question. He comes close to giving the answer, but not quite:

As to Aslan's other name, well I want you to guess. Has there never been anyone in this world who (1) Arrived at the same time as Father Christmas. (2) Said he was the son of the great Emperor. (3) Gave himself up for someone else's fault to be jeered at and killed

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<sup>17</sup> "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said", 73.

<sup>18</sup> The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, 209

by wicked people. (4) Came to life again. (5) Is sometimes spoke of as a Lamb . . . Don't you really know His name in this world. Think it over and let me know your answer!<sup>19</sup>

Like the good teacher he is, Lewis does not spell things out for his students, but points them in the right direction, and lets them discover the truth for themselves. Most evangelists are reluctant to do this! Lewis however is content to sow seeds, nurturing curiosity that he trusts will lead people to consider or reconsider the stories of Jesus without the interference of the watchful dragons. Is this evangelistic? In the sense of calling for an immediate decision to follow Jesus, no. But if evangelism involves all kinds of words whose intention is help people take steps towards faith in Jesus, then the stories of Narnia certainly count.

Some will want to ask, Does it work?—although people like Packer would say that is the wrong question to ask. However, for what it is worth, in the past six months, I have been in email communication with a woman in her 30's, in England, whom I have never met. She discovered my website, and emailed me with some questions. A couple of months ago, I suggested she needed to read the Narnia stories, and sent her the manuscript of a book I have been working on about the spirituality of Narnia. With her permission, I'm going to share some of the questions that reading Narnia has raised for her:

Of course I don't mind telling what questions I have, and if they are of any use, I don't mind you using them in your lecture though, if you don't want to appear a gibbering fool, you'd best put them into your own words rather than mine ;-). Some of the questions have come from the Chronicles themselves and some have come from reading your book. Some aren't really questions, just things I have to think about.

What have I been created (designed) for? Who am I meant to be? I found the whole creation scene [in *The Magician's Nephew*] very moving. It has made me realise that rather than simply (!) being created, I've been called to life for a purpose.

I've been questioning my work anyway regarding its moral validity [she works in the gambling industry]; reading about how the dwarves loved making the crowns (as you put it, "it is what they were made to do and thus what they do well") has made me question it in another way - "Where does my passion lie?" "What is it that I have been made to do well?"

How do logic and faith contribute to what I think is the truth? In the "We hear and obey" chapter, the "seeing is believing" / "believing is seeing" section has raised questions about my reliance on my own reason to understand/believe some things, but also helped me understand why and how I know the truth I know about other things (I'm sorry - that sounds like gibberish even to me).

What are the things that stop me following Aslan even though I believe in him (like Susan in *Prince Caspian*)? This is one I \*really\* need to work on.

The way Aslan accepts people and their failings has made me understand much better how God accepts us (and question how I accept myself and others).

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<sup>19</sup> C.S.Lewis, *Letters to Children*, ed. Lyle Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead (Toronto: Simon and Schuster 1985), June 3, 1953.

In your book, one phrase that really hits home is in the description of Uncle Andrew's reaction to the creation. "And Aslan will not force him to give in." It actually makes me feel the "wonder and a certain shrinking" sort of fear when I think about this.

I cannot imagine that (humanly speaking) any amount of preaching would have caused her to ask such questions. But Narnia has reached very deep into her soul, and is drawing her closer to Aslan almost by the day. The watchful dragons have been driven back.

### Conclusion

Lewis leaves me with many questions about our evangelistic practices. Many people in our world are guarded by the watchful dragons—they can smell religiosity a mile off and they do not want it—how do we get round the dragons? We know how to appeal to people's minds and wills in our evangelism, but how do we appeal to people's imaginations? Are we willing to trust the Holy Spirit enough to ask questions and let people figure out the answers themselves—without our spelling everything out? Do we feel the only way to explain the Gospel is by beginning with sin? Or are we prepared to think there might be other starting points, such as people's longing for joy, which will lead them to the same conclusion? Are we prepared to make use of a wide range of gifts within the Body of Christ to nurture people's progress towards Christ, however slow it may seem?

And, most relevantly, are we prepared for the movie of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe simply to baptize people's imaginations, rather than producing actual conversions? I would argue that if the movie succeeds in disarming the watchful dragons, that is an essential contribution to the process we call evangelism. And unless such sowing and watering takes place, there will never be any reaping.