



## Why C. S. Lewis is So Irritating! Part 1

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Today's podcast is going to be one that I expect will be a continuing topic here, "Why CS Lewis is just so irritating."

Why CS Lewis *\*is\** just so irritating is because, he already said everything. And he said it better than I'll ever say it. I find when I read him that I'm simultaneously just delighted and thrilled because he's just put it perfectly, and it's such a wonderful, original thought, and it's even a little deeper, and then I think, darn it, if I'd had enough time I could have come up with that! Curses! Foiled again! I just have to not read him, because I just get so frustrated, because he says everything, and he says it better and more concisely and more delightfully, easier to grasp, and all that. I think this is probably similar to the scientist who thinks, Darn it, if Einstein hadn't said  $E=MC^2$ , I would have thought of that! Just give me enough time!

So, I've been thinking about something. A line of questions I often get in email has to do with which side I am going to take, either for or against something, in the world or in the Church. Like, should we be leaning towards expanded roles for women in the church services. Should there be female altar servers. What about women in the diaconate. I have kind of intentionally not studied the issue of women in the diaconate, because I don't want to be put on the spot. Because I don't know, and I don't really want to choose a side on that.

Some other things: Some people lean a little bit more in our generation toward believing or at least hoping that ultimately everyone will be saved. Though if you listen to our services, there's sure a lot in there about the fire of hell, and about Judgment Day, and about how some are going to be sent off to destruction. It



doesn't sound like hell is going to be empty—as some Roman Catholic theologians like to say, We know that there is a hell, but we are permitted to hope that it is empty. But if you listen to our liturgy, I don't think we have any grounds for thinking that it's empty. But it's a very appealing idea! I think it was Origen who phrased it as, because God is almighty, and because He wills that all men be saved, as it says in scripture, one way or another eventually His will is going to be done. And though we can't understand it, someday, eventually, all men will be saved. Just because that's what God wants. He gets what He wants. It wasn't a softhearted kind of, oh, you know, well, come on, we were just kidding, you know? Everything's OK. You weren't really fighting against God every minute of your life and loathed Him and wanted nothing to do with Him. It's not that kind of softheaded nonsense. But Origen was declared a heretic, so no, we're not allowed to follow him on that. St. Gregory of Nyssa said it a bit more mildly, instead leaving it as an open question.

So I do hear Orthodox who are saying, aren't we able to sort of lean toward that side? There are a number of questions like that, and there was something I noticed when I was working to get pro-life and pro-choice people talking to each other, when we met at these meetings called Common Ground (which meant, safe ground where you can just be yourself, you can say what you want). At these Common Ground meetings, we acted as if the ground was level, but the thing we didn't admit was that the pro-choice had all the advantages. They controlled the status quo, the laws were and are the way they wanted them to be, they had the favor of the media, they had the favor of the whole college system, they had the favor of a great percentage of the government, and in fact, it has become even less permissible to speak of pro-life views that it was even ten years ago. The ground was not level, but we were pretending that these were these two equal and opposite opinions, and people could stand on either side. We were failing to realize the impact that fashion has. Fashionable opinion. We were just ignoring that and pretending it wasn't there.

There are a number of ways I see this functioning in contemporary Christianity, whether Orthodox or otherwise. Another example is that it is very fashionable to talk about social justice, economic justice, bringing justice for the poor, and that sort of thing. If you can say, "I'm doing it for the poor", then you get this automatic halo. And that has become extremely fashionable. I think it's because, in the eyes of the world, the Church has nothing to offer. We're just annoying and we're in the way and we probably believe the world is flat, and all of that stuff. But the one thing that we can do is, wouldja just get over there and at least take care of poor people? Make yourself useful. Be good for something. So, the world approves Christianity whenever we say that we are for helping the poor. And that begins to take this disproportionate amount of our concept of what we should do, and what the purpose of the church is. The Church is here to bring the Holy Spirit into this world, and to spread the presence of Jesus Christ. And one of the main things that Jesus will do is to care for the poor. But we get the cart before the horse because we are seeing what the world will approve. We're seeing what the fashionable thought is. And if it was a debate between someone who was taking a strong social gospel line and someone who was saying, "No, the most important thing is saving souls, we have to preach the Gospel, preach Jesus Christ, bring people to Him. Even the poor. Let the poor have the Good News preached to them, is what Jesus said. He didn't say, let the poor get wealthy." That would not really be an even debate, because fashionable opinion leans so heavy on one side.



Clive Staples Lewis

So, I'm going to let CS Lewis conclude this podcast a lot more brilliantly than I could. Darn it, because he wrote it first! This is from the Screwtape Letters, which is probably his best known—? One of his best known works, apart from the Narnia series. I'm looking on the front to see what it says... Copyright 1961. So that must have been really pretty close to the end of his life. Did you know that CS Lewis died on the same day as John F. Kennedy? And the same day as Aldus Huxley. The Roman Catholic writer Peter Kreeft wrote a really interesting book called "Between Heaven and Hell," imagining that CS Lewis, JFK, and Aldus Huxley are all in a waiting room on that November 22nd, waiting to go either to heaven or to hell, or wherever they're going to their ultimate destiny. But they're just kind of in a holding tank, and they're kind of having a conversation about life, faith, about God, life after death. This book was written in the form of almost like a play, with three voices. Not a dialogue, but a trialogue.

So CS Lewis died in '63, this has a copyright of '61. It's possibly a little earlier than that. But it was the fruit of very long meditation on these ideas. In the Screwtape Letters, as you probably know, it is written by a devil, a senior bureaucratic devil writing to his nephew, who is a younger devil on assignment trying to tempt and corrupt and confuse a young man in wartime London. So, this is some of the advice that the senior devil gives.

"The use of fashions in thought is to distract men from their real dangers. We direct the fashionable outcry of each generation against those vices of which it is in the least danger, and fix its approval on the virtue that is nearest the vice which we are trying to make endemic. The game is to have them all running around with fire extinguishers whenever there's a flood; and all crowding to that side of the boat which is already nearly gone under. Thus, we make it fashionable to expose the dangers of enthusiasm..."

(He's using the word "enthusiasm" in the sense of the 17th and 18th century use, an archaic use now, but it meant religious enthusiasm, excitability, emotional religion that is prone to spiritual incidents and seeing the miraculous and so forth. It's a term of contempt, although of course the spiritual experiences could be



very genuine.)

“Thus we make it fashionable to expose the dangers of enthusiasm at the very moment when they are all really becoming worldly and lukewarm. A century later, when we are really making them all Byronic and drunk with emotion, the fashionable outcry is directed against the mere understanding of mere intellectual Christianity. Cruel ages are put on their guard against sentimentality; feckless and idle ones, against respectability; lecherous ones, against puritanism; and whenever all men are really hastening to be slaves or tyrants, we make liberalism the prime bogey.”

So that’s an excellent way of framing something, in just one brief, terrific, memorable paragraph, that we should keep in mind as we look at these issues that seem to have two sides. Like, what about salvation and non-Christians? Or a strictly pro-life viewpoint that emphasized abortion as the most important thing—there’ve been almost fifty million abortions now—and though there are other issues that are similar, life issues, that’s the top, because of the number, because of the death toll. Those on the other side would say, no, they need to be all held in balance with each other, and the fashion in thought is going to lean more toward that second one than the first. It’s going to be more unpopular to take the purest pro-life stand. Or the question of, should you be evangelizing, preaching the Gospel, or should you be helping the poor (as if they’re opposites). Fashion is gonna lean more one way rather than the other way.

I was recently asked, what about the emphasis on Orthodoxy on strict asceticism and denying the flesh? Aren’t we also meant to rejoice in creation and delight in the good things God has given us? Well, yes, though I think personally we may lean a little too far toward the second of those, because in our culture there’s no understanding of asceticism. And indulgence is the thing the human flesh inclines to in the first place. But it’s also the thing that our economy demands of us, and advertising is continually, 24 hours a day, evangelizing us about.

In every issue like that, as you try to pray it through, and think about what is correct- be aware, call to awareness, the fact that fashion is probably smiling on one of those more than the other. And it’s gonna tip you naturally in that direction. So listen a little harder to the side you were not so inclined to pay attention to. The side that, if you go that direction, you’re going to be standing with “the nerds”. You’re going to be in with the out crowd. So much of what we do as grown-ups is controlled by peer pressure and we don’t even know it. You know, if you’re in the eighth grade, they keep telling you about peer pressure. You’re aware of it. And then you graduate, and you go to work, and you start living in the world, and peer pressure is still really leaning on you, and you don’t recognize it anymore.

So I’ll close with those brilliant words of CS Lewis about fashions in thought from the Screwtape Letters. Let me see what chapter is that, in case you want to look it up. Here you go, it’s in chapter 25. I’ll leave you with that to think about today.

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