

## Introducing C.S. Lewis by Desmond Ford

(Editorial note: Here Dr. Ford introduces one of the most popular Christian writers of this century. In later issues we shall review some of his apologetic works in more detail.)

*Letters to an American Lady*, C.S. Lewis, published by Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 121 pages; and *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis, published by Fontana, London, 160 pages.

C.S. Lewis, former Professor in English Language and Literature at both Oxford and Cambridge, is undoubtedly the foremost Christian apologist of the twentieth century. He has done more to enable people of the modern world to see the credibility of Christianity than any other person. Converted to Christ from atheism in 1929 at the age of thirty-two, the young university don began to pour out a cataract of essays and books which have changed the Christian world scene.

Lewis' autobiography is *Surprised by Joy*, but in some respects we learn more about him from his letters. For example, in October 1950 he began a correspondence with a woman whom he had never met and which he continued till his death. These are now found in *Letters to An American Lady* and are very fascinating. When we realize that some of the characters in *Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Four Loves* are taken from life — Lewis' life, they glow the more.

Lewis married one of his converts, the Jewish Joy Davidson, when she was dying of cancer and in order that she might not be deported from Britain as an alien. The friendship ripened into true love, and his *Grief Observed*, originally written anonymously, tells of his experience in bereavement.

Lewis never drove a car nor traveled outside Europe. He remained close to his university scene even during the war years

when he frequently lectured and preached to military personnel. Generous to a fault with time and money, he painstakingly replied to hundreds of inquirers in his own handwriting. He regularly distributed two-thirds of his income to help those in need.

While a great walker, Lewis' other health habits were not ideal, and he died at the comparatively early age of sixty-five. In his closing years he became increasingly stricter in his dietetic regimen and would have surrendered his smoking had he known what is now so universally recognized.

Here are a few extracts from *Letters to An American Lady*:

"How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing...it is irresistible. If even 10% of the world's population had it, would not the whole world be converted and happy before a year's end?" (p. 19).

"About sleep: do you find that the great secret (if one can do it) is not to care whether you sleep? Sleep is a jade who scorns her suitors but woos her scornors. I feel exactly as you do about the horrid commercial racket they have made out of Christmas. I send no cards and give no presents except to children" (p. 22).

"The precious alabaster box which one must break over the Holy Feet is one's heart. Easier said than done. And the contents become perfume only when it is broken. While they are safe inside they are more like sewage" (p. 34).

"...the only thing one can usually change in one's situation is oneself. And yet one can't change that either — only ask Our Lord to do so" (p. 46).

But the place to start with Lewis is certainly his *Screwtape Letters*. It is the best known of all his works, a fact Lewis regretted inasmuch as it is by no means his best. Yet perhaps it is the most

readable. It consists of a series of letters from a senior tempter (Wormwood) to a junior tempter — both of them devils. It is humorous, edifying, and mentally and spiritually stimulating. Discussed in this book are such themes as prayer, feelings, temptation, divine and human love, etc.

When the junior devil exults that his patient's religious phase is dying away, Wormwood warns him:

"Humans are amphibians, — half spirit and half animal. . . . This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation — the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks. If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen this undulation in every department of his life — his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites, all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth periods of emotional and bodily richness and liveliness will alternate with periods of numbness and poverty. . . . The Enemy [God] relies on the troughs even more than on the peaks; some of His special favourites have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else" (pp. 44-45).

You will laugh, you may even cry, as you read *Screwtape Letters*. But one thing is sure: you will be more mature and wise spiritually than ever before, yet more humble.

All will profit by delving into the mind of this great man. God is at work in all the world and has raised up good shepherds for all flocks. Yet read no writer uncritically. There is not a book in print which could not be improved. Lewis has his own oddities and the man was sufficiently intelligent to be tempted to despise any who agreed with him in entirety. □