

Foreword

GROWING UP IN ULSTER, I came to the reading of C. S. Lewis late in my intellectual journey. I cannot recall, for example, that the cohort of my friends at Queen's University in Belfast were seriously acquainted with his work. We certainly had heard of Lewis but we seldom if ever discussed him. I vaguely remember that my headmaster at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen had been a student of Lewis at Cambridge. However, he so terrified me in a class on Chaucer that I suspect that knowing this about my fearsome teacher of English and divinity would have inhibited interest in Lewis rather than fostered it.

When I did come to read Lewis, it was his wonderful essays rather than the standard apologetic texts that made him famous that caught my attention. I consider many of these essays masterpieces of elegance, insight, and even philosophical brilliance. Even then I came late to these works and initially I did not perceive how penetrating they really were. His autobiography, a work of superb literary quality, was much too mystical and idealist in orientation for my taste when I first read it. It did not address the questions of meaning and truth that were central in my training in philosophy. I never read the Narnia series, although I found his science fiction novels interesting, not least because they captured some of the philosophical issues that were central to my development. I was aware of Lewis as a literary critic but that was way outside both my interests and my competence; I was content to take it on good testimony that he operated at the top of his league. Taken in the round, beyond his splendid essays, Lewis was something of an enigma wrapped in a cloud of unknowing.

Perhaps Lewis remains something of an enigma; he is someone whom we too readily classify in terms where we can bind him to ourselves and keep him from unsettling us. Or maybe it would be better to say that

he has such an extraordinary wingspan that efforts to clip his wings all too quickly cut him down to manageable size. It is very rare to find him treated seriously as an evangelist; *prima facie* it looks like reductionism on steroids. Referring to him as an evangelist, however, expands rather than narrows the portrait of the life and work of Lewis. As a student of evangelism I had noted his readiness to offer this self-description but I failed to take it seriously. Certainly, when one looked at what he wrote on what we might grandly call the conversion of the West, there was plenty to detain the serious observer. Even so, this was a far cry from examining him from the point of view of evangelism. Indeed, to put Lewis and evangelism close together in one sentence would simply mean the kiss of death to his reputation. And yet, here we have a whole volume devoted to Lewis as an evangelist.

It is a great pleasure to see this careful study of Lewis as an evangelist appear in print. So much has been said about Lewis that it is far from easy to see how anything truly original can be written about him. Yet Michael Gehring has done exactly that. Gehring not only saw that one of Lewis's great gifts was that of an evangelist, he discovered that Lewis himself endorsed this judgment. With this in hand he set out to explore the whole Lewis corpus from this new angle. The result is a comprehensive and fresh look at the life and work of Lewis. To achieve his overall aim Gehring develops a fitting framework within which to get hold of the central elements in Lewis's life and work as an evangelist. The work throughout is thorough, splendidly informed by the secondary sources, and written with flair. Gehring is also fair to Lewis. For years Lewis has been treated as something of a cult figure whose blind spots have been either denied or passed over in silence. This is a delicate matter, for no one wants to undercut the extraordinary impact of Lewis as a witness to the truth of Christianity. Yet the blind spots have to be explored. Gehring does this with great care, covering all the relevant evidence. Moreover, he deftly examines the significance of the moral life for the work of evangelism. This is an important secondary theme in Gehring's book and he has provided wise and prudent comment for readers to ponder. Taken as a whole we have a fine, fresh treatment of Lewis and a volume that should be used in evangelism courses throughout the world.

William J. Abraham

Albert Cook Outler Professor of Theology and Wesley Studies
Southern Methodist University