

C.S. Lewis and the Latter-day Saints

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As an LDS fan of C.S. Lewis, I have periodically been asked questions about the relationship between Lewis and Mormonism. Here are some of the answers I've developed over the years.

Question: *"Why do Latter-day Saints connect with C.S. Lewis?"*

1. I believe that Latter-day Saints are unusually open to sources of inspiration coming from outside their specific faith. To some extent, I think this is almost a matter of necessity, given the small size of the Church, but there's more to it than that. It seems to me that the Restored Gospel encourages us to seek truth wherever it may be found. (See, *e.g.*, the 13th Article of Faith, D&C 88:118, Orson F. Whitney's remarks in General Conference about the Lord's work being "stupendous, magnificent, and altogether too arduous for this little handful of Saints to accomplish by themselves", and Brigham Young's statements about the Gospel embracing all truth and the duty of the Saints "to gather every item of truth ... [w]hether [it] be found with professed infidels, or ... the Church of England".) This openness (and the sometimes harsh criticism Lewis has received from certain Evangelical quarters) often makes me more comfortable introducing Lewis's work to my LDS friends than to my Protestant friends.
2. In the preface to one of his books, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said he relies on Lewis for his "phraseology" not his "theology". Persons who criticize Mormons for liking Lewis by arguing that there are theological differences between Lewis and Latter-day Saints are missing the point, I think. Whether or not, Lewis was thinking of the exact same things when he wrote as Mormons think of when they read his writings, the fact is that for many in the Church his words are marvelous vehicles for conveying truths of the Restored Gospel. We're less concerned with a theologically precise understanding of Lewis's views than with the effect that Lewis's words have on our hearts.
3. Lewis apparently didn't have the same distaste for concrete imagery that other orthodox theologians did. He was criticized fairly harshly by W. Norman Pittenger in the October 1, 1958, issue of *Christian Century* for using "vulgar analogies". In a letter to his brother on January 17, 1932, Lewis wrote: "Compare 'Our Father which art in Heaven' with 'The supreme being transcends space and time'. The first goes to pieces if you begin to apply the literal meaning to it. How can anything but a sexual animal really be a father? How can it be in the sky? The second falls into no such traps. On the other hand the first really *means* something, really represents a concrete experience in the minds of those who use it: the second is mere dextrous playing with counters, and once a man has learned the rule he can go on that way for two volumes without really using the words to refer to any concrete *fact* at all ..."
4. In the August/September 1998 issue of *First Things*, Gilbert Meilaender had an article entitled "The Everyday C.S. Lewis". Meilaender suggests that Lewis's writings tended to be religious rather than theological and that Lewis was more of a poet than a theologian.

Austin Farrer, in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, says that Lewis never advanced “the pretension to look deeply into the things of God.” Perhaps these observations help explain why whatever theological differences exist between LDS and Anglican thought don’t seem to matter much to many Mormons.

5. My (admittedly subjective) impression has been that, among Mormons, fans of Lewis seem more devout, loyal, or conservative than critics of Lewis. This seems to me to be in line with an observation Lewis made on pp. 11–12 of *Letters to an American Lady* (and elsewhere): “I believe that, in the present divided state of Christendom, those who are at the heart of each division are all closer to one another than those who are at the fringes. I would even carry this beyond the borders of Christianity: how much more one has in common with a *real* Jew or Muslim than with a wretched liberalising, occidentalised specimen of the same categories.”

Question: “*What about Lewis’s writings do you find personally appealing?*”

1. The way he has helped me to make sense out of suffering.
2. His vision of eternal glory, holiness, honor, etc. Besides the last letter in *The Screwtape Letters*, some of my favorite examples of these can be found in his sermon “The Weight of Glory” and his essay “The World’s Last Night”.

Question: “*In what areas are Lewis’s views most and least compatible with Mormonism?*”

On page 234, of Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls’ book *C.S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer*, there is a table contrasting the theological views of these two men. Here is a portion of it:

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Schaeffer</i>	<i>Lewis</i>
Fundamental role of God	Judge	Father
Guiding grid	Legal	Relational
Soteriological emphases	Punishment Justification Pardon Imputed Righteousness	Rehabilitation Moral Transformation Enablement Imparted Righteousness
God’s salvific intent	Unconditional election	Universal accessibility
Fate of the unevangelized	Different from those who have heard–tough luck	Same as who have heard–tough love

For me, the contrast between the views of Lewis and Schaeffer illustrates why one is so much more popular among Mormons than the other. The Moral Transformation vs. Justification contrast is also discussed in Meilaender’s article “The Everyday C.S. Lewis”: “[The Christian life that Lewis depicts] is not conceived primarily as a turn from consciousness of sin to the proclamation of grace. Instead, it is conceived as a journey, a process of perfection, and Jesus is the way toward that goal. From start to finish this journey is, to be sure, the work of grace, but that grace is primarily the power to finish the journey, not simply a pardoning word of forgiveness. The end of this journey is the beatific vision—to see God and to rest in God—and that vision is granted only to those who are perfected, to the pure in heart.”

In Douglas T. Hyatt's "Joy, the Call of God in Man: A Critical Appraisal of Lewis's Argument from Desire" (in *C.S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis*, Angus J.L. Menuge, ed., p. 308.) he states that "Desire, then, is rooted somewhere in the primordial memory of paradise". This makes me wonder if, perhaps, Lewis's frequent discussion of Sehnsucht might have a special appeal to those, like Mormons, who believe in a premortal existence.

As for areas of incompatibility, there are probably many, although I don't focus on them and won't take the time to list them. Donald T. Williams wrote an article for the December 21, 1979, issue of *Christianity Today* called "A Closer Look at the 'Unorthodox Lewis'". In that article, he said that Evangelicals "forgive Lewis's doctrinal imperfections because his *heart* was so obviously in the right place." I think Mormons do the same thing.