

“C.S. Lewis and Augustine School: Why C.S. Lewis Matters for Augustine School”
Augustine School Convocation Address
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Bradley G. Green

“The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.”¹

“We create men without chests and bid them breathe, we castrate geldings and bid them be fruitful.”²

“I wonder what they *do* teach them at these schools.”³

At Augustine School we are committed to the authority of Scripture in all realms of life. God has given us Scripture, and we affirm that Scripture is true wherever it touches. But we read more than simply Scripture. We read many other authors, from Plato and Aristotle, to Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, to Homer and Virgil, various novelists—from Stephen Crane to Shakespeare, from George Orwell to William Faulkner, and on and on. We read and think about all of these authors and their writings in light of Scripture, but we *do* read them. Some of these authors are friendly to historic Christianity; many are not. But we do read them. We must.

But if you were to take a poll of which authors—after Scripture—keep popping up in what is read at Augustine School, besides Holy Writ, the two authors likely to be mentioned would almost assuredly be J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. These two authors and their works ultimately seem to haunt the halls of Augustine School, and I am glad they do so.

Last year I shared a few words about Tolkien at Fall Convocation. This year I want to share a few words about C.S. Lewis.

At Augustine School we have certain of our students read *The Chronicles of Narnia* on a yearly basis. This year in Ninth Grade Theology and Bible student will work through Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*. A number of years ago I would have Augustine School faculty read Lewis’ classic essay, “Learning in War-Time,” an essay in which Lewis outlines a case for the necessity of studying, the necessity of reading, even amidst the horrors of war—in that particular case World War II. Lewis’s shadow looms large over the founding of Augustine School, and does so still. And again, I am glad.

I want to suggest several reasons why I am glad. That is, several reasons why C.S. Lewis is such a helpful guide and model for Augustine School.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 27.

² Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 37.

³ Professor Kirke, at the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

C.S. Lewis and the Importance of Reading

Lewis was committed to what Thomas Aquinas had called centuries earlier, the “truth of things,” and what others have called the “permanent things.” Lewis at one point could say of himself and his colleagues, in terms of what they could provide for college students: “we have fulfilled our whole function if we help you to *see* some given tract of reality.”⁴ Lewis was quite concerned and agitated about the educational movements of his own day. He believed that by the time a student went to college or university (i.e., when you graduate from Augustine School), you should have been trained such that it is time for you “to venture to look on reality in the raw.”⁵ Lewis understood that learning is about the human person—you and me—coming into contact with reality. Nothing else will do.⁶ So, as Lewis sees it the student must indeed be a voracious reader if they want to be learned. The student must read *old* books. Not because no good books are being written today, but because the books written recently have not proved themselves over time.

My guess is that when say, the 9th Grade, walked into school the first day and saw your pile of books, Homer, Plato, Thucydides and the like, perhaps you gulped. Perhaps you said, “I am supposed to read those books.” Well, yes, you are, and if you will go for it, *you will in fact be a different person because of it*. If you want to be educated, *those* are the kind of books you need to work through.

But why read, *really*? If we are not careful, we may be tempted to think that we read lots of old books simply so we can drop the names of certain authors and books: “I read Plato yesterday.” “Oh yeah, well I read Plato *and* Aristotle.” “Give me a break, I read Plato, Aristotle, *and* Thucydides.” “Oh YEAH? Well I read Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides *and* walked on the moon.” You get the picture. But listen to what Lewis says about the importance of reading. We read the old books *go guard ourselves from error*. Lewis writes: “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books.”⁷ We read because the intellectual life is a moral enterprise. And unless we read we are prone to go off the rails. We will not understand God, nor his world, nor our neighbor. We will assuredly find it difficult love God and neighbor—if we really don’t know much about either.

But this emphasis on reading leads to my second point, C.S. Lewis the apologist.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, “Our English Syllabus,” in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 87.

⁵ Lewis, “Our English Syllabus,” 89.

⁶ Lewis was quite critical of faculty committees which simply chose bits and pieces of the intellectual tradition to read.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.

C.S. Lewis the Apologist

We learn and read for a reason. As I suggested last year, all of you at Augustine School are being trained and shaped so that you can be one of the *Dúnedain*. Now, that is Tolkien's language. Here is how Lewis spoke about it. Listen to what he says: “

If all the world were Christian, it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defence but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.

Indeed, Lewis writes: “The cool intellect must work not only against cool intellect on the other side, but against the muddy heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether.”⁸ Do you see what Lewis is saying? It is no accident that Lewis and Tolkien were friends. Both—ultimately—were men of the *Dúnedain*. Both were attempting to resist and speak up against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Both saw themselves as fulfilling a moral duty to help their brother and sisters in Christ who for whatever reason did not have the education and intellectual prowess they both possessed.

All of you students, particularly those who have had several years to benefit from an Augustine School education, have a significant moral duty, and this duty will only increase as you one day take on the mantle of adulthood and adult responsibility. *You* will be the educated elite for the rest of your life. You are being shaped, formed, and trained so that you can help those God places in your life as they face the many challenges which will come from an unbelieving world.

C.S. Lewis the Story-Teller

While I am happy to stand by all I have said, if most of us are honest, we were originally drawn to Lewis because of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the stories he tells (e.g., his science fiction trilogy). And rightly so. One of the most important things we do at Augustine School is to lead students into the finest literature ever produced. As Lewis noted in *The Abolition of Man*, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.”⁹ The *Chronicles* are a means of irrigating the desert. The *Chronicles* are of means of encouraging the growth of the imagination. It has been said that the teacher—for good or for ill—is the interior decorator of the student's soul. If this is the case, then teaching (and learning!) is serious business. Reading good and beautiful and imaginative stories is not simply “filler” between the *real* classes like math. Rather, reading good stories is at the *heart* of a real education. Lewis made clear that real, or true education must be concerned with the training of a student's *sentiments*, their *dispositions*. Ultimately, education must be concerned with the students' *heart*. Lewis can write—turning to our namesake, Augustine: “St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of

⁸ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 50.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 27.

the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and degree of love which is appropriate to it.”¹⁰ Lewis goes on: “Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought.”¹¹ That is, when we at Augustine School speak of formation of our students into men and women who are learning to submit all things to the universal lordship of Christ, we actually mean that language. Education is about the transformation of a person into what they would not be without such an education.

And the truth of the matter is this: *all* education is about the transformation of persons. Lewis has written that we are all—with each and every decision—becoming more heavenly or hellish creatures. There is no other option. We are either living our lives, making decisions, taking action, in ways consistent with the lordship of Christ, or we are not. Thus ultimately *every* school has some sort of ultimate goal for its students (even if this goal is unclear, unstated, or unacknowledged).

And what Lewis provides in the *Chronicles* are seven wonderful books which all—in their own way—help in the trainings of our students’ sentiments, dispositions, and affections. Now, *they are of course simply immensely enjoyable* apart from any other value. But such stories are also *immensely* helpful in shaping our students’ sentiments, dispositions, and affections.

When Lucy Pevensie first discovers the wardrobe, and finds herself in a snowy land, what reader is not struck with a kind of joy and longing—a joy and longing which can only be fulfilled (as Lewis will so powerfully wrote) in meeting Aslan himself. When Edmund, Lucy’s brother, visits Narnia but then betrays Lucy by telling Peter and Susan that there is no such place as Narnia, what reader is not shocked and saddened at such shameful behavior. Does not the young reader recognize Edmund’s behavior as *objectively* and *really* wrong. When Tumnus is tempted, *truly* tempted, to betray Lucy to the White Witch, what reader is not on the edge of his or her seat, *just* hoping that Tumnus resists? When Edmund keeps asking for more and more of Turkish Delight, what reader does not truly know that Edmund is keeping into deeper and deeper trouble—trouble from which he may not recover? When all four Pevensie children fight the White Witch and her minions at the end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, what reader does not know that chivalry is good and cowardice is bad? And even more to the point, what reader does not at some level *want to be chivalrous*? In a different context I would love to hear your favorite episodes from the *Chronicles*. We cannot work through all of the myriad examples here. But would any reader *not* want the brave Reepicheep by his side in a time of battle? Do you not *want* to be brave after reading about Reepicheep in *Voyage of the Dawn-Treader*? When one reads of the evil Queen of the Underland in *The Silver Chair*, do you not know you are encountering evil. Do we not *know* that she is evil, that she has treated Prince Rilian evilly, and that she simply *must* be defeated?

There will come days when all of you students will face any number of challenges to your faith. At Augustine we want to train you in many ways: to think on your feet, to be articulate, to not be fooled by bad arguments, to have any number of historical facts at your finger-tips. That is all part of it. But you must also *want* to be good. You must *want* to do the right thing. You must be

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 28-29.

¹¹ Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 29.

so shaped and formed by years of immersion in stories like the *Chronicles* that you *desire* to be a hero or heroine. We make no bones about it. We are after your heart. Every teacher is kind of like the person in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we are standing in fields of tall rye. In the image of a catcher in the rye, the “catcher” wants to stop persons from blindly and unknowingly running over a cliff at the edge of a rye field. At Augustine we not only want to “catch” you—and hence rescue you, we want to see you transformed into Lucies, Reepicheeps, and Prince Rilians. Our goal is not simply to stop you from making big mistakes. Our goal is that when you leave this school, you will be different than when you came. Your heart, your dispositions, your affections will all be changed, so that you love the things you ought to love, and you love them the right way. And—we hope you hate well. We hope you hate every sort of evil—cowardice and sloth and pride, and every form of sin. We hope you love God and neighbor, and so fulfill the greatest commandment, as taught by our Lord Jesus.

And we hope these three aspects of Lewis are mirrored in your lives. We hope you find yourselves drawn to the old books over the course of a life time. We hope you will—in the way God calls you—be an apologist for the faith. And we hope you will continue to be shaped by great stories—including the *Chronicles of Narnia*—and that you will pass on stories to your children and to others with whom you may have influence. You might even try writing your *own* stories! There is always room for more good stories.

Of course, Lewis is only a guide. A wonderful guide, by simply a guide nonetheless. While Lewis is a good guide, the ultimate shepherd is of course Jesus Christ our Lord. And all of our learning—as Lewis rightly understood—is something offered, ultimately, the Lord. Enjoy Lewis—his life, his fiction, his essays, his works of literary criticism, his works of apologetics. But make sure and walk with—and run to—the Good Shepherd, who will ultimately bring you to the Father, if you trust in the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord.