

EXCERPT

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Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality ***C. S. Lewis and Incarnational Faith***

Available May 21, 2019 | \$22, 218 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5236-9

Gary S. Selby (PhD, University of Maryland) serves as professor of ministerial formation at Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan College. He is the author of *Not with Wisdom of Words: Nonrational Persuasion in the New Testament* and *Martin Luther King and the Rhetoric of Freedom: The Exodus in America's Struggle for Civil Rights*.

On "Red Beef and Strong Beer" and C. S. Lewis

Engaging the writings of C. S. Lewis, Gary Selby contends that spiritual formation comes about not by retreating from the physical world but through deeper engagement with it. By considering themes such as our human embodiment, our sense of awareness in our everyday experiences, and the role of our human agency, Selby demonstrates that an earthy spirituality can be a robust spirituality.

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"Red beef and strong beer." Those were the words C. S. Lewis used to describe life under the rigorous tutelage of his beloved mentor, William T. Kirkpatrick, "The Great Knock" (SJ 133-136). Lewis's father had secured Kirkpatrick as a private tutor for his son in order to prepare him for the entrance examinations to Oxford University. Lewis gave a glimpse of Kirkpatrick's character and teaching style in his endearing account of their first meeting. Kirkpatrick was an imposing figure over six feet tall, "very shabbily dressed (like a gardener, I thought), lean as a rake, and immensely muscular," with a billowing mustache and side-whiskers that made him look like Emperor Franz Joseph. After introducing himself, Lewis nervously tried to make polite conversation by pointing out that Surrey, the region of England where Kirkpatrick lived, seemed "wilder" than he'd expected.

Kirkpatrick's response jarred him. "Stop!" he shouted, with a suddenness that made Lewis jump. "What do you mean by wildness and what grounds had you for not expecting it?" Lewis attempted several answers, but found each subjected to further interrogation, until he was finally forced to admit that he'd had no clear rationale for applying the term "wildness" to that area whatsoever, a conclusion driven home by Kirkpatrick's question, "Do you not see, then, . . . that your remark was meaningless?"

Lewis went on to describe his tutor as coming closer than anyone he ever knew to being a "purely logical entity" for whom "the most casual remark was taken as a summons to disputation." Although he sometimes chafed under Kirkpatrick's discipline, Lewis learned to think critically, and about things that really mattered. Looking back he would say of his time there, "Some boys would not have liked it; but to me it was red beef and strong beer."

Lewis's choice of words to describe the crucible of Kirkpatrick's instruction clearly shows his gift for using language to stir our imagination. It also underscores his appreciation for the earthy, embodied stuff of life. Lewis loved food, drink, laughter, and good conversation. He relished an amble in the English countryside, a joy made all the more delightful by his anticipation of the cozy fire and pint of ale that awaited him in a pub at day's end. But I also believe that this phrase gives us a clue to what, for Lewis, it meant to be spiritual. It points to the possibility that savoring the sensations of taste and touch, sight and smell and hearing, these experiences that are often the richest of our earthly lives, represented a doorway into the presence of God and the first step in the spiritual journey. This book explores that tantalizing possibility.

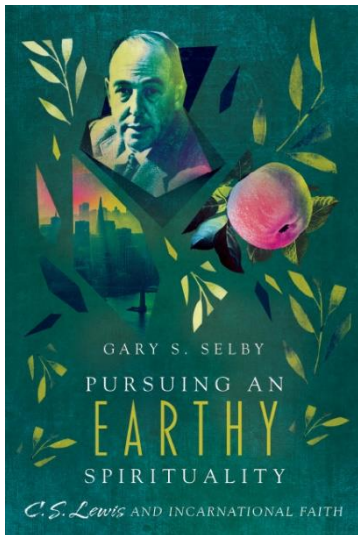


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Once, when asked where he wanted the royalties for his books to go after his death, C. S. Lewis predicted, "After I've been dead five years, no one will read anything I've written." As one person quipped, he would have made a lousy estate planner. In the years since his death Lewis has become the "Elvis Presley of Christian publishing." Within a decade of launching its "C. S. Lewis Signature Classics" in 2001, HarperOne reported sales approaching 10 million. His Narnia series is now in its third film adaptation. When the Huffington Post asked its readers to name one religious book that had most changed their life, the number one choice was *The Screwtape Letters*. And when *Christianity Today* asked contributors and church leaders to nominate the ten best religious books of the twentieth century, far and away the most popular author was Lewis, and the top choice was *Mere Christianity*. The editors said, "We could have included even more Lewis works, but finally we had to say: 'Enough is enough; give some other authors a chance.'"

What these sources demonstrate about Lewis's enduring influence I have seen directly in the lives of students over the past 25 years of university teaching and ministry. More times than I can count I have found myself invited to explore Lewis's writings with students at gatherings that range from late night fraternity reading groups to campus ministry retreats to spiritual formation training workshops to undergraduate and graduate academic courses. For most the experience has been life-changing. As one student put it, "I will never see the world in the same way again."

For these as for so many others, Lewis provides an intellectually defensible account of Christian faith, in marked contrast to the common view of faith as wishful fantasy (and nonbelief as the only intellectually honest response to the empirical data of the universe). Lewis also gives them theological coherence, where the biblical narrative and their own personal experiences of joy and longing as well as suffering and pain seem to make sense. They find practical wisdom on topics ranging from prayer and temptation, to relationships, emotions, and even good writing. Because he was so well-read in historical theology—from Athanasius and Augustine, to Anselm and Aquinas, just to name a few from the "A" section—Lewis provides access to a rich theological tradition that most would otherwise never encounter.

But most of all, Lewis gives us a way of living out the faith that is joyful and full of vitality—as God intended it to be. Lewis urges us to pay close attention to the rich, often mundane experiences of pleasure and delight that mark our days, and to view these wonderful sensory experiences as glimmers, from an unimaginable distance, of the very glory of God. He bids us wonder at what the nature of God must be to have created *this*. And he invites us to imagine what it might mean to live eternally in the presence of this God. In offering all of this, he presents a way of living well, a way of living that embodies the Christian message as truly good news. And whatever else is true of our lives, we who claim to follow God, the glad Creator, ought to be known as people who live well.

—Adapted from the introduction



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