

Episode 180 McGrath

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Alister McGrath

I'm Alister McGrath, and I'm a Professor of Theology at Oxford University in England.

David Capes

Dr. Alister McGrath, so good to see you. Welcome to *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

Alister McGrath

I'm really excited to be here. It's a great privilege. Thank you for having me.

David Capes

For those who don't know, who is Alister McGrath?

Alister McGrath

Well, Alister McGrath is someone who was an atheist when he was young. And to his surprise, discovered that Christianity made a lot more sense than atheism. It actually made life livable, I think that's one of the key things to say. I'm someone who has been an atheist, knows why he became a Christian and spends a lot of time talking to atheists, trying to help them to see what I've discovered. I guess I have two real concerns. One is to talk to atheists. The other is to help Christians rejoice in the depth and richness of their faith and discover more about it.

David Capes

That's exciting. You have degrees in science as well as theology, right?

Alister McGrath

Yes, that's right. I began as a scientist, and then really began to think in terms of ministry and service. Theology perhaps because I wanted to go into ministry. I think because I just want to know more about Christianity be able to explain it better to other people. And also to understand it better myself.

David Capes

Now you have a lot of books to your credit. Most of those you can find at the Lanier Theological Library. So we're grateful for that. But we're here today to talk a bit about a lecture that you're going to be giving in the early part of March 2024. If you're listening to this podcast later, you can watch it on our YouTube channel. But if you're listening to this before the event, you can register and come join us. The event is going to be exciting. The title is "CS Lewis, His Significance for Personal Faith, and the Ministry of the Church". Now you've written a lot about Lewis in the past, and you helped us understand him. How has C.S. Lewis influenced your own journey of faith?

Alister McGrath

Well, he was very important. As I said before, I was an atheist and then became a Christian. And as you might expect, I became a Christian with lots of questions. What about this? What about that? and my poor old Christian friends at college! They just couldn't cope with it. And I think, in desperation, they said why don't you start reading CS Lewis. And that was a new one for me. I had heard of Lewis, but I didn't know he was a Christian. I knew he'd written a book about lions or something but that was as far as it went.

Anyway, I went to the local bookstore, and I bought a book by Lewis on Christianity. And I have to tell you, it began to speak to me. And then I kept on reading him. And I keep on reading him because he's just so satisfactory. I guess you could say Lewis really helped me to appreciate the intellectual depth of faith, and its vitality. And really, this was almost like a gateway for me. I discovered something about how rich and exciting Christianity was. Lewis probably is the most significant writer beyond scripture in my Christian life.

David Capes

Well, that's one of the reasons I think that his writings are so applicable to preaching. We'll talk about that in just a moment. You wrote a book a number of years ago. You laid out all of his writings chronologically, and you read them in that order. Am I remembering right there?

Alister McGrath

Yes, you're right. That's when I was researching a biography of Lewis, and I thought the best way of doing this was to read everything he wrote in chronological order so I could see how his ideas were developing. His language developed, and also the way in which he went through periods of joy and depression as well. It's a very, very exciting thing to do. I read everything in the order in which he wrote it.

David Capes

I'm sure you saw some change over that period of time. All of us change our thinking over time. In some ways, our thinking evolves. Was there any particular thing that happened in his life that set about change? And the way he thought?

Alister McGrath

Well obviously, first there was his conversion to Christianity. That really changed everything. And it made him see the world, see everything in a very, very different way. Lewis was an atheist who became a Christian and knew why he'd become a Christian. And because he was such a good writer, he was really set up to be a brilliant apologist, and that's what he turned out to be. I think that's very important. It's actually quite pleasurable, quite fun to read his writings. And that makes it much easier to use him as a gateway to talk about faith. He's still so well known in many cultures.

David Capes

He's one of the most quotable writers, I think for Christians. It seems to me that in Britain, at least, that CS Lewis is not regarded as highly as he is in the States. Is that a correct observation?

Alister McGrath

I think you're right. I mean, here in Oxford, in particular, Lewis is very well known and respected. Mainly because we get so many American visitors wanting to see all of those sites! But you're right, it's in North America, that he has a particular influence. And I think it's partly because people are interested in him as a sort of eccentric Oxford academic. But also, someone who writes very well and is able to talk about Christianity in a way that's intelligent. I think you've discovered him more in America than we have, but we still like him a lot.

David Capes

We really appreciate him. As you know, at the Lanier Theological Library, we have a number of items from his life. We have some handwritten speeches that he gave. We have some letters and many of his first edition books. Professor McGrath, we have people listening to this podcast all over the world, many of whom have heard of CS Lewis, but some who haven't. Let's say somebody is asking from Cambodia to read a book by Lewis, what would be your first recommendation?

Alister McGrath

I think my first recommendation would be *Mere Christianity*. Why? Because it's Lewis thinking intelligently about what Christianity is and how it connects up with the way we feel, the way we think, and the difference that makes to us. And these were originally talks he gave on the British Broadcasting Corporation during the Second World War. So actually, they're quite short. They're manageable. You can in effect, take them a little bit at a time and let it soak in. It's a very, very good place to start. And I think you'll find Lewis will raise all sorts of questions for you and make you think, some very interesting thoughts and take you in some very interesting directions.

David Capes

I've loved that book. In fact, I was the founder of the Honors College at Houston Christian University, and that book was part of our readings. We talked a lot about that book. And in a sense, we were advocating for an Orthodox Christianity, that was also a "mere Christianity" at the same time. Which are not necessarily contradictory at all. How can pastors and church leaders begin using C.S. Lewis more thoroughly in their preaching, teaching, their leading and helping to develop spiritually in their own congregations?

Alister McGrath

Lewis was very, very good at envisaging an audience or a readership. He would want to know who these people are. And he made sure he spoke to them using language they could understand, answering questions that they were asking. I know that's very important, because sometimes I think preachers get carried away with themselves. They don't ask, will this be relevant to my congregation. Lewis was acutely aware of how it was necessary to speak a language that the audience understood, but also to connect up with questions that were on their minds and in their hearts. This gives us some very good guidance on the language that we use when we're preaching or teaching.

But the other thing is that Lewis in effect is a very, very good communicator. When he's trying to explain ideas like the Trinity or the incarnation or the nature of sin, for example, he very often will tell stories to help you get inside these ideas, to understand the difference that they make. You can read Lewis and

enjoy him. But I'd like you to read him and look at his techniques. Look at the way he uses language, the way he develops arguments to connect with people, because we can all learn from that as well.

David Capes

So, it's not just his ideas, but the way that he shares ideas.

Alister McGrath

I think that Lewis is a practitioner, not a theoretician. He's very, very good at doing things like communicating, unpacking, explaining, making connections, and we just all learn from the way in which he does things. He's someone who in effect is a role model in the sense that he doesn't just talk, he shows how to do this. I think that's very helpful.

David Capes

Professor Lewis died in 1963. How are the questions different for the church today?

Alister McGrath

You are right, there are different questions today. Lewis would be astonished that we were talking about him in this way because he thought he'd be forgotten within five years. But there's a lot about Lewis to discover. I think the key thing is Lewis' social context is very, very different to ours. But nevertheless, Lewis gives us guidance and ideas and principles that we can take and use, even though we're speaking in a very different age.

One of the people that I find very impressive is Tim Keller, who unfortunately died recently. And he is brilliant at taking Lewis and in effect, making Lewis relevant and usable for a current reader. He doesn't abuse Lewis at all. He just sees how you can make these connections. And what he's doing is seeing what's there in Lewis's work and extracting it from England of the 1940s and translating it into the realities the modern reader. I think that's wonderful. And it's a good illustration of what you can do with Lewis.

David Capes

You mentioned before we started the podcast about Colin Hansen's book on Tim Keller and to some degree, Tim Keller's own spiritual formation. And Lewis was a very important part of that.

Alister McGrath

I think he was very important to Tim Keller and very important to a lot of people. I think one of the great things about Lewis is he's not just enjoyable. He's useful. You can do things with him. He gives you ideas. In effect, you can see how Lewis did that in his day, addressing questions of the time. And you can work out how you're going to address our own situations. And Lewis effectively acts like a catalyst, working out better ways of engaging these questions. So, I think he really is a very important resource and stimulus for all of us.

David Capes

We should look at his letters, and his writings not just for what they say, but how he says them. And I know pastors and church leaders are very interested in the “how” of communication, not just what is communicated, but how it’s communicated as well.

Alister McGrath

I think that’s right. I think, American pastors are much better at doing this than we find here in Great Britain. We’re very often lecturers who are a little bit dry and dull and academic. Sermons tend to become lectures. That’s not very helpful. I think one of the things that Lewis really shows us that we need to do is to get inside the mind and the heart of our audiences by getting on their side. By showing we’re talking about questions that are relevant to them, and that we’ve got something important to say. This is a very, very good starting connection, and then beginning to speak into that situation and show how it can be moved ahead. And that certainly is a technique that many, many pastors already know about. Lewis still gives us ideas about how we can take that and make it better.

David Capes

I like the emphasis on story telling. I think we have rediscovered to some degree the power of a story. To be able to take an idea, to take a moral, to take something and move forward in ways that just mere propositional speaking cannot do.

Alister McGrath

I think that’s right. I talked to a lot of young Americans when I was a summer school teacher over a period of about 20 years. I used to ask them what authors they like reading and C.S. Lewis came up a lot. And what I noticed was as time progressed, more and more people liked him. One of the things they said to me was preachers talk to us about faith, but Lewis shows us what faith is like. In effect he’s able to connect on a deeper level.

My guess is preachers have moved on since those days but the key point, is that Lewis brings the imagination into preaching. He invites preachers to say, imagine this, think about it like this. See it, don’t just listen. See! And I think that really has been very, very helpful because often, older sermons tend to be very wordy, very idea based. And Lewis is really saying, let’s use stories. Let’s use pictures, because these connect with people on a deep level. And when you read the New Testament, there are a lot of these stories and images being used. So, we’ve got good biblical warrant for doing this.

David Capes

There’s a lot of great stories in the Bible. Will this be your third lecture at the Lanier Library?

Alister McGrath

I can’t remember when the last one was because COVID got in the way. But whether it’s my third or my fourth, I’m absolutely delighted to be coming back.

David Capes

Well, we’re thrilled that you’re coming back, and we look forward to seeing you in about a month now. It will be great being with you again. Thank you for being with us here today on *The Stone Chapel Podcasts*..

A Nugget of Wisdom from Dr. Alister McGrath

One of the things I've noticed as I've got older, is I've become very much aware of how much I learned from things in the past. Which at the time, I didn't think were really all that important. But they've proved enormously useful to this day. I very often think about the first two disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Remember they were fishermen and Christ calls them and invites them to be fishers of people. In other words, he takes their past experiences and uses them in the Christian context. And that's what I found happens all the time. I learn from where I've been on my personal journey and find the things that happened in the past proved to be relevant and important in the present. So, my nugget of wisdom is that God is teaching you all the time and using people you talk to and the things that you do and the problems you face. And very often you find that these come to be an important resource for you as you think about things in the present, as you try to help people. What I'm saying is God's preparing you all the time for the new challenges you're going to face. And very often you learn from what you did in the past, even though at the time you weren't aware you were learning anything.