On Monday evening, 11 May 1959, CS Lewis delivered the essay “Fern-seed and Elephants,” later retitled “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in the Common Room of Westcott House. But precisely why was Lewis invited, who was present, and what were the reactions to the talk?

The Invitation

The address by Lewis is mentioned briefly in the minutes of the Council meeting of Tuesday, 12 May 1959, a meeting held one day after the talk. The Principal, the Rt. Revd. Kenneth Carey, included mention of the term’s lectures in the report he gave to the Council, but the minutes were brief, stating only of the previous term, “Lectures had been given by Head Deaconess Grierson, Dr Mascall, Dr Victor Murray and Professor C. S. Lewis.” One of the discoveries of my research was the fact that Lewis served on the Council of Westcott House for four-and-a-half years, from 1 June 1955 to 1 December 1959. This discovery was made by Dr. Margie Tolstoy, Westcott’s Archivist, who was searching through the archives to learn about the location of the Lewis lecture. My article about his service on the Council will appear in a future issue of The Chronicle of the Oxford University C. S. Lewis Society.

The Audience

Among the forty to fifty students and faculty who were present when Lewis spoke were Principal Kenneth Carey (1908-1979), later Bishop of Edinburgh, who extended the invitation to Lewis when Lewis made some critical remarks about a book by Alec Vidler, perhaps while waiting for a Council meeting to take place; graduate student Don Cupitt, later Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, featured in the 1984 BBC television series “The Sea of Faith”; graduate student Lionel R. Wickham; student Kenneth J. Woollcombe, now deceased, later Bishop of Oxford and delegate to the World Council of Churches, who is said to have led the opposition to Lewis; the Reverend Canon John Davies, Chaplain of Westcott House; and Vice-Principal Dr. John Habgood, later Archbishop of York. The majority of the other attendees were Westcott students. Both Cupitt and Wickham provided me with a firsthand perspective on Lewis’s talk and the reaction of those who heard him.

The talk itself made four major points:

1. Some biblical critics lack literary judgment (they read between the lines of ancient texts, not understanding extra-biblical literary genres, e.g., reading John’s Gospel as a romance);
2. Some wrongly claim that the real teaching of Christ came rapidly to be misunderstood and has only been recovered by modern scholars (Alec Vidler’s Windsor Sermons is the example he uses);
3. Some wrongly claim that miracles don’t occur;
(4) Attempts to recover the origin of a text often err (as has happened with some of Plato’s and Shakespeare’s works).

Lewis spoke as a scholar of English literature, as a student of history and a lay reader of the New Testament, as the author of the impressive philosophical work *Miracles*, offering his perspective from both a biblical and a philosophical basis, and finally as a writer, stating that modern reviewers rarely understand the origins of his own writings, even though they have many advantages over a twentieth-century critic who is assessing first-century writing by one of the four evangelists.

Not all those present received the talk favorably, but Principal Kenneth Carey was appreciative of the talk and most of those who were present also seemed to resonate with Lewis’s words.

Those who have not read “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism” may like to read the essay and draw their own conclusions, but Lewis’s training in literature and his layman’s perspective enabled him to offer a powerful challenge to Vidler’s theological perspective. Suffice it to say that Westcott House has a strong connection with CS Lewis, both in his service on the Council and in the talk which that service led him to give.