

The Courage, Creativity and Charm of G.K. Chesterton

One of the most important cultural figures a hundred years ago was G.K. Chesterton: an astonishingly prolific writer, speaker and defender of Christianity.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in 1874 to a London family with a liberal religious faith, from which he soon drifted away. He studied art in London where he also took classes in literature but left without any degree. Chesterton, intelligent and well read, began working in a publisher's office but increasingly wrote art and literary criticism. His ability to rapidly produce appealing, thought-provoking articles on almost any topic was soon recognised and he began writing weekly columns for journals, something that continued for the rest of his life.

Chesterton's wife Frances, whom he married in 1901, was responsible for bringing him to faith in Christ. Increasingly, "GKC" became a celebrated figure on the cultural landscape. In fluent and frequently humorous words, he took a firm stand for a traditional Christianity and challenged many of the ideas of the early twentieth century. Chesterton became an imposing and popular speaker, debating with people such as George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells and Bertrand Russell. He was increasingly widely read and quoted, and in the 1930s began giving popular radio talks.

Chesterton died of heart failure at his home in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire on June 14, 1936, aged sixty-two.

Chesterton was remarkably prolific, somehow writing 80 books, several hundred poems, 200 short stories, 4,000 articles and several plays. He has been called "a master without a masterpiece." His three enduring achievements are his books

defending Christianity, his poetry and his detective novels.

His two defences of the Christian faith – Orthodoxy and The Everlasting Man – have played a part in many conversions, including that of C.S. Lewis. In his poetry, Chesterton created some of the most memorable and popular poems of the English language. Perhaps Chesterton's most enduring achievement lies in his creation of Father Brown, an amateur detective who is a short, clumsy priest. In over fifty short stories, Father Brown succeeds in solving crimes not because of his intelligence or deductive skills but – on the contrary – because he understands the depths of the human soul.

In his many writings Chesterton produced numerous, quotable phrases, many of which involve some sort of paradox in which a truth is seen in a fresh and unexpected way. Let me give you some of my favourites:

"We do not want a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world."

"These are the days when the Christian is expected to praise every creed except his own."

"Fallacies do not cease to be fallacies because they become fashions."

"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

"Do not be so open-minded that your brains fall out."

"The Bible tells us to love our neighbours, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people."

"Science must not impose any philosophy, any more than the telephone must tell us what to say."

There is too the brilliantly brief response he wrote to a

newspaper:

"Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly."

Chesterton was a big man in every way. He got a lot right but even his greatest admirers admit he was flawed. So while he saw the threat of Hitler, he was less critical of Mussolini. He had a naïve nostalgia for the Middle Ages and, perhaps most troubling today, wrote things that can be considered anti-Semitic. Nevertheless, as the Christian poet T.S. Eliot said, Chesterton "was importantly and consistently on the side of the angels."

As an evangelist, I see Chesterton as one of the great defenders of the Christian faith in the twentieth century. He was resolutely, persistently and brilliantly countercultural, and in the wonderful way he spoke out I find three things worthy of praise.

First, Chesterton confronted his world with courage. It was not easy being a traditional Christian in the early twentieth century when it was fashionable to have belief in progress and disbelief in religion. Undeterred, Chesterton boldly attacked atheism, agnosticism and liberal Christianity. He consistently reminded the people of God, Christ and their need for redemption.

Second, Chesterton confronted his world with creativity. He wrote an enormous amount on a variety of topics in many genres but his Christian faith was there in everything. The result: a multifaceted attack on unbelief. So, for example, those able to resist Chesterton's arguments in prose often found themselves challenged by his poetry.

Finally, Chesterton confronted his world with charm. All that he wrote bubbles with wit and humour. Although he battled against the most hostile of thinkers, he did so not with anger but with generous grace. For all his zeal to confront,

Chesterton made few enemies. In fact, the persistently happy tone of his writing may have had as much impact as the words themselves.

We could certainly benefit from having men and women like Chesterton today who can defend the Christian faith with courage, creativity and charm. {eoa}

Canon has been an evangelist for four decades. He has spoken in towns, cities and universities in 69 countries. This has included 36 series of Just10, re-examining the Ten Commandments, where the combined attendance exceeded one million people. In 2017, he launched JustOne at the Arsenal Emirates Stadium in London and JustOne events are being conducted throughout the UK. Evangelist, minister, speaker, broadcaster and writer, communicates the Christian faith in a practical way. He has his own weekly TV programme, which is broadcast globally, and a number of podcasts. He has written several books across a range of subjects including the "Theology for Little People" series to help children understand biblical truth. lives near London in England. He is married to Killy and is a father and grandfather.

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