

In Memoriam: Michael Green (1930-2019)

Thinker and Apologist¹

Alister E. McGrath²

Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion
The University of Oxford
alister.mcgrath@hmc.ox.ac.uk

Apologetics has been integral to Michael Green's work as an evangelist since the late 1960s. His early works *Man Alive* (1967) and *Runaway World* (1968) provided Christian students with winsome and challenging presentations of the Christian faith. Michael's distinctive emphasis in communicating effectively with his readership through relevant and accessible images and stories helped these works gain a large and grateful readership. I read both these works at Oxford in the early 1970s, following my conversion from an aggressive and superficial form of atheism and recall vividly the impact of a sermon Michael preached in Oxford on John 3 which helped me grasp the core themes of the gospel more firmly. I also recall the sense of excitement and anticipation within the Oxford Christian student community a few years later on learning that Michael was to be the next Rector of St Aldate's in 1975. Many were thrilled at the thought of sitting at the feet of such a gifted and well-known preacher and evangelist. They were not disappointed. Michael's preaching wove together his love for the New Testament, his passion for evangelism, and a deep sense of care and compassion for his congregation.

I first encountered Michael personally in 1985, a year before he and Rosemary moved to Vancouver. I was then Wycliffe

Hall's tutor in doctrine, and had been asked to give a short series of lectures to the Diocese of Oxford's part-time ministry course on Christology. My talk explored how a robust Christology could function as the basis of preaching, and I mapped out some possibilities that I suggested had some promise, focussing particularly (though not exclusively) on evangelism and apologetics. Two days later, I received a handwritten letter from Michael. He explained that he had never met me, but that he had been among the crowd listening to my lecture, and that the audience was "buzzing" afterwards with enthusiasm. I had communicated some important points effectively, engagingly, and accessibly. Might he encourage me, he asked, to keep speaking and start writing in this vein?

Michael's letter of encouragement marked the beginning of our friendship, which continued for the remainder of his life. He changed the way I thought of myself. Up to this point, I had never considered myself to be anything other than an academic writer, serving both the church and the academy through scholarship. Michael's letter made me aware of the importance of writing accessibly, engagingly, and faithfully for a wider readership – and encouraged me to develop this skill. It was an art that Michael himself had mastered, of course, and he was

more than willing to help me consolidate this aspect of my ministry.

Michael was a remarkable evangelist, who appealed to both the head and heart in his ministry. The great Puritan preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones often spoke of preaching as 'logic on fire;' Michael taught me to think of preaching as *theology* on fire, grounded in a deep and robust grasp of the core themes of the Christian faith. It was no surprise that Michael was invited to serve as Canon Theologian at Coventry Cathedral from 1970-75, or to serve on the Church of England's Doctrine Commission for ten years from 1968-77. It is, I think, an open secret that Michael did not find his time on the Doctrine Commission to be a particularly rewarding experience. Michael and J. I. Packer were the two somewhat lonely evangelical voices on the Commission and shared the widespread frustration and dissatisfaction with its report *Christian Believing* (1976). Their misgivings about the report, and the process leading to its production, were voted down by the predominantly liberal majority. Unsurprisingly, *Christian Believing* was widely criticized for its unrepresentative character, and its failure to even attempt to reach a consensus on theological issues.

Maurice Wiles, who chaired the Commission for most of this period, tended to see its role as reflecting the theological diversity within its ranks to the church at large – and in doing so, set out to minimize the impact of dissident evangelical voices. Wiles himself had earlier published a work entitled *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (1974), arguing for forms of doctrinal revisionism. Yet as things worked out, Michael was able to express his dissatisfaction with the Doctrine Commission in a remarkably positive way a year later.

In 1977, John Hick and a group of academics – including the Chairman of the Doctrine Commission, Maurice Wiles – produced a revisionist work entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which was severely critical of the classic Christian idea of the incarnation. It was a somewhat lightweight work, notable mainly for its radical views rather than the quality of the scholarship advanced in their support. Michael, recognizing the critical importance of this doctrine for evangelism, realized that a theologically orthodox response was required, and in an astonishingly short time assembled a coalition of writers to produce *The Truth of God Incarnate*, including essays from academic heavyweights such as Brian Hebblethwaite, John Macquarrie and Stephen Neill, as well as two finely crafted pieces by Michael himself. It was an effective and influential piece of apologetic writing, which appeared only six weeks after the publication of *The Myth of God*. Michael's timely intervention blunted the impact of Hick's volume and helped many to realize that the prevailing liberal theology of the 1970s was both intellectually vulnerable and evangelistically sterile.

Michael regularly described himself as 'colour-blind denominationally,' and worked easily across a wide range of denominational backgrounds. This became especially clear during his time as Professor of Evangelism at Regent College, Vancouver, following his period as rector of St Aldate's. Michael had taught at the college's summer school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and knew he and Rosemary would fit well in this trans-denominational graduate school of theology. This new position allowed Michael to develop his passion for evangelism on a wider stage. In addition to leading

missions with Regent students to cities in British Columbia and Washington state, Michael was able to take up speaking commitments across North America, creating and consolidating links with church leaders in the region. His teaching interests focussed on the areas of evangelism, apologetics, applied theology, and New Testament. Both a scholar and a practitioner, Michael became a role model to students, particularly through his informal ‘Green on the Grass’ sessions under a tree on Regent’s lawn, exploring questions of evangelism, apologetics and spirituality.

Michael’s personal integration of evangelism and apologetics led to invitations to debate matters of faith on college campuses, and helped him frame the themes of several apologetic works published during this period – perhaps most notably *Was Jesus Who He Said He Was?* (1989) and *Who Is This Jesus?* (1990). Both these works are clearly informed by apologetic questions Michael encountered on missions, and which he was able to engage in his typically winsome and accessible manner. They also highlight Michael’s core belief that the person of Jesus Christ lies at the heart of the Christian faith – and hence evangelism itself.

Many wondered whether Michael and Rosemary would stay in Vancouver until their retirement. The enthronement of George Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1991 proved to be an important turning point. Carey was convinced that the Church of England’s future depended on a recovery of the ministry of evangelism. Carey had served as chaplain to St John’s College Nottingham from 1970 to 1975, when Michael had been Principal, and knew of his competence and passion in this field at first hand. He invited Michael and Rosemary to return to Eng-

land to help lead his ‘Springboard’ Initiative in evangelism, serving alongside Martin Cavender and Bishop Michael Marshall. Michael served in this role from 1992-96, coordinating evangelistic training sessions and developing the apologetic and evangelistic vision of the Church from his base in Nottingham. I often spoke for Michael at the Nottingham conferences he organized, and was impressed by both his commitment to and expertise in apologetics. Finally, after four years, Springboard came to an end.

At this point, I stepped into the narrative of Michael’s life. I became Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford in 1995, and was aware of the need to have a wise and respected senior figure on the staff team, who could encourage and mentor students, as well as bringing them much-needed experience in evangelism and apologetics. We wanted a seasoned and wise practitioner, not merely someone who wrote about these themes. After speaking at one of Michael’s final evangelism training events in Nottingham in the spring of 1996, I realized that he seemed to have no obvious role within the Church of England or anywhere else once the Springboard initiative came to an end.

Wycliffe Hall had a tradition of welcoming senior scholars with expertise in mission to spend their retirement as part of the college community, allowing them to teach its students and serve as figures of wisdom and experience. Geoffrey Shaw, who served as Principal of the Hall from 1978 to 1988, had invited Bishop Steven Neill to join the community, where he lectured on modern Christian mission, while (nearly) completing his mammoth *History of Christianity in India*. I realized that Michael would fit easily and naturally into this pattern.

Consultation with colleagues and stu-

dent representatives made it clear this move would command widespread support within the college community. I therefore invited Michael and Rosemary to join the staff of Wycliffe Hall. Michael would serve as a Senior Research Fellow, a position which would allow him to teach in areas of his expertise – above all, evangelism and apologetics – while giving him space to write books, lead missions, and speak throughout the world. Michael and Rosemary could reconnect with St Aldates, as well as with Oxford – the city in which they met and fell in love. To everyone’s delight, they accepted, and moved to Oxford.

For reasons I have never quite grasped, the Church of England did not at this time consider either evangelism or apologetics to be essential, or even important, elements of ministerial preparation. It was a serious misjudgement. Pragmatically, it ignored both the shrinking membership of the Church, and its rapidly changing cultural environment. Theologically, it subverted the obvious link between Christology and evangelism, overlooking the capacity of Christ to illuminate and transform the human situation. In his *Evangelism in the Early Church* (1970), Michael identified these connections, and showed how they played out in the proclamation of the gospel in the Graeco-Roman context of the first three centuries.

Michael was able to build on his experience of the teaching and practice of evangelism at Regent College Vancouver to establish two core courses – one on evangelism and one on apologetics – at Wycliffe Hall from 1997. Michael developed and taught the first course; he and I developed and taught the second together. Students rated both highly, particularly the evangelism course. They comple-

mented the Hall’s wider teaching, particularly in New Testament and doctrine, helped along by Michael’s interest in the New Testament as a witness to early Christian outreach. His *Acts for Today* (1993), later revised as *Thirty Years That Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (2002), explored how early Christian practice could inform contemporary apologetics and evangelism – for example, by identifying ‘bridges and ditches’ for faith in the first century, and reflecting on today’s equivalents.

It was always clear to me that Michael regarded it as impossible to separate evangelism and apologetics, as if there was some well-defined line between them. Michael was willing to allow such conceptual distinctions, providing these did not lead to their formal separation in practice. In listening to Michael’s evangelistic preaching, I was struck by the way in which he seamlessly wove together apologetics and evangelism, identifying difficulties that his audience might encounter, and dealing with them graciously, seriously, and compassionately. Michael had mastered the skill of learning the language of his audience, and could easily communicate the core themes of the gospel in everyday language.

As I reflected on Wycliffe’s growing competence and confidence in the field of apologetics with the arrival of Michael, I began to wonder if there was any way in which this might be developed further. Wycliffe Hall focussed on training men and women for ministry in the Church of England. But what of lay people? Surely they ought to have access to such resources, given the growing cultural and intellectual pressures that they faced? In 1997, I had lunch in Oxford with Michael Ramsden, who had just taken up the position of European Director of the

Zacharias Trust. We had a shared interest in apologetics, and wondered what might be done to establish a dedicated centre which would encourage the emergence of academically rigorous yet pastorally effective approaches to apologetics within the churches. We began to explore the idea of establishing some kind of institution which would focus on this field, offering courses which would be open to all. Gradually, we began to see a way ahead. And knowing that Michael was settled in Oxford was an integral part of the plan we began to devise. It took more than five years to sort out the details – but it was worth it.

In 2004, the Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics was established as a partnership between Wycliffe Hall and the Zacharias Trust. I served as its first director. Michael played a critically important role in establishing this Centre, and especially in developing and testing out its original teaching programme. Students constantly expressed their high regard for Michael's apologetic teaching. Re-reading Michael's *Jesus for Sceptics* (2013) helps explain why his teaching was so highly valued. Michael seamlessly integrated evangelism and apologetics,

avoiding clunky and clumsy divisions between the 'apologetic' and 'evangelistic' aspects of his message. And just as importantly, he was able to express the significance and appeal of Christ using simple language, engaging analogies, and credible arguments. Michael's gracious and winsome approach to apologetics avoided ridicule, misrepresentation, and polemics. He took his opponents seriously. Michael was still lecturing on evangelism at Wycliffe Hall in 2019, more than twenty years after his arrival. His final lecture to Wycliffe students, given only a few weeks before his death, was on the theme of evangelism through the local church – the topic of one of his most influential books.

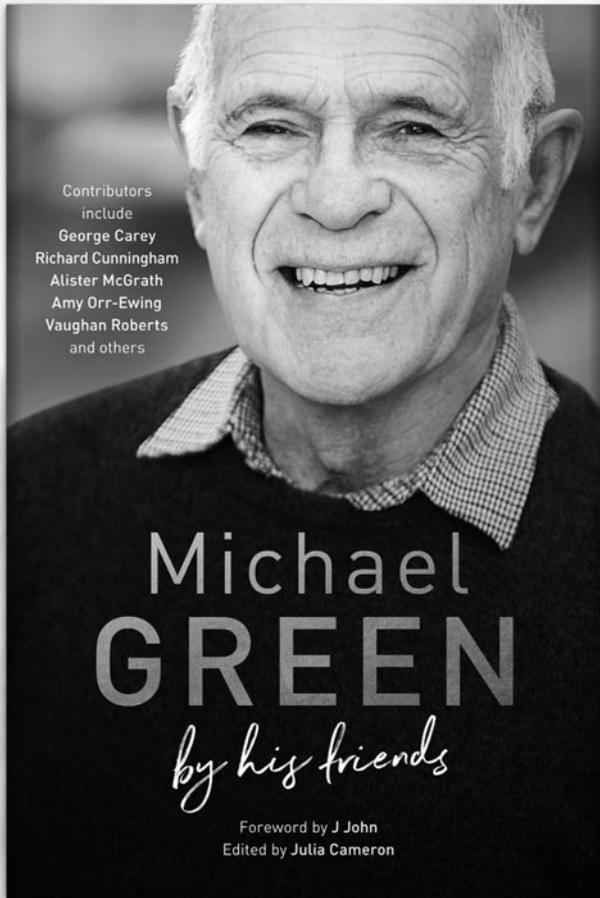
Michael's legacy will lie mainly in the lives of the many people who he advised and encouraged, especially in the field of apologetics and evangelism. They found in him a gracious and winsome Christian with a passion for his faith and a love for his Lord, who connected the life of faith with both the mind and the heart. Michael himself remarked many times that he was a Barnabas – an encourager. In today's harsh and discouraging world, we need more leaders like Michael Green.

Notes

1 [Ed.] This personal tribute by Alister E. McGrath was originally published as "Chapter 14: Thinker and apologist" in Julia E. M. Cameron (ed.) *Michael Green by his friends* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2019). It is re-published here with the kind permission from both the author, the editor, and the publisher.

2. [Ed.] Alister E. McGrath is Andreas Idreos Professor of Science and Religion at the University of Oxford, and a former Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. McGrath is the author of the international bestseller *The Dawkins Delusion?* (2007), and *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (2019).

A PORTRAIT OF A RENOWNED THEOLOGIAN
BY THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST



Contributors
include
George Carey
Richard Cunningham
Alister McGrath
Amy Orr-Ewing
Vaughan Roberts
and others

Michael
GREEN
by his friends

Foreword by J John
Edited by Julia Cameron

978 1 78974 114 8 • £16.99

AVAILABLE NOW



ivpbooks.com

[f /IVPbooks](https://www.facebook.com/IVPbooks)

[t @IVPbookcentre](https://twitter.com/IVPbookcentre)

[i @IVPbooks](https://www.instagram.com/IVPbooks)