

Mere Christianity: Uncommon Truth in Common Language
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Abstract

C. S. Lewis's most important work of apologetics takes the term "mere Christianity" from seventeenth century theologian Richard Baxter, Lewis summarized the historic center of Christianity in this work in easily understood language, using the analogy, the story, a basic vocabulary, and the innate longing in every person to catch the attention of the reader. The book has become one of the works for which Lewis is most well known, selling many millions of copies and influencing the lives of tens of millions.

The book originated in twenty-five BBC broadcasts that Lewis gave during the Second World War in response to requests from the BBC for talks that would help to raise the morale of the nation. Subsequently, the various broadcasts were adapted for the 1952 publication of *Mere Christianity*. The first series of broadcasts addressed the matter of natural law, the second discussed the fundamental Christian beliefs centering on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the third covered Christian morality, and the last series focused on the doctrine of the Trinity. According to most reviewers, Lewis was successful in accomplishing what he had once written in an essay entitled "Christian Apologetics," stating, "Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age."

Introduction

"Ever since I became a Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbors was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times."¹ That's how C. S. Lewis explains his purpose in writing one of the most influential Christian books of the twentieth century, *Mere Christianity*, the most important work of Christian apologetics he ever produced. This purpose helped to create "the supreme example of C. S. Lewis's ability to make profound truths clear to everyone."²

The term "mere Christianity" comes from the Protestant theologian Richard Baxter (1615–1691),³ a chaplain in one of Oliver Cromwell's regiments. Lewis explains the meaning of *Mere Christianity*: "Measured against the ages 'mere Christianity' turns out to be no insipid interdenominational transparency, but something positive, self-consistent, and inexhaustible."⁴ In other words, Lewis was referring to historic Christianity, centered in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. By avoiding denominational distinctives, Lewis provides a guide to that common core of beliefs that nearly all Christian denominations have held since the first century A.D. Consequently, he avoids topics where there are differing views among Christians, such as the Sacraments, the Second Coming, worship, or the Virgin Mary. He uses the word *Christian*, not in the popular sense of a good person, but to refer to someone who accepts the teaching of the original disciples of Jesus⁵ and "one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity."⁶

In 1993, a *Christianity Today* poll named *Mere Christianity* the single most influential book for Christians, other than the Bible. Heading a list that included works by Oswald Chambers, John Bunyan, Francis Schaeffer, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Mere Christianity* was listed first for having the most significant impact on the Christian life. It drew more than twice as many votes as any other book.⁷ *Mere Christianity* is the first "good Christian book" that John Stott recommends in his book, *Basic Christianity*, and it is the most frequently mentioned work that influenced members of the Evangelical Theological Society and the Wesleyan Theological

Society, though Lewis was neither an evangelical nor a Wesleyan.⁸ In the book *Indelible Ink: 22 Prominent Christian Leaders Discuss The Books That Shape Their Faith* (WaterBrook Press, 2003), General Editor Scott Larsen puts *Mere Christianity* as the top book and Lewis as the top Christian author with Lewis mentioned more than three times more frequently than the next author, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Obviously, what Lewis once wrote about his own feelings towards apologetics does not apply to his readers. On Aug. 2, 1946, he wrote to Dorothy Sayers, “My own frequent uneasiness comes from another source—the fact that apologetic work is so dangerous to one’s own faith. A doctrine never seems dimmer to me than when I have just successfully defended it.”⁹

The book has sold more than eleven million copies and helped turn around the lives of such well known public figures as Charles Colson, author, founder of Prison Fellowship, and former legal counsel to an American President, and Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino’s Pizza.¹⁰

Mere Christianity gives us an introduction both to the thought and the writing style of Lewis. The thought is profound and the writing style plain English, the product of a skilled writer, a Christian layman, and a student of the English language. That, of course, is the necessary approach for material that was first written for radio. The radio listener does not have the opportunity to consult the dictionary, if a word is unfamiliar, so the speaker must use common language that will be understood by all. A good radio producer can detect those places where the writer is likely to lose his audience, and Lewis benefited in this way from the BBC’s Eric Fenn, Assistant Director of Religious Broadcasting. For the purpose for which *Mere Christianity* was written, then, the medium of radio served as a support.

In 1946, Lewis wrote an essay later published by the Student Christian Movement under the title “Man or Rabbit?” In it Lewis argued that one of the distinctive characteristics of a human being was the desire to know things, particularly their truth claims. The question asked by some people of the day was whether they could live a good life without believing in Christianity. Lewis pointed out the fact that being good is not the essence of Christianity, but being remade, taking on the Divine Life, being transformed into a real person, a son or daughter of God, “drenched in joy.” People should not ask how helpful Christianity is, but how true it is! And if true, then the Materialist view, which places the good of civilization in prime position (since individuals live only a few decades), will be replaced by the Christian view, which places the good of the individual in prime position (since individuals actually live forever). And, in fact, the person who isn’t really interested in knowing about the truth of Christianity is afraid of considering that question because he is afraid that he will find out that it is true. Then he would have to change both his way of thinking and his behavior.¹¹ *Mere Christianity* is not simply a book written in the common language; it is a book about truth.

The book is autobiographical in the sense that it contains much of the thought process Lewis himself used in arriving at the conclusion that Christianity is true. For example, he used to believe, when he was an atheist, that most of the human race was wrong about the existence of God. Later, as a Christian, he didn’t have to believe that all other religions were completely wrong.¹² Lewis’s argument against the existence of God when he was an atheist created a problem for him. Where had he gotten the idea that the universe was unjust? If the universe was senseless, why was he so opposed to it?¹³ Lewis’s own awareness of the problem of justice forced him to conclude that he must have gotten an idea of justice from some source outside of himself. “If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning.”¹⁴ Later, Lewis alludes to what he calls “good dreams,” particularly those of a dying

and rising god.¹⁵ This allusion takes us back to the time prior to Lewis's conversion to Christianity, when he had accepted the position of Sir James George Frazer, whose twelve-volume work, *The Golden Bough*, argued that Christianity was simply one myth among the many religions that taught of a dying and rising god. Late in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis talks about his own situation, where he realizes that the most obvious sin in his life is a sin against charity. He has sulked or stormed that day when he did not need to. And the best evidence for the kind of person you are is how you act when you are taken off guard.¹⁶

The book reflects another aspect of Lewis's life in that Lewis uses in his apologetic writings the training that he received especially from W. T. Kirkpatrick. That training was substantially a relentless search for truth, and it influenced Lewis for the rest of his life. Conversation frequently became disputation, whether that conversation took place with friends or opponents. Former student John Lawlor once wrote, "One quickly felt that for him dialectic supplied the place of conversation."¹⁷ Such an approach prepared Lewis for apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith and a task which is in essence disputative.

At the BBC during World War Two

The book *Mere Christianity*, published in 1952, originated as four series of broadcasts over the BBC from 1941 to 1944 (see Appendix I). When Lewis was invited to speak over the BBC, the British Broadcasting Company was less than twenty years old. Founded in 1922 and incorporated in 1927, "the early BBC fully adopted Christian values."¹⁸ This would explain their willingness during World War Two to invite such a noted Christian speaker as Lewis.

Under Rev. F. A. Iremonger, Director of Religious Broadcasting, the BBC had begun to introduce into its religious programming lay speakers during the 1930s, including such leading lights as New Testament scholar C. H. Dodd.¹⁹ Rather than simply broadcasting worship services and church music, the BBC wanted to provide the listening audience with relevant, Christian programming. Then Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and Great Britain declared war on September 3. During the war the BBC was also anxious to raise the morale of the people. Lewis was one of those who could speak in his rich baritone voice with power, clarity, and relevance, becoming the second most well known radio voice in England after Winston Churchill.

In a setting where television, cinema, theater, and other places of entertainment closed because of the war and where newspapers became scarcer due to paper shortages, radio became the most important and strategic method for delivering information to the British people and for maintaining the nation's morale. The only restriction on radio time was the broadcast plans of the programmers, which had to be censored in order not to lower the morale of the country or inadvertently give valuable information to the enemy.²⁰ This created a situation which made the BBC the voice of the entire nation during the war, which writer J.B. Priestley described as "something as important to us in this war as an army or navy or air force."²¹ Justin Phillips wrote, "It was not just a battle for the mind and morale of a nation at war. For the religious broadcasters, it was a battle for the soul."

Rev. James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, read Lewis's book, *The Problem of Pain*, which was published in 1940, and was impressed by the lucid mind, the clarity of writing, and the powerful ideas. This led him to contact Lewis about appearing on the BBC, especially in view of the topic of Lewis's book. The book was published at an opportune time. In July 1940, Hitler had given Reichsmarschall Goering orders to destroy British air power, and in August the Battle of Britain had begun. On Sept. 7, German bombers attacked London.

The Blitz struck London over the next nine months and, at one point, for fifty-seven consecutive days. The Blitz ended on the night of May 10-11, 1941, the worst night of the Blitz and just a few days after Lewis had his microphone test in preparation for his first series of BBC broadcasts.²² It's no wonder that Lewis could write, "Most of us have got over the pre-war wishful thinking about international politics."²³

The war informed Lewis's broadcasts, not only in providing a part of the motivation for raising the nation's morale, but also in his choice of language. The broadcasts contain numerous words from the battlefield, on average more than one such reference per page. The Christian life involves the believer in spiritual warfare, so the comparison is apt. For example, Lewis uses the word *war* eighty times in his broadcasts, the word *surrender* eight times, the word *soldier* sixteen times, and a total of more than two dozen different terms in all.²⁴

Welch wrote to Lewis at Magdalen College on Feb. 7, 1941, inviting him to do a series of talks from a Christian perspective on either the underlying assumptions of modern literature or the Christian faith as Lewis saw it. The smaller number of undergraduates at Oxford University during the war seems to have made it possible for Lewis to accept, and the larger number of students as the war drew to a close made it hard for Lewis to accept future invitations to speak over the BBC. Lewis responded positively on Feb. 10, preferring a series of talks during his summer vacation on the topic of the Law of Nature, that is, an objective standard of right and wrong. The New Testament assumes an audience that believes in the Law of Nature, but we can't assume that for modern England. His hope was "to create, or recover, the sense of guilt" that was mostly absent in England.²⁵

The person in charge of producing religious talks, Eric Fenn, Assistant Director to James Welch, booked Lewis for four weeks, starting on August 6, the date that became the first of twenty-five broadcast talks that Lewis would give. They settled on the title, "Right and Wrong: A clue to the meaning of the universe?" Lewis sent the first two scripts to Fenn by June 3, and Fenn replied, "I think they are excellent and there is very little that any of us wish to suggest about them."²⁶ Though the talks were well written, Fenn still wanted Lewis to do a script rehearsal and read-through, so he wrote to Lewis on July 31 with an invitation to do so. His concern was that Lewis might speak too quickly or too slowly, and he wanted to be prepared. Lewis had never broadcast before,²⁷ and the medium of radio allows for no dead time.

The day of the first broadcast arrived, and Lewis faced the unenviable position of following the 7:30 p.m. news broadcast in Norwegian! While the Norwegian broadcast provided an important public service to a part of the listening audience, apparently no one had thought about the sequence of the programs. The problem was solved later, and Lewis never again followed the news in Norwegian. In spite of the schedule, Lewis's rich voice, fluency, command of the English language, passion for his topic, and the powerful content of his ideas all combined to produce an excellent broadcast. Listeners apparently agreed, for many letters began to pour in to the BBC.²⁸ A request from Fenn for a second series of five talks had arrived before the first series was over.

As soon as the four series were completed, a request came to the Overseas Religious Broadcasting Officer of the BBC from Australia for Lewis to rebroadcast all of his talks.²⁹ Several years later, a request originating with Charles Taft, President the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), came from the United States. A BBC officer in their New York office, Lillian Lang, wrote, "Apparently his new approach to religious subjects is causing considerable interest in this country."³⁰ She was requesting a script of one of his talks and a list of topics he had

covered, in the hope of being able to include a talk by Mr. Lewis in a network program of the FCC. But Lewis never did rebroadcast any of his talks.

The Approach

In spite of the tremendous influence his writings have had, Lewis downplayed his role, stating, for example, about his BBC talks, “Mine . . . attempt to convince people that there is a moral law, that we disobey it, and that the existence of a Lawgiver is at least very probable and also (*unless* you add the Christian doctrine of the Atonement) that this imparts despair rather than comfort.”³¹ His role was to convince the skeptic that there was a moral law and that the existence of the moral law suggested a deity behind that law.

He saw his writings as only a shadow of God’s work. In his Preface to *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, Lewis spoke of God’s work in nature when he wrote that narrow anti-Christian dogmatism “... exaggerates the distinctness between Grace and Nature ... and . . . makes the way hard for those who are at the point of coming in.”³² In other words, Lewis argues as Paul argues in his Epistle to the Romans that “the natural man” knows certain things about God by nature and sees those truths echoed in nature. Consequently, to understand Lewis as an apologist, in *Mere Christianity* and elsewhere we must see the connection between his role and the role of nature. For Lewis, nature will point people to God. Lewis’s role is to make that connection more explicit, to nudge the sleeping imagination, to point out the vague longing for something greater than oneself.

But there is more that Lewis does with this vague longing. Not only does he point it out, he also sharpens that longing so that people might see the one thing which satisfies, Jesus Christ. He had found in his own life that only Christ could satisfy his longings, and a biblical theology affirms the same thing. Writes Lewis, “Has not every object which fancy and sense suggested for the desire, proved a failure, confessed itself, after trial, not to be what you wanted? Have you not found by elimination that this desire is the perilous siege in which only One can sit?”³³

But first, the reader, or listener, has to understand that things are not right between him and God. Lewis writes, “We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.”³⁴ In England in the 1940s, Lewis felt, “A sense of sin is almost totally lacking.”³⁵ He chose to use the common language to communicate truth. “My task was therefore simply that of a *translator*—one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand.”³⁶ He believed that if speakers and writers could not translate their thoughts into common language, then their thoughts were confused.³⁷ In some places, he would use the vehicle of storytelling. “The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child’s mind may exist in a grown-up’s mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means.”³⁸ And he would allow the story to do its own work. “I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child’s imagination.”³⁹ His strategy was no different for adults than for children. These stories, he hoped, would awaken the Law of Nature in both children and adults.⁴⁰

Story allows the storyteller to convey profound truth in easily understood concrete language, which is not the natural language of the apologist. In approximately 1955, Lewis wrote the essay, “The Language of Religion” in which he argued that there was no specifically religious language, as there was a scientific language or a poetic language. He explained one of the reasons for his effective use of analogy in apologetic writings such as *Mere Christianity*, stating that the apologist cannot do effective apologetic writing in concrete language, but must use the abstract. This creates a problem, since most people have difficulty with abstract

language. Lewis solved this problem in *Mere Christianity*, not by the use of stories, but by the use of analogy.⁴¹ Analogies have the same ability that stories have, enabling the writer to set aside abstract language in favor of concrete terms.

Though primarily an apologist, Lewis at times takes on the role of an evangelist, for example, when he tells his readers that the biblical message can start to make a difference for them tonight.⁴² Likewise, when he invites readers to imagine themselves standing in the presence of God,⁴³ he wants them to think of the importance of their relationship to Him.

Book One: “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe”

After three unsuccessful attempts,⁴⁴ Lewis and the BBC finally settled on a title for the first series of broadcast talks, later known as Book One of *Mere Christianity*. The title was “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.” In short, when Welch invited Lewis to speak on the BBC, Lewis proposed as his topic the Law of Nature. He wanted to awaken a consciousness of sin in the listener, something that could not be taken for granted in the England of the 1940s. Christianity would be mentioned only at the end.⁴⁵

In Chapter One, “The Law of Human Nature,” Lewis presents two basic ideas, that there is a Moral Law which people know they should obey and that they break that Law. Chapter Two, “Some Objections,” deals with the fact that this Moral Law, or Law of Human Nature, is neither instinct nor social convention. In Chapter Three, “The Reality of the Law,” Lewis argues that the Law of Human Nature is not to be compared to the law of gravitation, which is only a description of what always happens when something is dropped. The Law of Human Nature is a law which is real and which tells us what humans *ought* to do rather than what they in fact do. Lewis writes, “A man occupying the corner seat in the train because he got there first, and a man who slipped into it while my back was turned and removed my bag, are both equally inconvenient. But I blame the second man and do not blame the first. I am not angry—except perhaps for a moment before I come to my senses—with a man who trips me up by accident; I am angry with a man who tries to trip me up even if he does not succeed.”⁴⁶ Chapter Four, “What Lies Behind the Law,” addresses the two major views of the universe—the materialist view and the religious view. The matter of the Moral Law is not materialistic and therefore not subject to science, for it is not a scientific question. The religious view has the advantage that we are able to look inside ourselves. We can observe our conviction that there is a moral law which we should obey and that there is Something behind the law which is directing the universe and urging us to obey that law. That Something is more like a mind than anything else. Chapter Five, “We Have Cause to be Uneasy,” encourages the reader to turn back if she is going in the wrong direction. It offers two pieces of evidence about the Something behind the universe, i.e. the universe itself and the Moral Law. They tell us that this Something is a great artist, since the universe is beautiful, and that He is interested in right conduct. It is best to recognize our failure to obey this law, and Christianity will make no sense to people who do not realize that. We must go back to go forward.

As the first series of broadcasts concluded, Fenn wrote a letter of thanks to Lewis:

My dear Lewis,

I warned you as I bade good-bye that we should make a more formal expression of our gratitude to you by post, and this is meant to be it!

We should like you to know how extremely grateful we are for these five talks and for your promise of further talks at a later date if we can find a suitable time.

I do think the talks were really good. The only one that seemed to me to be turgid was the second, which was in many ways the most difficult. Last night's I thought was an excellent finish.⁴⁷

Book Two, "What Christians Believe"

When Fenn read the scripts for the second series, he wrote to Lewis, "I think they are quite first class—indeed I don't know when I have read anything in the same class at all. There is a clarity and inexorableness about them, which made me positively gasp!"⁴⁸ The third broadcast, entitled "The Shocking Alternative," more than any other, "established Lewis's reputation as a Christian apologist of the first rank."⁴⁹

In a section later removed from the published talk, Lewis provided an introduction to the second series, since he was unable to assume that listeners remembered his first series, which had ended four months earlier:

It's not because I'm anybody in particular that I've been asked to tell you what Christians believe. In fact it's just the opposite. They've asked me, first of all because I'm a layman and not a parson, and consequently it was thought I might understand the ordinary person's point of view a bit better. Secondly, I think they asked me because it was known that I'd been an atheist for many years and only became a Christian quite fairly recently. They thought that would mean I'd be able to see the difficulties—able to remember what Christianity looks like from the outside. So you see, the long and the short of it is that I've been selected for this job just because I'm an amateur not a professional, and a beginner, not an old hand. Of course this means that you may well ask what right I have to talk on the subject at all.

Well, when I'd finished my scripts I sent them round to various people who *were* professionals: to one Church of England theologian, one Roman Catholic, one Presbyterian, and one Methodist. The Church of England man and the Presbyterian agreed with the whole thing. The Roman Catholic and the Methodist agreed in the main, but would have liked one or two places altered. So there you've got all the cards on the table.

What I'm going to say isn't *exactly* what all these people would say; but the greater part of it is what all Christians agree on. And the main reason why I couldn't alter it so as to make them agree completely was that I've only got 15 minutes for each talk. That doesn't give you time to make many subtle distinctions. You've got to go at it rather like a bull in a china shop or you won't get through.

One thing I can promise you. In spite of all the unfortunate differences between Christians, what they agree on is still something pretty big and pretty solid: big enough to blow any of us sky-high if it happens to be true. And if it's true, it's quite ridiculous to put off doing anything about it simply because Christians don't fully agree among themselves. That's as if a man bleeding to death refused medical assistance because he'd heard that some doctors differed

about the treatment of cancer. For if Christianity is true at all, it's as serious as that. Well, here goes...⁵⁰

The four clergymen to whom Lewis sent these scripts were probably former student Dom Bede Griffiths (Roman Catholic), RAF friend Rev. Joseph Dowell (Methodist), his BBC producer Rev. Eric Fenn (Presbyterian), and Rev. Austin Farrer (Anglican), chaplain of Trinity College, Oxford University.⁵¹

In the first chapter of Book Two, "The Rival Conceptions of God," Lewis divides all of humanity into those who believe in God or gods and those who don't. Christianity is in the majority by maintaining a belief in God. Then Lewis divides those who believe in God according to the sort of God they believe in—the Pantheists and the Theists. In the latter category, he includes Jews, Muslims, and Christians. If one adopts a pantheistic view of the world, Lewis argues, then one can't complain about injustice. For the Pantheist, God is a part of the world, God permeates the world, and God almost *is* the world. That drives one to the conclusion that what we call evil really can't be evil; after all, it's God. If there truly is a good and a bad, then "you must believe that God is separate from the world and that some of the things we see in it are contrary to His will".⁵²

Chapter Two, "The Invasion," whose title shows the influence of World War Two, addresses the Incarnation. The rightful king has landed in enemy-occupied territory, but in disguise, and He is inviting us to join Him in a campaign of sabotage. That is the Christian view. The other view that Lewis also addresses, and demolishes, is Dualism, the view that there are two equal powers, one of them good and the other bad. The universe is the battlefield, and these two powers are at war with one another. The moment you judge one of these powers "good" and the other "bad," you are using a standard above both powers and saying that one power conforms to that standard while the other does not. And the source of that standard is God. Furthermore, goodness can be experienced for its own sake, while badness cannot. No one likes badness just because it is bad, but because of something they can gain by it. Badness is parasitic, only able to function by corrupting that which is good. Therefore, badness looks much more like it came from an originally good, but now fallen, creature than from an eternally existent being that is on a par with goodness.

The Principal of Manchester College at Oxford University, Nicol Cross, a Unitarian, didn't like the logic of Lewis in one of his talks. He said at a meeting of the Socratic Club on November 11, 1946 that "he must allude to the 'vulgar nonsense' that 'a man who said the things that Jesus said, and was not God would be either a lunatic or a devil.'"⁵³ He was quoting Lewis's BBC address, entitled "The Shocking Alternative," first delivered on Feb. 1, 1942, an address that later became Chapter Three of Book Two in *Mere Christianity*. Elton Trueblood, professor of philosophy and chaplain at both Stanford University and Earlham College, had a much different and more accurate perspective on this most powerful chapter: "In reading Lewis I could not escape the conclusion that the popular view of Christ as being a Teacher, and only a Teacher, has within it a self-contradiction that cannot be resolved. I saw, in short, that conventional liberalism cannot survive rigorous and rational analysis."⁵⁴ In this chapter, Lewis presents what is often referred to as the Free Will Defense. God could not create a world of love and goodness without creating creatures that could freely give or withhold such love. To eliminate free will would be to create robots instead of people. Lewis addresses the fall of Satan, the flaw in human beings, and God's solutions—He gave us a conscience, good dreams (stories that seem to anticipate the Christian religion), and the Jewish people. One of those Jewish people claimed to

forgive sins, and that leads us to the shocking alternative: either Jesus was a liar, a lunatic, or the Son of God.

Chapter Four, “The Perfect Penitent,” describes fallen mankind in need of repentance, and in this chapter Lewis pictures repentance as a kind of death. The problem is that only a bad person needs to repent, but only a good person can. The worse a person is, the less capable she is of repenting. But God has solved that problem for us in sending His Son to endure death in our place so as to pay our debt of sin. The fifth and last chapter in this book, “The Practical Conclusion,” tells us that the suffering and death of Christ have made possible a new kind of person for those who believe in Him. Baptism, belief, and the Lord’s Supper convey that Christ-life to us. And one day, in the practical conclusion of all things, God will land in force rather than in disguise.

Book Three, “Christian Behavior”

In Chapter One, “The Three Parts of Morality,” Lewis describes moral rules as “directions for running the human machine” rather than attempts on God’s part to spoil people’s fun. Then he discusses the three aspects of morality as (1) relations between people, (2) what’s inside an individual, and (3) the purpose of human life, or relations between people and God. Most people think of morality as the first part, relations between people, but the second and third parts need to be considered also. The third aspect of morality, rarely discussed in most circles, is important because people will last forever while civilizations will not.

“The ‘Cardinal Virtues’,” or pivotal virtues, are four—prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. God wants a child’s heart but a grownup’s head, so He wants prudence, or common sense. He wants people to take the path of moderation rather than excess, so He wants temperance. He wants fairness, or justice, and He wants courage, or fortitude. Why? For three reasons, which correspond to the three aspects of morality from Chapter One: (1) so that we will learn to do the right thing for the right reason, (2) so that we will develop into the right sort of person, and (3) because these virtues are necessary for the next life as well.

Chapter Three, “Social Morality,” presents the Golden Rule, “treat others as you wish to be treated.” Christianity does not provide a particular political program, but a sense of direction and a source of energy. God wants everyone to pull their own weight, no manufacturing of unnecessary luxuries, no advertisements to convince us that we need those luxuries, obedience to authority, giving to the poor, sacrificial giving, and a development of the inner self through a relationship with God.

In Chapter Four, “Morality and Psychoanalysis,” Lewis agrees that Freud was correct in attributing some of our behavior to the subconscious. When Freud became an amateur philosopher, however, and espoused a particular world view, Lewis disagreed. Morality has to do with choices people make, but psychoanalysis has to do with the feelings and impulses that sometimes cause our choices to go wrong and not at all with the moral choices we make. Most important of all, however, Lewis argues that every choice we make changes us from what we are, causing us to become either more of a heavenly creature or more of a hellish creature.

Chapter Five, “Sexual Morality,” is not the center of Christian morality, in spite of what some people think. Christianity thoroughly approves of the body, for God took on a human body in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and Christianity has produced nearly all of the great love poetry. Sexuality is part of God’s creation, so God is in favor of the appropriate practice of our sexuality. Given our warped natures, however, propaganda has convinced many that we are sexually starved and need to indulge our senses. The evidence around us is that the sexual

appetite grows by indulgence, just as any other appetite does. The evidence of jealousy, lies, deceit, disease, impotence and other problems suggests that the indulgence of the past has not solved any problems of the sexual instinct, but has actually made them worse. Therefore, the Christian practice of marriage or complete faithfulness to your spouse or abstinence is the best road to sexual health.

Chapter Six, “Christian Marriage,” discusses three types of “love”—(1) infatuation, (2) the initial sense of “being in love,” and (3) the deep unity and commitment that lasts. This third type of love is the engine by which the marriage runs, while “being in love” is the explosion that starts the marriage. Lewis correctly places sexuality within marriage as one type of union that should not be isolated from the other types of union that come with marriage. Few have accepted his view that there be two kinds of marriage, one governed by the State and the other governed by the Church, but Lewis attempts to recognize that Christians make a different commitment in marriage than those who are not Christian.

Chapter Seven addresses the topic of “Forgiveness,” a topic that Lewis calls even more unpopular than chastity. How does one forgive one’s enemies? How can a Pole or a Jew forgive the Gestapo? Two things make it easier—start by forgiving a member of your family and learn the meaning of loving your neighbor. One can hate bad actions without hating the person, or, as Lewis writes, “hate the sin but not the sinner.” Lewis tells us that we do that to ourselves all the time, loving the self while disliking our pride or greed or cowardice. Christians realize that each thought or action changes the central part of us and moves us more towards being a heavenly creature or a hellish creature. To love our enemy is not to feel fond of the enemy or to be nice to the enemy, but to wish good to the enemy. After all, God loves us, and we don’t really have much in us that is lovable.

“The Great Sin” is the topic of Chapter Eight. That sin is pride, the center of Christian morals, and its opposite is humility. Few see the problem in themselves, and most detest it in others. Pride is “the complete anti-God state of mind.” Pride is competitive by nature, and that is why it is the chief cause of misery in people’s lives, but also the chief reason why people turn away from God. “As long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.” Lewis also addresses misconceptions about pride: (1) Pleasure at being praised is not pride, provided that the praise doesn’t result in causing you to think how wonderful a person you are to have done what you did. (2) Being proud of others is a step away from pride, which is a very self-centered thing. (3) God is not concerned about His dignity, so He does not forbid pride for His own sake. He forbids pride because He wants us to know Him. (4) Humility does not result in a smarmy person, but in someone who is truly interested in you.

Chapter Nine, “Charity,” covers the first of the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity. While the term now means giving to the poor, it originally meant something much wider, that is, “Love, in the Christian sense.” Charity is a state of the will, that of willing good to someone else. We need not fear that we don’t feel loving; we must simply act as if we did. The feelings will follow the actions. The same is true of our love for God. We must act as if we did, and we will find that we soon feel the same way. But although our feelings for God may come and go, God’s love for us is always steadfast.

Chapter Ten, “Hope,” addresses the second theological virtue with this stunning statement: “the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.” Hope is not escapism or wishful thinking; it is “a continual looking forward to the eternal world.” “Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”⁵⁵ Our tendency is to think of this world and to fail to notice the longings that point to

another world. The fool blames people and things, the disillusioned person learns not to expect too much, but the Christian understands that these longings, or desires, which cannot be satisfied by anything in this world, mean that we were made for another world.

In Chapter Eleven, “Faith,” Lewis addresses faith in its first sense, that of believing or regarding as true the teachings of Christianity. Lewis says that his faith is based on reason, but people don’t always make decisions on the basis of reason. Reason and faith are often opposed by emotion and imagination. The habit of faith needs to be developed so that we learn to hold on to our faith in spite of our changing moods. Before Lewis addresses the second sense of faith, he wants us to know that the idea that most people have at one point or another—that we might be able to earn a passing mark on God’s exam or somehow put God in our debt—will never happen.

Chapter Twelve, “Faith,” talks about faith in the second sense. When we despair of our own efforts and leave our spiritual condition in the hands of God, we put our trust in Christ and discover that He offers something for nothing, in fact, that He offers everything for nothing. Lewis goes on to discuss the relationship between faith and good actions, attempting to chart a middle course between them, thereby avoiding the heart of the issue and arguing that we need both to lead us home. It would have been best for him to say that it is not faith plus works that saves, but a faith that works.

Book Four, “Beyond Personality: or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity”

Chapter One, “Making and Begetting,” compares theology to a map. While doctrines are not God, or the experience of God, they are a map that is based on the experiences of many people who knew God. Therefore, theology has the very practical value of being able to provide directions. It provides directions that avoid the popular idea that Jesus Christ was merely a great moral teacher. Christ is the Son of God, who can enable us to become sons of God, but in a different sense than He is. Begetting results in something of the same kind, because a human being begets a human being and God begets God. When God enables us to become sons and daughters of God, He is making us, not begetting us, into sons and daughters of God, which Lewis compares to statues or pictures of God. We become like God, as a statue is like a person. This making us into sons and daughters of God occurs because God adds spiritual life (*Zoe*) to our biological life (*Bios*).⁵⁶ We are thereby changed, as a statue would change if it became a real person. “This world is a great sculptor’s shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life.”⁵⁷

Chapter Two, “The Three-Personal God,” explains the doctrine of the Trinity as God being *more than* personal rather than *less than* personal, or impersonal. The illustration of a three-dimensional figure serves as “a sort of faint notion” of a super-personal God, that is, Father, Son, and Spirit. That biblical picture of God isn’t anything we could have made up, because people would have made a simpler picture. For us to know God, He has to take the initiative. And He has.

Chapter Three, “Time and Beyond Time,” is a chapter that Lewis invites the reader to skip, if the reader has no interest in the topic. He addresses the problem of how God can answer the prayers of millions of people at the same time. His answer? God is not in time and therefore has all of eternity to answer the millions of prayers that come to Him at any given moment. God is like a novelist who leaves a story he is writing to answer the door. The character’s action stops when the novelist lays down the pen or when the reader lays down the book. Time has stopped for the character at that moment, and that is similar to God’s state of timelessness. All moments are now for God.

Chapter Four, “Good Infection,” explains how God makes people into little Christs. This happens by the work of the third person, the Holy Spirit, who delivers to us spiritual life, *Zoe*, much like a germ or virus infects us with disease, except that this infection is a good infection. This infection allows us to share in the life of Christ.

In Chapter Five, “The Obstinate Toy Soldiers,” Lewis compares the making of sons of God to the turning of a tin soldier into a real person. The problem is that we are self-centered and don’t want to be turned into sons of God. A tin soldier would be self-centered also, not wanting to become a flesh and blood person because he would see that as killing him. He would cease to be made of tin and would then be made of flesh. God solved this problem in the Incarnation when God became an actual human being, thereby becoming what all people were intended to be. He not only showed us what we could become; He made it possible for us to become sons and daughters of God by being killed and then rising again. If we open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed, then God will turn our biological life (*Bios*) into a spiritual life (*Zoe*) with that “good infection” mentioned in the previous chapter.

Chapter Six, “Two Notes,” answers two questions raised as a result of the previous chapter. The first question: If God wanted sons and daughters instead of toy soldiers, why didn’t He just make lots of sons and daughters in the first place? After all, the process of becoming sons and daughters is so difficult and painful. The first answer to this question is that our turning away from God long ago made this becoming of sons and daughters into a difficult process. People could turn away because God made us with a free will. He made us with a free will because to do otherwise was to create robots instead of people capable of love and, therefore, of infinite happiness. The second answer to this question states that it is nonsensical to ask, when talking of God, if it could have been otherwise. We will never know, and the speculation does no good.

In response to the second question, which had to do with the value of the individual vs. the value of the whole, Lewis argues both that we do belong to the whole human race and that individual differences do matter. Christianity wants individuals to share their uniqueness with others and complement them in the same way that the different bodily organs complement one another. That’s one of the reasons for differences. These differences do not allow us to ignore someone else’s problems because they aren’t our business; in fact, they belong to the same organism, the human race. Therefore, we should avoid both errors—neither becoming an Individualist who ignores the human race nor becoming a Totalitarian who ignores individual differences.

In Chapter Seven, “Let’s Pretend,” Lewis opens with the story of a man who wore a mask to make himself look nicer than he really was. After many years of wearing the mask, the man took off the mask and discovered that his face had taken the shape of the mask and was now quite handsome. In the same way, living like a son of God is pretending, because we know at the time that we really aren’t sons of God. So we dress up as Christ. Pretending can be either good or bad. It is bad if it is a sham or a pretence, designed to cover up the real thing; it is good if the pretence leads to the real thing and actually helps us to get there. The real Son of God is gradually turning us into real sons and daughters of God. He concludes the chapter with two points—what we are is more important than what we do, since our deeds flow from our character, and God is the one who actually does the pretending, since He is at work in us.

Chapter Eight expresses its purpose by its title, “Is Christianity Hard or Easy?” The answer is “both.” It is hard because Christ tells us to take up our cross, and it is easy because Christ says that His yoke is easy and his burden is light. The hard thing is that our natural self is

constantly looking to have its own way, while God wants to kill that natural self and give us a brand new self.

Chapter Nine, “Counting the Cost,” builds on Chapter Eight by telling us that the only help that Christ wishes to give is help to enable us to become perfect. God is like the dentist who wants, not to ease the pain of a toothache, but to eliminate the problem. Lewis cites George MacDonald who wrote, “God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy.”⁵⁸ God will be delighted with our first feeble steps, much like the parent is with the young child. But God will not stop there. Where we think that He wants to remodel us just a bit, God wants to do a great work in our lives and reshape us into palaces. And that hurts, but it’s a good hurt.

In Chapter Ten, “Nice People or New Men,” Lewis responds to the objection that all Christians should be obviously nicer than all non-Christians. Christianity makes people nicer, but you can’t divide all people into two camps. Although most would disagree with Lewis, he argues that some are in the process of coming to Christianity, and others are leaving it. Furthermore, some people have niceness because of their upbringing or their innate God-given temperament. Consequently, some non-Christians will be nicer than some Christians. However, the Christian will be nicer than she would have been without Christianity, and the non-Christian will not be as nice as he could have been with Christianity. The real problem is that this entire discussion suggests that the essence of Christianity is niceness, or that Christianity is something that nasty people need and nice people do not. That’s not true. The crucial thing is whether people will offer their natures to God. The crucifixion of Christ made that possible, but we can turn away from giving our natures to God. The paradox is that only those things that we give to God are the things that really belong to us.

Chapter Eleven, “The New Men,” concludes the book. God wants transformation rather than improvement. How does He accomplish that? Not through some evolutionary or gradual process, not through sexual reproduction, but through the good infection of the nature of Christ into us. This is voluntary, Lewis writes, not because we choose it but because we have the opportunity to refuse it. And it comes like a flash of lightning. New men and women are all over the world right now. When the One who is beyond personality takes over our lives, we become more truly ourselves. “Look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”⁵⁹

Publication and Reviews

Before *Mere Christianity* was published, the individual BBC talks were published in separate volumes. The first two series of talks, “Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” and “What Christians Believe,” were published as *Broadcast Talks* (Bles, 1942),⁶⁰ the third as *Christian Behavior* (Bles and Macmillan, 1943), and the fourth as *Beyond Personality* (1944 in the UK by Bles, 1945 in the US by Macmillan).

Reviews appearing in 1942 demonstrate the general opinion of the listening, or reading, public to the first two series of talks. *The Tablet* wrote, “We have never read arguments better marshaled and handled so that they can be remembered, or any book more useful to the Christian...who finds himself called upon to argue briefly from first premises, to say why morality is not herd-instinct, why there is a special and unique character attached to the sense of obligation, why the conviction that there is a law of right and wrong and a transcendent morality is only intelligible if there is a God.” *The Times Literary Supplement* said, “No writer of popular apologetics today is more effective than Mr. C. S. Lewis.” *The Clergy Review* carried G. D.

Smith's opinion: "The author shows himself a master in the rare art of conveying profound truths in simple and compelling language."⁶¹

When *Christian Behaviour* was published, reviewers were equally enthusiastic. Robert Speaight wrote for *The Tablet*, "Mr. Lewis is that rare being—a born broadcaster; born to the manner as well as to the matter. He neither buttonholes you nor bombards you; there is no false intimacy and no false eloquence. He approaches you directly, as a rational person only to be persuaded by reason. He is confident and yet humble in his possession and propagation of truth. He is helped by a speaking voice of great charm and a style of manifest sincerity." A reviewer for *The Guardian* wrote, "His learning is abundantly seasoned with common sense, his humor and his irony are always at the service of the most serious purposes, and his originality is the offspring of enthusiastically loyal orthodoxy."⁶²

The reviewers of *Beyond Personality* were just as effusive as those who reviewed the previous publications of portions of *Mere Christianity*. A reviewer wrote for *The Times Literary Supplement*, "Mr. Lewis has a quite unique power of making theology an attractive, exciting and (one might almost say) an uproariously fascinating quest... Those who have inherited Christianity may write about it with truth and learning, but they can scarcely write with the excitement which men like ... C. S. Lewis show, to whom the Christian faith is the unlooked-for discovery of the pearl of great price."⁶³

Conclusion

Mere Christianity contains uncommon truth in common language. It is uncommon truth because of the power of Lewis's ideas, all of them reflecting biblical teaching, and it was common language because of the style in which Lewis wrote, his drawing upon universal human longing, and his use of analogy and the war in which Europe was at the time engaged. Few writers have the capability of presenting profound truth in exceedingly clear language, but Lewis is one of those. As Lewis wrote in his essay, "Christian Apologetics," "Our business is to present that which is timeless (the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow) in the particular language of our own age."⁶⁴ The timeless is uncommon truth, and the language of the age is common language.

Appendix I

| <u>BBC Broadcast Title</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Chapter Title in <i>Mere Christianity</i></u> |
|----------------------------|-------------|--|
|----------------------------|-------------|--|

Series 1: "Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe" (Wednesdays from 7:45 to 8:00 p.m., August 6 through September 6, 1941). This became Book 1 in *Mere Christianity*, and the chapter numbers are designated after the chapter titles.

| | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Common Decency | August 6, 1941 | The Law of Human Nature, ch. 1 |
| Scientific Law and Moral Law | August 13, 1941 | The Reality of the Law, ch. 3 |
| Materialism or Religion | August 20, 1941 | What Lies Behind the Law, ch. 4 |
| What Can We Do About It? | August 27, 1941 | We Have Cause to Be Uneasy, ch. 5 |
| Answers to Listeners' Questions | September 6, 1941 | Some Objections, ch. 2 |

Series 2: "What Christians Believe" (Sundays from 4:45 to 5:00 p.m., January 11 through February 15, 1942). This became Book 2 in *Mere Christianity*.

| | | |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| First Talk | January 11, 1942 | The Rival Conceptions of God, ch. 1 |
| Second Talk | January 18, 1942 | The Invasion, ch. 2 |
| Third Talk | February 1, 1942 | The Shocking Alternative, ch. 3 |
| Fourth Talk | February 8, 1942 | The Perfect Penitent, ch. 4 |
| Fifth Talk | February 15, 1942 | The Practical Conclusion, ch. 5 |

Series 3: “Christian Behavior” (Sundays from 2:50 to 3:00 p.m., September 20 through November 8, 1942). This became Book 3 in *Mere Christianity*. Some of the chapters in *Mere Christianity* were never broadcast (chapters 2, 6, 9, and 10).

| | | |
|--------------|--------------------|---|
| First Talk | September 20, 1942 | The Three Parts of Morality, ch. 1 The “Cardinal Virtues,” ch. 2 |
| Second Talk | September 27, 1942 | Social Morality, ch. 3 |
| Third Talk | October 4, 1942 | Morality and Psychoanalysis, ch. 4 |
| Fourth Talk | October 11, 1942 | Sexual Morality, ch. 5 Christian Marriage, ch. 6 |
| Fifth Talk | October 18, 1942 | Forgiveness, ch. 7 |
| Sixth Talk | October 25, 1942 | The Great Sin, ch. 8 Charity, ch. 9 Hope, ch. 10 |
| Seventh Talk | November 1, 1942 | Faith, ch. 11 |
| Eighth Talk | November 8, 1942 | Faith, ch. 12 |

Series 4: “Beyond Personality: The Christian View of God” (Tuesdays evenings from 10:20 to 10:35 p.m., February 22 through March 30, 1944). This became Book 4 in *Mere Christianity*. Some of the chapters in *Mere Christianity* were never broadcast (chapters 3, 6, 9, and 10).

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|-------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Making and Begetting | February 22, 1944 | Making and Begetting, ch. 1 |
| The Three-Personal God | February 29, 1944 | The Three-Personal God, ch. 2 Time and Beyond Time, ch. 3 |
| Good Infection | March 7, 1944 | Good Infection, ch. 4 |
| The Obstinate Toy Soldiers | March 14, 1944 | The Obstinate Toy Soldiers, ch. 5 Two Notes, ch. 6 |
| Let’s Pretend | March 21, 1944 | Let’s Pretend, ch. 7 |
| Is Christianity Hard or Easy? | March 28, 1944 | Is Christianity Hard or Easy?, ch. 8 Counting the Cost, ch. 9 Nice People or New Men, ch. 10 |
| The New Man | April 4, 1944 | The New Men, ch. 11 |

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1. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, VIII.
 2. Walter Hooper’s comment in the Foreword to Phillips, vi.
 3. See Baxter’s *Church History of the Government of Bishops*, published in 1680. For more information, see N. H. Keeble, “C.S. Lewis, Richard Baxter, and ‘Mere Christianity,’” in *Christianity and Literature* (Vol. XXX, No. 3, Spring 1981), pp. 27-44.
 4. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” 203.
 5. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, XV.
 6. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, XII.
 7. Michael G. Maudlin, “1993 Christianity Today Book Awards,” *Christianity Today*, April 5, 1993, p. 27f.
 8. Noll, 35.
 9. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 730.
 10. Phillips, 295.
 11. Lewis, “Man or Rabbit?” 108–110, 112.
 12. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 35.
 13. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 38f.
 14. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 39.
 15. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 50.
 16. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 192.

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17. Lawlor, *C. S. Lewis: Memories and Reflections*, 3.
 18. Phillips, 15.
 19. Phillips, 21.
 20. Phillips, 6, 33.
 21. Phillips, XI.
 22. Phillips, 86.
 23. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 32.
 24. By my count Lewis uses the following words: battle (4x), invasion/invade (4x), force (20x), Allies (once), march (2x), Gestapo (twice), army (4x), blow to bits (3x), soldier (16x), war (80x), ration (21x), battle/battlefield (4x), enemy (22x), fight (16x), struggle (once), German/Germany (4x), Nazi (3x), infantry (once), sabotage (once), rebel/rebellion (9x), surrender (8x), arms (7x), conquest (2x), conquer (2x), Jews (7x), smuggle (2x), and military (once) for a total of 247 World War Two references.
 25. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, II, 470.
 26. Phillips, 88.
 27. Phillips, 111f.
 28. Phillips, 124.
 29. Mr. R. S. Lee wrote to Lewis about this on Oct. 3, 1944. Phillips, 262.
 30. This request came to the BBC in London on June 16, 1948. Phillips, 272.
 31. *Collected Letters*, II, 484f.
 32. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 207.
 33. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 155.
 34. Lewis, "God in the Dock," 244.
 35. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," 95. See also "God in the Dock," 243.
 36. Lewis, "Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger," 183.
 37. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," 98.
 38. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," 38.
 39. Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*, 318.
 40. For more information on this topic, see my chapter, "*Praeparatio Evangelica*," in *C. S. Lewis: Lightbearer in the Shadowlands*.
 41. Lewis, "The Language of Religion," 136, 141.
 42. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 187.
 43. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 217.
 44. First, Lewis suggested "The Art of Being Shocked," or "These Humans," then "Inside Information." Phillips, 85, 91.
 45. A letter dated Feb. 10. 1941, *Collected Letters*, II, 470.
 46. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 18.
 47. Written on September 4, 1941, Phillips, 129.
 48. Phillips, 141.
 49. Phillips, 147.
 50. Hooper, 306f.
 51. Phillips, 142.
 52. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 37.
 53. *The Socratic Digest*, Number Four, 103.
 54. Trueblood, *While It Is Day: An Autobiography*, 99.

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55. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.
 56. *Zoe* and *Bios* are Greek words for “life,” with the former denoting a spiritual kind of life and the latter denoting biological life.
 57. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 159.
 58. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 203.
 59. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 227.
 60. Published by Macmillan in the US as *The Case for Christianity* (1943).
 61. Hooper, 327.
 62. Hooper, 327.
 63. Hooper, 328.
 64. Lewis, “Christian Apologetics,” 93.