

RESPONDING TO MERE CHRISTIANITY

By Justin Spratt

C.S. LEWIS'S *Mere Christianity*, a modern classic, is often used as a text to introduce students today to Christian apologetics. In it, Lewis espouses the “mereness” of Christianity—that essential quality of Christianity that has “been common to nearly all Christians at all times” (Lewis VIII). *Mere Christianity* was written partly in a reaction to all of the books devoted to discussing the distinctions between various denominations in Christianity. It came originally as radio broadcasts on the BBC during World War II and was later transcribed into book form. The Nazi terror clearly served as a tool for Lewis to make his necessary points about morality: “Most of us have got over the prewar wishful thinking about international politics. It is time we did the same about religion” (p. 32). The work is divided into four books: *Right And Wrong As a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe*, *What Christians Believe*, *Christian Behavior*, and *Beyond Personality*. The order of the books and the topics within each book was designed to lead someone who had not been previously exposed to Christianity in a

systematic manner to an understanding of Christian Theology. This paper will first give a summary of the views presented in each book and the arguments brought forth by Lewis before turning to reflect on Mere Christianity in the contemporary religious scene.

Right And Wrong As a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe

Lewis begins *Mere Christianity* taking the perspective of someone who does not accept the Bible—or any other religious text—as an authority. Making his case on logic, reasoning and common sense, Lewis observes that a common argument that skeptics of any non-naturalistic interpretation of the world offer (and one he used prior to his conversion to theism and Christianity), that the existence of evil and suffering in the world precludes the existence of a good god, self-destructs upon closer examination; for there to be evil there must be good, and good in a different sense than “the will of the majority” or “a personal preference”. The evil that the naturalist asserts is proof of the non-existence of a good god must

be a real, objective evil, not someone's or many peoples' fancy, and herein lies the problem: for there to be objective evil there must be objective good (that which the evil departs from), and for there to be objective good there must be some outside source from which the good derives. Lewis develops the idea of there being a Law of Human Nature and shows that this outside source must be more like a mind than anything else we know: "I think we have to assume it is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know—because after all the only other thing we know is matter and you can hardly imagine a bit of matter giving instructions" (Lewis 25). The first book concludes with a chapter describing the difficulty that man faces: he knows there must be a god (because of the inborn natural law)—a god he needs in order that there be meaning in the universe, but also a god to which his own behavior has made him an enemy—and this is a cause for dismay. This naturally leads into the second book which contains the Christian solution to this dilemma.

What Christians Believe

After showing that the existence of a moral law giver is a reasonable assumption, *Mere Christianity* delves into the Christian account of our spiritual situation while arguing against atheism, dualism, and pantheism. Lewis explains that Christ came not only to teach the world about good

morals but to atone for our behavior which has been contrary to God's law. The doctrine of atonement is central to the Christian faith, whereas there is no particular theory a Christian must hold that explains how this atonement takes place: more than one of them is acceptable. With Christ, the God-man's work on Earth, the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, our debt was paid. Much time is spent explaining how Christ's being fully man was essential for his atoning work to have effect, but also how Christ's being fully God was required for him to perfectly fulfill this task. At the end of Book II, Lewis paves the way for the following discussion of Christian Behavior by discussing how we share in the glory of Christ's atonement through physical and not purely moral means.

Christian Behavior

The third book inside *Mere Christianity* begins by laying a foundation of terminology and organization for a deep discussion of morality. According to Lewis, moral laws are best thought of as rules and not ideals: they do not vary with personal taste; they are the same for all. Morality can be divided into three domains: harmony between individuals in society, harmony inside the individual, and the guiding principle for all of life. Often, people focus on the first of these to the exclusion of the others (partly because the first is the easiest to deal

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with, partly because a religious framework is increasingly required to answer the second and even more so the third), yet all are important. The cardinal virtues, central to the Christian view of morality, are prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. The man who follows virtues does more than simply not violate God's laws, he develops a strong character—the kind of character that God requires.

The discussion that follows this introduction to morals includes the Christian perspective on social morality, morality and psychoanalysis, sexual morality, Christian marriage, forgiveness, pride, charity, hope, and faith. Lewis focuses on pride (which he calls the "great sin") as the worst vice as opposed to sexual immorality which most people take as being the most condemned sin in Christianity. Pride is the only sin which is entirely anti-relational; while a thief may enjoy the company of other thieves a proud man lives in enmity with all others. Lewis also discusses two types of faith: faith as accepting Christianity on the strength (and persevering in that faith) and faith that God will share sonship with us because of the atoning work of Christ.

Beyond Personality

Lewis starts the fourth book by discussing the aversion to and importance of theology, Lewis then probes into a variety of important, often misunderstood, theological

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questions: How can Christ be begotten but not created? How can there be three persons in one God? How can God care for and listen to us all at the same time? *Beyond Personality* is concluded with a lengthily discussion of the "new man". Appealing to the popular term *evolution*, Lewis compares the Christian to the final stage in human development. Several characteristics of the new men are given: (1) New men are not simply "nice" men, they are redeemed men. (2) New men are improved over their old selves. (3) New men have true, God given personality.

A Personal Reflection

This being the first time I have read through *Mere Christianity* in its entirety, I was pleasantly surprised: it was exceptionally readable, conversational, presentable, and relevant. Lewis, being very aware of his audience and a prolific writer, has produced a modern classic. *Mere Christianity's* readable, conversational style is, to a certain extent, due to the many excellent analogies Lewis uses (from his postman leaving the paper packets to the people living in darkness for their whole lives). Even for someone who has heard many of the arguments Lewis offered before the analogies are still very useful.

Mere Christianity is also a very presentable piece. While not mincing words, it manages to be a book that one could easily give as a modern introduction to

Christianity to a non Christian friend. The language used is still assessable to Lewis's target audience—a secular, modern, post-Christian society. Lewis's focus on discussing the core of Christianity instead of overly controversial and divisional issues (such as Mary's perpetual virginity) lends itself to the ears of the un-churched.

My two criticisms of Lewis's views presented in *Mere Christianity* are his expansive view of government and his partly universalistic view of salvation. Lewis clearly leans to the left of the political spectrum on economic issues: "To that extent a Christian society would be what we now call Leftist." (Lewis 84), yet he provides little biblical support for his position. In addition, Lewis appears to differ from the traditional view that all are condemned except by a saving faith: "we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him" (Lewis 64). This universalism also leads Lewis to include Catholicism as a denomination from which to choose: "You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic" (Lewis VIII) (emphasis added). Despite these shortcomings (which are, after all, very infrequently found in the text), *Mere Christianity* remains a true classic in Christian Apologetics, both for students and for Christian Culture at large.

Bibliography

Lewis, Clive S. *Mere Christianity*. San Fransisco: HarperCollins, 1952.