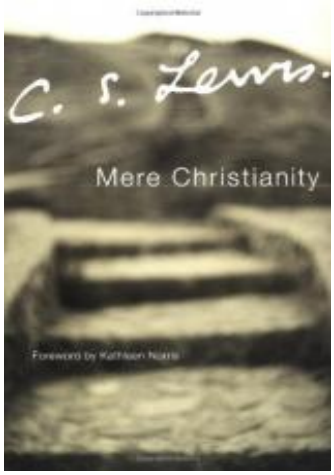
Mere Christianity

by C.S. Lewis



About the Book

In 1943 England, when all hope was threatened by the inhumanity of war, C.S. Lewis was invited to give a series of radio lectures addressing the central issues of Christianity. More than half a century after the original lectures, they continue to retain their poignancy. First heard as informal radio broadcasts, the lectures were then published as three books and subsequently combined as Mere Christianity. C.S. Lewis proves that "at the center of each there is something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice," rejecting the boundaries that divide Christianity's many denominations. This twentieth-century masterpiece provides an unequaled opportunity for believers and nonbelievers alike to hear a powerful, rational case for the Christian faith.

Discussion Guide

1. At the end of the first chapter in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis lays out the scope of his argument: "First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in" (p. 21). All cultures, he says, have a moral code and those codes are remarkably similar. Is he correct in inferring from this observation the existence of a Universal "Law of Human Nature," an innate sense of right and wrong? How do you think Lewis would respond to contemporary proponents of moral relativism?

2. Lewis first delivered the chapters that make up *Mere Christianity* as live radio addresses for the BBC beginning in 1941. In what ways does the writing reflect the fact that it was originally intended to be heard rather than read? What qualities of Lewis's speaking voice come through in the book? How do these qualities affect your receptivity to Lewis's ideas? What pains has Lewis evidently taken to make himself clear to an audience who had to absorb his ideas on first

hearing?

3. Lewis argues that repentance "means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death" (p. 60). In what ways have we trained ourselves to be conceited and willful? In what ways has Western culture contributed to this willfulness? Why does Lewis insist that part of the self must die in order to truly repent? How is this interior death related to Christ's death on the cross?

4. In explaining the way Christians see good, Lewis offers a vivid analogy: "?the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life within him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it" (p. 64). Such analogies appear throughout *Mere Christianity*. Why are they so effective in making complex ideas accessible? In what ways does this particular analogy reinforce and clarify the statement that precedes it?

5. Lewis ends the chapter "Sexual Morality" with a remarkable assertion: "?a cold self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute" (p. 95). Why does Lewis consider spiritual sins to be worse than sins of the flesh? What is Lewis's view of the proper role of sexuality, pleasure, and chastity for Christians?

6. Why does Lewis see Pride as the greatest sin, "the utmost evil," in comparison with which "unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that are mere fleabites"? (p. 110). How does he define Pride and its opposite, Humility? What effect does Pride have on one's relation to other people, to oneself, and to God? What is the relationship between Pride and the other vices? Lewis cites other Christian teachers who share his perspective but does not name them. Who might he be thinking of?

7. In an introduction to a broadcast given on 11 January 1942, which was later deleted from the published text, Lewis explains why he was chosen to give the talks: "?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." Do you think Lewis has succeeded in representing the ordinary person's view of Christianity? In what ways might his atheism and later conversion have affected his relationship to Christian beliefs? Do his convictions gain weight because he struggled to arrive at them?

8. Lewis wants his theology to have practical uses. In discussing Charity, he says: "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did?. When you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love him" (p. 116). The reverse, he says, is also true. "The Germans, perhaps, at first ill-treated the Jews because they hated them; afterwards they hated them much more because they had ill-treated them" (p. 117). Why would behavior influence feeling in this way? Why would pretending to feel something lead to actually feeling it? Do you think this principle applies both to individuals and, as Lewis implies, to larger political groups and nations? Have you ever witnessed or experienced this phenomenon yourself?

9. In the chapter on Hope, Lewis makes fun on those who reject the Christian idea of Heaven because they don't want to spend eternity playing harps. "The answer to such people," he says, "is that if they cannot understand books written for

grown-ups, they should not talk about them" (p. 121). What is Lewis's conception of Heaven? What is his view on the right relation between this world and the next? Why does he feel we should we "aim at Heaven" rather than at earth? (p. 119).

10. Why does Lewis so vehemently reject the view that treats Jesus as a historical rather than a divine figure? Why does he find the notion of some who regard Jesus merely as a great moral teacher to be absurd? Why does he assert that "If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance"? (p. 157).

11. In "Counting the Cost," Lewis says that God "will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or a goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly?His own boundless power and delight and goodness" (p. 176). What is required to become such a creature? Why do you think Lewis has chosen to describe this apotheosis with these images?

12. How appealing is Lewis's conception of Christianity as he presents it here? Has it clarified any theological confusions you may have had, or changed your own beliefs about how to live as a Christian? Do you think Lewis's ideas about virtue and morality can be valuable for non-Christians?

Author Bio

Clive Staples Lewis was born in 1898 in a suburb of Belfast. An extraordinarily precocious child, at the age of eight he was writing and illustrating "Animal-Land" stories with his brother Warren, at ten was reading Paradise Lost, and at nineteen was described by one of his teachers as "the most brilliant translator of Greek plays that I have ever met." By the time Lewis entered Oxford in 1917, he had long considered himself an atheist, a position that his experiences on the front lines of World War I only confirmed. But in 1925 he was elected to a fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he taught for twenty-five years and where his intellectual, creative, and religious development underwent a remarkable flowering. Shortly after a late night talk with J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson in 1931, Lewis had a conversion experience, beautifully described in his autobiography Surprised by Joy (1955), and regained his faith in Christianity. There followed an astonishing succession of fiction, criticism, and religious books, including The Problem of Pain (1940), The Screwtape Letters (1942), The Abolition of Man (1943), The Great Divorce (1946), Miracles (1947), George MacDonald (1947), and Mere Christianity (1952), and the seven children's books comprising The Chronicles of Narnia, completed in 1954. Greatly admired for his teaching, Lewis was offered the chair of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge in 1954, a position he held until his death. In 1956 he married Joy Davidman Gresham, the American poet and novelist, who was diagnosed with cancer later that year. Despite his wife's illness, Lewis achieved in his final years the happiness and contentment he had searched for all his life. His relationship with Joy, who died in 1960, is the subject of Richard Attenborough's film Shadowlands, and Lewis's own A Grief Observed, published under a pseudonym in 1961, is a deeply moving account of his struggle to come to terms with her loss. C.S. Lewis died on November 22, 1963, at his home in Oxford.

Critical Praise

"I read Lewis for comfort and pleasure many years ago, and a glance into the books revives my old admiration. "

Mere Christianity

by C.S. Lewis

Publication Date: March 11, 2013
Paperback: 227 pages
Publisher: HarperSanFrancisco
ISBN-10: 0060652926
ISBN-13: 9780060652920