



C. S. Lewis

ME
RE
CHRISTIANITY

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M E R E

C H R I S T I A N I T Y

C. S. LEWIS

A revised and amplified edition,

with a new introduction,

of the three books

Broadcast Talks,

Christian Behaviour

and

Beyond Personality

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[prefac e](#)

The contents of this book were first given on the air, and then published in three separate parts as *Broadcast Talks* (1942), *Christian Behaviour* (1943) and *Beyond Personality* (1944). In the printed versions I made a few additions to what I had said at the microphone, but otherwise left the text much as it had been. A ‘talk’ on the radio should, I think, be as like real talk as possible, and should not sound like an essay being read aloud. In my talks I had therefore used all the contractions and colloquialisms I ordinarily

use in conversation. In the printed version I reproduced this, putting *don't* and *we've* for *do not* and *we have*. And wherever, in the talks, I had made the importance of a word clear by the emphasis of my voice, I printed it in italics. I am now inclined to think that this was a mistake—an undesirable hybrid between the art of speaking and the art of writing. A talker ought to use variations of voice for emphasis because his medium naturally lends itself to that method: but a writer ought not to use italics for the same purpose. He has his own, different, means of bringing out the key words and ought to use them. In this edition I have expanded the contractions and replaced most of the italics by a recasting of the sentences in which they occurred: but without altering, I hope, the 'popular' or 'familiar' tone which I had all along intended. I have also added and deleted where I thought I v

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understood any part of my subject better now than ten years ago or where I knew that the original version had been misunderstood by others.

The reader should be warned that I offer no help to anyone who is hesitating between two Christian 'denominations'.

You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic.

This omission is intentional (even in the list I have just given the order is alphabetical). There is no mystery about my own position. I am a very ordinary layman of the Church of England, not especially 'high', nor especially 'low', nor especially anything else. But in this book I am not trying to convert anyone to my own position. Ever since I became a

Christian I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times. I had more than one reason for thinking this. In the first place, the questions which divide Christians from one another often involve points of high Theology or even of ecclesiastical history, which ought never to be treated except by real experts. I should have been out of my depth in such waters: more in need of

help myself than able to help others. And secondly, I think we must admit that the discussion of these disputed points has no tendency at all to bring an outsider into the Christian fold. So long as we write and talk about them we are much more likely to deter him from entering any Christian communion than to draw him into our own. Our divisions should never be discussed except in the presence of those who have already come to v i

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believe that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son. Finally, I got the impression that far more, and more talented, authors were already engaged in such controversial matters than in the defence of what Baxter calls ‘mere’

Christianity. That part of the line where I thought I could serve best was also the part that seemed to be thinnest. And to it I naturally went.

So far as I know, these were my only motives, and I should be very glad if people would not draw fanciful inferences from my silence on certain disputed matters.

For example, such silence need not mean that I myself am sitting on the fence. Sometimes I am. There are questions at issue between Christians to which I do not think we have been told the answer. There are some to which I may never know the answer: if I asked them, even in a better world, I might (for all I know) be answered as a far greater questioner was answered: ‘What is that to thee? Follow thou Me.’ But there are other questions as to which I am definitely on one side of the fence, and yet say nothing. For I am not writing to expound something I could call ‘my religion’, but to expound

‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.

Some people draw unwarranted conclusions from the fact that I never say more about the Blessed Virgin Mary than is involved in asserting the Virgin Birth of Christ. But surely my reason for not doing so is obvious? To say more would take me at once into highly controversial regions. And there is

no controversy between Christians which needs to be so delicately touched as this. The Roman Catholic beliefs on that v i i

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subject are held not only with the ordinary fervour that attaches to all sincere religious belief, but (very naturally) with the peculiar and, as it were, chivalrous sensibility that a man feels when the honour of his mother or his beloved is at stake.

It is very difficult so to dissent from them that you will not appear to them a cad as well as a heretic. And contrariwise, the opposed Protestant beliefs on this subject call forth feelings which go down to the very roots of all Monotheism whatever.

To radical Protestants it seems that the distinction between Creator and creature (however holy) is imperilled: that Polytheism is risen again. Hence it is hard so to dissent from them that you will not appear something worse than a heretic—

a Pagan. If any topic could be relied upon to wreck a book about ‘mere’ Christianity—if any topic makes utterly unprofitable reading for those who do not yet believe that the Virgin’s son is God—surely this is it.

Oddly enough, you cannot even conclude, from my silence on disputed points, either that I think them important or that I think them unimportant. For this is itself one of the disputed points. One of the things Christians are disagreed about is the importance of their disagreements. When two Christians of different denominations start arguing, it is usually not long before one asks whether such-and-such a point ‘really matters’

and the other replies: ‘Matter? Why, it’s absolutely essential.’

All this is said simply in order to make clear what kind of book I was trying to write; not in the least to conceal or evade responsibility for my own beliefs. About those, as I said before, there is no secret. To quote Uncle Toby: ‘They are written in the Common-Prayer Book.’

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The danger clearly was that I should put forward as common Christianity anything that was peculiar to the Church of England or (worse still) to myself. I tried to guard against this by sending the original script of what is now Book II to four clergymen (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman

Catholic) and asking for their criticism. The Methodist thought I had not said enough about Faith, and the Roman Catholic thought I had gone rather too far about the comparative unimportance of theories in explanation of the

Atonement. Otherwise all five of us were agreed. I did not have the remaining books similarly ‘vetted’ because in them, though differences might arise among Christians, these would be differences between individuals or schools of thought, not between denominations.

So far as I can judge from reviews and from the numerous letters written to me, the book, however faulty in other respects, did at least succeed in presenting an agreed, or common, or central, or ‘mere’ Christianity. In that way it may possibly be of some help in silencing the view that, if we omit the disputed points, we shall have left only a vague and bloodless H.C.F. The H.C.F. turns out to be something not only positive but pungent; divided from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all. If I have not directly helped the cause of reunion, I have perhaps made it clear why we ought to be reunited. Certainly I have met with little of the fabled *odium theologicum* from convinced members of communions different from my own. Hostility has come more from borderline people whether within the Church of England or i x

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without it: men not exactly obedient to any communion. This I find curiously consoling. It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine.

And this suggests that at the centre of each there is a something, or a Someone, who against all divergencies of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.

So much for my omissions on doctrine. In Book III, which deals with morals, I have also passed over some things in silence, but for a different reason. Ever since I served as an infantryman in the First World War I have had a great dislike of people who, themselves in ease and safety, issue exhortations to men in the front line. As a result I have a reluctance to say much about temptations to which I myself am not

exposed. No man, I suppose, is tempted to every sin. It so happens that the impulse which makes men gamble has been left out of my make-up; and, no doubt, I pay for this by lack-ing some good impulse of which it is the excess or perversion.

I therefore did not feel myself qualified to give advice about permissible and impermissible gambling: if there is any permissible, for I do not claim to know even that. I have also said nothing about birth-control. I am not a woman nor even a married man, nor am I a priest. I did not think it my place to take a firm line about pains, dangers and expenses from which I am protected; having no pastoral office which obliged me to do so.

Far deeper objections may be felt—and have been ex-

pressed—against my use of the word *Christian* to mean one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity. People x

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ask: ‘Who are you, to lay down who is, and who is not a Christian?’ or ‘May not many a man who cannot believe these doctrines be far more truly a Christian, far closer to the spirit of Christ, than some who do?’ Now this objection is in one sense very right, very charitable, very spiritual, very sensitive.

It has every available quality except that of being useful. We simply cannot, without disaster, use language as these objectors want us to use it. I will try to make this clear by the history of another, and very much less important, word.

The word *gentleman* originally meant something recognisable; one who had a coat of arms and some landed property.

When you called someone ‘a gentleman’ you were not paying him a compliment, but merely stating a fact. If you said he was not ‘a gentleman’ you were not insulting him, but giving information. There was no contradiction in saying that John was a liar and a gentleman; any more than there now is in saying that James is a fool and an M.A. But then there came people who said—so rightly, charitably, spiritually, sensitively, so anything but usefully—‘Ah, but surely the important thing about a gentleman is not the coat of arms and the land, but the behaviour? Surely he is the true gentleman who behaves as a gentleman should? Surely in that sense Edward is far more truly a gentleman than John?’ They meant well. To be honourable and courteous and brave is of course a far better thing than to have a coat of arms. But it is not the same thing. Worse still, it is not a thing everyone will agree about. To call a man

‘a gentleman’ in this new, refined sense, becomes, in fact, not a way of giving information about him, but a way of praising him: to deny that he is ‘a gentleman’ becomes simply a way of x i

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insulting him. When a word ceases to be a term of description and becomes merely a term of praise, it no longer tells you facts about the object: it only tells you about the speaker’s attitude to that object. (A ‘nice’ meal only means a meal the speaker likes.) A *gentleman*, once it has been spiritualised and refined out of its old coarse, objective sense, means hardly more than a man whom the speaker likes. As a result, *gentleman* is now a useless word. We had lots of terms of approval already, so it was not needed for that use; on the other hand if anyone (say, in a historical work) wants to use it in its old sense, he cannot do so without explanations. It has been spoiled for that purpose.

Now if once we allow people to start spiritualising and refining, or as they might say ‘deepening’, the sense of the word *Christian*, it too will speedily become a useless word. In the first place, Christians themselves will never be able to apply it to anyone. It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men’s hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense. And obviously a word which we can never apply is not going to be a very useful word.

As for the unbelievers, they will no doubt cheerfully use the word in the refined sense. It will become in their mouths simply a term of praise. In calling anyone a Christian they will mean that they think him a good man. But that way of using the word will be no enrichment of the language, for we already have the word *good*. Meanwhile, the word *Christian* will have been spoiled for any really useful purpose it might have served.

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We must therefore stick to the original, obvious meaning.

The name *Christians* was first given at Antioch (Acts 11:26) to

‘the disciples’, to those who accepted the teaching of the apos-tles. There is no question of its being restricted to those who profited by that teaching as much as they should have. There is no question of its being extended to those who in some refined, spiritual, inward fashion were ‘far closer to the spirit of Christ’ than the less satisfactory of the disciples. The point is not a theological or moral one. It is only a question of using words so that we can all understand what is being said. When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.

I hope no reader will suppose that ‘mere’ Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions—as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or

anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms.

If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at. I do not know why there is this difference, but I am sure God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. When you do get into your room you will find that the x i i i

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long wait has done you some kind of good which you would not have had otherwise. But you must regard it as waiting, not as camping. You must keep on praying for light: and, of course, even in the hall, you must begin trying to obey the rules which are common to the whole house. And above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and panelling. In plain language, the question should never be: 'Do I like that kind of service?'

but 'Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?'

When you have reached your own room, be kind to those

who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.

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[foreword](#)

This is a book that begs to be seen in its historical context, as a bold act of storytelling and healing in a world gone mad. In 1942, just twenty-four years after the end of a brutal war that had destroyed an entire generation of its young men, Great Britain was at war again. Now it was ordinary citizens who suffered, as their small island nation was bombarded by four hundred planes a night, in the infamous “blitz”¹ that changed the face of war, turning civilians and their cities into the front lines.

As a young man, C. S. Lewis had served in the awful

trenches of World War I, and in 1940, when the bombing of Britain began, he took up duties as an air raid warden and gave talks to men in the Royal Air Force, who knew that after just thirteen bombing missions, most of them would be declared dead or missing. Their situation prompted Lewis to speak about the problems of suffering, pain, and evil, work that resulted in his being invited by the BBC to give a series of wartime broadcasts on Christian faith. Delivered over the air from 1942 to 1944, these speeches eventually were gathered into the book we know today as *Mere Christianity*.

This book, then, does not consist of academic philosophical musings. Rather, it is a work of oral literature, addressed to people at war. How strange it must have seemed to turn on the x v

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radio, which was every day bringing news of death and

unspeakable destruction, and hear one man talking, in an intelligent, good-humored, and probing tone, about decent and humane behavior, fair play, and the importance of knowing right from wrong. Asked by the BBC to explain to his fellow Britons what Christians believe, C. S. Lewis proceeded with the task as if it were the simplest thing in the world, and also the most important.

We can only wonder about the metaphors that connected

so deeply with this book's original audience; images of our world as enemy-occupied territory, invaded by powerful evils bent on destroying all that is good, still seem very relevant today. All of our notions of modernity and progress and all our advances in technological expertise have not brought an end to war. Our declaring the notion of sin to be obsolete has not diminished human suffering. And the easy answers: blaming technology, or, for that matter, the world's religions, have not solved the problem. The problem, C. S. Lewis insists, is *us*. And the crooked and perverse generation of which the psalmists and prophets spoke many thousands of years ago is our own, whenever we submit to systemic and individual evils as if doing so were our only alternative.

C. S. Lewis, who was once described by a friend as a man in love with the imagination, believed that a complacent acceptance of the status quo reflects more than a failure of nerve. In *Mere Christianity*, no less than in his more fantastical works, the Narnia stories and science fiction novels, Lewis betrays a deep faith in the power of the human imagination to reveal the truth about our condition and bring us to hope.

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“The longest way round is the shortest way home”² is the logic of both fable and of faith.

Speaking with no authority but that of experience, as a layman and former atheist, C. S. Lewis told his radio audience that he had been selected for the job of describing Christianity to a new generation precisely because he was not a specialist but “an amateur . . . and a beginner, not an old hand.”³ He told friends that he had accepted the task because he believed that England, which had come to consider itself part of a “post-Christian”

world, had never in fact been told in basic terms what the religion is about. Like Søren Kierkegaard before him and his contemporary Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lewis seeks in *Mere Christianity* to help us see the religion with fresh eyes, as a radical faith whose adherents might be likened to an

underground group gathering in a war zone, a place where evil seems to have the upper hand, to hear messages of hope from the other side.

The “mere” Christianity of C. S. Lewis is not a philosophy or even a theology that may be considered, argued, and put away in a book on a shelf. It is a way of life, one that challenges us always to remember, as Lewis once stated, that “there are no ordinary people” and that “it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.”⁴ Once we tune ourselves to this reality, Lewis believes, we open ourselves to imaginatively transform our lives in such a way that evil diminishes and good prevails. It is what Christ asked of us in taking on our humanity, sanctifying our flesh, and asking us in turn to reveal God to one another.

If the world would make this seem a hopeless task, Lewis insists that it is not. Even someone he envisions as “poisoned x v i i

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by a wretched upbringing in some house full of vulgar jealousies and senseless quarrels”⁵ can be assured that God is well aware of “what a wretched machine you are trying to drive,”

and asks only that you “keep on, [doing] the best you can.”

The Christianity Lewis espouses is humane, but not easy: it asks us to recognize that the great religious struggle is not fought on a spectacular battleground, but within the ordinary human heart, when every morning we awake and feel the

pressures of the day crowding in on us, and we must decide what sort of immortals we wish to be. Perhaps it helps us, as surely it helped the war-weary British people who first heard these talks, to remember that God plays a great joke on those who would seek after power at any cost. As Lewis reminds us, with his customary humor and wit, “How monotonously

alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different the saints.”⁶

Kathleen Norris

1 Information on the blitz and Royal Air Force pilots by William Griffin, *Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life*; sections on the years 1941 & 1942.

Holt & Rinehart, 1986.

2 “The longest way round,” quoted from *Mere Christianity*.

3 “An amateur,” from January 11, 1942, radio broadcast; cited in *Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life*.

4 “There are no ordinary people,” quoted from “The Weight of Glory,” a C. S. Lewis sermon delivered June 8, 1941.

5 “Poisoned by a wretched upbringing,” quoted from *Mere Christianity*.

6 “How monotonously alike,” quoted from *Mere Christianity*.

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[book one](#)

right and wrong

as a clue to the

meaning of the universe

[1](#)

the law of human nature

Every one has heard people quarrelling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: ‘How’d you like it if anyone did the same to

you?’—‘That’s my seat, I was there first’—‘Leave him alone, he isn’t doing you any harm’—‘Why should you shove in

first?’—‘Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine’—‘Come on, you promised.’ People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man’s behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: ‘To hell with your standard.’ Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not 3

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keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise. It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.

Now this Law or Rule about Right and Wrong used to be

called the Law of Nature. Nowadays, when we talk of the

‘laws of nature’ we usually mean things like gravitation, or heredity, or the laws of chemistry. But when the older thinkers called the Law of Right and Wrong ‘the Law of Nature’, they really meant the Law of Human Nature.

The idea was that, just as all bodies are governed by the law of gravitation, and organisms by biological laws, so the creature called man also had his law—with this great difference, that a body could not choose whether it obeyed the law of gravitation or not, but a man could choose either to obey the Law of Human Nature or to disobey it.

We may put this in another way. Each man is at every

moment subjected to several different sets of law but there is only one of these which he is free to disobey. As a body, he is 4

the law of human nature subjected to gravitation and cannot disobey it; if you leave him unsupported in mid-air, he has no more choice about falling than a stone has. As an organism, he is subjected to various biological laws which he cannot disobey any more than an animal can. That is, he cannot disobey those laws which he shares with other things; but the law which is peculiar to his human nature, the law he does not share with animals or vegetables or inorganic things, is the one he can disobey if he chooses.

This law was called the Law of Nature because people

thought that every one knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it. They did not mean, of course, that you might not find an odd individual here and there who did not know it, just as you find a few people who are colour-blind or have no ear for a tune. But taking the race as a whole, they thought that the human idea of decent behaviour was obvious to every one.

And I believe they were right. If they were not, then all the things we said about the war were nonsense. What was the sense in saying the enemy were in the wrong unless Right is a real thing which the Nazis at bottom knew as well as we did and ought to have practised? If they had had no notion of what we mean by right, then, though we might still have had to fight them, we could no more have blamed them for that than for the colour of their hair.

I know that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behaviour known to all men is unsound, because different civilisations and