

STUDY GUIDE to *Mere Christianity*

By C.S. Lewis

Introduction

Mere Christianity is possibly Lewis' most frequently read work. It was originally given as a series of broadcast talks during the Second World War. Of his own qualifications to speak on Christianity he said:

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. [The British Broadcasting Corporation] have asked me, first of all because I'm a layman and not a parson, and consequently they 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 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 and 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... 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...

Lewis' ability to get to the heart of Christian doctrine in this way was one of his greatest gifts and helped to inspire a greater sense of solidarity amongst churchmen of many persuasions. As far as the world at large was concerned, the level of public response to Lewis' talks was considerable, and divided, more often than not, into warm appreciation or vehement criticism. In a letter to Eric Fenn of the BBC Lewis expressed no surprise at this great divergence of opinion:

The two views you report aren't very illuminating about me perhaps; about my subject matter, it is an old story isn't it? They love, or hate.

Quotes taken from Walter Hooper's C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide

Background

The emphasis on moral law was especially important to Lewis because it seemed to him that:

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the New Testament, by preaching repentance and forgiveness, always assumes an audience who already believe in the law of Nature and know they have disobeyed it. In modern England we cannot at present assume this, and therefore most apologetic begins a stage too far on. The first step is to create, or recover, the sense of guilt.

Modern man, in doubting the reality even of good and evil, has cut himself off from his ancestors (with the age-old notion of the Tao, or Law of Human Nature) and the whole bedrock of Christian thought that related to it.

Those interested in learning more about the idea of the Tao can find practical examples of it at work in different cultures in the appendix to Lewis' *The Abolition of Man*. If you want to learn more about this concept in the history of Christian thought, you can also look at Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, a work that Lewis almost certainly drew on for help with his definitions. In the *Summa* Natural Law is defined as humans' willed participation in the Eternal Law of God, by using reason to discern fundamental goods and evils.

Suggestions

There is a basic question-and-answer study guide for *Mere Christianity* available for downloading from the internet at http://www.gordy-stith.com/Mere%20Christianity/mere_christianity_study_guide.htm

Group members may like to work through this guide prior to the meeting as it is best used as a checklist for making sure you have understood Lewis' arguments. Or, alternatively, you might like to select some questions from the guide for use in the detailed chapter by chapter discussion of *Mere Christianity*.

Thus the study guide we have provided has been gauged towards a different set of needs. Some of the questions deal with unearthing the particularities of Lewis' arguments. But most questions seek to spark debate within the group as to how far people agree with Lewis' ideas, and how we might apply his insights to our lives today. We have provided at least one question per chapter for Books 1 and 2. Books 3 and 4 furnish more material for discussion because they were almost twice as long. In view of this, it might be a good plan to divide your study into three sessions starting with Books 1 and 2 together and then Books 3 and 4 separately. Once again, we suggest that you pick and choose questions according to your group interests and time constraints and that you have someone moderate the discussion to ensure that everyone who wishes has a chance to participate.

Questions

Book 1

- (1) "There has been a great deal of soft soap talked about God for the last hundred years. That is not what I am offering." What, in your opinion, *is* Lewis offering us in *Mere Christianity*?
- (2) Do you agree with Lewis that we can all appeal to an objective sense of what is right and wrong – a God-given conception of the Moral Law?
- (3) How is the Law of Human Nature/Moral Law distinguished from other laws?
- (4) In our postmodern society, many argue that morality is relative to culture and upbringing. How might you answer them with Lewis' arguments in mind?
- (5) What does Lewis say about the limitations of (a) Science, (b) Psychoanalysis

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Why, in his view, do neither of them pose a real challenge to belief in God? Do you agree with him that there is no conflict?

- (6) According to Lewis, Christianity only begins to make sense when we have realized a few hard facts about the kind of universe we live in. What, in his view, are the illusions that people have to give up before Christianity can begin to speak to them? Can you think of any other illusions people might have to dismantle before coming to God?

Book 2

- (7) Lewis raises a number of opposing belief systems to Christianity (Atheism, Pantheism, Dualism) and attempts to show why none of them fit the facts. Do you agree with his arguments here? Would you have anything to add to them?
- (8) Is there anything surprising in Lewis' description of atheism as "too simple"?
- (9) Do you think "Christianity and water" is a prevalent phenomenon? In what other ways might people attempt to water down the faith?
- (10) What did you make of Lewis' analogy of Christians as "living in enemy territory"? Is this a biblical principle? In what other ways might the analogy be applicable to our lives?
- (11) Do you think Lewis' distinctive style of writing reinforces his argument for Christianity?
- (12) "...out of that hopeless attempt [to be their own masters, and invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God] has come nearly all that which we call human history." Do you agree with this summation of world history? Would you have anything to add to it?
- (13) According to Lewis, God's rescue plan for humanity took the form of four things (the Moral Law, good dreams of a dying god, the revelation given to the Jews, and finally the coming of Jesus).
- (a) Is "good dreams" a strange inclusion in this list?
 - (b) Can you think of any examples of good dreams in pagan/heathen cultures?
 - (c) Why was the Judaic revelation so important?
 - (d) Are there any other ways in which God could be said to have revealed himself to humanity?
- (14) "If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of truth." Can you identify any "hints of the truth" within other world religions? What do you think our attitude towards people of other faiths should be?
- (15) Despite Lewis' famous words about the foolishness of accepting Christ simply as "a great moral teacher," it seems that many people today still take that attitude towards Jesus. Why?
- (16) What did you make of the theory of atonement that Lewis proposes? Are there any other such theories that have helped you in your understanding of what happened on the Cross?

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Book 3

- (17) “People often ask when the next step in evolution – the step to something beyond man – will happen. But on the Christian view it has happened already.” How?
- (18) What, according to Lewis, are the three things that spread the Christ life to us? How might this work in practice?
- (19) “Christian writers seem to be so strict at one moment and so very free and easy at another. They talk about mere sins of thought as if they were immensely important: and then they talk about the most frightful murders and treacheries as if you had only got to repent and all would be forgiven. But I have come to see that they are right. What they are always thinking of is the mark which the action leaves on that tiny central self which no one sees in this life but which each of us will have to endure – or enjoy – forever.” Do you think Lewis is right to put so much emphasis on our inner lives? What are the consequences of this view?
- (20) Do you agree that our sexual instinct has gone wrong? On what do you base your answer?
- (21) What do you make of Lewis’ model of Christian marriage?
- (22) “Loving my enemies does not apparently mean thinking them nice.” What *does* it mean then?
- (23) Do you agree with Lewis that an honest pacifist is mistaken?
- (24) “The essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride.” Why does Lewis say so? Do you agree?
- (25) How do we recognize pride in (a) others, (b) ourselves?
What should our reaction be?
- (26) How does being humble help us to progress in the Christian life?
- (27) What does Lewis see as the secret of learning to love people? Are there any other good ways of cultivating charity?
- (28) “On the whole God’s love for us is a much safer subject than our love for him.” Why?
- (29) “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.” Do you agree (a) that modern Christians are largely ineffective, (b) that it is because they have ceased to think much of heaven?
- (30) “I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country, and to help others to do the same.” How might we do this?
- (31) “Faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods.” Would you agree with this definition of faith?
- (32) “If you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already.”
 - (a) How does this understanding of salvation conflict with popular ideas of what Christianity means?

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- (b) How do we really “hand ourselves over” to God?
 - (c) What are the consequences of this new obedience?
- (33) “I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads you on, out of all that, into something beyond.” Is Lewis getting all mystical on us here? What do *you* Christianity is really all about?

Book 4

- (34) How might some understanding of Theology aid us in deciding practical questions of the Christian life?
- (35) Why is it important for us to consider the difference between making and begetting (a) in reference to Christ, (b) in reference to humanity?
- (36) Men, says Lewis, are naturally like statues or pictures of God. We become true sons of God only when we receive spiritual life from him. How do we receive that life?
- (37) “[God] shows much more of himself to some people than to others – not because He has favourites, but because it is impossible for Him to show Himself to a man whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition.” How can we put ourselves in the right condition to receive God?
- (38) Why, in Lewis’ view, is the Christian community the most reliable source for knowledge about God?
- (39) Do you find Lewis’ picture of God as outside time, viewing the whole of it at once, helpful?
- (40) What does Lewis make of the statement “God is love”? What do you make of it?
- (41) Did Lewis’ description of the Trinity help you understand the concept of how a personal God could be three persons in one? Are there any other models that you have found helpful in thinking about this?
- (42) Lewis says that we are “naturally afraid” of the spiritual world. Should we be scared of it? If so, why? If not, is our fear due to a wrong understanding of the spiritual world or a wrong reaction to it?
- (43) “Christianity thinks of individuals... as organs in a body.” What does this image suggest?
- (44) “The devil... sends errors into the world in pairs – pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse... He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.” Can you think of any particular errors Christians might be tempted to make out of a frantic desire to avoid their opposites?
- (45) “The Church exists for nothing else than to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.” Do you agree with Lewis here? How might this influence the way we run our churches?

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- (46) Why, in Lewis' view, is simply trying to obey your conscience not going to bring you any closer to putting on Christ?
- (47) "Never, never pin your whole faith on any human being." Is Lewis telling us never to trust anybody?
- (48) "The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it." What, according to Lewis, is the real problem of the Christian life, and where are we most likely to be confronted with it?
- (49) Is it possible to be perfect, as Christ told us to be? In what way(s)?
- (50) "The world does not consist of 100 per cent Christians and 100 per cent non-Christians." Do you agree with Lewis? What implications does this have for the way we view others?
- (51) "A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world – and might even be more difficult to save." Do you agree that "niceness" can make people more difficult to save? How?
- (52) What did you think of Lewis' picture of "the new men"? Have you met any?
- (53) It's one of Lewis' main premises that in turning to Christ we become real personalities, and more ourselves. Do you agree that in order to gain your life you must lose it? What does the losing involve?

Conclusion

- (54) Did Lewis' arguments in *Mere Christianity* convince you that the claims of Christianity are true?
- (55) Did reading this book make you view what it means to be a Christian in a new light? Specifically, how?
- (56) Have you taken that step of faith personally? Have you publicly acknowledged it?