

Dear fellow pilgrims,

Last week we began our exploration of the important preface that Lewis wrote for the soon-to-be-published *Mere Christianity* in 1952, in which he gives us some insights into his reflections on the purpose of this book, some parts of which had been prepared a decade earlier. Below are links to recorded versions of the class, as well as a great article (for those who are scuba diving) on the important but easy to miss stylistic brilliance of *Mere Christianity*.

We reviewed the history of the book's publication by Geoffrey Bles (who also published the wartime memoir of Maria von Trapp!), and looked at how the term "mere Christianity" had been marinating in Lewis's thoughts for some time before he chose it for the title of the book. Coined by the English Protestant cleric and scholar Richard Baxter in 1680, the term "mere Christianity" appeared in *The Screwtape Letters* (1942--first lines of Letter 25:), *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), *On the Reading of Old Books* (1944), "Christian Reunion: An Anglican speaks to Roman Catholic" (circa 1944), and Letter to the Editor of *Church Times* (1 February 1952) before becoming the title of this book.

Here are some of the key points from the 1952 preface that we looked at last week:

1. Background on use of words and writing techniques—alterations due to medium of writing rather than speaking. Some great lessons about writing and speaking in Lewis's introduction here.

2. Lewis's focus will be on explaining and defending belief common to all Christians at all times, not helping on choosing denomination: *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.*

A. He will not treat divisive questions of high Theology, leaving them to "real experts."

B. Divisive questions "...should never be discussed except in the presence of those who have already come to believe that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son."

C. Explaining and defending "mere" Christianity was "...that part of the line where I thought I could serve best [and] was also the part that seemed to be thinnest."

3. What silence on certain disputed theological matters means

A. "Such silence need not mean that I myself am sitting on the fence. Sometimes I am."

B. "There are other questions as to which I am definitely on one side of the fence, and yet say nothing. For I was not writing to expound something I could call "my religion," but to expound "mere" Christianity.

C. "My silence on disputed points [does not mean] that I think them important or that I think them unimportant. One of the things Christians are disagreed about is the importance of their disagreements."

4. What measures were taken to guard against prejudice in describing what constitutes "mere Christianity"

A. "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..."

B. Mere Christianity is not "vague and bloodless" but "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."

C. "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 something, or a Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice."

5. What silence on certain matters of morals means

A. "I have a reluctance to say much about temptations to which I myself am not exposed."

6. A defense of the meaning of the word "Christian"

A. Statement of the issue: "Far deeper objections may be felt—and have been expressed— against my use of the word *Christian* to mean one who accepts the common doctrines of Christianity."

B. Analogous issue with the word "gentleman": "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.

"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 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.)"

C. Why it matters: "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... 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.

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 apostles. 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.

7. "Mere" Christianity and entering into the community of faith

A. "mere" Christianity... 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...**

B. "When you do get into your room you will find that the long wait [in the hall] 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 paneling."

C. "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?"

D. "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."

I believe that the sections of the Preface about the use of the word "Christian" (with the analogy with the word "gentleman") and the extended metaphor about the hall and the rooms as an image for entering the community of faith are of extraordinary importance for believers today. Vague ideas of what it means to be Christian create rampant confusion not just in the church and the culture, but in the lives of individuals as well. Lewis's understanding of "mere Christianity" as the hallway by which you enter into the rooms where there are fires and chairs and meals and fellowship is a framework we need to reclaim today, especially in American Christianity. The modern American phenomenon of those who identify themselves as Christians seeking to follow Jesus but who are not involved in any faith community is something that is unknown to New Testament Christianity, where coming to faith meant simultaneously coming into the Christian community. Being deeply engaged in community for worship, teaching, fellowship, and service is part and parcel of following Jesus!

Our next class will be Wednesday, December 2, at 7:15 p.m. via Zoom, and we will finish up with some comments on the preface and then dig into Chapter 1. We will not have class this week because of Thanksgiving.

Below are links to materials from our last class and video and audio in case you missed it, as well as the essay link for those who are scuba diving.

I hope you and your family have a wonderful and joyous Thanksgiving, and I look forward to "seeing" you soon in class!

Further up and further in,
Brian+

Link for class on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXb3DB3AqhE>

Podcast link:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mere-christianity-timely-truth-for-a-hurting-world/id1537579476>

Link to audio on church website:

<https://www.sphilipchurchsc.org/mediaPlayer/#/episodeaudio/386>

Music selection from class:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EdFHBOWMOE>