

# White Paper: Mere Christianity

## Arise Church

*Mere Christianity commits itself to focusing on the core, central aspects of the Christian faith while allowing for differences of faith and practice on non-central things. It's gospel-centered, creedal, balanced, embraces particulars, intellectually humble, drawn from the Great Tradition, and both faithful and practical.*

### I. What is Mere Christianity?

The term “mere Christianity” has enjoyed modern popularity since C.S. Lewis titled one of his most famous works by the same name. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes the kind of plain Christian faith he believed this way:

The central Christian belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start. Theories as to how it did this are another matter.... We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying He disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is Christianity. That is what has to be believed. Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself. All the same, some of these theories are worth looking at.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis himself did not coin the term, but instead built upon Puritan Richard Baxter's use of the term and concept. In “On the Reading of Old Books,” Lewis provides his most succinct summary of mere Christianity, saying that it is “a standard of plain, central Christianity which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective.”<sup>2</sup>

Baxter and Lewis, of course, were far from the first Christians to call for a focused and unified faith. Even within the New Testament, we see calls for the unity of the Church (John 17.20-26; Ephesians 4.1-6) as well as the necessary precondition for such unity: a discerning and nuanced articulation of faith (1 Corinthians 10.5; 2 Timothy 3.1-5; 1 Peter 5.7-9). Fifth-century theologian Vincent of Lerins advocated for the standard that, “in the universal Church... we should hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.”<sup>3</sup> In historical usage, then, mere Christianity is not a desire to return to a golden age of Christian faith and practice (as if there were such a thing); rather, it is a call to major on the majors and minor on the minors when it comes to belief and praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 54, 55-56.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books.”

<sup>3</sup> Vincent of Lerins, “Commonitory,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 11*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1894), rev. Kevin Knight, II.6

Perhaps the best articulation of the mere Christian approach comes from the statement, “*In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.*”<sup>4</sup> That is, *in necessary things unity, in doubtful things freedom, in all things love*. In other words, **mere Christianity focuses on the core, central facets of the Christian faith while allowing for differences of faith or practice on non-central things, all surrounded by charitable understanding where disagreements occur.**

Such an approach to faith obviously pushes back against the situation that the Church finds itself in, by positing that a focus on the central necessities of the faith can help limit the infighting, divisions, and distraction of non-essential issues that far too often prevent people from hearing the Good News of Jesus and following Him. Mere Christians contend that Christianity’s image problem—the all-too-common perception that the Church is composed of divisive, sheltered, sexually-repressed, judgmental, political, hypocrites<sup>5</sup>—is in large part self-inflicted, and can be mediated by the mere Christian approach that emphasizes what Scripture (and Tradition) contend are important, while refusing to divide over other issues.

## **II. Remaining *Christian While Being Mere***

Of course, it’s one thing to talk about mere Christianity, but another to actually put it into practice. One question that mere Christianity immediately raises is that of boundaries: how are we to distinguish between “plain, central Christianity” or “necessary things” and non-central doctrinal points or non-essential issues? In many instances, this is where mere Christianity runs into trouble.

The mere Christian perspective inherently pushes back against the rampant problem of divisive and sectarian Christianity that has dominated the global Church, and especially the Western Church, since the dawn of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>6</sup> Yet adopting a mere Christian approach can easily become fodder for a number of other problematic approaches to faith. In his excellent book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Gavin Ortlund classifies such viewpoints under the banner of “doctrinal minimalism,” where any doctrine or practice should be treated with skepticism and avoided altogether.<sup>7</sup> Using this as a cautionary standard for what to avoid, this means the mere Christian approach should not devolve into theological liberalism, where the theology, history, and morality of Scripture are viewed as negotiable rather than norming.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, mere

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<sup>4</sup> Often attributed to Augustine, this quote likely originated with Marco Antonio de Dominis (d.1624) and was popularized by Lutheran theologian Peter Mederlin in his 1626 work, *Paraenesis votiva pro pace ecclesiae ad theologos Augustanae*.

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful overview of this perspective, see David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For a brief history of denominationalism, see Roger Olson, et al, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States, 14<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018). Also helpful is Michael Patton’s article, “Why are there so many divisions in the Church?” Finally, for a helpful review of the problems of the sectarian approach, see Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 27-43.

<sup>7</sup> Ortlund, 45-59.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Seven Characteristics of Liberal Theology,” *The Gospel Coalition*, 26 September 2017.

Christianity should not stand in for ecumenical approaches, which are often high on intellectual camaraderie but low on practical unity. The mere Christian approach is also not the same as postmodern Christianity, where faith is exclusively personal, service to the world need not be done in the name of King Jesus, and the institutions of the past are viewed as something to be torn down rather than learned from.

As we describe it, mere Christianity should not take any of these forms, because the mere Christian approach can also affirm that “many doctrines are significant even if we don’t divide over them.”<sup>9</sup> Mere Christianity continues to recognize the norming status of Scripture and the Great Tradition of the Church. The central core of the faith and its attendant authorities—Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason—are still recognized as valid by the mere Christian approach (though not all such structures are necessarily of equal validity or value). In short, those adopting mere Christianity must be able to equally label themselves as “mere” *and* as “Christian,” a test that many doctrinally minimalist viewpoints struggle to pass.

### III. Characteristics of Mere Christianity

How else may we describe and explain the mere Christian approach? We propose the following seven characteristics:

**a. Gospel-Centered.** The Good News of the Kingdom of God—that King Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, has come to earth, died on a cross, rose from the dead to defeat death and inaugurate the reign of God, and will soon come again—stands at the heart of mere Christianity. Without the proclamation of this news as the guiding principle and central focus of this approach, mere Christianity would be worse than useless (1 Corinthians 15.1-19). Mere Christianity starts with and focuses on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who God is, what God has done, and what God is continuing to do in creation. Bringing the good news to a dark and distorted world is the whole point. The gospel must always stand at the center of mere Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

**b. Creedal.** As we express, proclaim, and seek to live out the gospel, mere Christianity takes its definitional leads from the great creeds of the Christian tradition, namely, the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. The particulars of what we confess and believe are important—so important, in fact, that the creeds formulated by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us in faith serve as better guides for the boundaries of our understanding of what is central to faith than any novel statement of faith or clever articulation we devise.<sup>11</sup> On the question of what counts as necessary or unnecessary, the creeds instruct us: who God is, what He has done, and life in Him are the essentials. Beyond those issues—and even, quite frankly, in the minutia of those

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<sup>9</sup> Ortlund, 47.

<sup>10</sup> On the hermeneutic appropriateness of gospel centered approaches to scripture (a key interpretive underpinning of this approach), see Christian Smith, [The Bible Made Impossible](#) (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), 93-126.

<sup>11</sup> Scot McKnight, [The King Jesus Gospel](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 45-62. See also McKnight’s ongoing conversations about [what is central to the gospel](#) on [The Jesus Creed](#).

issues—we may (and at times, must) find nuance and theological dialogue. But creedal Christianity forms the core of mere Christianity.

**c. Balanced.** Mere Christianity is neither lax nor dogmatic; it finds its place between the polarities of dividing over everything and dividing over nothing. In the spirit of Romans 14, both conviction and charity must bear out. To restate what was said above, mere Christianity recognizes that all theology is important, but not all theology is essential, urgent, or worth breaking community or communion over. Accordingly, when disagreements do occur, they are confronted in a spirit of dialogue and mutual submission, not division or condemnation.<sup>12</sup>

**d. Embraces Particulars.** Mere Christianity is not afraid to get into the nitty-gritty of theology and life. This is not the approach of “avoid disagreement at all costs” or even “let’s just talk about where we agree.” Mere Christianity embraces, converses about, and even celebrates theological and practical distinctives. Differences on non-necessary or tertiary issues are not *not* important; to the contrary, they are worth talking about and learning from.<sup>13</sup> The distinction, however, is that the mere Christian approach engages those divergences *and does not divide over them*. Perhaps the best example of this aspect of the mere Christian approach today comes in “views on” books like the Zondervan Counterpoints Series. In these volumes, Christians of different convictions and viewpoints come together to discuss issues while continuing to affirm each other’s status as a follower of Jesus. This is the kind of embrace of particulars that the mere Christian approach celebrates.

**e. Intellectually Humble.** Mere Christianity emphasizes rejecting legalistic approaches to faith while encouraging Christian freedom and recalling our own human fallibility.<sup>14</sup> This approach highlights the fact that we—the saints of God and members of the bride of Christ—cannot determine with full certainty the precise articulations of every theological issue or question. We all have our biases; we all have our soapboxes; we all have our experiences; we all have our sin and tendencies toward distortion to overcome. Accordingly, the mere Christian approach champions holding much of what we believe with open hands and takes a spirit of humble submission and speaking the truth in love.<sup>15</sup> Truth is contextual, contested, and often difficult to find; thus, while we seek after the Truth, we do so with the knowledge that we might be wrong. Mere Christianity embraces teachability; in the words of Michael Bauman, “The Church rarely prospers more than when its teachers are teachable.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more on what this approach to balance requires in terms of scriptural interpretation, see Christian Smith, 127-148.

<sup>13</sup> In the words of D.A. Carson, “Every generation of Christians faces the need to decide just what beliefs and behavior are morally mandated of all believers, and what beliefs and behavior may be left to the individual believer’s conscience.” D.A. Carson, “On Disputable Matters,” *Themelios* 40.3 (2015): 383.

<sup>14</sup> Helmut Thielicke, [\*A Little Exercise for Young Theologians\*](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). See Gilbert Meileander, [\*The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity\*](#) (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 57-88. See also, Bauman, 35-48.

<sup>15</sup> See Ruth Koch and Kenneth Haugk, [\*Speaking the Truth in Love\*](#) (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, 15.

**f. Drawn from the Great Tradition.** Rather than rejecting wholesale the particulars, lessons, or emphases of denominational Christianity, mere Christianity seeks to learn from the best parts of the Great Tradition of the Church. While mere Christianity does not necessarily embrace (for example) a Baptist view of baptism, a Catholic view of communion, or a Methodist's view of church governance, mere Christians learn from these particulars. Functionally, this means that many mere Christians find themselves connecting, gathering, growing, and serving alongside Christians from other backgrounds and denominations.<sup>17</sup>

**g. Faithful and Practical.** The mere Christian approach is never just about faith, belief, doctrine, or what's in your head; neither is it only about practice, praxis, or what you're doing with your hands. In the words of James, *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.* Mere Christianity seeks to balance faithfulness and practicality with a living faith that rejects cheap grace and embraces sacrifice and the servant-hearted life. Mere Christians live out their faith and show it by what they do.

#### **IV. Summary**

Mere Christianity commits itself to focusing on the core, central aspects of the Christian faith while allowing for differences of faith and practice on non-central things. It's gospel-centered, creedal, balanced, embraces particulars, intellectually humble, drawn from the Great Tradition, and both faithful and practical. Is this approach perfect? Will it solve all of the problems that contemporary Christianity faces? Probably not. But it does represent a path forward, one that we believe can provide a sound, helpful way forward for a Church that is focused on bringing the good news of Jesus to our world.

In order to foreground the mere Christian approach at Arise, all white papers will begin with the following preamble:

Scripture was written in and for diverse contexts and situations. Accordingly, within the New Testament there exist affirmations of “mere Christianity”— a focus on the core proclamation of the Risen Jesus while simultaneously allowing for freedom when it comes to non-essential beliefs and practices.<sup>18</sup> We see this applied to various issues, including baptism, communion, eschatology, leadership structures, how to interpret the Old Testament, and the like. In each of these areas, there is a core idea that allows for a relatively diverse expression of practice. Following the New Testament model for the Church today, then, is not so much about discerning *the* single way to understand what Scripture says, so much as discerning what is core to faith in the Lord Jesus. Put another way, gospel freedom, when properly focused on the Good News of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of creation, allows for a certain amount of diversity on non-essential issues. Thus, an appropriate guiding principle for Christians is, “In necessary things, unity; in unnecessary things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

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<sup>17</sup> Mere Christianity thus has strong parallels to interdenominational or trans-denominational churches, though the approach is not strictly limited to those particular manifestations.

<sup>18</sup> [1 Corinthians 15.1-34](#); [Romans 14.1-23](#). See also C.S. Lewis, [Mere Christianity](#).