

BOOK

Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

Not since C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* has such a wise and informed leader taken the time to explain what Christianity is and how it is practiced. In *Simply Christian*, renowned biblical scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright makes a case for Christianity from the ground up. Walking the reader through the Christian faith step-by-step and question by question, Wright's *Simply Christian* offers explanations for even the toughest doubt-filled skeptics, leaving believers with a reason for renewed faith.

"Rebuking someone on the other side of the world (while ignoring the same problems back home) is very convenient, and it provides a deep but spurious sense of moral satisfaction."

"You could put it like this. The ancient Greeks told a story of two philosophers. One used to come out of his front door in the morning and roar with laughter. The world was such a comical place that he couldn't help it. The other came out in the morning and burst into tears. The world was so full of sorrow and tragedy that he couldn't help it. In a sense, both were right. Comedy and tragedy both speak of things out of order – in the one case, simply by being incongruous and therefore funny; in the other case, by things not going the way they should, and people being crushed as a result."

"The fool says in his heart, "there is no God" – that was the verdict of the ancient Israelite poet (Psalm 14:1 and elsewhere) – yet there are many who have declared that it is the believer who is the fool."

". . . spirituality might not be simply a harmless pursuit. It might actually be dangerous, if not to ourselves, then at least to those whose lives are affected by what we say and do. Some hard-nosed skeptics, seeing the damage done by (what they would call) religious fanatics – suicide bombers, apocalyptic fantasists, and the like – have declared that the sooner we recognize all this religion as a kind of neurosis, and either pay it no further attention or even try to have it banned outright or confined to the safety of consenting adults in private, the better."

"Thus from the most intimate relationship (marriage) to those on the largest scale (national institutions) we find the same thing: we all know we are made to live together, but we all find

that doing so is more difficult than we had imagined. And it is within these settings, large and small, but particularly at the more personal and intimate end of the scale, that we find the natural setting of those characteristic signs of human life: laughter and tears. We find each other funny. We find each other tragic. We find ourselves and our relationships, funny and tragic.”

“One of the central elements of the Christian story is the claim that the paradox of laughter and tears, woven as it is deep into the heart of all human experience, is woven also deep into the heart of God.”

“Indeed, the beauty sometimes seems to be in the itching itself, the sense of longing, the kind of pleasure which is exquisite and yet leaves us unsatisfied.”

“What we must also rule out, along with any identification of beauty and truth, is the idea that beauty gives us direct access to God, to ‘the divine.’ or to a transcendent realm of any sort.”

“It seems we have to hold the two together: beauty is both something that calls us out of ourselves and something which appeals to feelings deep within us.”

“And when the cynic reminds us that people fall of crags, get lost after sunset, and are drowned by waves and eaten by lions; when the cynic cautions that faces get old and lined and forms get pudgy and sick – then we Christians do not declare that it was all a mistake. We do not avail ourselves of Plato’s safety hatch and say that the real world is not a thing of space, time, and matter but another world into which we can escape. We say that the present world is the real one, and that it’s in bad shape but expecting to be repaired. We tell, in other words, the story we told in the first chapter: the story of a good Creator longing to put the world back into the good order for which it was designed. We tell the story of a God who does the two things which, some of the time at least, we know we all want and need: a God who completes what he has begun, a God who comes to the rescue of those who seem lost and enslaved in the world the way it is now.”

“I say this because people often grumble as soon as a discussion about the meaning of human life, or the possibility of God, moves away from quite simple ideas and becomes more complicated. Any world in which there are such things as music and sex, laughter and tears, mountains and mathematics, eagles and earthworms, statues and symphonies and snowflakes and sunsets – and in which we humans find ourselves in the middle of it all – is bound to be a world in which the quest for truth, for reality, for what we can be sure of, is infinitely more complicated than simple yes-and-no questions will allow.”

“We honor and celebrate our complexity and our simplicity by continually doing five things. We tell stories. We act out rituals. We create beauty. We work in communities. We think out beliefs.”

“The difficulty is that speaking of God in anything like the Christian sense is like staring into the sun. It’s dazzling. It’s easier actually, to look away from the sun itself and to enjoy the fact that, once it’s well and truly risen, you can see everything else clearly.”

“This sense of overlap between heaven and earth, and the sense of God thereby being present on earth without having to leave heaven, lies at the heart of Jewish and early Christian theology.”

“Part of the central task of the king, should a true king ever emerge, would not only be to establish justice in the world, it would also involve the proper reestablishment of the place where heaven and earth met. The deep human longing for spirituality, for access to God, would be answered at last.”

“[The story of Israel] is the story of going away and coming back home again: of slavery and exodus, of exile and restoration. It is the story which Jesus of Nazareth consciously told in his words, in his actions, and supremely in his death and resurrection.”

“In other words, Christianity is not about a new moral teaching – as though we were morally clueless and in need of some fresh or clearer guidelines. This is not only to deny that Jesus, and some of his first followers, gave some wonderfully bracing and intelligent moral teaching. It is merely to insist that we find teaching like that within the larger framework: the story of things that happened through which the world was changed.”

“Part of the reason for all this is that, like every figure of history, Jesus is open to reinterpretation. People write revisionist biographies of Winston Churchill, more whom we have truckloads of evidence; or of Alexander the Great, for whom we have considerably less. In fact, the more evidence you have, the more there is to interpret this way or that; the less evidence you have, the more have to make educated guesses to fill in the blanks.”

“But, to the surprise of many in Jerusalem, on his arrival he directed his attack not at the Roman garrison, but at the Temple itself. Declaring it corrupt . . . he performed one of his greatest symbolic actions, overturning tables and, for a short but potent time, preventing normal business.”

“Nothing in all the history of paganism comes anywhere near this combination of event, intention, and meaning. Nothing in Judaism had prepared for it, except in puzzling, shadowy prophecy. The death of Jesus of Nazareth, as the king of the Jews, the bearer of Israel’s destiny, the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people of old, is either the most stupid, senseless waste and misunderstanding the world has ever seen, or it is the fulcrum around which world history turns.”

Resurrection like this is not found in other world religions. “Nobody in those religions ever supposed it actually happened to individual humans.”

“As was so often the case, Jesus didn’t answer the question directly. Many of the questions we ask God can’t be answered directly, not because God doesn’t know the answers but because our questions don’t make sense. As CS Lewis once pointed out, many of our questions are, from God’s point of view, like someone asking, “is yellow square or round?” or “How many hours are there in a mile?” Jesus gently puts off the question. “It isn’t for you,” he says, “to know the times and periods which the Father has set up by his own authority. But you will receive power . . .”

“If the Spirit is the one who brings God’s future into the present, the Spirit is also the one who joins heaven and earth together.”

“The book of Acts says that in the previous book (Luke) the writer described “all the Jesus *began* to do and teach.” The implication is clear: that the story of the church, led and energized by the power of the Spirit, is the story of Jesus continuing to do and to teach—through his Spirit-led people. Once more, that’s why we pray that God’s kingdom will come, and his will will be done, ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”

“The Lion is an ancient Jewish image for the Messiah, the king of Israel and the world. The Lamb is the customary sacrificial offering for the sins of Israel and the world. Both these roles are combined in Jesus in a way that nobody has ever imagined before but now makes perfect sense.”

“Conversely, when you give that same total worship to anything or anyone else, you shrink as a human being. It doesn’t, of course, feel like that at the time. When you worship part of the creation as though it were the Creator himself—in other words, when you worship an idol—you may well feel a brief “high.” But like a hallucinatory drug, that worship achieves its affect at a cost: when the effect is over, you are less of a human being than you were to being with. That is the price of idolatry.”

“The reason we read scripture in worship isn’t primarily to inform or remind the congregation about some biblical passage or theme they might have forgotten. Likewise, it’s much more than a peg to hang a sermon on, though preaching from one or more of the readings is often a wise plan. Reading scripture in worship is, first and foremost, the central way of celebrating who God is and what he’s done.”

“What matters is not so much how we go about [worship] as *that* we go about it. Think back to Revelation 4 and 5. The whole creation is worshipping God. We are invited not only to watch, like flies on the wall, but to join in the song. How can you refuse?”

“Supposing Scripture, like the sacraments, is one of the points where heaven and earth overlap and interlock? Like all other such places, this is mysterious. It doesn’t mean that we can’t. But it does enable us to say some things that need to be said and that are otherwise difficult.”

ABOUT LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

“Other obvious examples include the parables of Jesus. I’ve never yet met a reader who was under the impression that the story of the prodigal son had actually happened, so that if you visited enough family farms around Palestine you would eventually run into the old father and his two sons . . .”

*“This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father’s world: the battle is not done:
Jesus Who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and Heav’n be one.*

And earth and heaven be one: that is the note that should sound like a clear, sweet bell through all Christian living, summoning us to live in the present as people called to that future, people called to live in the present in the light of that future."

"When you see the dawn breaking, you think back to the darkness in a new way. 'Sin' is not simply the breaking of a law. It is the missing of an opportunity."

"Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open before us."

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THREE OPTIONS for two spaces (God's space and Our space)

Option 1. Spaces are one

Pantheism (formerly Stoicism)

The divine force permeates everything. Humans need to get in touch/in tune with it

Issue: there is cancer, hurricanes, disease

Panentheism = everything might not be divine, but it exists within God.

Option 2. Spaces are fully apart.

Epicureanism (not Hedonism, as sobriety was seen most enjoyable)

Breeding ground for Gnosticism

Most recently, Deism

Option 3. Heaven and earth overlap and interlock in a number of ways.

EX: Shakespeare, comedies & tragedies

Intersect at the temple, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Bible