

Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians

by Chris R. Armstrong

Reader's Guide

**Prepared by Katelyn Arnold, Lori Kyles,
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“Relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing has yet been done.”

—C. S. Lewis

Dear Reader,

In Medieval Wisdom for Modern Christians, Chris Armstrong connects medieval and modern practices of faith, through the lens of C. S. Lewis's thoughts and writings, to explore traditions of the medieval church that could benefit the modern evangelical church.

We hope this guide can be a tool in your journey to explore the medieval church. We recommend that you complete the comprehension section individually and review the discussion section in a group. In this reader's guide, when we refer to "modern Christians" we mean contemporary American evangelical Protestant Christians. We also distinguish between individual Christians and the church as a whole. We encourage you to think critically about how medieval traditions can be put into practice in your church and in daily life.

*Sincerely,
Katelyn Arnold, Lori Kyles, and Allena
Palmer*

Chapter 1: My Angle of Approach

Comprehension

1. Pick one or two of Armstrong's influences to research, especially those authors who are unfamiliar to you. (1–2)
2. How can modern Christians avoid “antiquarianism,” which Armstrong defines as “study[ing] a past period without connecting it to our own”? (4)
3. What is the origin of immediatism? How does Armstrong define immediatism? (6–8)
4. What attempts to understand medieval spiritual wisdom have failed? How might these failures be avoided? (14–16)
5. What have immediatists contributed to the Christian faith despite their dismissal of the medieval traditions? (16–18)
6. How were humans involved in the creation of the Bible? (18)
7. What myths do modern Christians commonly believe about medieval times? (24–25)

Discussion

1. Is your general opinion of the medieval church positive or negative? How do your opinions differ from Armstrong's examples or examples within your church? (2–3)
2. Armstrong argues that the modern church needs a transplant of medieval knowledge. What medieval knowledge do you think the modern church needs today? (4–5)
3. Identify immediatisms that exist in today's society, especially those in the modern church. (7–8)
4. Armstrong writes, “The immediatism of American evangelicals is also *a way to God without mediation* . . . or rather, our fancy that this unmediated, individual access is the *only* kind we need.” How do you see modern Christians practicing mediation? (8)
5. Armstrong believes the Bible “needs to be read and understood in and through human community.” How does interpreting in a community change your perspective of the Bible? (18)
6. How do scientific findings affect how you understand the mystery of creation? (23–24)
7. Armstrong argues, “We do not make art worth looking at. We do not write poems worth reading. We do not build churches worth walking into or worshiping in.” How can we change the stigma associated with Christian art? Where have you seen examples? (27)

Chapter 2: C. S. Lewis—A Modern Medieval Man

Comprehension

1. How familiar are you with C. S. Lewis's works and his practice of medievalism? Which of Lewis's works would you like to be more familiar with? (29)
2. In what ways did Dante interest Lewis, Williams, and Sayers? (31–34)
3. Armstrong suggests that for C. S. Lewis “the medieval worldview was never an inert object of study—a ‘subject.’ It was a ‘way’—a road traveled to get to meaning.” What is the distinction between a “subject” and a “way”? How are they approached differently? (35)

Discussion

1. How do Christians today have a romanticized perspective of the Ptolemaic universe similar to or different from Lewis's? (31)
2. If you are familiar with Dante's works, what medieval ideologies have you noticed that consistently show up in his works? (31–32)
3. Of the different perspectives on Dante and his works discussed in Armstrong's book, which one challenged your personal perspective? (31–34)
4. How do the same medieval practices that drew Lewis into the medieval world repel modern Christians? (35–42)
5. What “pagan” practices are evident in the modern church? (38–39)
6. Why have formal confessions been neglected in the modern church? (39)
7. What was your response to Lewis's affirmation of the doctrine of purgatory? (41)

Chapter 3: Getting Rooted

Comprehension

1. Why does Armstrong say that “our faith, as a stalwart outpost of the kingdom in a threatening world, seemed somehow precarious”? (46)
2. According to Lewis, how has the modern church chosen to separate itself from the past? (47–48)
3. What is the significance of the church militant and the church triumphant within the medieval church? (59–60)
4. In what ways can past historical examples from non-Christian philosophers help modern Christians? (65–67)

Discussion

1. Armstrong asserts that “the insecurity of the church stemmed from what J. I. Packer identifies as evangelicalism’s ‘stunted ecclesiology,’ rooted in our alienation from our own past.” What signs does the modern church show of stunted ecclesiology and insecurity? (46)
2. Do generations feel separated from each other in your church? How has this happened and what might be done to remedy it? (48, 57)
3. C. S. Lewis defines chronological snobbery as “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.” In what ways have you experienced chronological snobbery? (50)
4. What does Armstrong (and Lewis) say about the impact of making spiritual matters into intellectual matters? (60–61)
5. How can the modern church better embrace surrounding cultures in order to engage in relevant outreach? (66)

Chapter 4: Getting Thoughtful

Comprehension

1. What are the consequences of the modern church's failure to actively seek the "third realm necessary for human flourishing: the realm of Truth"? (70–71)
2. How did C. S. Lewis apply philosophy to his faith? (72–73)
3. How did medieval Christians embrace scientific discovery? How does their perspective contrast modern Christians' perspectives? (79)
4. How do Anselm's and Abelard's explanations of the death of Christ differ? (88–90)
5. How do liberal and conservative theologies mirror the misconceptions of Bernard of Clairvaux's and Peter Abelard's views? (91–92)

Discussion

1. What does Armstrong say about evangelism? How can you use his insight daily? (69)
2. Armstrong discusses positive and negative experiences within a charismatic church. Have you had any similar spiritual experiences? (69–70)
3. Armstrong states that modern Christians "cannot content [them]selves with seeking (only) the experience of encountering God in worship." How does seeking an experience of God differ from seeking to live for God? (70)
4. What is your experience with the type of spiritual exercises Lewis practiced? How did your experiences affect your faith? (72)
5. Lewis describes his conversion as "almost purely philosophical." Has your Christian faith paralleled Lewis's philosophical journey? If so, how? (73)
6. Has Armstrong revealed any common misconceptions that you held to be true? Which other common ideas in the modern Church or society might not be true? (91)

Chapter 5: Getting Moral

Comprehension

1. How does Bonhoeffer's concept of "cheap grace" connect to Armstrong's discussion of moral lawlessness? (95–96)
2. How are belief and practice separated in the modern church? (97)
3. Why does a grounded faith involve concrete actions? (100)
4. How does the distinction between vainglory and pride illuminate the medieval church's precision in regulating morality? (106–8)
5. How does Dante comment on corruption within the hierarchy of the medieval church? (111)

Discussion

1. Why is the topic of morality difficult for the modern church to discuss? (95)
2. Do you see morality and grace as working together, opposing one another, or responding to each other? (96)
3. How does American culture contribute to the moral instability of modern Christians? (97)
4. Armstrong gives a brief description of Ron Sider's *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. How does Sider's book show the "sanctification gap" that Armstrong discusses? (97)
5. How can you start strengthening the integration of moral psychology and grace in your life? (104–5)
6. Do you see the modern church as concerned with material matters rather than spiritual matters? (110–12)
7. Why must modern Christians realize they are not "slaves of chance"? (115)

Chapter 6: Getting Merciful

Comprehension

1. Why does the modern church rarely talk about the hospitals founded by the medieval church even though it was a noteworthy action? (117–18)
2. In what ways is modern Christianity a “world-affirming” and “world-denying” religion? (120–21)
3. What is the difference between Lewis’s interpretation and the modern church’s interpretation of the Lazarus story? (121–22)
4. How did simple acts of service performed by medieval Christians lead to the creation of the hospital? (123–25)
5. Armstrong asserts, “Charity started as a theological virtue with social implications.” How do people today understand and practice charity? (134)
6. How did the medieval church (and Lewis) understand and practice charity? (135–38)

Discussion

1. Consider Matthew 8:1–4 (healing a leper), Mark 5:25–34 (healing a hemorrhaging woman), and John 2:1–11 (changing water into wine). How does Jesus tailor miracles to fit the people around him? How can the modern church follow Jesus’s examples in its own ministries? (119)
2. Armstrong discusses Christianity as a world-affirming religion. However, outside observers might “classify it as one of the world-denying religions.” How might a non-Christian see your Christian faith as a paradox between world-affirming and world-denying? (120–21)
3. Are acts of *agape* by modern Christians as surprising as medieval Christians’ acts of healing? (122)
4. How does the non-Christian interpretation of *agape* differ from the Christian interpretation? (122–23)
5. How could the modern church today follow the monks as examples of kindness? (129–30)
6. According to Armstrong, “When Jacques de Vitry . . . wrote model sermons intended to be preached to hospital workers, he emphasized that the appropriate motive for caring for others in this way was not a thirst for public reputation or a desire to secure a place in heaven but rather a pious empathy with the sufferings of others.” How might the modern Christians’ focus on conversion drive people away? (132)
7. The seven works of spiritual mercy, writes Armstrong, “were to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offenses willingly, comfort the afflicted, and pray for the living and the dead.” Which works of spiritual mercy are missing from the modern church? (135)

Chapter 7: Getting Earthy

Comprehension

1. In what way does gnosticism devalue the physical world, “sapping it of all spiritual significance”? What values of gnosticism can be found in the modern church? (139–40)
2. In what ways did theologians attempt to cover more topics in the medieval church than some theologians do in the church today? (143–51)
3. How does Armstrong depict the ongoing social conflicts between science and religion? (147)
4. How did medieval Christians interact with the progression of astronomy? (148)
5. How does conversation about personal and sinful desires differ between the medieval church and the modern church? (162–64)
6. Armstrong paraphrases an anonymous author who described Christ as “able at all times to keep one eye on ‘nature’ and the other on God” but who then argued, “humans cannot do the same: we must ‘shut the eye of nature.’” In response to this anonymous author, Lewis wrote, “Encountering the material world as a place rich with sacramental meaning, was the incarnation of our Lord.” Do you agree with the anonymous author or Lewis? How is shutting our eye to the world “unlike the Lord”? (163)

Discussion

1. Have you heard the phrase “spiritual but not religious”? What does this statement mean? (140)
2. In what ways does materialist thinking devalue the physical world instead of adding value to it? (140–42)
3. How do you see a lack of the fine arts within the modern church and the Christian community? (142–43)
4. Discuss apparent conflicts in the relationship between modern Christians and scientists? (149)
5. Recent medical discoveries in science have been seen by some as unnatural and against God’s will. How does the medieval view of God’s gift of reason interact with this idea? (149–52)
6. Why doesn’t each work of art require deep metaphorical interpretation for Christians to appreciate it? (152–57)
7. How does distancing ourselves from personal desire separate us from the full experience of God? (162–63)

Chapter 8: Getting Passionate

Comprehension

1. Have you seen examples of modern Christians using strong emotions negatively? (165)
2. How does Augustine write about changing desires? (166)
3. Joan Nuth defines a mystical experience as “an intense awareness of God’s presence, accompanied by a knowledge and love of God that are recognized as extraordinary.” How would you define mystical experiences? (166)
4. Why might modern Christians view the tradition of affective piety toward God as an uncomfortable topic? (170–84)
5. How did Jesus show physical and emotional passion as a human being? (184–86)
6. Why do modern Christians focus mostly on Christ’s death in terms of salvation and sin? (187–88)

Discussion

1. How does Lady Philosophy counter the usual idea of a philosopher? What do you think this indicates about the medieval view of philosophers? (167–70)
2. What would your actions look like if your primary virtue was selflessness instead of love? (168)
3. Most consider God to be a father-like figure. How can viewing God in a maternal light impact your relationship with God? (170–84)
4. In what ways does Jesus’s passion encourage Christians to embrace passion? (184–86)
5. Why does Armstrong argue that the incarnation and death of Jesus do not invoke strong passion within the modern church? (187–88)
6. Christians often have a strong emotional reaction when they experience God through physical means, such as revivals, church camps, and baptisms. Why are Christians pulled to these embodied experiences of God? (188–89)
7. How can downplaying the physical nature of human beings become harmful to the Christian faith? (188–89)

Chapter 9: Getting Human

Comprehension

1. Why does Armstrong argue that Mary, often overlooked by modern Christians, should be a captivating character to all Christians? (191–92)
2. Why did God the Son choose to go through the process of birth? Why didn't he simply descend to earth as an adult human? (192–93)
3. How does Lewis combat Christians' typical reaction to anxiety and fear by pointing to Christ in Gethsemane? (194)
4. How does the scene of Christ in Gethsemane demonstrate Jesus's humanity and bring comfort to modern Christians? (194)
5. How does God becoming human ennoble humanity? (194–96)
6. What does Lewis mean when he says, "Until you have given up yourself to Him you will not have a real self"? (196)

Discussion

1. Why is Mary, the "*theotokos*," so often connected with medieval traditions? How can Mary be connected with modern church traditions? (191–92)
2. Why is Jesus's incarnation "the key fact of salvation history"? Why is his birth so integral to this incarnation? (192–93)
3. Armstrong compares humans to the creatures in the Chronicles of Narnia "who were turned to stone in the White Witch's courtyard." In this metaphor, what does the White Witch represent? (198)
4. According to Armstrong, "Not only did Lewis affirm the materiality of the new creation . . . , he thought of it as more solidly material than this one." How does this idea change the way modern Christians live in the material world as Christ did? (203)
5. How do the mystery plays that Armstrong discusses portray a view that opposes the modern church's view of miracles? (205–6)
6. In what ways could the modern church return to the "earthy quality" of living found in the medieval church? (205–6)

Chapter 10: Getting It Together

Comprehension

1. How could refocusing on the incarnation of Jesus impact modern Christians' faith? (210–14)
2. Armstrong writes about a friend who defines “super-spiritualizing.” In what ways have you seen the modern church super-spiritualizing? (217)
3. According to Lewis, why does God force troubles into our lives? (219)
4. Why do modern Christians tend to see grace as a means to forgiveness of sin but not as a means to spiritual growth? (223–24)
5. How have orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxy impacted the medieval and modern church? (229)
6. According to Armstrong, how should Benedict's four pillars lead the modern church into medieval practices? (232)

Discussion

1. How does Armstrong depict the incarnate Jesus experiencing human materiality, affectivity, rationality, and cultural creativity? (207–8)
2. Why must the modern church be selective in incorporating the practices of the medieval church? (208)
3. How did depictions of Jesus in art help the medieval church embrace the incarnation of Jesus in worship? (208–10)
4. Armstrong argues that “by losing a vivid sense of the incarnation, we have lost the sacredness of our own work.” Where have you seen modern Christians losing the sacredness of work? (209)
5. Armstrong observes, “Naturally, . . . the New Testament is no philosophical book of moral teachings but rather the narrative of a life, a sacrifice, and a resurrection played out on the stage of history.” How has the modern church forgotten biblical history? (211)
6. Why does Armstrong argue that human needs are as essential to the spirit as to the body? (216–17)
7. According to Armstrong, “The struggle with self-will and pride (the deadliest of the seven deadly sins) drove the monastic ascetic quest for holiness.” How do you understand this to work? (218)
8. What aspects of monasticism do you find the most challenging to integrate into your faith? (224–29)
9. Armstrong writes that “because we have not properly valued the precious humanity of Christ, we have also not valued the precious humanity of humanity.” How can reevaluating the incarnation of Jesus change the way individual Christians interact with each other? (233)