

RANDY NEWMAN



*Mere
Evangelism*

the goodbook
COMPANY

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FOREWORD

Mere Christianity, yes, we all know about C.S. Lewis's book with that title, spun out of some BBC radio talks during WWII; but *Mere Evangelism*? Does C.S. Lewis have anything to teach us about evangelism—let alone ten insights?

If Lewis were alive today, I suspect he might be surprised at our surprise, for in his view of his own work, all his popular Christian writing was driven, at least in part, by evangelistic concerns. By this I mean that what he said and how he said it were shaped by his understanding of the gospel, and how to be winsome and persuasive in articulating it. Once you become aware of this fundamental feature of his work, and start looking for it, it is not hard to find, whether in overtly evangelistic essays (like *Mere Christianity*), works of beguiling fantasy (like the *Narnia* set), sober treatments of objections to Christian faith (like *The Problem of Pain*), or rather personal testimony (like *A Grief Observed*).

True, Lewis never set out to teach a course on evangelism or apologetics. Rather, it is the manner in which he writes that testifies to his self-conscious awareness of the importance of winsomely disclosing Christian truth. In this book, Randy Newman is careful not to over-schematize Lewis. He does not pretend that Lewis set out to deliver these “ten insights,” still less construe them as ten lessons. Rather, Newman's book is the result of a close, inductive reading of Lewis, while asking

the kinds of questions that a seasoned evangelist like Randy Newman cannot help but pose. The ten insights are overtly the thought of Randy Newman, but they are laced with so many telling examples drawn from the corpus of C.S. Lewis that they are overtly the thought of Lewis, too.

The result is more than a primer on evangelism, but not exactly an advanced course on the subject, either. Rather, while providing a stimulating entrée into the thought of C.S. Lewis, Randy Newman has given us a refresher course on evangelism, graced with the lightness of touch and imagination characteristic of Lewis himself.

D.A. Carson

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you're sitting on a bus with a book by C.S. Lewis—let's say one of his *Narnia* volumes—and someone asks you what you're reading.

When you respond to your new acquaintance, her face lights up, and she tells you she read *The Chronicles of Narnia* when she was a child. She asks which is your favorite in the series, and a fun conversation ensues. Then, “Do you know his other books?” she wonders. “Didn't he write about religion or something?”

Would you know what to say? Could you point her beyond Aslan?

Or suppose you're attending your cousin's wedding and you meet a relative you haven't seen in decades. He shakes your hand, asks how you've been, and then says, “I've heard you've become religious. How'd that happen?”

Are you prepared for such a question? Or do you hope the band starts to play something really loud?

Evangelism is an extraordinary task; it's what God uses to bring people from death to life. But it is difficult. It always has been. We need inspiration and help—and I can think of no better source of those things (humanly speaking, anyway) than the creator of Narnia, C.S. Lewis: a man who has been used by God to point countless wanderers to the one who promised eternal life.

SURPRISED BY LEWIS

A decade before he published the *Narnia* books, Lewis was well known for his *Broadcast Talks*, a BBC radio series which presented the Christian faith to listeners across the UK. This was the material which later became the book *Mere Christianity*—ensuring that Lewis’s evangelistic influence did not last just in his own lifetime. When *Christianity Today* magazine “asked more than 100 of its contributors and church leaders to nominate the ten best religious books of the twentieth century ... by far, C.S. Lewis was the most popular author and *Mere Christianity* the book nominated most often.”¹

Quite apart from the content of the *Broadcast Talks*—which we’ll come to later—the story of how they came about should itself energize us for evangelism. It was less than a year after Britain had sustained nightly onslaughts of bombing by the Nazis and only a short time after the miracle of Dunkirk. At this desperate moment, producers at the BBC invited Lewis to craft short messages about the Christian faith to be woven into the weekly programing.

The original plan offered five messages of less than fifteen minutes each, one week apart, from August 6th to September 6th, 1941. These attracted enough listeners to warrant a second series, also of five messages, four months later. A third and then a fourth series were commissioned. From beginning to end, these broadcasts took almost three years! We might learn something from this about perseverance through gradual evangelism.

But the most amazing thing was the unlikely size of the audience. You might enjoy hearing about what fare preceded Lewis’s messages at 7:45 pm. “At 7pm came a half-hour variety show of musical acts by less-than-impressive amateurs—[with] such improbably named groups as the Berkeley Square Bunkhouse Singers and the Hillbilly Swingers.”² At 7:15 came the news—“not in English or even

in Welsh but in Norwegian.”³ If ever an audience had a good excuse to turn off their radios, fifteen minutes of news in a foreign language was it. And yet, people did *not* turn off. They listened—over 1.2 million of them, week after week, over the course of months and years.

Longtime friend and biographer of Lewis, George Sayer, remembered “being at a pub filled with soldiers on one Wednesday evening. At a quarter to eight, the bartender turned the radio up for Lewis. ‘You listen to this bloke,’ he shouted. ‘He’s really worth listening to.’ And those soldiers did listen attentively for the entire fifteen minutes.”⁴ We could learn something about trusting a supernatural God for supernatural results by remembering stories like these.

ANOTHER RELUCTANT CONVERT

Because Lewis was a writer as well as a broadcaster, his evangelistic influence has extended far beyond his own times. I know this firsthand: his words were instrumental in my own journey to faith.

Growing up in a Jewish home, I heard very little about Jesus. Religion meant reciting prayers, participating in rituals, and celebrating holidays. To me, the Almighty seemed distant and alien. So, in my first year of college—aided by existentialist writers, Woody Allen movies, Kurt Vonnegut novels, and parties with large quantities of beer—I decided life was just absurd; it would never really make sense.

But even though I believed life was meaningless, I desperately hoped I would find something to prove that theory wrong. I loved music: perhaps that could provide the link to the transcendent, a connection to something beyond the material world. But every piece of music disappointed, every concert ended, and every noisy subway ride back to my dorm room contrasted rudely with the splendors of Dvorak, Rachmaninoff, and Mozart.

Little did I know, however, that I was already on a journey to saving faith.

Back in high school, one of my drinking buddies had invited me to his church's youth group because, he said, "the girls are cute." He was right, and I became a regular, albeit non-Christian, attender of that youth group's many activities. Along the way, I heard the gospel—a message I promptly dismissed as "something Christians should believe" but irrelevant to Jewish people because "Jews don't believe in Jesus."

But people at that youth group displayed a kind of relationship with God that I found attractive. They prayed about anything and everything, and urged me to read the New Testament, as well as a book by some English guy named C.S. Lewis. I read neither. But I remembered the title of the book: *Mere Christianity*. And oddly, several years later, as I got ready for my sophomore year of college, I shoved the New Testament into one of my packing boxes.

It remained in my closet as I resumed my absurd-reading, beer-drinking, concert-attending rituals. Then all that came to a screeching halt when a friend died in a tragic accident. Sitting at his funeral, I realized that Woody, Kurt, and Heineken could not provide the answers I longed for. "If there is a god, how can I know him?" I wondered. I went back to my dorm room and started reading that New Testament. I also checked out *Mere Christianity* from the library. I read both where nobody could see me.

As I read Matthew's quotations from the Old Testament and Jesus' claims to be God, C.S. Lewis's arguments stoked my searching. He eliminated one of my firmest convictions—that Jesus was just a good teacher. I'll never forget reading, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make

your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.”⁵

That convinced me that Jesus was the Messiah. But mere intellectual assent has never saved anyone. It was the other strand of Lewis’s presentation that pushed me over the line of surrender. When I got to his chapter on hope, I saw why every concert left me feeling empty. After offering “two wrong ways” of dealing with life’s disappointments, Lewis wrote, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁶

It was at the intersection of the intellect (Jesus was who he said he was) and imagination (I was made for another world) that the gospel became irresistible to me. Sitting at my dormitory desk, I acknowledged that Jesus was not just *the* Messiah but *my* Messiah, the one I longed for in music and needed for atonement for my sins. Unlike Lewis, who said he came to believe in God “kicking, struggling, resentful ... perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England,” I rejoiced with singing.⁷ It felt like a tremendous relief to receive music as a gift and not demand it be a god—and to have no need to perform rituals because I could rest in the finished work of the cross. I was overjoyed.

It’s the intertwining of the two forces of mind and imagination that, I believe, made C.S. Lewis such a powerful evangelist, not only for me but for countless others. An expert on medieval literature may not seem like the kind of person God would use for widespread evangelistic fruit. But Lewis saw himself as a “translator—one turning Christian doctrine ... into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand.”⁸

People listened to Lewis not because of his impressive qualifications but because he spoke in ways that made sense

to them. We read his fiction today because it takes us to a land beyond a wardrobe. He appeals to our whole selves.

Lewis firmly believed that “most of my books are evangelistic”.⁹ That’s why it’s not only *Mere Christianity* but also his many other writings that we can learn from as we seek inspiration for evangelism. As part of my work, I once conducted extensive interviews of students about their conversions. Unsurprisingly, Lewis’s writings were mentioned frequently: not only *Mere Christianity* but *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his other fiction, as well as apologetic works like *Miracles* and essays like *The Weight of Glory*. All these helped nudge people out of skepticism into faith. In one instance, it was a movie version of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* that ushered a theater major across the line of belief.

It’s with stories like those in mind that I write this book. By unpacking how this one far-from-ordinary evangelist did outreach, I believe we can equip ourselves in new ways for the extraordinary task of evangelism.

ALL THE ROAD BEFORE US

You may feel inadequate to the task. There is only one C.S. Lewis. But the methods he used—storytelling, imagery, directness and humor, to name just a few—are all tools we can pick up and apply in our own conversations.

Each chapter that follows weaves together an approach Lewis used and some ways we can practice it, as well as thoughts about how Scripture sheds light on those methods. The third of those considerations is by far the most important. C.S. Lewis did many things well, but let’s face it: he wasn’t perfect. God’s word is our flawless authority and the best resource to help us evangelize.

After all, our greatest “qualification” is not in ourselves—it’s in the self-authenticating, powerful truth of our message. We can be “not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of

God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1 v 16).

Evangelism occurs at the intersection of the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural, the practical and the impossible. God calls timid Timothys to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4 v 5). Flawed, reluctant, sinful, less-than-brilliant proclaimers contribute the human ingredients—making “the most of every opportunity,” letting our “conversation be always full of grace” and “seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4 v 5-6). Then God provides what no human evangelist can—opening up blind eyes, softening hardened hearts, and drawing people to himself. That’s how it worked with Lewis’s *Broadcast Talks*. That’s how it worked in my own journey to faith. And that’s how it will work for all of us.

This isn’t a book to increase membership in a C.S. Lewis fan club or prompt praise for him. It’s to strengthen our resolve to point lost people to the one who can deliver them from a realm where it’s “always winter but never Christmas.” My prayer is that this book will help you say and do things that will make an eternal difference in many people’s lives.

When C.S. Lewis was writing *The Four Loves*—which is not considered a particularly evangelistic book—he still had a posture toward outreach. He wrote to a friend, “Pray for me that God grant me to say things helpful to salvation, or at least not harmful.”¹⁰

May we all have that same mindset and prayer.