

# REVIEW: MERE EVANGELISM

Josiah Peterson on a New Work on Lewis

**Randy Newman, *Mere Evangelism: 10 Insights from C. S. Lewis to Help You Share Your Faith*. Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2022. 160 pp.**

Do you know the American singer-songwriter behind such classics as “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” and “If I Didn’t Have You?” Well this isn’t him. But this Randy Newman, the Senior Fellow for Evangelism and Apologetics at The C.S. Lewis Institute, does sometimes get emails intended for the musician Randy Newman. He uses his replies as evangelistic opportunities, some of which have turned into ongoing relationships.<sup>1</sup>

The title of Newman’s book is pretty self-explanatory. Each chapter “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.”<sup>2</sup> The ten insights can be broadly organized into the first four which focus on pre-evangelism and the second six which focus on evangelism proper.

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Newman, *Mere Evangelism: 10 Insights from C. S. Lewis to Help You Share Your Faith* (Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2022), 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

The first starts off with “The Necessity of Pre-Evangelism” before going into three methods of pre-evangelism: “The Appeal to Clues” (chapter 2), mostly focusing on the many pointers in this world that excite but cannot fulfill our deepest longings; “The Honoring of Objections” (chapter 3); and “The Stirring of Uneasiness,” that the world and we ourselves are not as we should be.

The second group starts with “The Centrality of the Gospel” (chapter 5) and concludes with “The Call to Respond” (chapter 10) with “The Value of Imagery” (chapter 6), “The Reality of Opposition” (chapter 7), “The Power of Prayer” (chapter 8), and “The Timeliness of Pushback” (chapter 9) in between.

Many of the insights as presented in chapter titles may seem basic, and in a sense they are. But they are basics that are fundamental and warrant continual attention and practice. The book is not a technical manual; its strength comes from the collected examples, practical wisdom garnered through Newman’s decades of ministry experience, and the sheer joyous exhortation to the task of evangelism.

Newman’s insights are practical. He stresses the advantage of a “clue” approach rather than a “proof” approach to pre-evangelism, as it calibrates expectations appropriately.<sup>3</sup> He argues we should call people to “respond” to the gospel, rather than “decide” as the latter places the emphasis more on the individual’s choice than the gospel that demands a response.<sup>4</sup> He points out that “believe” may need translation in our current context:

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<sup>3</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

Many people think belief involves pretending something is true that really isn't. Or that by believing something, you make it true. To explain to people what the Bible means by "believe," I like to substitute the word "trust."<sup>5</sup>

Like Lewis, Newman has so many insights on language, they could easily have made up an additional "insight," but then he'd have had "eleven insights" and that doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

Newman's book is realistic. He does not assume that all his readers are intellectuals, that people naturally like talking about religion, that people go around feeling dissatisfied with their non-Christian lives seeking a savior, or that all evangelistic encounters are going to end favorably. He has a whole chapter on preparation for persecution (chapter 7), which he believes is an essential component of evangelism training that is too often neglected. (Lewis was almost certainly passed over for promotion at Oxford due, at least in part, to his evangelistic activities.)<sup>6</sup> And he is constant throughout in recognizing the centrality of God's work in the salvation process, most evident in the chapter on prayer. (Lewis kept a daily prayer list of those for whose salvation he was praying, and a list of those whose salvation he was celebrating.<sup>7</sup>) Newman stresses the

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<sup>5</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-107.

need for preparation and practice for evangelism. The stakes are high and we can not rely on spontaneity.<sup>8</sup>

Like Lewis, Newman's writing is rich and engaging. He employs his own metaphors, comparing the current state of our culture to a "cut flower," and the tension between God's mercy and his justice throughout scripture as a "dominant melody in God's symphony."<sup>9 10</sup> He adapts Lewis's famous line from "Learning in Wartime," "good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered" to argue that "good imagery needs to exist, if for no other reason, because bad imagery needs to be countered."<sup>11</sup> In his tenth chapter he cleverly imitates Ecclesiastes 3 with:

There is a time for every evangelistic  
situation, And a season for every witnessing  
activity under the heavens:

A time to sow and a time to reap,

A time to answer questions and a time to pose  
questions,

A time to appeal to clues and a time to  
proclaim truths,

A time to respond clearly and a time to push  
back gently,

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<sup>8</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 50-51. He offers good insight comparing 1 Peter 1:2 and Matthew 10:19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

A time to stir uneasiness and a time to stoke  
the imagination,

A time to pray and a time to resist attacks,

A time to offer reasons and a time to call for a  
response.<sup>12</sup>

From a Lewis scholarship standpoint, the book is fairly well researched, employing a wide array of primary and secondary sources, including many passages from Lewis's *God in the Dock* and many quotes from *Lightbearer in the Shadowlands: The Evangelistic Vision of C.S. Lewis*. There's one *God in the Dock* quote that is not quite used in context. He uses the quote "This is very troublesome and it means you can say very little in half an hour, but it is essential" to suggest the necessity of honoring objections, rather than in the original context of translating abstract theological language into the vernacular.<sup>13</sup> There is a missed opportunity to unpack Austin Farrer's quote "We think we are listening to an argument; in fact, we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction" but that may be because he got it second hand from George Marsden's *C.S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography*, rather than from Farrer's original essay "The Christian Apologist," included in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb. This would also explain why he left out Farrer's other memorable quote

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<sup>12</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 55. C.S. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 98.

Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.<sup>14</sup>

Newman is not attempting to write hagiography. He says of the Lewis, practical advice, scripture triad of each chapter that: “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.”<sup>15</sup> He calls out Lewis’s hasty generalizations regarding scripture and cultural anthropology and acknowledges concern that Lewis’s emphasis on an appeal to desire, if left in isolation, downplays the seriousness of sin.<sup>16 17 18 19</sup> At the same time, he defends Lewis as a model, arguing that “Lewis’s strengths far outweigh his weaknesses.”<sup>20</sup>

There is unrealized potential in the “Imagery” chapter. Newman hits many highlights from Lewis’s work on imagination, but blurs together stirring emotions, slipping past watchful dragons, and

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<sup>14</sup> Austin Farrer “The Christian Apologist,” in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

imagination as the organ of meaning, when each of these subjects could have warranted more careful distinction and attention.<sup>21</sup> He employs the term “enjoyment” once or twice, but never unpacks Lewis’s fruitful distinction between the detached intellectual practice of “contemplation” from the involved experience of reality that is “enjoyment.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Newman was trying to avoid getting too technical, but to Lewis lovers interested in the imagination and its potency, the chapter falls short. On the plus side, Newman avoids the false dichotomy of pitting an imaginative approach against a propositional approach to sharing the gospel that some writers have fallen into recently.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the book is fueled by joy. Newman’s own path to Christianity involved his searching for joy through music, only to find it coming up empty and yet –

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<sup>21</sup> Stirring the emotion in this sense is awakening spiritual longing, which Lewis sometimes refers to using the German word, *sehnsucht*. Lewis talks about this extensively in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. “Slipping past watchful dragons” is a famous aphorism Lewis employs in the essay “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said,” and refers to the practice of recasting Christian truths that have become stale or even offensive in their familiarity into new imaginative renderings in order to win them an unbiased reception. Lewis explains the idea of imagination serving as the organ of meaning in his essay “Bluspels and Flalansferes.” Reason is the organ of truth, but before something can be true or false it first must *mean* something, and this meaning, Lewis argues, is mediated through the imagination.

<sup>22</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 217-218. and “Meditation in a Toolshed,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> See, Maxie B. Burch, “Teaching as Translation and the Theological Formation of the Imagination” *The Undiscovered C.S. Lewis: Essays in Memory of Christopher Mitchell* edited by Bruce Johnson, (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2021).

joyous day! – receiving joy in music back again even richer when he converted (partly through the influence of *Mere Christianity*) and put first things over second things.<sup>24</sup> His chapter on “Clues” mostly invokes longing, what Lewis called *sehnsucht* or joy.<sup>25</sup> He invites us to see the world through the light of Christianity, and to “expand our palate” for clues.<sup>26</sup> In the gospel chapter he invites us to “preach the gospel to ourselves” as fuel for our evangelism. When responding to the pushback “are you trying to convert me?” he answers “Doesn’t everyone try to tell others about good things they’ve found?”<sup>27</sup> In his concluding chapter, asking why it is we don’t evangelize, he invites us to “Recall the joy of your salvation: how God sovereignly worked to adopt you.”<sup>28</sup> The awakening of joy and all its consequences is reason alone to commend this book to all who have experienced the joy of the gospel.

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<sup>24</sup> Newman, *Mere Evangelism*, 15, 127, 140.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

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