

# KNOWING & DOING

C · S · LEWIS INSTITUTE



*A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind*

From the Summer 2015 issue of Knowing & Doing:



## Paving the Way for Gospel Conversations

by Randy Newman, Ph.D.  
*Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism, C.S. Lewis Institute*

**H**ave you ever driven a car with a stick shift? If so, you know that stepping on the clutch is absolutely crucial before shifting gears. If you forget that prerequisite, you'll hear grinding noises that could cost you lots of money.

(I do realize this illustration sounds alien to some. You may have no idea what a “stick shift” is. How about this illustration instead: When it comes to performing a specific function on a computer, you need to press the “shift” key *before* pushing the F4 key. If you don't, the F4 key performs a completely different function. That's similar to what I mean. But the stepping-on-the-clutch-before-shifting-gears illustration has more drama to it.)

My point is that some actions require a preliminary step, without which you can't accomplish your goal. In our day and age, when people have negative notions about religion, we may need to pave the way for gospel conversations before asking them where they'll spend eternity or whether they know God personally or how they deal with their “sin problem.”

After Jesus asked a woman at a well for some water and conversed about why He would do such a culturally unusual thing, He then spoke about “living water” that springs “up to eternal life.” This dialogue paved the way for the good news that He was the Messiah and all that that entailed—such as some convicting insights about her moral failures and theological correction of her views about worship (see John 4:1–26).

Sometimes we need to pave the way for the gospel with words that prepare people to overcome prejudices, listen carefully, and hear accurately. Sometimes we need to step on the clutch before shifting gears. I can think of at least three different kinds of “clutches” we might want to use to pave the way for evangelistic dialogues with people we know and care about.

### The Clutch of Permission

I know some people who need lead time before discussing heavy issues. They're actually interested but probably won't handle it well if someone just switches from light chatting about the weather to serious issues of eternity. And they'd appreciate being asked for an “okay” before making that dramatic leap.

I think there is wisdom in asking for permission before beginning the conversation. In some ways, it shows respect for the person and esteem for the topic. A permission question can sound something like this: “I wonder if you'd ever be up for talking about spiritual things. We've talked about a lot of other things. Would it be okay if we chatted about faith sometime?” In addition to showing people you don't just want to force your agenda on them, it also shows you respect them, their time, and sensitivities.

The permission question also gives people time to think about what they really do believe. Between the time of asking for permission and actually having the faith conversation, some people open up to ideas they might just reject on the spot if they feel backed into a corner.

## The Clutch of Tone

Let's face it. Some people have strong feelings about faith, and they're not always pleasant ones. A lot of our friends have had bad experiences in church, have read horror stories about abusive clergy, or think Christians are a bunch of "hypocrites." On top of this, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and thus people "love darkness." (see Rom. 3:23 and John 3:19).

We shouldn't be surprised if the topic of faith elicits anger or other negative emotions. Some like to attack us with sarcasm or embarrass us at family gatherings or send scorching emails. Responding in kind makes things worse and shows us to be foolish just like them (Prov. 26:4).

One way to lower the temperature in the room or the blood pressure in their veins (and yours!) is to quietly acknowledge the tone of the conversation. I've sometimes said something like "I think I've struck a nerve, haven't I?" or "Maybe this isn't the best time or place for this conversation" or "I feel uncomfortable about how this is going." Their response could direct you to move forward in a cooler atmosphere. Until you "step on the clutch" of setting a better tone, your evangelistic presentation may not yield the best response.

## The Clutch of Common Ground

An increasing number of non-Christians consider our Christian faith implausible or just plain crazy. They view us as homophobic, intolerant, narrow-minded bigots, and apologetic arguments or archaeological evidence may not help. However, we can pave the way for their consideration by finding things we do have in common about the world of ideas or the arena of faith.

For example, when accused of being narrow minded, we could suggest that everyone says no to some ideas or beliefs. We're all "narrow" about some things. If need be, we can point to extremes that most people reject. Philosophers like to use the example of "torturing babies" as something we can all be "intolerant" of. Once we find common ground with people, we can then pursue discussions of where those limiting ideas come from. Eventually we can posit the notion that we Christians get our views from God who has revealed them to us in the Bible.

Sometimes we should follow the apostle Paul's example when he preached to secular skeptics on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–34). He quoted their poets to make the points he wanted to establish. Once they started shaking their heads affirmatively, he showed how their ideas, expressed by their poets, aligned with truth in God's Word.

This may not go as smoothly as we'd like. But I have found that stepping on the clutch of finding common ground can help a great deal. If we fail to do so, we may prompt noises even louder than grinding gears in cars with stick shifts. The gospel resonates with some things all people should know. They may have "suppressed the truth in unrighteousness" (see Rom. 1:18), but God can raise the dead. He did so for all who believe (see Eph. 2:1), and He can do so for the people He brings our way.





**Randy Newman** is Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism at the C.S. Lewis Institute. He is also an adjunct faculty member for Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Patrick Henry College. He received his M.Div. and Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. After serving for over 30 years with Campus Crusade for Christ, he established Connection Points, a ministry to help Christians engage people's hearts the way Jesus did. He has written three books and numerous articles about evangelism and other ways our lives intertwine with God's creation. He and his wife Pam live in Annandale, VA and have three grown sons. Randy blogs at [www.connectionpoints.us](http://www.connectionpoints.us).

*Knowing & Doing* is published by C.S. Lewis Institute; 8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301; Springfield, VA 22151 | [www.cslewisinstitute.org](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org). Electronic copies of this PDF file may be duplicated and transmitted via e-mail for personal or ministry use. Articles may not be modified without prior written permission of the Institute. For questions, you may call us at 703.914.5602 or email us at [staff@cslewisinstitute.org](mailto:staff@cslewisinstitute.org).

2015 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE, *Discipleship of Heart and Mind*

*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis, the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ through personal and public life.*