



KNOWING & DOING

C · S · LEWIS INSTITUTE

A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

From the Spring 2016 issue of Knowing & Doing:



Mere Evangelism: Using C.S. Lewis's Classic Book to Win Outsiders for Christ

by Randy Newman, Ph.D.

Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism, C.S. Lewis Institute

Have you ever talked with a non-Christian about the gospel and wanted to follow up the conversation with the gift of a book? You sensed the person was open, and you knew you had more to say. Or have you hoped to have such a conversation but were afraid to? Having a few “leaving pieces” to offer outsiders may bolster your confidence, encourage someone’s seeking, and lead to eternally significant outcomes.

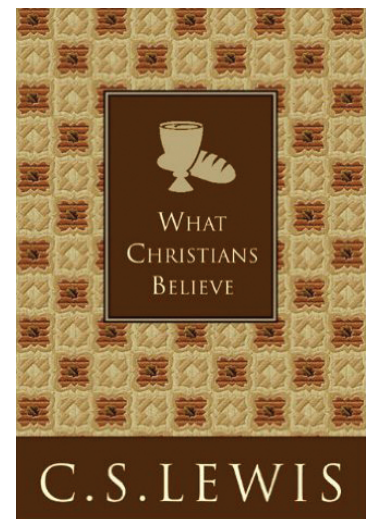
But what to give? At one time, it was fashionable for Christians to carry a stash of tracts or booklets that could help people understand the gospel in concise ways and propel them on to faith. I’m not convinced that’s the best route these days. And I’m even more persuaded that there isn’t a one-size-fits-all tool to connect well with people. We need a wide assortment of items to fit a very diverse audience.

Those of us who love C.S. Lewis often think his *Mere Christianity* must be *the* book for all non-Christians to read to bring them from darkness to light. When *Christianity Today* asked more than a hundred of its contributors and church leaders to nominate the ten best religious books of the twentieth century, in the context of having enduring significance for the Christian faith and church, *Mere Christianity* was at the top of the list. The magazine’s related article, “Books of the Century,” included David S. Dockery’s comment that *Mere Christianity* was “the best case for the essentials of orthodox Christianity in print.”¹ But if you’ve given or suggested that book to more than a few people, you know it resonates well with some and seems like hieroglyphics to others. For some people, given their limited level of interest or reading stamina, the book is just too long. And Lewis’s style, which seems delightful, clear, and persuasive to some, sounds obscure, complex, or too intellectual for others.

While I hate to say anything negative about one of my all-time favorite books, one I’ve reread many times, and the one book except for the Bible that was most pivotal in my own conversion, *Mere Christianity* isn’t without its flaws. I think Lewis’s dismissal of deep reflection and debate about what the cross accomplished is too strong. Several evangelical spokespersons have made this clear in their various critiques.² And Lewis seems to imply a kind of saving faith for people of other religions that has been rejected by many Christians of various stripes.

But some of *Mere Christianity* is still ideal for some people at some points in their journeys. So far, I have not found anything else that says what Lewis says as powerfully and convincingly as this classic book. Despite its flaws, I know why it is considered by some to be the most important Christian book of the twentieth century. No one makes me think so deeply and smile so widely at the same time as Lewis.

So I was delighted to come upon the HarperCollins publication of *What Christians Believe*, a handsome hard-back small item (fewer than 100, 4 x 6-inch pages) of just one section of *Mere Christianity*.



Mere Christianity was first published as three separate books, *The Case for Christianity* (1943), *Christian Behavior* (1943), and *Beyond Personality* (1945). Later, as one book, it was divided into four major sections, all the material being transcriptions of radio broadcasts delivered by Lewis between 1942 and 1944. *The Case for Christianity* comprised two short parts, “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” and “What Christians Believe.” The first of these might be considered pre-evangelism; here Lewis builds a case from “the law of human nature” to the shared beliefs of right and wrong. This points us to God as the One who declares what is right and wrong and plants “eternity in our hearts.”³ Then, in “What Christians Believe,” Lewis declares who Jesus is, what He did, and the need to respond in faith. In ways that have moved many from ignorant, unbelieving, or confused to informed, convinced, and repentant, these pages have been used by God to deliver skeptics from their lostness. To God be the glory!

It is “What Christians Believe,” the second of the four sections of *Mere Christianity*, that I like to give to open non-Christians. It explains the gospel in ways that inform and inspire while minimizing some of the problems in Lewis’s questionable theology. This limited presentation also leaves discussion of morality (a major theme in the third section of *Mere Christianity*) and related theological issues (significant parts of the fourth section) for other times and other publications. Given how far our contemporary world has strayed from biblical morality, I find it is best to deliver all these topics in slower installments than Lewis’s broadcasts in the 1940s.

(I should say that, for some people, an ideal gift would be the first two parts of *Mere Christianity*, the pre-evangelistic section about “right and wrong” and the evangelistic presentation of “what Christians believe.” At one time, Simon and Schuster published such a piece, titled *The Case for Christianity*. But it is no longer in print. You can still find used paperback copies that might work as good gifts for thoughtful searchers.)

The nicely packaged hardback *What Christians Believe* is small enough not to scare off the most reluctant of readers. Its size, paper quality, and layout convey the feel of a nice all-occasion gift. I have given several copies to friends in casual settings, while chatting in a coffee shop, for example. And I’ve sent copies through the mail as gifts for holidays or birthdays. It’s small enough for the casual settings and nice enough for the special-occasion gift. It might be just what some people need to help them start or restart a spiritual pilgrimage they’ll never regret. Who knows? Maybe someday they’ll proclaim, along with Lewis, that anyone “who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.”⁴ ■■

Notes

¹ “Books of the Century: Leaders and Thinkers Weigh in on Classics That Have Shaped Contemporary Religious Thought,” *Christianity Today*, April 24, 2000.

² See, e.g., Kevin DeYoung’s critique at “The Gospel Coalition,” <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/ke>

³ See Ecclesiastes 3:11.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando, FL: HarcourtBooks, 1955), 191.

So far as I can judge from reviews and from the numerous letters written to me, the book, however faulty in other respects, did at least succeed in presenting an agreed, or common, or central, or “mere” Christianity.

C.S. Lewis



Randy Newman is Senior Teaching Fellow for Apologetics and Evangelism at the C.S. Lewis Institute. He is also an adjunct professor at Talbot School of Theology. 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.

RECOMMENDED READING

C.S. Lewis, *What Christians Believe* (HarperCollinsPublishers, 2005).

Master storyteller and essayist C. S. Lewis here tackles the central questions of the Christian faith: Who was Jesus? What did he accomplish? What does it mean for me?

In these classic essays, which began as talks on the BBC during World War II, Lewis creatively and simply explains the basic tenets of Christianity. Taken from the core section of *Mere Christianity*, the selection in this gift edition provides an accessible way for more people to discover these timeless truths. For those looking to remind themselves of the things they hold true, or those looking for a snapshot of Christianity, this book is a wonderful introduction to the faith.



Knowing & Doing is published by C.S. Lewis Institute; 8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301; Springfield, VA 22151 | 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.

2016 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.