



LESSLIE NEWBIGIN: LOOKING FORWARD IN RETROSPECT

Sixteen years after the death of missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin, Paul Weston offers a retrospective of his contribution to missionary theology and assesses his continuing relevance for the church's mission to Western culture. He backs the view that Newbigin's work maintains a surprising and often prophetic edge for contemporary practice. After describing Newbigin's abiding knack of putting into words the really important questions for contemporary mission, he goes on to outline three areas in Newbigin's work which hold particular promise for the future. First, he explores Newbigin's identification of the local Christian community as the source of an authentic gospel witness. Second, he analyses Newbigin's contribution to a re-focusing of apologetics and their relocation in the narrative of the gospel itself. Finally, he assesses the on-going contribution of Newbigin's contention that the gospel is 'public truth'. He concludes that Newbigin's approach to missional practice still has the power to

critique and refocus our thinking, and continues to offer a 'place to stand' that is theologically coherent as well as culturally engaged.



When Leslie Newbigin returned from India in 1974 after 36 years of missionary experience, he was struck by what he came to describe as 'the disappearance of hope' in the culture of the West.[1] Always the missionary, Newbigin's quest to find out what had happened to produce such an effect propelled him into a programme of study and reflection. As he would later describe it, this process led him to the judgement that the culture of the West was 'the most challenging missionary frontier of our time'.[2] It also bore enormous fruit over the following 24 'retirement' years, resulting in the publication of 15 books and over 160 articles and shorter papers, reflecting a variety of talks and lectures given both here and abroad. He died in 1998 at the age of 89.

The impact of this work has been profound. George Hunsberger's 1991 analysis described it as a 'potent catalyst for focusing our attention on what must become a primary agenda for Western churches.'[3] Meanwhile the Gambian mission theologian Lamin Sanneh, who had recently become the Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale, wrote in his 1993 book, *Encountering the West* that 'There is no doubt of the enormous influence of Newbigin and his significance for a cross cultural critique of the West'.[4]

But has this significance stood the test of time? Or has the value of his contribution waned with the passing years? What follows is inevitably a personal and selective view, and concentrates on Newbigin's later writing with its specific focus on Western mission, but I hope to make the case that his work *does* have a continuing - even a prophetic - voice for us today. I'll begin with a methodological observation about Newbigin's way of working, and then try to point up three themes that I think find a particular resonance.

Newbigin has the knack of putting into words the really important questions for contemporary mission.

When Newbigin's 'trailer' publication *The Other Side of 1984* was published in 1983, it was his bold ability to combine cross-cultural analysis with pointed critique that most stood out. Subtitled 'Questions for the Churches', Newbigin himself thought that the book 'contained nothing new or revolutionary'.[5] Others, however, were struck by its capacity to focus key missional issues succinctly and cogently for the benefit of the wider church. His colleague Dan Beeby summed this up when he said that 'he has formulated clearly some of the questions which have hovered over many minds. Straws in the wind have been brought into one compact rick. He has systematized for many of us the gropings and half answers that were already ours and we are grateful'.[6]

In my view, this ability of Newbigin's writing to raise and articulate the right (and often difficult) questions continues to have a timeless quality about it. Times move on of course, and new contexts raise their own unique challenges. But living with *key* missional questions that arise from a deep engagement with cultural themes can often lead to more effective, longer-term, and more varied local engagement in a way that 'off-the-shelf' universal solutions rarely do. In an age that is driven by a craving for the latest 'how-to' answers, Newbigin's questions still have the capacity to challenge complacency, stretch mission theologies, and energize responses that are both local and contextual. To take but a few: What would it mean to view our cultures today through the lens of the Gospel?; Do my cultural assumptions about 'truth' imprison rather than liberate the message of Jesus?; In what ways does my church collude with the privatisation of faith? . . . and so forth.

Part of the prophetic dimension of Newbigin's insights was the fact that they came from someone who was effectively an 'outsider'.^[7] As a missionary who had himself made two cross-cultural journeys - the first when he went to India in 1936, and the second when he finally came back to settle in his 'home' culture some 38 years later - he was particularly well-placed to identify challenges for mission to the West, as well as to point up the ecclesial dangers of various kinds of cultural collusion. It is not by mistake that he introduces himself at the start of *Foolishness to the Greeks* by saying that "The angle from which I am approaching the study is that of a foreign missionary."^[8]

This of course doesn't mean that his cultural analysis is sacrosanct - particularly since with the passing of the years Western cultures have moved on and developed. But my experience of working with church-planters, pioneers, and those concerned with the health of the church both here and abroad is that an open engagement with Newbigin's ideas often brings an unusual vitality and vigour to thinking about the contemporary mission of the church. Somehow the combination of missionary passion, cultural questioning, and theological weight is hard to resist.

I want in the remainder of this article to highlight three particular themes in Newbigin's later work that combine these elements, and which I believe continue to address the challenge of missionary engagement in the West. I've chosen them partly because they speak to different dimensions of that engagement.

1. *Newbigin understood the dynamic relationship between community and witness*

Prior to the period of the 1990s (with its much heralded 'Decade of Evangelism' amongst the mainline churches in Britain), the connection between corporate and individual witness was rarely developed or really understood. As a young minister in South London, I had already read some of Newbigin's earlier work, and was therefore pleased that the two books recommended by the Anglican Church's 'Board of Mission' for reflection at the start of the decade were Newbigin's *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, and William Abraham's *The Logic of Evangelism* (both published in 1989).

Both in their own way were paradigm-shifters for me. Abraham's book (still one that I recommend to students) called for a thoroughgoing reappraisal of our understanding of evangelism in the light of its

manifest kingdom-orientation in the gospel stories. Abraham forced me to rethink evangelism more biblically and to place individual witness in the context of the on-going flow of kingdom discipleship. Newbigin's book was equally formative. Written with a winsomeness that masked its deceptive simplicity, here was a book that effectively rearranged the missional and ecclesial furniture.

Amongst its many insights was a first encounter with Newbigin's understanding of the local church congregation as 'the hermeneutic of the gospel'.^[9] This arresting phrase places the witness of individuals within a broader and deeper hermeneutical context: one in which the 'triggers' towards faith were not simply to be understood as arguments to be won, or words to be spoken, or even individual lives to be lived, though all of these have their place and importance. What Newbigin stressed was that the only way in which the outlandish message about a crucified saviour and a reigning Lord could truly be understood and experienced was through the complex of caring, praising, confessing, and forgiving relationships that we know as the local congregation. It is this corporate life, lived in community, which often most effectively 'interprets' the good news about Jesus to those who don't yet know him.

Though Newbigin only began to use the actual phrase 'hermeneutic of the gospel' from the late 1980s onwards, the theological substance of the idea comes much earlier. It is built out of a deep understanding of the personal nature of God. For Newbigin, the missional 'flow' of God's love that embraces the world is essentially *relational* rather than purely intellectual. We find the beginnings of this in one of his early student essays entitled 'Revelation' (written in 1936). Christianity rests on the foundational belief that 'the meaning of the world is personal', he argues. 'For if the final meaning of the world is less than personal, then it [is] best understood by those methods of scepticism and experiment which are the requisites of scientific enquiry, but which would be the complete destruction of any personal understanding'.^[10]

From this theological starting-point much of his later reflections about the nature and mission of the church are built. As you read his writing on the church, you find a rich and deep interweaving of the themes of personal indwelling (mediating the knowledge of God to one another and to the world), corporate unity (that ecumenical imperative which enables the church to signal the reconciling gospel it is called to proclaim), and missional scope (that the few are called for the sake of the many). Take this, for example, as a sample from his classic 1953 book on the Church (*The Household of God*):

. . . a salvation whose very essence is that it is corporate and cosmic, the restoration of the broken harmony between all men and between man and God and man and nature, must be communicated . . . by the actual development of a community which embodies - if only in foretaste - the restored harmony of which it speaks. A gospel of reconciliation can only be communicated by a reconciled fellowship.^[11]

This emphasis on an 'embodied' and relational missional ecclesiology connects strongly with many streams of contemporary ('postmodern') thinking that stress the realm of the personal alongside the more narrowly intellectual, the affective emotions alongside the cognitive, the visual alongside the word, and so forth. And because of its strongly theological grounding,

Newbigin's approach holds great promise. It continues to inform, undergird, and sometimes critique, themes in contemporary mission-thinking that rightly stress that relationships usually count more than arguments; that the experience of community is frequently essential as the tangible expression of what faith means; and that it is within the context of a living faith community that the experience of God is most readily encountered by outsiders.

2. *Newbigin understood the need to subvert the stranglehold of Enlightenment thought on apologetics*

Newbigin's late work is widely known to revolve around a sustained critique of the period of Western thought known as the 'Enlightenment'. Indeed, in the run-up to the Gospel and Our Culture conferences of the early 1990s, one of Newbigin's colleagues referred to him and his fellow-organisers as 'Enlightenment-bashers'.^[12] The inference sometimes drawn from this is that now that we have passed into a *post*-modern paradigm, Newbigin's work is rather less relevant today. However, I think that this sort of reaction misunderstands the nature and purpose of Newbigin's critique.

One of the strengths of his work in my view is that it is culturally 'distanced'. By that I don't mean that it fails to engage with culture, but rather that it sets out to critique culture from the starting point of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ rather than from some alternative cultural standpoint. This helps to explain, I think, why his method has no need to change when modernity begins to give way to *post*modernity.^[13] The critiques of both cultural 'movements' provide examples of Newbigin's quest to engage with the fundamental question that he had been wrestling with since his return to the West, namely 'what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture.'^[14]

So when Newbigin critiques the Enlightenment, he is often doing so in order to call our attention to the difficulties that Enlightenment thinking has created from a gospel point-of-view, and - more particularly - to the fact that these assumptions have often disempowered Christians from faithfully presenting that gospel to others.

The nature of these assumptions is well-documented and frequently discussed in Newbigin's writings, with Rene Descartes and John Locke regularly appearing in the firing line. One can argue about the details of this critique, but the continued existence of the distinctions between the notions of 'public' and 'private'; between 'facts' and 'values'; or between the ideas of 'knowing' and 'believing' is still part of our Western cultural landscape and provides the backdrop against which the church seeks to live out and share the good news of Jesus.

As soon as the suggestion is made that the good news has a broader truthfulness than simply representing a private faith-option, then the Enlightenment stranglehold begins to have its effect. The reigning 'plausibility structure' acts as a 'constraint' within which we feel compelled to explain the good news.^[15] The gospel must in these circumstances be demonstrated as 'true'

on rational grounds that are available to all people. And if it cannot, then it must remain as a matter of 'private opinion' or merely 'subjective belief'.

Newbigin's 'take' on apologetics therefore critiques the way in which Christians have been tempted to defend the gospel on the basis of prevailing cultural assumptions about 'truth'. There's nothing inherently wrong about this of course. But Newbigin's writing underlines the need to make the distinction between the desire for cultural relevance (which he argues is the necessary starting point for effective communication[16]), and cultural collusion (which reduces a message to the conditions of acceptance operative within a given culture). As a result, he says, resulting apologetic strategies often reveal a greater debt to Enlightenment rationalism than to revealed biblical faith. But the gospel cannot be so constrained, says Newbigin, for 'It has never at any time been possible to fit the resurrection of Jesus into any world view except a world view of which it is the basis'.[17]

Part of the way through this Enlightenment impasse for Newbigin is to rediscover the proper 'subjective' element in the process of knowing, and to realise that all forms of knowing - whether 'scientific' or otherwise - are inescapably 'personal' in their commitments. As such they involve faith, but they also involve risk. 'Faith' is part-and-parcel of the business of 'knowing'. Newbigin's great ally in arguing this way is Michael Polanyi, the Hungarian-British chemist-turned-philosopher, whose major book *Personal Knowledge* forms something of a hermeneutical 'key' to much of Newbigin's later thought,[18] and which he read regularly after its publication in 1958.

We could get quite technical at this point, and some of Newbigin's discussions of 'epistemology' can appear overly philosophical and abstruse. But one way of summarizing this is to say that the way we explain the good news of Jesus effectively creates the terms on which it becomes believable. If I habitually explain it in terms of axioms, principles, evidential probabilities or philosophical 'proofs', then the gospel is moulded into a structure created by the presuppositions with which I'm trying to explain it. The medium is the message. Newbigin's point is that when this happens, the gospel of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ is pulled out of shape because my communication is being moulded by cultural considerations rather than the gospel itself. The liberating thrust of Newbigin's thought at this point is that apologetics is essentially a 'bearing witness' sort of venture, rather than a 'demonstrating-to-be true' one. It will often involve story, because narrative is at the heart of the gospel revelation, and it will include testimony to what God is doing in our lives, because this is frequently how God demonstrates his truthfulness.

Thankfully, the postmodern 'turn' has rightly entailed a front-on assault on some of these grandiose Enlightenment assumptions about the nature of truth, and the discussion of apologetics is beginning to come to terms with some of these. This is not necessarily to jettison earlier patterns of apologetics, but it is certainly to frame them in a deeper theological context. Once again, Newbigin is helpful in this debate precisely because of his theological rootedness.

He still speaks to two dimensions of the apologetic discussion. On the one hand he shows how our assumptions need continually to be shaped by the narrative of the gospel, whilst on the other he never slides into a form of ‘testimonialism’ that understands the good news purely in terms of the stories I tell about myself. He never decries personal testimony, but he is deeply committed to the fact that our stories find their meaning in *the* story of God’s purposes for the world, and their supreme revelation in the story of Jesus, who is the ‘clue to history’.[19]

3. *Newbigin points the way towards a humble but confident confessional witness in the public square*

Many have found that Newbigin’s approach to evangelism and apologetics has given them a ‘place to stand’ in relation both to the gospel and to contemporary culture. It has helped to create and nourish in them a mind-set that is both missionally coherent and yet also theologically robust. And if this is true for individual apologetics it can also be said to be true of his approach to Christian witness in the ‘public square’.

The question of the role Christians should play in the public realm has intensified in the West today in what is now both a ‘post-Christendom’, but also an increasingly multi-faith society. On the one hand the ‘Constantinian’ settlement in which Christian faith was assumed – if not imposed – is long-gone. On the other, the increase of religious plurality in contemporary cultures has opened up new understandings of what ‘public space’ means in the context of personal freedom and human rights. Meanwhile the church has become increasingly marginalised in this process, with the forces of secularisation further loosening the institutional connections between Christian faith and public life.

In this situation, Newbigin’s repeated description of the gospel as ‘public truth’ highlights some fundamental aspects of his own approach to these questions, but also offers a valuable contribution to the contemporary debate. To begin with, the use of *this* phrase rather than another—such as ‘public theology’—is significant. Newbigin never used the phrase ‘public theology’ in any of his published writings. He offers no explicit reason for this, but it was no doubt because to speak about ‘public theology’ would have implied that there was also another theology that was somehow ‘private’. This was not only a fundamental theological contradiction for him, but would have been a capitulation to the very cultural assumptions of the Enlightenment that he was trying to critique.[20]

The development of the argument that addresses this false dichotomy became a central concern of Newbigin’s writing from the mid-80s, and gained particular prominence in Newbigin’s ‘Gospel and Our Culture’ programme in the early 1990s. It was used as the main theme of the National Consultation held at Swanwick in July 1992, and also as the title of the preceding ‘Conference Call’ published in *The Gospel and Our Culture* Newsletter in the spring of that year.[21] Here Newbigin affirms that the Christian faith is ‘public truth’ because it originates as a public fact. It is, he says, ‘an account of things which have happened . . . It is narrated history’.[22] And

because the good news was made known in this very public way, its earliest witnesses were in no doubt about its rightful presence in wider society. They did not draw the conclusion that its truth was a private matter for the individual. They did not avail themselves of the protection that Roman law provided for the exercise of religions of personal salvation. They affirmed that the message that had been entrusted to them was one that concerned the destiny of the whole human race. The one who died and rose again was the saviour and judge of the world. The news of this was therefore of vital concern to every human being. It was 'public truth'.^[23]

Today the debates about the role of Christianity in the public realm seem to be caught between a right hesitancy about any form of imposed faith in the public square on the one hand, and the retreat of the Christian voice into a privatised sphere on the other. Newbigin has much to offer this debate. In personal conversation, for example, he used to insist that the last *public* thing that Jesus did was to die on a cross. The resurrection was not 'public' in the same sense, for Jesus' appearances were to a chosen group of followers who are identified in the last chapters of the four gospels, the start of Acts, and in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7.

Newbigin used to insist on the theological logic of this, a logic that is repeated throughout the New Testament narrative. For although Jesus' followers thought that he had come to usher in the last times, he does so with an unexpected twist. He comes as Saviour, but the end is 'not yet'. The final judgement of God is still in the future, and our calling in the present is to bear witness to this future reality as the 'first fruits' and 'sign' of the renewal that it will bring. The death of Christ therefore effectively creates an intervening 'space', in which the gospel is to be proclaimed to all, and in which the possibility of faith and repentance is offered ahead of the final summing up.

Within this framework, Newbigin's interpretation of democracy is a deeply theological one. The period between the cross and final judgement opens up a 'space' for dialogue and debate in which differing commitments and viewpoints (both Christian and other) may rightly and openly be expressed and examined. There is no such thing as a 'neutral' public space in which such viewpoints are value-free. They all involve faith and assume a set of beliefs about goals and about human flourishing. And it is in this context that Christians are called to bear their witness to the Lordship of Jesus, a witness that is paradoxically marked 'from start to finish . . . by the sign of the cross'.^[24]

Newbigin's discussion of these themes is theologically rich. For example, in the context of postmodernity, the emphasis on the cross addresses the postmodern attack on the Christian faith as another 'master-narrative', whilst maintaining at the same time the properly 'public' nature of the gospel itself. In our tense political times, where the alternatives of imposition or privatisation are still very much alive, Newbigin's theology of the gospel as 'public truth' maintains its value and relevance as a contribution to a very contemporary debate.

I sub-titled this short essay 'looking forward in retrospect' because it seems to me to encapsulate Newbigin's way of working. His focus is always missional: it is future-oriented and aims continually to be culturally engaged. But it maintains this forward momentum by being theologically rooted. He looks forward by looking back. It remains my belief that engaging with Newbigin's work can help us in similar ways. It can focus our missional intentions, and stimulate us towards a deeper cultural engagement. But it will do so by encouraging a more rounded reflection on the gospel that we are called to proclaim, and by provoking us to a more faithful retrieval. By doing so, his work may continue to help us in finding that 'place to stand'.

Photograph credit: WCC/Peter Williams

[1]Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986) 1.

[2] Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 20.

[3]George R. Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America," *Missiology: An International Review*, 19, 4 (1991) 393.

[4]Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West- Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (London: Marshall Pickering/ Harper Collins, 1993) 162-3.

[5]Lesslie Newbigin, *An Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*, 2nd ed., (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993) 256.

[6]Dan H. Beeby, "The Other Side of 1984: Medieval University or Post Enlightenment Academy? A View from the Selly Oak Colleges." *Selly Oak Journal* 2 (1985) 13.

[7]A 2002 collection of essays about him was titled *A Scandalous Prophet* (Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, J. Andrew Kirk and Werner Ustorf, eds. *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission After Newbigin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002)).

[8]Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1.

[9]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989) chapter 18, 222-241.

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- [10]Lesslie Newbigin, "Revelation." *Lesslie Newbigin Papers, Library Special Collections, The University of Birmingham, UK* (Box: DA29/3/1/2) (1936) 1-2. (Extracted in Paul Weston, ed. *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (London/ Grand Rapids, MI: SPCK/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006) 18-21.)
- [11]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953) 141.
- [12]Lesslie Newbigin, "Beyond the Familiar Myths", *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* 1 (1989) 1.
- [13]See my discussion of this in Paul Weston, "Lesslie Newbigin: A Postmodern Missiologist?" *Mission Studies* 21, 2 (2004) 229-248.
- [14]Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 3.
- [15]The phrase 'plausibility structure' was coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to describe the conditions within a culture that enable a belief system to maintain its plausibility.
- [16]See eg. Lesslie Newbigin, "Context and Conversion," *International Review of Mission* 68 (1979) 302ff.
- [17]Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966) 53.
- [18]For more on this see Paul Weston, "Michael Polanyi and the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin," in *Critical Conversations: Michael Polanyi and Christian Theology*, ed. M. A. Rae (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).
- [19]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1969) 65-87.
- [20]For a discussion of this point, see Gavin Drew, "The Gospel as Public Truth in a Pluralist World: A reflection on Lesslie Newbigin's thought," *Evangel* 24, 2 (2006) 54.
- [21]Lesslie Newbigin "Conference Call: the Gospel as Public Truth" *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* 12 (1992) Insert.
- [22]Lesslie Newbigin "Conference Call" 1.
- [23]See eg. Lesslie Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh and Jenny Taylor, eds., *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in 'Secular' Britain* (London: SPCK, 1998) 135ff.
- [24]Lesslie Newbigin, "A Christian Vendetta?" *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter* 12 (1992) 2.



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