

Lesslie Newbigin A Bible Society Perspective

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by *Colin J D Greene*

My first meeting with Lesslie Newbigin took place in Dan Beeby's office in Selly Oak college library, Birmingham in the spring of 1989. I went to see both Dan and Lesslie ostensibly to talk about a possible partnership between Bible Society and the flourishing Gospel and our Culture movement spawned by Lesslie's writings. Lesslie had just produced the first draft of arguably his best book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. I was immediately impressed by Lesslie's deep and passionate concern to draw individuals and other missionary minded organisations into the common task to redefine the relationship between the gospel and the mores and values of contemporary Western culture.

From that first meeting there developed not just a warm personal friendship, but a shared missiological agenda between Bible Society and the Gospel and our Culture movement which was to have major repercussions for both parties. Two memorable regional conferences aimed at clergy and lay leaders were organised. The first took place from 15–17 October 1990 in London entitled *Mission to our Culture in the Light of Scripture and the Christian Tradition*. The second from 10–12 April 1991 in Swanwick, Derbyshire was called *Freedom and Truth in a Pluralist Society*. Both were oversubscribed and their success paved the way for the jointly organised and sponsored international conference with took place again at Swanwick, 11–17 July 1992, called *The Gospel As Public Truth*. This was an impor-

tant and significant conference which celebrated ten years of corporate work and endeavour for the Gospel and our Culture movement which over 400 people attended.

During this period Bible Society moved into a major period of re-evaluation and reappraisal in regard to its own role and future as an organisation serving the churches in England and Wales. The influence of Lesslie's writings as well as his personal advice and counsel was a seminal factor as the Society sought to redefine its strategic aims and objectives. During this at times painful and arduous period of assessment and re-evaluation a firm conviction arose, wholly supported by Lesslie, that the future role and mission of the Bible Society should be concerned with the critical repositioning of the Bible in the public life of Western culture. Such a conviction cohered with Lesslie's own avowal that the gospel is not a mere private conviction or belief but public truth, if indeed it is the universal truth about human life and destiny. To facilitate this end, a strategic decision had already been taken to concentrate on researching and examining how the biblical narrative could or should impact contemporary concerns in the areas of politics, education and the media. The importance of these areas of public life as major instruments of change and innovation in contemporary culture cannot be underestimated.

Towards the end of this crucial period Bible Society was approached by Churches Together in England to partner an important

public campaign called the Open Book. The common task of those involved was to 'open the Book to the culture and the culture to the Book'. Such a campaign could only succeed if both in the short and long term those involved endeavoured to facilitate a much more intelligent, credible and creative encounter between ordinary people and the central drama or narrative of the Bible. So to the areas of politics, education and the media was added the creative arts because the Bible is not just a text but a multimedia event, which should be performed as such both in our churches and also in the public life of a society which may at the present time only look back nostalgically at its origins in the Judeo-Christian faith. Once again Lesslie was wholly supportive because as he himself had continually argued:

'The Bible is... a narrative that structures human experience and understanding. However varied be its texture, it is essentially a story that claims to be the story, the true story both of the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos'. (*Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Pennsylvania, Trinity Press 1996, p38)

Lesslie understood very clearly that such a conviction had major implications for the public life of our culture. Take for instance the present debates in the area of education. So often the apparently laudable concern for higher standards of literacy and numeracy reflects a market-driven consumerist mentality which is itself based on a vision of education which is largely secular,

humanist in content and emphasis. And yet the fact remains that mass education developed in Western culture from the 16th century onwards after the Reformation had replaced the authority of the Church with that of the Bible. Previously other cultures regarded knowledge as a source of power to be guarded by and for the elite. The work of Bible translation and the advent of the printing press allowed everyone, rich and poor, men and women, high society and the outcasts, access to the divine revelation without the necessity of intermediaries. This in itself provided a powerful impulse for mass education and the missionary movement globalised education as the right of every citizen regardless of race or status.

Education is presently embroiled in a debate about the importance of viewing children not just as consumers of knowledge and information, but as future responsible citizens who need to be equipped for citizenship through understanding the importance of spiritual, moral, social and cultural values. But where does one find access to such values? Primarily in the great communitarian traditions which are part of our cultural heritage. In terms of Western culture there are only two such traditions, the Judeo-Christian faith and the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of virtues based on the ideal of citizenship.

Secular humanism tried to reconstruct moral discourse on the notion of a universal humanity. This was proved to be a rationalist abstraction which ignores both the importance of religious traditions and the cultural pluralism of the real world we inhabit.

Postmodernity is rightly jaundiced towards the inflated rationalism of modernity, viewing it as just another example of cultural imperialism, and yet it is unable to halt the slide toward a debilitating consumerist relativism in regard to moral and spiritual values. In the end we are told 'You pays your money and you takes your choice'.

If education is indeed a discipline in search of a new story then, as Lesslie continually reminded us, this is precisely where the gospel and our culture intersect. Perhaps then it is both appropriate and providential that the movement he both created and nurtured should find its institutional home once again with the Bible Society as part of those wider concerns to create a forum for change in Church and culture.

In his later years Lesslie's considerable intellectual and pastoral gifts were primarily orientated toward a critical engagement with the philosophical and scientific presuppositions which undergird Western culture. His was a radical disputation with modernity. As a man of his times and a gifted missiologist this was where both his instincts and his vocation led him. He viewed the advent of postmodernity as another immense challenge; one, however, which would need to be the responsibility of another generation of thinkers and leaders who had the prophetic insight to read the signs of the times and the courage to declare the good news that in Jesus Christ:

'...God has crowned all his mighty acts by a supreme act in which sin and death were disarmed and all the nations were invited to become part of the people of the God of Abraham ... All the

nations, in other words, were invited to find the clue to the puzzle of human life not in the eternal truths of the philosophers but in the story told in the Bible.' (ibid., p67)

When the gospel is regarded as the clue provided by the Creator to the meaning of the whole created process, it generates a proper universalism. It is not good news for the privileged few, the elite or the recipients of some special *gnosis* (knowledge). And yet postmodernity is in danger of saying precisely that, namely that good news is simply a function of the individual's social construction of reality. The deconstruction of modernity by the exponents of postmodernity presently leads us towards greater fragmentation and uncertainty. We are in need of a vision of reality which can celebrate a proper diversity and pluralism without discarding the search for the truth which alone can set us free. Such a vision is offered to us both at the beginning and at the end of the story the Bible recounts.

