

# Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution to the Theology of Mission

by *Wilbert R Shenk*



*Lesslie Newbigin has been one of the decisive influences on the theology of mission in the twentieth century. Not only did he live a long and full life but he continued to speak and write right up to the end. His writings touching on mission theology and practice span six decades. In this appreciation of Newbigin's contribution, I want to note the characteristics that distinguish his work and assess the impact of his thought.*

A fitting starting point is the formative experience he records in his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda* (1993 2nd edn). In 1928 he entered Cambridge an agnostic with regard to religion; but during his first year at university the example of an older student challenged him to consider the Christian faith. The following summer, at the age of nineteen, he joined a Quaker service centre in South Wales that provided recreational services to unemployed miners. The coal-mining industry was depressed and the situation bleak and hopeless. One night, as he lay in bed overwhelmed with concern for these men, he saw a vision of the cross (p.11) touching, as it were, heaven and earth. The cross embraced the whole world and the whole of life. This conversion experience left an indelible imprint on him, furnishing the point from which Newbigin would thereafter take his bearings. The cross as "clue" became a central motif for his life. Furthermore, his relationship with God was intimate and vivid, nurtured by continual communion. He was God's partisan.

Newbigin was highly disciplined. He mastered the basics of whatever he was studying and prepared thoroughly for each assignment. When he arrived in India in 1936 he immediately set out to attain proficiency in Tamil,

a language non-native speakers find difficult to master. Next he deepened his understanding of the culture and religion of India by spending many hours with the Ramakrishna Mission reading alternately the Svetasvara Upanishad and John's Gospel in the original languages. This attitude of intellectual fearlessness enabled him to engage in dialogue with a range of viewpoints regardless of whether or not he found them congenial.

By force of personality and giftedness, Newbigin early emerged as a missionary statesman and ecumenical leader. His views were never parochial and yet he remained rooted in the local – be that the rural villages of Tamilnadu, urban Madras or inner-city Winson Green in Birmingham. He modelled what it means to contextualise Christian witness by immersing oneself in the language and culture of a particular people. Rather than narrowing or limiting one's view, true contextualisation will extend one's horizon.

Lesslie Newbigin was a frontline thinker because of an uncommon ability to sense the emerging issue that must be addressed at that moment. This is not to be confused with the pursuit of fads. He had an aversion to fads. What drew his attention was those issues that impinged on

the future of the church and its obedience in mission: the nature of the church in relation to unity and mission, the relevance of the Trinity, the gospel and the religions, the proper meaning of contextualisation, conversion, pluralism, Christian witness in a culture that has rejected Christendom. Time and again Newbigin led the way in introducing an issue that would become a dominant theme in the ensuing years.

Newbigin's mode of discourse was theological even though he consistently disclaimed any pretension to being a professional theologian. In the preface to one of his most widely read books, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), he wrote: "I can make no claim either to originality or to scholarship. I am a pastor and preacher." Virtually everything Newbigin wrote was 'on assignment', that is, in response to a request to speak or write for a particular occasion. He found no time for leisurely and detached reflection. He spoke and wrote 'on the run.' This gave his thought an immediacy not characteristic of the academy so that some academics felt compelled to point out that he was not one of them; yet his thought commanded attention because of its profundity, vigour and challenge.

Because he remained intensely engaged in both church

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and world Lesslie Newbigin devoted himself to reflecting on the life of faith as it intersected with that of the world; he was impatient with ‘airy-fairy’ or detached scholarship that flaunted its objectivity. (He could be devastating in exposing the pretensions of the latter.) His vocation was to be one of the seminal frontline thinkers of the twentieth century. He was read with appreciation by a vast number of lay people while his books have regularly appeared on the reading lists of numerous divinity schools. Rather than a systematic scholar attempting to provide a comprehensive account, he is best characterised as a strategic thinker.

## Contribution to theology and practice of mission

Lesslie Newbigin was wholly committed to God’s mission of the redemption of the world. He was equally committed to the unity of the church. At the centre of both stood Jesus Christ. His forceful commitment to Christ-centred mission and Christ-centred ecumenism gave his witness a coherence that leapt over the usual ecclesiastical and theological lines. Conventional theological labels were never adequate to describe him.

The following passage from *The Household of God* (1953), and frequently repeated, serves as something of a programmatic statement of Newbigin’s theological vision:

“It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community. He committed the entire work of salvation to that community. It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought – and is seeking – to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second.” (p.20)

Here Newbigin emphasises that the starting point is God’s initiative in Jesus Christ, the calling on the church to be the visible and witnessing community of the

gospel, and the essential structure that of an unfolding narrative rather than an institutional system.

The categories of theology and missiology are almost wholly irrelevant. Newbigin’s theology is thoroughly missiological and his missiology is theological. The wellspring of his thought was his vision of the cross that perforce thrusts the church into missionary witness; and for him action must continually be tested against the norm of the gospel, the centre of which was the cross.

I want to examine Lesslie Newbigin’s contribution in terms of three dimensions: missionary theologian, contextual theologian, and strategic theologian.

## Missionary theologian

On almost every page of the Newbigin writings, one encounters the mind and heart of the missionary theologian at work. In the William Belden Noble Lectures for 1958 at Harvard University, Newbigin offered a rejoinder to one of Harvard’s most eminent philosophers in the twentieth century, William Ernest Hocking, who two years earlier had published a book, *The Coming World Civilisation*. In the 1930s Hocking had presided over the Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry that produced the multi-volume report *Re-Thinking Missions* (1932) and stirred debate about the future of Christian missions. Hocking’s proposed reformulation of missionary principles in the summary volume, which entailed a considerable redefinition of the meaning of mission, contributed to polarisation within the missionary movement.

Newbigin titled his reply to Hocking *A Faith for this One World?* Already at this point Newbigin was wrestling with the issue that would preoccupy him continually in the last two decades of his life: ‘No faith can command a man’s final and absolute allegiance, that is to say no faith can be a man’s real religion, if he knows that it is only true for certain places and certain people. In a world which knows that there is only one physics and one mathematics, religion cannot do less than claim for its affirmations a like universal validity’ (p.30). The modern secular solution in which two mutually unintelligible categories were established – ‘fact’ and ‘val-

ues’ – had to be rejected. The secularist claimed universal validity for scientific fact but allowed only for personal preference where values were concerned. In making his critique, Newbigin considered the proposals for a universal religious framework for humankind put forward by Indian philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, British historian Arnold Toynbee, and Hocking. It is the latter that concerns us here.

In his quest for a basis for a universal civilisation, Hocking argued that Christianity alone offered such a foundation provided its offensive parochialisms and doctrinal particularisms were stripped away. Newbigin queried Hocking’s proposals at three crucial points: Hocking’s view of faith, the meaning of Jesus Christ, and the relationship between faith and history.

(1) The biblical view of faith is radically different from that of Hocking. For the latter, faith is ‘an individual experience of timeless reality,’ a view that echoes Radhakrishnan’s. In the Bible the living God takes the initiative in creating a new social reality. According to the biblical account, the eternal emphatically has a history, however shocking it may be to the philosopher. Hocking speaks abstractly of One who is Love but this One never engages history.

(2) Hocking is diffident about Jesus Christ, preferring to interpret the Christ in relation to some universal religious spirit. He suggests that Christian faith is of a piece with the faith by which all people live. Hocking cited the words from John’s Gospel: ‘The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world’ (1:9a NEB). Newbigin pointed to the logical fallacy on which Hocking’s argument turns. Hocking bases his reasoning on personal religious experience whereas the Johannine passage insists that this light is ‘present where man is present, not wherever *religion* is present.’ In this and numerous other passages, Newbigin warns of the danger of putting confidence in religion. Biblical faith arises from God’s initiative in history, encountering us in our world, dying at the hands of sinful humans and in the resurrection gaining victory over the power of death. Biblical faith depends on what Newbigin repeatedly refers to as ‘the total fact of Christ.’



(3) The third criticism of Hocking has to do with the way the philosopher argues for a necessary link between history and religion but fails to base this on the Incarnation. Christians believe, insists Newbigin, 'that at one point in human history the universal and the concrete historical completely coincided, that the Man Jesus of Nazareth was the incarnate Word of God, that in his works and words the perfect will of God was done without defect or remainder.' The Christian gospel depends on this 'total fact of Christ.' Hocking fails to take this seriously, opting instead for a universal mystical experience available to humankind but without any specific point of reference. The gospel insists that God acted decisively in Jesus Christ to reveal the meaning of divine love and salvation.

In the end, Newbigin's reply to Hocking is that the only viable basis for the 'civilisation in the singular' he advocates is to be found in the missionary proclamation of God's revelation in Jesus Christ by which a new humanity is being called into being. In coming years Newbigin would develop his theology of mission further by placing it in a trinitarian framework and thinking through issues of conversion and contextualisation. But its foundation remained 'the total fact of Christ'.

### Contextual theologian

A cursory reading of the Newbigin writings might suggest a fair amount of repetition. He early developed a characteristic style of discourse that persists throughout. Certain themes recur over the decades. The theological framework remains securely in place. All this must be granted. I want to suggest, however, that what makes Newbigin consistently compelling is his keen sense of context and his ability to identify with his audience. He had the ability to articulate what for others remained only subliminal until he expressed it for them.

Lesslie Newbigin began his missionary service in India in 1936. The West was in turmoil, with intimations of another world war. Movements for political independence in the Asian and African colonies constantly reminded the European colonial powers that the present order could not last indefinitely. Missionary leaders were aware that the so-called younger churches were restive under continued mission control.

Newbigin begins the 1952 Kerr Lectures – later published as *The Household of God* – with a discussion of the breakdown of Christendom and its significance for ecclesiology. Christendom means 'the synthesis between the

Gospel and the culture of the western part of the European peninsula of Asia' which had developed over a long period. Christianity was so at home in European culture that it had become the folk religion and Western ecclesiology had developed in this insular context: it was non-missionary and focused on conflicts between various Christian groups rather than any vision of the church in relation to the pagan world. The break-up of this historical reality, starting in the seventeenth century, coincided with the movement to send Christian missions from the West to other continents. Naturally, these missions took with them the only understanding of the church they knew, the Christendom model. Thus, both in the historical heartland of Christendom as well as in other parts of the world where Western missions had established churches based on this Christendom ecclesiology, ecclesiology was an urgent concern.

Comparing *The Household of God* with *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, written thirty-six years apart, one notes an underlying coherence in theme and structure. Both books model sensitivity to the socio-historical context in which it is set that characterises a vital theology. In 1952 Newbigin is a Western missionary living in the non-Western

world trying to address both worlds; by 1988 his outlook has undergone a radical change. Now he is looking at his homeland with critical concern, even alarm. Retiring from service in India in 1974, he attempted to ‘go home’ but discovered that the Great Britain he once knew was no more. Instead it had become a disconcerting, even disturbing environment. What some artists and philosophers were describing as the ‘decline of the West’ and ‘the end of Christendom’ in the pre-World War II era, had now become reality. A palpable existential hopelessness had settled over Western society. The bankruptcy of the Christendom ecclesiology weighed heavily on him. It is no surprise that the chapter in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* that attracts the greatest reader response is ‘The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel’, chapter 18. The malaise widely felt among Western Christians is generally attributed to forms of church life that do not support Christian discipleship and witness in modern culture. The diagnosis Newbigin offered in 1952 has, if anything, become even more compelling.

### Strategic theologian

In 1981 Newbigin was asked by the British Council of Churches to write an aide-memoire that would guide the council in responding to the concern for Christian witness in modern British society. The result was a small book, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (1983). This, of course, set the course for the rest of his life as it became his consuming passion: so to renew the church in the West that it would again bring the witness of Christian revelation to bear on the whole of life, but do so without reverting to ‘Constantinian’ forms and assumptions. Newbigin deployed insights from philosophy, history, sociology, and science to create a compelling analysis of the present situation, but his framework was theological and missiological. From this point on Newbigin was not only engaging a particular context but was continually asking the question of strategy: how can the church respond faithfully in this situation?

### Future agenda: the challenges ahead

It is entirely characteristic that Lesslie Newbigin titled his autobiography *Unfinished Agenda*. He lived in the present for the future. He had a strong sense of an eschatology that gave one nerve to face the present knowing that the victory was assuredly in God’s hands. What guidance with regard to the future has Newbigin left us?

Firstly, we are being called to affirm that the cross provides the clue to the human predicament. The gospel tells us the story of what God has done to redeem the whole creation from bondage to sin, decay and death. At the centre of that story stands the cross representing that moment when God in Jesus Christ intervened decisively ‘for us and our salvation’. No part of human existence is beyond the scope of God’s salvation. God’s compassion extends to the whole of creation. Yet Christian history is filled with examples of ways the gospel of the cross has been denied or reduced to fit the prevailing plausibility structure. Whenever this happens, the power and impact of the gospel is diminished. In modern culture a fundamental division was introduced in the seventeenth century between ‘fact’ – empirically verifiable according to scientific laws – and ‘value’ – subjective, personal, private. Only objective ‘facts’ could be regarded as universally valid and authoritative. Religion was classed as a ‘value’. The gospel of the cross not only was scandalous but entirely out of place in the public sphere. But if the church is to have a witness, it will have to reclaim ‘the total fact of Christ’, as Newbigin frequently put it, and not a truncated version tailored to modern sensibilities. This means that the church needs to learn once more to indwell the biblical narrative so that its own life, witness, and worship are shaped by that narrative rather than secular myth.

Secondly, we are being called to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose. In *The Household of God* Newbigin pointed to the fatal dichotomy that marks Christendom ecclesiology: church and mission.

Mission is often treated as a stepchild or, even worse, in some cases an orphan. That is to say, traditional ecclesiology has had no place for mission. Yet the church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be a sign of God’s reign and the means of witnessing to that reign throughout the world. The church that refuses to accept its missionary purpose is a deformed church.

Thirdly, we are being called to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose in relation to modern Western culture. While it is essential that we press to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose, the next step is to work out that fundamental missional ecclesiology in relation to modern Western culture. And this is admittedly a challenging undertaking. Modern Western culture with its roots in Christendom manifests deep antagonism towards religious faith. It views itself as being post-Christendom, even post-religious. Such attitudes and habits of thought are deeply held. The task facing the church in the West is retrieving the integrity of its identity as a missionary presence in society. This will entail learning to understand this culture from a missionary perspective – its controlling myths and plausibility structure – and discerning the relevance of the fullness of the gospel in this culture.

*“So the logic of mission is this: The true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be private opinion. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part.”*

*(The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, SPCK, p. 125.)*