

Renewing Faith during the Postmodern Transition

by *George R. Hunsberger*

George Hunsberger identifies the resources Lesslie Newbigin bequeathed to the churches in the USA.

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The publication in 1986 of Lesslie Newbigin's book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, loosed a new wave of his influence among pastoral leaders in the USA. For decades, his influence had already moulded the way people approached an important range of issues. His missionary ecclesiology (*The Household of God*) and his insistence on the pursuit of its visible unity (*Is Christ Divided?*) had taught us how to think about the Church. He had led us to take proper note of the theological underpinnings for the mission of the Church (*The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission, The Open Secret, Mission in Christ's Way*). He had engaged the relationship of Christian faith with the variety of other religious faiths in the world (*A Faith for This One World?*, *The Finality of Christ*). He had displayed in it all a deeply pastoral style, whether in the villages of India or the bureaucratic halls of Europe (*A South India Diary, The Good Shepherd*). We looked over his shoulder as he did the work of an evangelist among children of the traditions of the West as well as the East (*Honest Religion for Secular Man*, and the lesser known but very significant *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary*).

But now he had turned his gaze in a new direction. It was not divorced from the issues he

had dealt with for years, so productively for so many people. In fact, it was a specific application of that missionary angle of vision he had so clearly developed, and now turned upon the Western culture which was his own culture of origin and his home in retirement.

What he asked seemed impertinent to some, incomprehensible to many, but liberating to others. He wondered what a genuine missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture would be like if the encounter were to take its clue from centuries of missionary experience, from the recently recovered sense of the Church's essential missionary identity, and from the insights of companion churches around the globe which were the fruit of the missionary approach of Western churches. Whatever comfortable situations the churches in the West had once enjoyed in their Christianised societies had now passed, and the time was more than ripe for the question. With *Foolishness to the Greeks* and numerous other books, articles and addresses he has made this the orienting issue for a generation of emerging leadership in churches in the USA and other Western societies.

This alone has made him an indispensable resource for pastoral leadership in general and the

practice of preaching in particular. Under this vision, you can no longer preach in the same way. Preaching sermons for a church membership and general public that comes to church to be nourished in the moral and spiritual character assumed to be the norms of a Christian society is no longer adequate. In a mission context, and in a missional Church, the requirements for the biblical nourishment of the community and the clear articulation of liberating news in multiple spheres of human living are not just raised to a new level, they require preaching to be something more. In an atmosphere where it is no longer true that all good people are supposed to believe (that is, they ought to, and it may be presumed that deep down they already do), preaching can bolster little of what is socially expected. Instead it invites, welcomes and enables people to believe things that are at odds with the going versions of reality. It participates in the inner dialogue between the gospel and the assumptions of one's own culture and cultivates a community for whom continuing conversion is the habitual approach. It is for the art of that sort of preaching that Newbigin provides essential resources for the preacher.

In reflections on the significance of Newbigin's work just after his death in January 1998, I found myself referring to him as an "apostle of faith and witness." I never spent time with Bishop Newbigin when he was not working hard to cultivate for the Church a sense of its authority to preach the gospel and its authority to believe that it is true. In deep response to the crisis of missional nerve in the churches of the West, which had become ultimately a crisis of faith, he seemed to have been called to be pastor to us all. That pastoral quality was much in evidence from the beginning of his ministry as a bishop in the Church of South India and throughout his years in India. But he pastored us in the churches of the West no less. He gave us ways to believe, whether under the privatising effects of modernity or the pluralist social arrangements of postmodernity. In our progress-and-success culture, he helped us see that death finally mocks all our greatest achievements and our only hope lies not in the perma-

nence of our accomplishments but in the risen Christ.

In the latter years of his life, it was Newbigin's purpose to open Western culture to a missionary dialogue with the gospel. In the course of that effort, he was essentially cultivating 'ways of Christ' for people living in the midst of the cultural transition from modern worldviews to post-modern and in what had already become a post-Christian social era. His cultivation of ways of believing, of witnessing, of being community and of living in hope anticipates the daily and weekly preoccupations of any preacher or minister sensitive to the demands of the present day. For these crucial elements of a preacher's vocation today, important resources are to be found in Newbigin's approach.



Ways of Belief

When Christians feel intimidated about telling other people the Christian message, it is not just a matter of believing that people will not like being told that Christianity is true and that it calls other claims to truth into question. It goes much deeper, to the ability to believe the message themselves in a world that tells them in one way or another that a religious conviction cannot lay claim to be the truth in any factual sense and must be held only as a private opinion. The strict dichotomy that grew up under Enlightenment rationality between knowable public fact and chosen private opinion already pushed in this direction. The emerging post-modern sense that all knowing is from some particular perspective further relativised all claims to truth and questioned such claims as exertions of the will to power.

Christians imagining any form of direct public assertion of the Christian message do not have to be told that it will meet with a cloud of questions about its legitimacy. Besides pushing them toward silence, the atmosphere erodes the strength of their own inner conviction that the Bible's account of things can be taken to be a valid option for construing the world.

Newbigin always wrestled with such matters himself, and the way he found pathways through the intimidating terrain maps out a route for others. His early theological training under John Oman of Cambridge had taught him the importance of recognising the personhood of God, and that God's personal character is displayed by the freedom to act, and to choose the time and place of such action. God can be known in the ways that any person can be known, by what that person reveals through the choices they make and actions they take. This sense of the necessity of revelation as the way to know God had come to be viewed by many, under the imprint of the Enlightenment's confidence in autonomous human reason, as a less sure form of knowledge than that gained through the scientific method and the certainty of tracing cause and effect. What Newbigin ultimately discerned, helped immeasurably by the work of Michael Polanyi, was that science was as much a tradition, borne by a community and rooted in certain beliefs, as is any religious tradition, including that of the Church. Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* gave clarity to Newbigin's sense that knowing what the gospel announces and knowing what science detects are not the fundamentally different sorts of knowing that the culture tends to assume. In fact, Newbigin shows that Christian faith is not irrational but represents a wider rationality than that posited by the norms of scientific discovery, because the gospel opens the question of purpose which scientific knowing set aside in favour of cause and effect.

Newbigin's use of Polanyi's approach, most developed in the first five chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, provides an apologetic approach to undergird the faith of believing

people, something that is essential for the presence of confident witness. I have watched as students have read the sixty-five pages of those chapters and found themselves liberated to believe – to really believe – that this good news is true and can be told with assurance. The preacher today is in the business of securing ways for people to see how they can believe. What I have called elsewhere Newbigin’s ‘postmodern apologetic’ is a helpful frame of reference for the preacher’s work. It is essential for a context where Christian faith is no longer merely what polite citizens are expected to believe.

Ways of Witness

Postmodern people have a way of using qualifying phrases that show a sensitivity to the opinions of others. Affirmations are prefaced by phrases like ‘It seems to me,’ or ‘I believe that...,’ or ‘I have found this to be true for me’. The language is generous and tolerant. But somewhere in it lurks the potential that all notions are held as true only ‘for me,’ with little or nothing presumed to be true also for others. Newbigin helps us see that even within the generous tolerance of humility about the provisional character of our knowing there is nonetheless the possibility – for all postmodern people on all sorts of issues – to hold some things with universal intent, that is, as being true for everyone, however partial may be our grasp of it. As Christian believers read the gospel they find that it is surely in this sense that the New Testament expects to be believed. It announces with firm conviction that this good news is for and about the whole world, not just a particular few. Jesus’ prophetic utterance, ‘You shall be my witnesses’ both energises them with a sense of their calling and haunts them with the dilemmas it causes in the midst of the postmodern mood. It is not hard to see how deliberate, direct Christian witness rubs against the sensibilities of a world living on the rump of several centuries of Western colonialism. What right do Christians have to pretend to be the bearers of a message everyone should believe?

It is to this matter of ‘the

duty and authority of the Church to preach the gospel’ that Newbigin has constantly addressed himself in an attempt to build confident Christian witness. What is most distinctive about his rationale for witness in the contemporary world is that it is grounded in particularity, not undone by it. Most take the particularity of the Christian Church and its historic cultural location primarily in the West to be the problem that thwarts any possibility of universal witness (whether that means among all peoples of the world or all people in our own locale). If only some point of reference in a universally validated gospel could be found, it is supposed, then witness might rest on that ground. Some seek this under the rubric of objective truth, others in universally found religious principles. In either case, the particularity of the Church is suspect and believed to be an obstacle to witness.

But not so for Newbigin. The rationale for witness, for the mission of the Church and thus its very existence, does not lie in some universal principle distilled out from the particularity of Christian communities; it is rooted precisely in their particularity! He finds it an unworkable myth that we can only witness forthrightly if we somehow rise above and beyond particularised belief to a shared, universal knowledge. That at any rate is impossible. But what is more important still for Newbigin is that he finds in the biblical rationale for witness the notion that a true particular faith is exactly where the universal scope of witness finds its grounding.

Newbigin shows this in what he calls the ‘logic of election’. In his understanding of the ‘missionary significance of the biblical doctrine of election’ we find a thread that runs through his major work on mission theology, *The Open Secret*, and in fact throughout the range of his writings. By the term *election* Newbigin refers to God’s choice of Israel to be God’s particular people, to be blessed by God and to be a blessing to the nations, and to God’s choice of the incipient Church – the earliest circle of disciples – to be witnesses to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. In both cases, the choice of the nation and the Church is the choice of a particular community to be the

means by which people of other particularities will hear and see the witness. In the very act of witness from one particularity to another, and in the birth of faith in persons and communities to whom the witness is born, the healing reconciliation about which the gospel speaks occurs. In the end, so declares Paul in Romans 9–11, both the Jew and the Greek depend on the witness of the ‘other’ from whom the gospel is received. God’s method of choosing particular witnesses is congruent with the social nature of the gospel which envisions the healing of the nations.

The consequence of such a rationale for the Church’s mission of witness is an attitude of humility. Any missionary who recognises this as the source of authority for commending the gospel with universal intent will do so knowing that the particularity of the missionary Church’s faith must be worn with confidence but not assumed to be absolute or final. The conviction with which the gospel is told leads to a humble form of missionary dialogue with the ways that a new person or community or culture grasps and exhibits the gospel in response to the Spirit.

Preaching that approaches its task in this way will model the sense that in any preaching – in sermon, conversation, demonstration or deed the calling of the Church is to give the gospel away and to expect wonderful new flowerings of its expression in the message’s recipients. Confident witness by the whole community is best nourished when that is the case.

Ways of Community

If Newbigin has been an apostle of faith and witness, he has always been an apostle on behalf of the Church. It is the Church’s faith and the Church’s witness that he is concerned to nourish. Christian existence is fundamentally corporate and Christian calling is a corporately shared calling. While not denying the individuality of each person’s experience of Christ, he warns against the individualism of belief and identity that so strongly shapes Western forms of Christian life and undermines the corporate nature of God’s salvation. For Newbigin, the Church is the chosen witness

that bears in word and deed the witness of the Spirit.

This theme has always been a strong one in Newbigin's thought. He presents it with special relevance in his most recent writings and thus helps to form a postmodern, post-Christendom way of understanding the very existence of the Church as a community of Christ and the character of its life together as critical features of its whole witness to Christ and the reign of God he announced. He so often said that the Church is the 'sign, foretaste and instrument' of the reign of God. It is the firstfruits of the new creation in the Spirit.

His stress in later years on understanding the congregation to be a 'hermeneutic of the gospel' forms an important answer to another of the authority questions postmodern people ask: 'Why the Church?' By what authority, and on what ground, is there a rationale for the Church to exist at all? The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message. The presence of the Christian community functions as a hermeneutical key, an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colours of common life. The Christian congregation offers itself to be a community within which one can grow into faith in the gospel, put on the garb of its followers and join oneself to the distinctive practices that mark the community as God's own people.

This is refreshing good news in light of the identity crisis which has seized so many churches living within a secular culture. In an earlier day, it could be assumed what a church is for. It served the chaplaincy needs of a Christianised civic order. But that day has faded. Churches can still seem to thrive by providing the public with the religious goods and services it seeks. But even in that role the Church is uneasy. What are we for, when stripped of those things that used to give us meaning?

Both the content of what is preached and the manner in which preaching addresses the Christian community week after week are crucial for the recovery of the Church's identity. Preaching first has to know that it shapes

communal identity, for good or for ill. Then it has to wrestle to find the sense of identity that has faithful roots in the gospel and recreates the Church's reason to exist in its present circumstances. Finally, it has to discover what style of preaching cultivates such identity. For all these, the vision Newbigin has for the Church's vocation is an invaluable resource.

Ways of Hope

Another aspect of the humility which Newbigin both espouses and models lies in his sense that in the final analysis death mocks all our achievements. Hope for the future must rather be found in the distinctive way the Christian faith is rooted in history. The gospel comes in the form of a narrative that renders accessible to us the character, actions and purposes of God. The particular actions of God told in the narrative are world news, not just news for the religion page. The narrative claims that no less than the meaning of the world's life is revealed in the story whose centre is Jesus Christ. His heralding of the coming reign of God shows the meaning of the story by showing its end!

Hope is not convincingly cultivated in a congregation by preaching that hope resides in the success of our efforts and the height of our achievements. Biblical visions of hope are not lodged in the actions of clever entrepreneurs but in the actions of God against all odds. The coming reign of God that is hoped for is not portrayed in the Bible as the cumulative effect of human efforts but as God's gracious gift. Faithful preaching invites us to receive it and enter it, not try to build it.

There are deep pastoral implications if we see things this way. I remember the first time I personally encountered the impact of Newbigin's vision and the way it nourished me at a time of exhaustion and grief in the work of pastoral ministry. It was in 1980. I had just returned from an intense year of work in Kenya, working among Ugandan refugees from Idi Amin's regime. Back in the USA, a friend commended *The Open Secret* to me and I began to read it.

At about the same time, contact with people in the congregation I had pastored until a year

"And what would it mean if, instead of trying to explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific culture, we tried to explain our culture in terms of the gospel?"

(Foolishness to the Greeks, SPCK, p. 41.)

"For the Christian tradition the supremely authoritative memory is that embodied in the Bible, and the supremely authoritative practices are the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist."

(Truth to Tell, SPCK, p.87.)

and a half before made me aware that serious fracture lines were emerging in the congregation, and its unity and continued existence were threatened. I did not know that before long my worst fears would be realised. A division would leave a fragile remnant behind that would try for several more years to rebuild the community. But eventually it was to end in the dissolution of the congregation.

I came to the place in the book where Newbigin observed that all our greatest achievements are destined to go down into the chasm of death and become part of the rubble of history. Or if they should remain at the time of Christ's return, they will be subject to God's discriminating judgment. Ultimately, he said, our hope lies not in the quality or permanence of our achievements but in Christ who has passed through the chasm of death and come up on the other side in his resurrection. The significance of our work is not in its success or achievement but in its relationship to the risen Lord.

This redirection of hope nourished me in the midst of my fears for the congregation I had been a part of for over five years. A few years later it would console me again when the news of its death overwhelmed me with grief.

The cultivation of hope lodged in Christ – its proper place – is desperately needed in churches and preachers living in today's success-and-achievement world. Newbigin's help nourishes the kind of hope that overcomes the world's despair and cancels the demands for performance as the basis for self-worth. It fashions preachers and pastoral leaders whose confidence is as deep as the resurrection of Christ is sure.