

**LIBERATING THE GOSPEL FROM ITS MODERN CAGE:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S GOSPEL  
AND MODERN CULTURE PROJECT**

*Missionalia*, Vol. 30, No. 3, November 2002, pp. 360-375.

*Michael W. Goheen*

A number of historically significant contributions to the world church have characterized the life of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, securing him an important place in twentieth-century church history. Perhaps the most noteworthy historical accomplishment is his role as catalyst in challenging missiologists and many others Christians in the West and beyond to consider the central importance of mission to modern western culture. Newbigin spent almost forty years in India as a missionary. Upon his return to Britain in 1974 he found a church that had accommodated itself to its culture and thereby surrendered its missionary identity and calling. He devoted the remainder of his life to fostering a missionary encounter between the church and modern western culture. Newbigin produced more than half of his writings after his return to Britain and the majority of that literature engaged the subject of mission in modern culture.

In his writings, Newbigin consistently maintains that the most urgent task facing the global church is a missionary encounter with modern culture. While this is of fundamental importance to the church in the West which has been badly battered by its confrontation with modernity, it is also significant for the church in every part of the world. This is because modern western culture exerts tremendous worldwide influence; globalization describes a process in which the expanding urban peoples of the earth are being drawn into a single global network that share the foundational assumptions and social institutions of modern culture. But beyond its widespread influence, it is the danger modernity poses to the Christian faith that makes this missionary encounter so crucial. Although modern culture has been shaped by the gospel to some degree, it has rejected Christianity as a public doctrine and has developed powerful defences against the thrust of the gospel. Everywhere western culture has penetrated 'the acids of modernity' have been powerful enough to dissolve ancient structures of culture and religious belief (Newbigin1991a:23; 1997:98-99). "It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture" (Newbigin1986:3).

Newbigin believed that two essential elements of a missionary approach to modernity were an examination and analysis of the assumptions that underlie the public life of western culture and a clarification of the authority of the gospel. This paper offers an interpretation of Newbigin's own contribution to that task.

## **The Normal Posture of the Church: A Missionary Encounter**

According to Newbigin, the normal posture for a faithful church in any culture is that of a missionary encounter. In Jesus Christ God has acted decisively and definitively to reveal and effect the divine purpose and goal for all cosmic history. The centre of the gospel is the cross; at the cross God made known and accomplished the salvation of the cosmos. If God has done this, then it is true and universally valid for all humankind; it must be communicated to all the world. How is it possible, Newbigin asks, for people to believe that the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? He answers: "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it" (Newbigin1989:227). During his ministry, Jesus formed a community to bear this gospel to the world. When the gospel is faithfully embodied by this community, a missionary encounter occurs between the gospel that the church bears and the fundamental beliefs and reigning public doctrine that shapes the society in which the church lives. The witness of the church to the comprehensive demand of the gospel calls the inhabitants of the dominant culture to conversion, to the different way of life offered by the church in the gospel. Insofar as the church is faithful to the gospel, then, there will be three aspects to this missionary encounter. First, the foundational beliefs shared by a cultural community will be challenged. A missionary encounter requires the church to live fully in the Biblical story and to challenge the reigning idolatrous assumptions of culture. The culture must be understood and encountered in light of the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to be absorbed into the formative religious assumptions of the culture. Only in this way is the culture challenged at its roots. Second, the church will offer the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its culture. It will embody in its life the coming kingdom of God. That life will contrast with the life of those within the cultural community. Finally, there will be a call for radical conversion, an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel. As Newbigin expresses it, the church that embodies the gospel

. . . must necessarily clash with contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole 'fiduciary framework' within which our culture operates. It must call unequivocally for radical conversion, a conversion of the mind so that things are seen differently, and a conversion of the will so that things are done differently. It must decline altogether the futile attempt to commend the biblical vision of how things are by seeking to adjust it to the assumptions of our culture (Newbigin1983:53).

The problem of the church in modern culture is that it has for so long learned to peacefully co-exist with post-Enlightenment culture that it is hard for the church to recover the posture of a

missionary encounter with its culture. The church in the West has uncritically accepted the foundational faith commitments of its culture and has been absorbed without posing any kind of radical challenge to those assumptions. Western Christianity is “an advanced case of syncretism” (Newbigin 1983:23).

### **Liberating the Western Church for a Missionary Encounter**

Martin Luther has said somewhere that the gospel is like a caged lion; it does not need to be defended, just released. For Newbigin, this would be an ecclesiological statement since the church embodies the gospel. The barred cage that forms the prison for the gospel in contemporary western culture is the syncretistic accommodation of the gospel to the fact-value dichotomy. The liberation of the gospel can only occur as the church’s embodiment of the gospel is released from the idolatry of the reigning public doctrine of modern culture. Newbigin’s ‘mission to modern culture’ project can be interpreted as an attempt to liberate the church from its syncretistic accommodation and to recover its missionary posture. For this liberation and recovery three tasks are important: historical, epistemological, and theological.

It is important to insist that Newbigin approached all of these tasks *as a missionary*. Newbigin’s writing on the topic of gospel and western culture is broad: historical, philosophical, theological, and missiological. Yet all of these disciplines serve his missiological purpose to liberate the gospel by uncovering the idolatrous root of western culture that has imprisoned the gospel and by recovering a Biblically faithful rendering of the gospel. Newbigin is not in the first place an apologist or philosopher or even a theologian. Rather he approaches this task as a missionary who examines the culture to enable a faithful communication of the gospel. In so doing he avails himself of the disciplines of intellectual history, history and philosophy of science, epistemology, biblical studies, sociology of knowledge, and theology. All serve his missionary intention.

#### *The Historical Task: A Missiological Analysis of Western Culture*

A missionary who shoulders the responsibility of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel is well-advised to make a careful study of the culture to which he or she is going (Newbigin 1994:100; cf., Hendrick 1993:64-65). An analysis of the historical development of the worldview that shapes the culture offers a helpful way of analysis. Newbigin writes: “One way to gain a perspective on our culture is to look at it from the angle of history. European history was not always so. . . . There was a time when the Gospel was regarded as part of public truth. . . . How did it come about that Christianity ceased to be part of public truth and became a matter of private opinion?” (Newbigin 1990:2). When surveying Newbigin’s writings on the topic of gospel and modern culture, one is struck by the frequency of analyses that examine the historical

roots of the missionary crisis. An historical analysis enables the church to see how the plausibility structure which appears to be simply the way things are is, in fact, a social construction that has been developed throughout the centuries of western history. This kind of historical analysis equips the church for its missionary encounter by showing “that the axioms and assumptions of our modern culture are not simply an objective account of ‘how things are’, but are themselves questionable and vulnerable” (Newbigin 1984:16). The belief that the gospel is only a private opinion that cannot attain to the status of truth is not the way things are; such an understanding has not always been the case. There is a history wherein one belief system replaced another.

To expose the vulnerability of the unexamined assumptions which appear so obvious to a person under the spell of modernity requires the telling of the story from a missiological standpoint. An African proverb states ‘until lions have their historians the hunter will always be the hero of the story.’ Newbigin is aware that any telling of the story involves a commitment to some ‘hero’ whereby the facts of history are selected and interpreted. Most western histories assume the ‘hero’ of autonomous reason disciplined by the scientific method translated into technology and a rationally organized society. Newbigin’s retelling of the story, motivated by missionary concern, demonstrates the way that autonomous reason has replaced the gospel as the light of the world.

There are various themes that provide the clue for selection of data in Newbigin’s historical narratives. Yet one motif is found repeatedly: it was the emergence of the humanist-rationalist tradition in the Renaissance which came to maturity in the Enlightenment to occupy the place of public doctrine in the West that has marginalized the gospel to the private realm.

Western culture is the product of two incompatible historical streams: classical rationalistic humanism and the Biblical story (Newbigin 1989:1-3; 1995b:3). The difference between the Greek and Hebrew views of the world is the location of reliable truth. In the Bible, truth is located in a story of God’s deeds in history centred in Jesus Christ, while classical thought finds truth in timeless ideas that can be accessed by autonomous reason. Newbigin contrasts Augustine and Descartes in the way that they related the two traditions.

Augustine’s position is the culmination of years of struggle in the early church wherein the gospel was faithfully contextualized providing a new *arche* for understanding and living in the world. Augustine’s slogan *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to know) rightly placed priority on belief within which understanding can take place. This slogan forged a synthesis that endured for a thousand years in which “the biblical story was to have the greater part in shaping the thought of Europe” (Newbigin 1995b:9). In Augustine’s thought, the insights of the classical-rationalist tradition were understood within the context of a faith commitment to the gospel.

While the Biblical tradition provided the framework within which the classical tradition found

a subordinate place during the medieval period on the basis of Augustine's synthesis, the roles of these two traditions are reversed in the modern period. Newbigin highlights the work of four men in engineering this shift: Rene Descartes, John Locke, Francis Bacon, and Isaac Newton. Descartes is the primary villain in Newbigin's telling of the western story. Descartes divorced the subjective and objective poles in human knowledge and turned Augustine on his head by advocating the priority of doubt over faith in the knowing process. "Doubt, not faith, was to be the path to knowledge. By relentless skepticism, the famous 'critical principle,' every claim to truth was to be put through the critical sieve in which only the indubitable would be retained" (Newbigin 1995b:21). John Locke reinforced this commitment to autonomous reason as the fundamental arbiter of truth by distinguishing between knowing and believing (Newbigin 1994:103). Newbigin follows Michael Polanyi's contrast of Locke and Augustine (Polanyi 1958:266). Augustine brings the critical age of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating a post-critical philosophy; classical reason is understood in the context of the fiduciary structure of the Christian faith. Locke introduces into the English speaking world a new critical age by inverting the relationship between belief and knowledge. The distinction between knowing and believing, with the former occupying the pride of place, is the result of an exchange of traditions: the classical humanist tradition replaces the Christian tradition as the dominant way of understanding and living in the world. Francis Bacon contributed to this shift with his advice to "abjure speculation and collect facts" (Newbigin 1995b:55). Speculation refers to the universals of medieval philosophy: essence, existence, substance, cause, and purpose. However, since the idea of a total empiricism is impossible, Bacon maintained the universal of 'cause.' Bacon's legacy is to reduce the explanation of the world to the cause-effect relationship and reject the concept of purpose as a clue to understanding (Newbigin 1986:24, 34; 1989:36-37). Isaac Newton strengthened the grip of autonomous reason and the classical tradition by his development of a method that seemed to explain the cosmos. Descartes vision of the world seemed to be vindicated (Newbigin 1995b:29).

While Descartes, Locke, Bacon, and Newton gave philosophical articulation to the shift in western culture during this time, the combination of two historical events enabled confidence in autonomous reason to become widespread at the time of the Enlightenment. The first was the remarkable success of science. The scientific method seemed to provide a reliable centre to unite people in the truth. Science could liberate the West from the tyrannies of contentious religion and superstition. The second was the concurrent religious wars. While science appeared to unite people in the truth, the religious wars were stark evidence that religion leads to factions, violence, and bloodshed (Newbigin 1995b:29-30).

This led to the collective conversion of western Europe at the time of the Enlightenment (Newbigin 1984:11-12; 1986:23). This is called the 'age of reason' because mathematical

rationality is enthroned at the centre of European culture as the ultimate arbiter of which truth claims may shape the public life of society. It is precisely this enthronement of sovereign reason that has produced the public fact-value dichotomy that shapes the plausibility structure of western culture.

Newbigin's narration of western history is a story of two different traditions of understanding and living in the world. Both traditions are committed in faith to some light to make sense of the world. The Christian tradition offers the gospel of Jesus Christ as the light of the world while the classical tradition offers autonomous reason disciplined by the scientific method as the light of the world. Augustine is the father of a synthesis that places the classical tradition in the context of the Biblical story. Descartes is the father of a synthesis that places the gospel in the context of the classical tradition.

Newbigin's indictment of the church is that it followed Descartes and thus was unfaithful to the gospel. When autonomous reason, the light of the classical tradition, is the ultimate arbiter of truth, the gospel cannot be propagated as truth but is reduced to the category of values, private opinion, and subjective taste. Timidity incapacitates the church's witness; there is no missionary encounter between ultimate beliefs. Rather one set of beliefs has domesticated another. The question is: "How, in this situation, does one preach the gospel as truth, truth which is not to be domesticated within the assumptions of modern thought but which challenges these assumptions and calls for their revision" (Newbigin1989:5). The need of the hour, if that missionary encounter is to be recovered, is to again acknowledge the gospel as public truth. This begins with the household of God.

If the church is to recover the gospel as public truth and encounter the faith assumptions of modern culture there are two more tasks that are necessary. First, an alternative epistemology must be proposed to the one that shapes western culture and presses the gospel in its mould. Second, the authority of the gospel must be rightly understood and recovered from various dichotomies issuing from western idolatry.

### *The Epistemological Task: An Alternative Theory of Knowledge*

Like a missionary who desires to understand the religious core that lies at the heart of the culture to which he or she is sent, Newbigin's historical narrative uncovers that core. For Newbigin, "the fundamental issue is epistemological: it is the question about how we can come to know the truth, how we can know what is real" (Newbigin1994:104). It would be easy, however, to misunderstand this concern and to classify Newbigin as simply another western apologist or philosopher with an obsession with epistemological questions. Epistemology in western philosophy has been driven by skepticism about the truth. To gain the proper vantage point to Newbigin's forays in epistemology we must approach it from the standpoint of a missionary. His

epistemological reflection is rooted in the recognition that the religious foundations of western culture are epistemological because autonomous reason is the central of idol in modernity with the ascendancy of the classical-rationalist tradition. Newbigin's concern is not first to establish a credible theory of knowledge for its own sake but to encounter and challenge the foundational beliefs of western culture that hold the gospel captive. His task is to liberate the church and the gospel from its captivity to this idol "through a resolute attack on the fundamental problem which is epistemology . . ." (Newbigin 1989:25). This attack is twofold: a challenge to the unquestioned epistemology that lies at the centre of modernity; and the offer of a more truthful model of the way we know the truth.

Newbigin draws on the insights of post-empiricist philosophy and history of science. There are two philosophers Newbigin utilizes to challenge the epistemological assumptions at the core of our culture and to advance an alternative understanding of knowledge: Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre.

Newbigin's primary ally is Michael Polanyi. Polanyi challenges the subject-object dichotomy in science by speaking of personal knowledge. In this phrase Polanyi affirms the personal commitment of the whole person in the process of knowledge. According to Polanyi scientific knowing involves the commitment of a person to the authority of a tradition. If one wants to be a player in the scientific enterprise he or she must submit to the authority of the scientific tradition and internalize its ways. This scientific tradition functions like spectacles or a probe in the hands of a surgeon. One does not attend focally to the probe or spectacles. Rather one looks through the spectacles and attends focally to the object he or she is looking at. The surgeon feels through the probe and focusses his or her attention on that which is being examined. The whole scientific tradition functions like a probe or spectacles that are assumed in the process of scientific work. Polanyi calls this a fiduciary framework: it is a framework of assumptions, practices, and skills that the scientific community trusts when it carries out its work. This fiduciary framework contains a vast amount of 'tacit knowledge' that is transmitted by the scientific tradition and must be trusted if one is to be a participant in this tradition.

There are three elements of this description of science that are important for Newbigin in equipping the church for its missionary encounter. First, autonomous reason is an illusion; reason always works in the context of the authority of some tradition (Newbigin 1989:58). The assumption of reason as a neutral umpire of truth is the result of an uncritical acceptance of the scientific-humanist tradition. Even the most rationally rigorous of the sciences work within the context of a tradition.

Second, this rationality tradition is always socially embodied; the community of scientists work together in carrying forward this tradition and bringing its foundational insights to bear on various situations and experiences. The Enlightenment propagated the illusion that all authority

and tradition must be brought under the searching light of rational criticism to be validated. In fact, what took place was the triumph of one rationality tradition over another. It is not a matter of setting faith and revelation over against critical reason. Rather it is a matter of which tradition is shaping the rational process.

The third element that Newbigin accents in Polanyi's description of science is that the scientific tradition arises when there is an imaginative disclosure or leap that marks the birth of a new vision for scientific discovery. This new insight or imaginative disclosure provides the light for working within the tradition bringing its illumination to bear upon the various data and problems with which it deals. The illuminations or insights of Newton and Einstein, for example, became "the starting point of a tradition of reasoning in which the significance of these disclosures is explored, developed, tested against new experiences, and extended into further areas of thought" (Newbigin 1989:60). Thus this disclosure functions as the light of the tradition in two ways: it is the starting point for the tradition's emergence and it continues to provide illumination in new contexts and situations. This light is not questioned; it is trusted to provide illumination for further understanding.

Polanyi is concerned with how science works; Newbigin's appropriation of these insights is missiological. Newbigin draws an analogy between the scientific tradition and the Christian tradition (Newbigin 1989:52-65). The structures of both are similar. In both cases reason operates in the context of a continuing tradition; the tradition is socially embodied by a community; the tradition arises out of a disclosure which functions as the ultimate light in which the community works and lives; and the tradition continues as that community brings the light of the original disclosure to bear on new contexts and situations.

Lamin Sanneh is uncomfortable with this analogy (Sanneh 1993:166). He believes that Newbigin's Enlightenment roots are clear when he makes a path for Christianity by "turning it into a look-alike surrogate rationality" (Sanneh 1993:167). Yet Sanneh has not taken sufficient account of the differences Newbigin articulates concerning the starting point of the two traditions. While both traditions arise out of original disclosures, they fundamentally differ in two ways. First, while the scientific tradition begins with the original experience "I discovered", the Christian tradition begins with the original experience "God has spoken" (Newbigin 1989:60). The second difference between the two traditions is that the ultimate disclosure in the Christian tradition concerns ultimate questions:

Unlike the scientific tradition . . . this [Christian] tradition is not confined to a limited set of questions about the rational structure of the cosmos. Specifically, unlike science, it concerns itself with questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of things and of human life—questions which modern science eliminates

as a matter of methodology. The models, concepts, and paradigms through which the Christian tradition seeks to understand the world embrace these larger questions. They have the same presupposition about the rationality of the cosmos as the natural sciences do, but it is a *more comprehensive rationality* based on the faith that the author and sustainer of the cosmos has personally revealed his purpose (Newbigin 1989:49; emphasis mine).

These insights from the history and philosophy of science are important for mission in western culture for at least two reasons. The close connection between rationality, tradition, and community exposes the important place of the church in embodying the truth of the gospel. Moreover, a grasp of this epistemology liberates the church to again believe and embody the gospel with confidence. Newbigin challenges the timidity of the western church by showing that the claims of autonomous reason are not simply the way things are; they are an alternative tradition in action. The church is free to decline that way of looking at the world and joyfully and confidently offer an alternative—the gospel as truth.

Newbigin draws out the missionary implications of this epistemology with the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre's description of paradigm shifts or conversion from one tradition to another. MacIntyre addresses the following question: 'If all rationality functions in the context of a socially and linguistically embodied tradition, then what criteria are there to judge between the adequacy of rival traditions?' MacIntyre argues that traditions can be judged according to their adequacy for grasping and coping with the reality of the world that we all face. All traditions are constantly changing in an effort to make sense of the experience that confronts them. Sometimes anomalies arise that challenge the tradition. Often the tradition is flexible and strong enough to incorporate these anomalies into it. At other times these experiences challenge the tradition in a more profound way and the tradition faces a crisis. At this point of crisis adherents of a tradition will search for a rival tradition that can make more sense of these conflicting experiences. If another tradition offers a more adequate way of seeing things, another vision that accounts for the anomalies, there is a paradigm shift or conversion to a new tradition.

This account has significant implications for Newbigin's understanding of a missionary encounter. When there are two rival traditions, the adequacy of a tradition is demonstrated, not by recourse to a neutral adjudicator that stands above both, but by that tradition which is able to make the most sense of the world. If the gospel is true, then its light will make more sense of the world than the limited insights of the cultural community. The mission of the church is to embody the gospel in such a way as to offer an alternative way of understanding and living in the world. This insight is especially important in our day when the modern scientific worldview is collapsing. The church can offer a 'rival tradition' to a cultural community that faces the crisis of

its own tradition that has made sense of the world for centuries.

*The Theological Task: The Gospel as Public Truth*

Lack of confidence in the gospel cripples the missionary church: “Uncertainty cuts at the root of any real missionary witness” (Newbigin 1984:9). This uncertainty comes, not only from a tacit acceptance of a faulty epistemology that lies at the core of western culture, but also from a misunderstanding of Biblical authority: “I think that there is one theological task which we must undertake if we are to recover this kind of confidence in the Gospel for which I am calling. I refer to the urgent need for the development of a coherent and intellectually tenable doctrine of Scriptural authority” (Newbigin 1995a:7). In fact, “one of the central issues involved in a missionary encounter with our culture is the question: How do we appeal to scripture as the source of authority for our mission?” (Newbigin 1984:13). The problem that confronts the western church is that the Bible has been part of the culture for so long that it has accommodated itself to the fundamental assumptions of the culture and appears unable to challenge them. Newbigin asks: “Have we got into a situation where the biblical message has been so thoroughly adapted to fit into our modern western culture that we are unable to hear the radical challenge, the call for radical conversion which it presents in our culture?” (Newbigin 1984:11).

Newbigin speaks of Scripture in the following way: “I would want to speak of the Bible as that body of literature which—primarily but not only in narrative form—renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (Newbigin 1986:59). In this brief statement a number of Newbigin’s convictions about Scripture are clear: the Scriptures are a record of God’s mighty acts; these historical events form a narrative unity; they reveal the character and purpose of God; since it is the purpose *of God* the Bible is public truth or universal history (cf. Goheen 2000:123-127).

This understanding of the Scripture is undermined by the fact-value, public-private dichotomy that lies at the core of modern culture. When scientific rationality is enthroned as the final arbiter of truth, all truth claims must appear before that judge. Those claims which are validated attain the high status of facts; these facts are considered to be objective truth for all and are thus given a place in shaping the public life of culture. Those claims which cannot be validated by scientific reason are shunted to the lesser status of values; these values are simply subjective tastes and preferences and are thus to be confined to the private sphere. Newbigin’s complaint is that the nature and authority of Scripture has been reconfigured and deformed by its relegation to the latter sphere and, worse, that the church has meekly acquiesced. The Enlightenment creed replaced the gospel as the confessional stance in which Scripture was understood and interpreted (Newbigin 1985:1).

This acquiescence is evident in the disastrous split between ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ and

in the methods of Biblical scholarship. Both of these traditions have in different ways accommodated themselves to the same fact-value dichotomy. On the liberal side of the Christian fellowship accommodation took two forms. On the one hand, the Bible was reduced to religious experience: “We are not dealing directly with acts and words of God, but with human religious experience which has interpreted events in a religious way on the basis of their cultural traditions and assumptions” (Newbigin 1991c:43). The Bible is reduced to the private world of religious values with no authority for today. On the other hand, modern scholarship sought to determine the ‘historical facts’ in the Bible: “Modern scholarship, following the models of modern science, has worked by analysing and dissecting the material into smaller and smaller units and then re-classifying and re-combining them—obviously on the basis of a modern understanding of ‘how things really are’” (Newbigin 1984:14). This reconfigured the narrative structure of the Bible. On the ‘conservative’ side of the Christian church the Bible is simply reasserted as propositional truth in the fashion of Enlightenment truth. In other words, the Enlightenment notion of fact is functioning in this notion of Scripture; the ‘facts’ of Scripture are asserted over against the ‘facts’ of science. In this tradition too the story design of Scripture is changed. In the case of conservative scholars, it is not historical scholarship but systematic theologies that reshape the narrative of the Bible and reduce it to a set of timeless dogmas (Newbigin 1989:12f.). As a result the text is able to say only what Biblical and theological scholars allow it to say and it says it in a way very different from what it was originally meant to say it.

In both cases the Enlightenment understanding of facts is operative. Both traditions are haunted by the Cartesian legacy that “there is available a kind of truth which is ‘certain’ in the sense that it cannot be disbelieved, ‘objective’ truth, ‘scientific’ truth”, truth that is achieved by the employment of a hermeneutical method (Newbigin 1985:2). For the liberal tradition, the Bible as a true story cannot live up to the scientific notion of fact, and so the Biblical expositor employs the higher-critical method to determine what the facts are. The historical facts of Israel’s religion become simply *their* subjective religious experience. For the conservative tradition, the Bible is simply cast into the mirror image of its Enlightenment enemy. Newbigin draws on John Milbank (1990) to show that the roots of modern science as a special kind of knowing involved a “shift from a way of seeing truth as located in a narrative, to a way of seeing truth as located in timeless, law-like statements” (Newbigin 1992:6). Instead of challenging this shift in the location of truth, the church has simply adopted it and reshaped the Bible into historical-critical statements of truth, theological statements of truth, or moral statements of truth. ‘Liberals’ have set forth historical truth as verified by the historical critical method, abandoning all religious truth claims. ‘Conservatives’ have set forth the ‘truth’ of the Bible as timeless theological propositions. Over against this Newbigin argues:

The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.... Here, I think, is the point at which we may well feel that the eighteenth-century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man. The Bible was a source of information about such of these eternal truths as could not be discovered by direct observation of nature or by reflection or innate human ideas (Newbigin 1989:12-13).

This formulation offers an alternative to the liberal and conservative traditions of the church. On the one hand, this story is a story about universal history and so holds universal validity; it is true. This stands against the liberal contention. On the other hand, it is a story (Newbigin 1989:12, 38, 51) and not a system of timeless theological doctrines. This stands against the conservative contention.

In a missionary encounter with western culture it is essential to stress two things about the Biblical narrative. First, historical truth is essential to the Biblical narrative of universal history. Newbigin finds George Lindbeck's categories helpful (Newbigin 1986:59; 1996:34-35). In *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Lindbeck contrasts three understandings of doctrine: propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-linguistic. Adherents of the propositional model believe that the Bible asserts timeless propositional truths. Advocates of the experiential-expressive model believe the Bible employs Biblical imagery to represent general religious experience. These categories are roughly similar to the contrasts Newbigin makes between liberals and conservatives. The third category is cultural-linguistic. This understanding emphasizes the importance of the Bible as a narrative in which the church dwells and makes sense of the world *through* that story. Newbigin adds a qualifier so that his appropriation of narrative theology is not misunderstood. When we speak of Jesus as the clue to the meaning of the whole human story, it is not merely a cognitive clue for understanding. It is an historical act of atonement through which the world is being redeemed. It is more than a matter of illumination and intellectual understanding; "it is a matter of reconciliation" (Newbigin 1996:39). This carries tremendous significance for Newbigin's understanding of the importance of the church (Newbigin 1996:25-32). If revelation is simply a "cognitive clue" then revelation is best communicated by way of a book; this is the unexamined contention of many within a more conservative tradition. However, if revelation is an act of God which atones and reconciles, this can be communicated only by a community that has experienced the power of the atonement and exhibits reconciliation in its fellowship. For this reason Newbigin continues to insist that the historicity of the Biblical narrative is essential to its authority. If narrative theology neglects this

historicity, it fails to live up to the true nature of Scripture.

When the word *narrative* is used in theological discourse, it is sometimes with the implication that the historical truth of the narrative is not important. The narrative that structures our understanding of things might be nothing more than a story told by us to explain our experience, something with no ontological status beyond our imagination. It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story (Newbigin 1996:40).

The second thing that Newbigin stresses about the Biblical narrative is that the interpretation of Scripture must take account of the Bible as a redemptive-historical whole. Since it is a story about universal history the Bible must be understood in terms of its canonical whole. This is important for a missionary encounter with western culture. Western culture offers one story with a universal claim. The Bible offers another story with an equally universal claim. If the Bible is reduced to timeless statements of one sort or another (historical-critical or systematic-theological) they are easily absorbed into the reigning story of the culture. Newbigin writes: “I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives—both personal and public” (Newbigin 1991b:2).

This last point highlights the significance of a true understanding of Biblical authority for a missionary church. If ‘Bible bits’ are absorbed into the reigning cultural story, then there is no challenge. The church finds a place within the culture. It is only as the story as a whole in its comprehensive claim and universal validity is maintained and embodied that the church will offer a contrasting way of life to its contemporaries.

## **Conclusion**

Newbigin has been called God’s missionary to western culture (Stafford 1996). When this perspective is kept firmly in place, the work of Lesslie Newbigin in the last two decades of his life will be properly understood. Newbigin was not first of all concerned to make a contribution to a history of the development of western worldview, nor to epistemology, nor to a theological articulation of Scripture. In fact, he always eschewed the label ‘scholar.’ His last act of self-identification, in the preface of a book he co-authored that was published posthumously, he describes himself as a missionary (Newbigin, Sanneh, Taylor:1998:x). Newbigin was interested in communicating the gospel to a culture that had absorbed that gospel. He was also interested in protecting the missionary identity of the church in other parts of the world that increasingly faced

the formative power of modernity. To this end he attempted to liberate the gospel from its cultural cage by exposing the foundational cultural assumptions and reasserting the comprehensive scope of the gospel's authority. According to his own testimony, this was only a modest beginning toward a task that should occupy the church and its missiologists for decades to come.

### **List of References**

HENDRICK, John R. 'Pete'. 1993. Two Ways of Realizing the Vision of the PC (U.S.A.) for its Congregations: Congregations with Missions and/or Missionary Congregations, *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary, Gospel and Western Culture Issue*, Fall, 59-68.

LINDBECK, George. 1984. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

MILBANK, John. 1990. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

NEWBIGIN, Lesslie. 1983. *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*. Geneva: WCC.

----- . 1984. The Bible and Our Contemporary Mission, *Clergy Review*, 69, 1, 9-17.

----- . 1985. *The Role of the Bible in Our Church*. Unpublished paper.

----- . 1986. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

----- . 1989. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

----- . 1990. *The Gospel and Modern Western Culture*. Unpublished paper.

----- . 1991a. The Christian Message Versus 'Modern' Culture, in eds. Gerald Anderson, James Phillips, and Robert Coote, *Mission in the Nineteen Nineties* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 23-26.

----- . 1991b. Response to 'Word of God?', John Coventry, SJ, *The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter*, 10, 2-3.

----- . 1991c. *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*. Grand Rapids Eerdmans.

----- . 1992. The Gospel and Our Culture: A Response to Elaine Graham and Heather Walton, *Modern Churchman*, 34, 2, 1-10.

----- . 1994. *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

------. 1995a. *New Birth into a Living Hope*. Unpublished paper.

------. 1995b. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

------. 1996. *Truth and Authority in Modernity*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International.

------. 1997. Culture of Modernity, in eds. Karl Muller, Theo Sundermeier, Stephen B. Bevens, and Richard H. Bliese, *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 98-101.

NEWBIGIN, Lesslie, Lamin SANNEH, and Jenny TAYLOR. 1998. *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in 'Secular' Britain*. London: SPCK.

POLANYI, Michael. 1958. *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

SANNEH, Lamin. 1993. *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

STAFFORD, Tim. 1996. God's Missionary To Us, *Christianity Today*, December 9, 24-33.

#### Biographical Statement

Mike Goheen is associate professor, teaching worldview studies, mission and World Christianity, and Biblical theology in the Religion and Theology Department at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. He is also minister of preaching at First Christian Reformed Church, Hamilton, Ontario. He received his Ph.D. in missiology from the University of Utrecht, Netherlands. His dissertation was entitled *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* published by Boekencentrum Press, Zoetermeer, Netherlands.