

Liberating the Gospel in Western Culture: Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution

It is a pleasure for me to be invited by the publishers to write a brief introduction to the Korean translation of this important book by Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin is one of the most important missiological and theological thinkers of twentieth century. The American church historian Geoffrey Wainwright from Duke University once remarked that when the history of the church in the twentieth century comes to be written, if the church historians know their job, Newbigin will have to be considered one of top ten or twelve theological figures of the century. Newbigin was first and foremost a missionary; he spent forty years of his life in India. But he was much more. He was theologian, biblical scholar, apologist, ecumenical leader, author, and missiologist. The breadth and depth of his experience is almost unparalleled.

Newbigin was born in England in 1909. He was converted to Jesus Christ during his university days at Cambridge. He was married, ordained in the Church of Scotland, and set sail for India as a missionary in 1936. He spent the next eleven years as a district missionary in Kanchipuram. He played an important role in clearing a theological impasse that led to the formation of the Church of South India—a church made up of Congregationalists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists. He served as bishop of Madurai for the next twelve years. The next six years of his life were spent as an ecumenical leader, first as general secretary of the International Missionary Council, and then as associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches. He returned to India and became bishop of the important diocese of Madras for ten years. Following his retirement in 1974 until his death in 1998, he lectured at Selly Oaks College in Birmingham, England, pastored a small Reformed church in Birmingham, and carried out a punishing schedule of lecturing and writing that produced about a dozen books and hundreds of important articles.

A number of significant accomplishments have characterised Newbigin's life. But perhaps the most important is his role as a catalyst in awakening the church to see the central importance of mission to modern western culture. Newbigin believed that a missionary encounter with modern western culture was the most urgent item on the agenda of missiology: 'It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture.'² His leadership enabled many believers in cultures shaped by the modern western worldview to understand their calling. But the importance of this topic goes beyond those in western culture. The process of globalization is spreading this worldview around the world, especially in urban settings. So the church in other parts of the world, including South Korea, also will benefit from his discerning analysis.

When Newbigin returned to Britain he observed that the church was timid about the truth of the gospel. The primary root for this lack of confidence was the enthronement of reason in the modern scientific worldview. He believed that the western church had accommodated itself to this idolatrous worldview and was in an 'advanced state of syncretism'—like an Indian church might accommodate the gospel to Hinduism. If the gospel was to be liberated from this syncretism, the religious beliefs at the centre of western culture needed to be unmasked. He employed the tools of his missionary training to bring new light to bear on the topic.

This was a fourfold task. The first task was *cultural*. If the gospel was to be liberated for a missionary encounter, there was a need to engage in a missiological analysis of culture. In the same way a good missionary will seek to understand the religious beliefs at the core of the

² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3.

culture to which he or she is sent, so the western church must understand the religious beliefs at the core of its culture. The western church had been too long blinded to this by being under the illusion that the culture was either Christian or secular and neutral. His profound analysis cannot be undertaken in an article of this size. However, one of his major contributions was to show that the idolatry of scientific reason led to a dichotomy at the heart of western culture between facts and values. Facts could govern and shape the public life of a nation. Values were merely tastes, preferences, and opinions, and therefore were to remain in the private realm. The gospel was reduced to a mere value, and domesticated to the private realm by this dichotomy.

The second task was *theological*. If the gospel has been reshaped and compromised by the modern scientific worldview, then what is the gospel? The phrase that captured his struggle in this area is the gospel as public truth. That is, the gospel is true for everyone and for all of life. In Jesus Christ, the end of history had been revealed and accomplished. All of history was moving toward the coming kingdom of God. The gospel reveals the true story of the world. Therefore, the gospel must be proclaimed as true for all and must be brought to bear on all of social and cultural life. Any less dishonours the Lord of the gospel.

The third task *ecclesiological*. For Newbigin, the church is essential to the gospel. That is, Jesus does not make provision for the communication of the gospel by writing a book in the way Mohammed had done. Rather he forms a community and gives them these parting words: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21). The church has been given a foretaste of the salvation of the kingdom and is now called to make that gospel known in life, word, and deed. This means that mission is not one part of the church’s task but defines its very identity.

The final task was *epistemological*. If reason had become a central idol, moving outside of its proper created domain, to judge all truth claims, it is necessary to unmask its pretentious claims.

However, what is the true place of reason in creation? This is not an interesting academic question but an issue that will enable the church to be freed from bondage to the idolatrous claims of reason. He argues that reason must be seen as a God-given ability to understand the world in community in the light of ultimate faith commitments. In other words, reason was always socially embodied in a tradition. The church declines to accept the ultimate beliefs of western culture and instead lives and reasons in the ultimate light of the gospel.

In Newbigin's remarkable output of writing that pursued these goals, three books stand out—*The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (1983), *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986), and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989). Perhaps *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is his most important work: this book was judged by the leading evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* in 2000 to be one of the top 100 Christian books of the 20th century and one of the fifty most influential books in the evangelical church. So the choice by IVP in South Korea to translate *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* for the modern classics series is certainly well-advised.

The target audience for this book is the Christian church, and more specifically a church which has become fearful in proclaiming the gospel as truth as it is bullied by accusations of dogmatism. Newbigin wants to restore confidence in the gospel by exposing the accusations as rooted in a different dogma. The first five chapters are a “resolute assault on the fundamental problem which is epistemology” [Eng. p. 23]. This is because he wants to meet head on the primary idol of western culture that has eroded confidence in the gospel—scientific reason. He proceeds to show that the West's overweening confidence in scientific reason is the product of a long story shaped by a rationalistic humanism. Early in the second chapter Newbigin notes that the “way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story.

What is the real story of which my life story is a part?” He goes on to say that “two quite different stories” are told in our contemporary culture—the biblical and humanist stories [Eng. p.15]. The charges of dogmatism that cripple the church are rooted in a different story. Newbigin’s concern is that, instead of challenging this cultural story, this other dogma, the Christian church has collapsed beneath its criticisms. It has fit the biblical story into the humanist story and reduced it to a private taste. And so, Newbigin exposes the way that scientific reason has become more than a method for gaining knowledge about the world. It has arrogated itself to the clue for understanding all of human life. The church is called to reject this story as the true story of the world and instead embrace the biblical narrative whose clue is the gospel. These first chapters are a challenge to the Christian community: Which story will the church live by—the humanist or the biblical? What will be the light or dogma that the church will live by—scientific reason or the gospel? These chapters set the stage for the rest of the book.

If Jesus Christ is the clue to rightly understanding the world, a number of issues have to be addressed. This Newbigin does in the next two chapters. First, since the gospel is about events that take place in history, the argument made by exponents of the modern scientific worldview that God cannot act in history must be met. And second, if gospel is public truth, then why has God only revealed it to one particular community? Newbigin takes up the logic of election and argues that God has chosen a community to embody the truth of the gospel for the sake of the world.

The chosen community is called to make known the gospel which reveals the goal of cosmic history. Yet the Christian community has not always understood the nature of what they have in the Bible. They have nothing less than “a quite unique interpretation of universal history” and along with that a unique interpretation of the meaning of human life [Eng. p. 89]. The

provocative quote by the Hindu with which Newbigin starts chapter eight challenges the church to again grasp what it has in the Scriptures. Unfortunately many have broken up the Bible into bits: fundamentalists have turned the Bible into bits of factually inerrant theological propositions while liberals have turned the Bible into bits of religious experience. In so doing, they have accepted the fact-value dichotomy of the West—evangelicals choosing for the ‘fact’ side and liberals opting for the ‘value’ side; both have lost the Bible as the true story of the world. Over against this Newbigin calls the church to embrace the Bible as universal history.

This startling claim for Scripture is rooted in Jesus Christ. The goal to which all things are moving has been revealed and accomplished in Jesus: he is the clue to history. This kingdom will remain veiled and hidden until Jesus returns again to complete his work. But why has God held off the end? The answer: the church’s mission to the ends of the earth. If the gospel is true, then the mission of the church is the next logical historical step after God’s revelation in Christ. The church takes up the mission of Jesus to make the kingdom of God known.

The problem is that when people hear the word ‘mission’ they think of different things. Some think of a cross-cultural enterprise; others think of evangelism (evangelicals); and still others think of merciful and just deeds (liberals). These reductionisms have paralyzed the church so Newbigin tackles the nature of mission in chapter eleven: mission is making the gospel known in word and deed, and most deeply in life.

If the church is faithful to its mission to make known the good news, the true meaning of history, it will face other stories, both religious and cultural. In the next four chapters (12-15) Newbigin tackles the way that the church should approach its religious and cultural context. A faithful church will be relevant to its cultural context yet challenge its idolatrous ways. A faithful church will also stand firm on the truth of the gospel in the midst of religious pluralism.

Following these chapters Newbigin turns to consider two blind spots that hinder the Western church from seeing their mission as one to their culture. First, individualism blinds them to the communal, societal, and cultural dimensions of their mission. Newbigin takes up a discussion of the principalities, powers, and people to show how the Bible itself sees mission in terms of the renewal of societal structures and not simply as evangelism. Secondly, the myth of a secular culture that believes that the West is not shaped by religious beliefs remains powerful. Newbigin exposes this as a dangerous illusion. The West is a culture, like all other cultures, that is shaped by ultimate beliefs that are contrary to the gospel.

This leads to what is perhaps the most discussed and quoted chapter in the whole book—‘The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel.’ The question is how will anyone in West believe that the gospel is really public truth? How can people in Western culture really believe that in Jesus Christ the end of universal history has been revealed and accomplished? Newbigin’s consistent answer: only if there is a church that believes and lives the gospel. The church is a ‘hermeneutic’, that is, a living interpretation of the gospel, and only when it lives in countercultural fashion out of another story will the gospel be credible, convincing, and compelling. His next chapter takes up the question of what kind of leadership is needed in the church if it is to be an attractive demonstration of the gospel.

Newbigin closes the book with the topic that drove him to write in the first place: confidence in the gospel. If the church is to be faithful to its mission it *must* have confidence in the gospel over against a timidity and anxiety that cripple the Christian community.

Martin Luther once said that the gospel is like a caged lion: it does not need to be defended just released. Newbigin’s greatest contribution to the world church is to help it see that modern western culture has in some ways ‘caged’ the gospel in the private realm, and to provide ways

that the bars of that cage might be torn away. This book goes a long way down that road. It is only when the church has confidence in the truth, the power, and comprehensive scope of the gospel that it will be equipped for a missionary encounter with western culture.

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July 2007