

The Lasting Legacy of Lesslie Newbigin: A Missionary Encounter with Western Culture

Duke University theologian Geoffrey Wainwright has said that when the history of the 20th century church is written Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) will be reckoned among the 10 or 12 top theological thinkers of the century. Newbigin spent forty years in India as a missionary and it was upon his return to England in 1974 that his ministry really took off as he published numerous books and commanded an international audience. He brought fresh missionary eyes to the Western church and called for a missionary encounter with Western culture. And it is precisely in that phrase—a ‘missionary encounter with Western culture’—that we find Newbigin’s most lasting legacy for the Western church today.

A missionary encounter involves the recovery of three things—the public truth of the gospel, the missional nature of the church, and a missional analysis of Western culture. The word ‘recover’ is carefully chosen—it assumes that these things have been diminished in our history.

According to Newbigin the public truth of the gospel had been obscured. It had been reduced to a personal message about the otherworldly future of the individual person. And yet, he believed, it was a message about the goal of cosmic history. In the death of Jesus the evil of the whole world had been dealt with and in the resurrection the renewing power of a new world had broken into history. This new world would one day fill the whole earth and all history would culminate in the kingdom of God. If this is true then this is not a private message. It is news about the goal of universal history, the cosmic completion of God’s purpose to restore his original creational intentions for the whole creation and all of human life. Thus the “Bible tells a story that is *the* story, the story of which our human life is a part,” said Newbigin, and it is possible for us to know this true story because in Jesus God has decisively and finally revealed and accomplished where the history of the world and humankind is going. And this gives meaning to human life today.

If the gospel is true, if it tells us where all of history is going, then mission must follow. This is the logic of mission: the true goal and meaning of universal history must be made known. The way Jesus chose to do that was not to write a book, as Mohammed did, but rather to choose a

community that would make it known by embodying it in its life, expressing it in its deeds, and announcing it in its words. He charged them with these words: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). The church is missional by its very nature—a people charged with embodying the true end of history for the sake of the world.

Yet the mission of God’s people is undermined when it is compromised by cultural idolatry. Newbigin believed that this is exactly what had happened to the Western church; it was an “advanced case of syncretism.” A missionary encounter requires that the church embody its comprehensive story over against the cultural story. This is eclipsed when the church allows its story to be accommodated into the cultural story. Thus, it is necessary to analyse Western culture and understand its religious foundation. Newbigin wrote that “incomparably the most urgent missionary task for the next few decades is . . . to probe behind the unquestioned assumptions of modernity and uncover the hidden credo which supports them.” He quotes a Chinese proverb: “If you want to know about water don’t ask a fish”: Western Christians are unaware of the religious beliefs of their culture because they are swimming in it all the time. They are too easily seduced by the myths of a Christian culture or a neutral secular or pluralistic culture. However, Western culture is neither Christian nor neutral—it is shaped by a false religious *credo*.

And so it is necessary by way of a missional analysis to uncover this religious *credo*. A further problem for most Western people, including Christians, is that the word ‘religion’ is used in a limited way to describe a department of life concerned with such things as worship, prayer, reading sacred scriptures, an ethical system, beliefs about God and the afterlife, and so forth. Newbigin is impatient with this narrow understanding. Religion is much more basic and comprehensive than that. It is a peculiarity of Western culture to isolate the domain of religion from the rest of life. Religion, he said, is a “set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty.” Thus religion includes the comprehensive worldviews that shape Western culture like the modern scientific worldview in both its Marxist and its liberal-democratic-capitalist expressions. If the Western church is to be faithful to the gospel and its mission, we will need to work hard to understand the religious beliefs of our culture in order to extricate ourselves from idolatry.

This will be Newbigin's lasting legacy—calling the Western church to recover the comprehensive scope of the gospel and its story, its missional identity to embody that story, and a critical stance toward the idolatry of its cultural story. And perhaps in part the life of the Western church will be dependent on owning this legacy.

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