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KRISH KANDIAH & PAUL WESTON

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# Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998)

**This year has marked the centenary of the birth of Lesslie Newbigin, arguably the twentieth century's greatest missiologist. Two experts on Newbigin here offer introductions to his thought and writings. Krish Kandiah describes his personal journey, highlighting five key areas where he learned from Newbigin what is needed to work for the conversion of the West. Paul Weston then offers a brief guide to reading Newbigin for those wishing to explore his thought further.**

## Krish Kandiah

### **New beginnings in apologetics and evangelism: a personal journey with Lesslie Newbigin**

It felt like a hurricane had swept through the mental furniture of my Christian faith and displaced everything I was used to. And yet the chaos left in its wake strangely seemed to feel more appropriate, more alive, more like home. On that one and only face to face encounter with an elderly gentleman in a crowded lounge in Birmingham I experienced something unforgettable that sent me off on a journey. Fifteen years later I am still on that journey as I seek to present the gospel more effectively and engage with contemporary culture. Lesslie Newbigin, evangelist, ecumenist, bishop, thinker, writer and without doubt the most significant missiologist of his generation, continues to have an enduring impact not only on my life but on missional theology and practice one hundred years after he was born.

## **Beginnings**

A proudly conservative evangelical student worker with Universities and College Christian Fellowship (UCCF) I admit to having been, at the time, somewhat sceptical when my team leader invited Lesslie Newbigin to speak to us. Back then I was devouring the classic North American apologetic texts as a result of listening to the book recommendations on cassette recordings of Ravi Zacharias.<sup>1</sup> I felt confident that I could provide rock solid arguments for the existence of God, humiliating anyone who dared challenge me as my model was the approach carefully expounded in the appendix of Zacharias' *Can Man live without God?*<sup>2</sup> I was also more than happy to systematically conclude my apologetic demolitions with a traditional four-point gospel summary complete with memorised proof texts. Little did I know that what Newbigin was to talk about for the following four hours would shake my confidence in that system to the core and reboot my whole thinking on evangelism, mission and the church.

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1 Works such as Craig 1984; Geisler 1993; Moreland 1987.

2 Zacharias 1994: 181ff.

At that time – the mid-1990s – all our training seemed to revolve around ‘postmodernism’ and it was on that topic that Lesslie Newbigin had been invited to speak. As the frail elderly gentleman sat in front of us reading his typed script with a ruler that acted as a magnifying glass, it was hard to imagine that he could know and minister to the ‘postmodern’ student scene better than us. He had studied at Cambridge back in the 1920s and 1930s and was very clearly part of the Student Christian Movement, even working for them briefly. But on that cold morning in Birmingham we literally sat at the feet of a world-class missiologist and listened to an alternative exposition of the history of western culture, the central significance of the doctrine of election, an epistemic humility that undercut the post-modern critique without regressing to modernist foundationalism, and a bad Latin joke on the transition from Cartesianism to consumerism (*Cogito ergo sum* transformed to *Tesco ergo sum*).

Several years passed and, as a result of further reading and further observation of Newbigin’s theories, I made a decision to pursue theological study alongside my ministry. But, in what I remember as a devastating coincidence, the day I posted my application for a Masters programme at Selly Oak Colleges (where Lesslie Newbigin continued to teach well into his 80s) was the same day I heard that he had passed away. He had spent over thirty years of his life as a cross-cultural missionary to India and his last decades as a cross-cultural missionary to Britain. He was writing and accepting speaking engagements to the end as he challenged the church in the West to rise to the challenge that had hit him between the eyes on his ‘retirement’ bus journey home from Madras to Birmingham – that the West was as much in need of conversion as the rest of the world. As he wrote in his seminal article for the Princeton Seminary Review:

If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the Church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the Church...Can there be an effective missionary encounter with this culture – this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as ‘the coming world civilization’?<sup>3</sup>

Newbigin spent the rest of his life searching out answers to that question. His answers I discovered as I immersed myself in his extensive writings – some two hundred and fifty books, journal articles and pamphlets – during my doctoral study at Kings College London on the subject of Lesslie Newbigin’s theology of evangelism. They are answers that I continually test out when I get evangelistic opportunities across the different racial and age groups in the church, in the community, in the media and on university campuses. These answers crystallised in my mind into five key areas which I believe are vital foundations for the church as we seek the conversion of the West.

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3 Newbigin 1985a: 25.

## 1. The gospel and humility

What Newbigin wrote during his seventies and eighties was not the memoirs of a retired missionary but the culmination of his missionary experience combined with cutting-edge cultural, theological, sociological and philosophical thought. Newbigin began to engage with a whole spectrum of thinkers from Peter Berger, Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre to Martin Buber, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck. Newbigin modelled an insatiable appetite for learning in the service of mission. Yet it is the humility that flows out of Newbigin's tone for missional cultural engagement that sets the standard for a new approach to the gospel and apologetics.

Newbigin has been described as 'God's missionary to us'<sup>4</sup> and through the publication of books like *The Other Side of 1984* he opened up the global missionary movement to the need for a bold yet humble re-engagement with a mission to the west as well as the rest.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing from the epistemology of X-ray crystallographer-turned-philosopher-of-science Michael Polanyi, Newbigin joined the critique of modernity and of the claims to objectivity from scientific rationalism. But rather than acquiescing in the relativism of some post-modern thinkers he proposed adopting Polanyi's concepts of 'tacit knowledge' in combination with a commitment to hold truth claims with 'universal intent'.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, 'tacit knowledge' is the recognition that the human mind's access to reality is mediated through a worldview shaped by our language, our social location, education and many other factors. So, a middle-class English businessperson with a tertiary education in the UK experiences the world in a very different way than a poverty-stricken Indian villager with no formal academic training. Both have access to the same physical world, but they interpret it differently, both reaching valid conclusions and making invalid assumptions about the world and the way things really are. Our knowledge of the world is mediated through our culturally conditioned worldview (as well as our spiritually influenced level of regeneration and enlightenment), but this does not mean there is no room for dialogue and discussion. Indeed, in the scientific community scientists from diverse cultural backgrounds and scientific interpretive frameworks declare each new discovery with humility, recognising that their findings may be provisional, yet still with a claim to truth made with universal intent.

Newbigin's approach challenged and changed my own previous absolute approach to apologetics where I attempted to seal my arguments whilst tearing down any opposition. But Newbigin's approach also challenges the corroding confidence in evangelism in a pluralist society where those of us unable to present watertight arguments retreat into embarrassed silence. We can proclaim the gospel with a claim to truthfulness yet admitting the provisionality of our understanding and thus show humility in our dialogue. This model has a biblical precedent in Paul who claims that the gospel is the revealed truth of God and yet admits that our knowledge of God is partial – 'now we see through a glass darkly' and provisional – 'then we will see face to face' (1 Cor. 13:12). Paul recognises that even the first apostles, despite having had Jesus in the flesh as their personal tutor and an extraordinary anointing of the Spirit to discern, record and transmit God's truth, were still fallible in their understanding. Hence Peter and Paul's debacle over circumcision and Peter's reluctant discovery at Cornelius' house that the gospel

4 Stafford 1996.

5 Newbigin 1983.

6 On Polanyi see Clark 2008.

was also for Gentiles. Paul's bold confidence in the gospel went alongside his openness about his struggles and the room for development which he saw in his own discipleship and theology: 'not that I have achieved all this, but I press on to take the prize...' (Phil. 3:12).

This confidence in the revealed truth of God combined with our honesty in stating our limited grasp of God's revelation means we can engage in genuine conversations with people from other faiths and no faith with bold humility. This approach is most clearly explained in Newbigin's book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* which I believe should be essential reading for every Christian leader.<sup>7</sup> In my experience I have found Newbigin's model extremely helpful as a respectful way of engaging in evangelism in multicultural contexts. On a university campus it allows me to proclaim the gospel as I have understood it by expounding scripture, as the students look over their own copy of the text, and as I invite questions, comments and dialogue in a mutual search for the truth.

## 2. The gospel and story

The emphasis on narrative in a lot of contemporary theology and preaching owes its rediscovery to the post-liberal writings of people like Hans Frei and also I believe to Newbigin. Newbigin was ahead of his time in engaging with the narrative nature of the gospel message. This was not, however, always present in his theology. In *What is the Gospel?* Newbigin, in a similar vein to C.H. Dodd, sought a lowest common denominator approach to the gospel. In this, the key elements of the gospel were distilled out of Peter's Pentecost sermon in an apparent bid to work out the minimal noetic elements of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> But Newbigin's evangelistic requisition of the post-liberal approach to narrative theology led him to later assert:

The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story...here I think 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...Any defence of the Christian faith...must take a quite different route. The Christian faith, rooted in the Bible, is...primarily to be understood as an interpretation of the story – the human story set within the story of nature.<sup>9</sup>

Newbigin identified for me the inadequacy of a lot of the apologetic literature that I had been devouring. I had tried to use the classical arguments for the existence of God with little fruit. My two-step process meant that I had to convince the listener using pure reason that a first cause, moral law giver or designer existed and then also convince them, through the use of historical and biblical evidence, that this God was the Triune God of the Bible. Whereas this approach may have engaged some from a monotheistic religious background such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims, it completely failed to engage anyone influenced by the post-modern critique of the objectivity of rationality. Newbigin undercut this approach recognising, along with Alasdair MacIntyre, the need to ask the question, 'Which Justice? Whose Rationality?'<sup>10</sup> If a supra-cultural rationality is not available to us

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7 Newbigin 1989.

8 Newbigin 1942.

9 Newbigin 1989: 12-13.

10 MacIntyre 1988.

then the idea that there would be a watertight apologetic argument that will work in every context is a myth.

Newbigin's challenge to evangelists was to tell the biblical story, allowing it to provide a window (or a tacit connection) to God's character, purpose and explanatory power of the universe. It is a very relevant approach for our age, despite the alleged suspicion of meta-narratives, and it has transformed my own preaching, apologetics and evangelism. My four-point gospel outline was rendered virtually redundant, replaced by a desire to present something of the grand sweep of the biblical story as a way of understanding who we are, why we are here and what we are supposed to be doing. I suggest that in my experience Christianity is the best explanatory framework that makes sense of who we are and what we do and is the story in which our own stories make sense. I find myself spending most of my time telling stories about Jesus or retelling stories he told in order to win people's allegiance to Christ – recognising both who he is as the glory of God revealed and what he has done for us as our Saviour and Lord.

### 3. The gospel as public truth

Sometimes those that emphasise the narrative approach to theology underplay the historicity of the story. Newbigin shows how the two elements need not contradict each other, clearly asserting in some of his last books:

It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story.<sup>11</sup>

The gospels are 'human perceptions of the things that really happened'.<sup>12</sup>

Newbigin's thinking in this area was altered after a specific encounter of interreligious dialogue where a Hindu commented to him that:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion...I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of human history...<sup>13</sup>

As a result, Newbigin was forced to reconsider the pietism, ghetto-isation and reductionism that was involved in much evangelism. He was also provoked to think beyond the bifurcation of the world into the subjective world of private values and the objective public world of facts, a split that he attributed to the Enlightenment. Once again, influenced by Polanyi's philosophy of science, Newbigin debunks the myth of scientific objectivity.

Newbigin commandeers Polanyi to argue against the alleged pure objectivity of the scientific process but he also wants to argue for the historicity of the Christian story. This not only refutes the Enlightenment's privileging of scientific knowledge, it also refuses to allow Christians to reduce the gospel to the realm of personal piety. Newbigin carefully avoids the excesses of rationalism without falling into absolute subjectivism.

This approach revolutionised my own understanding of the gospel. I find that I am less comfortable with approaches that focus solely on helping people know they are going to heaven when they die (Tom Wright has further helped my thinking in this more recently<sup>14</sup>). I also find it imperative to talk about the implications of

<sup>11</sup> Newbigin 1996: 40.

<sup>12</sup> Newbigin 1999: 4.

<sup>13</sup> Newbigin 1999: 4.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Wright 2008.

the gospel not just for personal piety, but also for politics, community, relationships, economics and justice. Our public as well as our private life is radicalised by the gospel of grace.

#### 4. The gospel in four dimensions

In *Sin and Salvation*, a book he wrote on the boat journey as he travelled out to India, Newbigin explained how sin amounts to four dimensions of alienation. In a chapter entitled 'What is Salvation?' he outlines this four-dimensional schema as follows:<sup>15</sup>

- Man is in a state of contradiction against the natural world
- Man is in a state of contradiction against his fellow man
- Man is in a state of inner self-contradiction
- Man is in a state of contradiction against God<sup>16</sup>

Far from reducing the gospel to four bite-size chunks, as I used to do, this schema points us to recapturing the immensity of the gospel in four grand-scale dimensions. Newbigin goes on to show that salvation can be then understood as the repairing of these four fractured relationships leading to 'the restoration of creation to its original purpose'.<sup>17</sup> Using this outline, the gospel story can be expanded through following through how each of these four dimensions of salvation are worked out through creation, fall, redemption and consummation – a theme that I developed in my own evangelistic book.<sup>18</sup> This approach resonates well with younger adults, as there is recognition of the sense of connectedness there is between all things and it naturally calls people to receive from God his gracious gift of reconciliation. It presents the need for integrity, rather than a dualistic soul-insurance, and it also calls people to join the adventure of participation in the *missio dei*.

The gospel according to Newbigin challenged my own pietistic and simplistic presentations of the gospel as simply a message that needed to be intellectually assented to as a means to avoid eternal damnation. It is rare to find evangelistic presentations that offer more than a personal one-dimensional approach to salvation. The gospel of course is of inestimable importance to the individual, with the need for personal faith and an individual response to God's call. However, when salvation looks like the personal rescue of an individual soul for an ethereal eternity, rather than the radical restoration of all things, we can fall into a number of traps. Sometimes we minimise repentance and the importance of the atonement, sometimes we underplay the resurrection and the social implications of the gospel, sometimes we fail to pass on the importance of church, community and evangelism and ecology.

Newbigin opened my eyes to the fact that the gospel is bigger than we think and needs to include all four aspects of salvation. In my experience, instead of putting people off the faith, the scale of the thing actually draws people in. Instead of being a lifestyle choice, Christianity returns to being a cause to live and die for which transforms relationships and the environment as well as our personal eternal destiny.

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<sup>15</sup> Newbigin 1956.

<sup>16</sup> Please excuse the lack of gender-inclusive language, this is a summary of a book written before we were enlightened in this way.

<sup>17</sup> Newbigin 1956: 124.

<sup>18</sup> Kandiah 2007.

## 5. The gospel and community

Pre-Newbigin my apologetics usually included an apology for the state of the church. I argued that it was a personal relationship with God that was central, not experience or impressions of the church. I would liken the church to a school orchestra generating a cacophonous noise playing a Mozart concerto and then challenge people to conclude either that Mozart was a terrible composer or that the performance of Mozart was flawed.

But Newbigin rightly argues that the church is the chosen means of God's revelation of the gospel – 'the hermeneutic of the gospel'.<sup>19</sup> Focussing on evangelism without the respect for church and an understanding of the church's need for renewal and reformation is counterproductive. Newbigin the evangelist invested much of his life into ecumenism, arguing consistently and passionately that the gospel is best served by a unified church. In my own experience it is sadly often those who are most concerned about evangelism that are the least concerned about unity and this may well be an outworking of the minimalist, personalised gospel that is preached.

In *The Reunion of the Church*, Newbigin gave a theological defence of the 1947 Church of South India (CSI) unification scheme in which he played a strategic role.<sup>20</sup> The CSI was the joining of the South India United Church (made up of reformed Presbyterian and Congregational Churches), the South Indian Methodist Church, and Anglicans from the Church Missionary Society in order to form one visible institutional church. Newbigin saw that disunity undercut the gospel in three key ways: firstly, division contradicts Christ's sufficiency; secondly, division contradicts the reconciliatory purpose of God; thirdly, division contradicts the eschatological destiny of redeemed humanity.<sup>21</sup> Newbigin's powerful arguments challenged me to cross the tribal boundaries of evangelicalism as I worked with churches as diverse as the Baptists, Brethren and Anglicans, the conservatives, charismatics and café-style church-planters. Ultimately, it led me into my current position seeking unity for mission through the Evangelical Alliance.

Newbigin was not an armchair theologian or a missiological number-cruncher working in an office block. Newbigin was a reflective practitioner – an idealistic prophet calling for the reformation of the church with his feet firmly planted on the ground, either as a bishop who equipped his diocese in Madras to be at the cutting edge of poverty relief, evangelism and apologetic engagement or as an aging missionary church leader in Winson Green, Birmingham.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

I have shared with you my personal journey with Newbigin because, in this centennial year, I invite you to go on a similar journey. His post-retirement commitment to engage with a whole new field of missionary research and practice is a challenge to those of us who feel too old to start the journey. His cross-cultural example and willingness to be criticised as too ecumenical in evangelical circles and too evangelical in ecumenical circles is a challenge to those of us who have lived our lives in the isolation of only one Christian culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Newbigin 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Newbigin 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Newbigin 1960: 12.

<sup>22</sup> For information on Newbigin's life see Wainwright 2000.



For your own new beginning I recommend you pick up a copy of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, work your way through Paul Weston's Reader, explore Newbiggin's works which are available for free download at [www.Newbiggin.net](http://www.Newbiggin.net), and be guided further by Paul's short introduction to Lesslie Newbiggin's writings which follows.

**Krish Kandiah** is Executive Director, Churches in Mission at the Evangelical Alliance. He did his doctorate on Newbiggin's theology of evangelism and is the author of several books including *Disciples: Why I Fall Asleep When I Pray and Twelve Other Discipleship Dysfunctions* (Authentic Media, 2009).

## Paul Weston

### Reading Lesslie Newbiggin: where best to begin?

Lesslie Newbiggin's writings span sixty-one years of his life, with some 259 published items in his literary output. Many of these are occasional pieces geared towards particular issues and questions which he confronted in his ministry as a bishop in South India, as an office holder with the World Council of Churches, or later as an elder missionary statesman in retirement in Britain from the mid-1970s. Simply because of the amount of this published work, it can appear quite a daunting task to find a 'way in' to Newbiggin's work.

Many will be familiar with Newbiggin's name through his later writings on the missionary challenge presented by a post-Christian West. Here his short 1983 book *The Other Side of 1984* is a good place to start.<sup>23</sup> It set in motion a significant and creative dialogue in Britain on the challenge of reaching our culture with the gospel. It is brief, pithy and provocative and still resonates today twenty-five years after it was first published. It could usefully be followed up by looking at *Foolishness to the Greeks*, the first half of which is perhaps the most succinct analysis of the missionary challenge that Newbiggin felt he was confronting on his return to Britain from India.<sup>24</sup> His later celebrated work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, is often the first piece that people try to tackle, but in my view this is better read after reading one or both of the previous books. Then, as a further development of central strands of his thought, his 1995 book *Proper Confidence* is well worth exploring and pondering for its treatments of 'faith', 'doubt' and 'certainty' in contemporary culture.<sup>25</sup>

For those wanting to delve further back into Newbiggin's work, his 1953 book *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* is still a classic in the field of ecclesiology, prophetic in its prediction that the Pentecostal movement would come into prominence for contemporary studies of the church.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, his Trinitarian approach to mission studies was ground-breaking when first developed in the early 1960s and can perhaps best be examined in his introductory book on mission, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* which was originally published in 1978, and then republished in 1995.<sup>27</sup>

For writing about Newbiggin, you can't beat his Autobiography *Unfinished Agenda* (first published in 1985, and updated in 1993), which is both an exciting read and

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23 Newbiggin 1983.

24 Newbiggin 1986.

25 Newbiggin 1995.

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26 Newbiggin 1953.

27 Newbiggin 1978 (republished in 1995 with minor changes).

a great introduction to the way his mind works.<sup>28</sup> In terms of books written by others, pride of place must go to Geoffrey Wainwright's *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*, which is a magisterial introduction to the many different facets of his work interwoven with detailed biographical material.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it was in response to the question framed in the title of this piece that I set about compiling *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, which was published in 2006. Following a short biographical introduction, the Reader is divided into two parts. Part One explores six foundational aspects of Newbigin's thought with extracts from his earlier writings. These cover epistemology, atonement, election, Christ and history, ecumenism, and trinitarian mission. Part Two explores extracts from his later writings in the areas of cross-cultural mission, inter-faith dialogue, the missionary crisis in the West, and the gospel as 'public truth'.<sup>30</sup>

Happy reading! I can confidently predict that you will find yourself challenged, heartened and invigorated by one of the most significant missionary thinkers of our time.

**Paul Weston** is Tutor in Mission and Homiletics at Ridley Hall, Cambridge and Chair of the *Anvil* Editorial Board and author of *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (SPCK, 2006).

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**28** Newbigin 1985b (updated 1993 with a new final chapter).

**29** Wainwright 2000.

**30** Weston 2006.

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