

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY by Lesslie Newbigin. Eerdmans/WCC, Grand Rapids, 1989.

Long before multiculturalism, diversity, and pluralism became buzz words in the trendy corridors of mainline churches, Lesslie Newbigin was coming face to face with that triumverate in his daily work in India for nearly forty years: as missionary, parish minister, and, finally, as the first Presbyterian consecrated a bishop in the Church of South India. He knows firsthand how the gospel plays amid pluralism, and how the Spirit operates to convince, convert, heal, make interreligious dialogue possible, and sustain the faithful in the faith of Jesus Christ. As practicing pastor and theologian, he brings *experience* (that final arbiter of personal existence in our “post post-modern” age) to illustrate, inform, and enrich his 1988 lecture series at Glasgow University, which became *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

Newbigin acknowledges his debt to persons as diverse as Walter Wink and Hendrickus Berkhof, yet his epistemological and theoretical base is most heavily influenced by Michael Polyani. Polyani gives Newbigin assumptions about truth and being to challenge the relativism of our culture, which happily relegates religious truth to the “realm of value” where it becomes all too easily a matter of personal conviction rather than public truth. Newbigin shows us how much faith is present in assertions about the world of facts. His overall project in this book (and in its companions: *Foolishness to the Greeks* and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* — both by Eerdmans) is to assist us in reclaiming the center of our proclamation: “...namely, that in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus God has acted decisively to reveal and effect his purpose of redemption for the whole world....New Testament writers are at one in regarding this fact as of decisive importance for all peoples everywhere.”¹

Newbigin knows well how such talk frightens his liberal Christian friends, and angers them, because “it threatens what has been accepted as axioms — namely the right and power of the human mind to make its own decisions about what is true. It appears as a threat to the basis of our free societies. It threatens the effort to bring unity into a pluralist culture....”² Such talk may also irritate readers of this journal, yet Newbigin so eloquently and sharply defines the issues that even in disagreement, our own thinking is clarified. Though modestly disavowing his status as theologian, his chapter titles betray the work of a serious, theologically disciplined mind: “Knowing and Believing,” “Authority, Autonomy, and Tradition,” and “The Logic of Election.” Throughout this book, Newbigin persuasively argues that the church in Western society needs to recover its conviction that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not simply one religious truth among many. Rather that revelation, mediated to us through Scripture and church in a Trinitarian formulation, is the unique, intelligible truth about nature, human history, and ourselves.

What makes this book different? What else is new?

Because they are his personal, lifelong friends, Newbigin shows profound respect for persons of other religions, even as he disagrees with their ultimate truth claims. He demonstrates that all religions do not lead us to the same God, nor that at

base, do they all teach the same thing (a very helpful reminder as we white, Western Christians are tossed to and fro by ethnic/religious assertion and violence on one hand, and an urgent search for human unity on the other).

Newbigin reconstructs a gentle orthodoxy that is faithful to the best of our Reformed tradition, yet is inclusive of other understandings. He refuses to romanticize the past, yet he calls upon us to recover what is best in our heritage for living faithfully in the present age, and for the future that God has in store, not only for Christians, but for all people. What is most helpful for the preacher, however, is that he demonstrates the captivity of the church and faith in European and American cultures, exposes our own forms of Western syncretism, and shows us how to recover what is essential in new theological forms.

Newbigin is especially concerned about the health of the local church, not as an isolated parish, but as a local representative of the holy, catholic church. For ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity is possible in every urban congregation in the United States, as we observe daily that pentecostal and evangelical congregations exhibit that diversity which eludes most mainline congregations.

There are necessary disclaimers to be made. As an elderly, white male Newbigin is not nearly sensitive enough to the claims of feminist Christians, nor aware of their impact on the church. And being British, with a Scottish heritage and Calvinist upbringing, and having followed the Empire to India, he is not fully conversant with distinctions of church and state which are uniquely American. (He must have witnessed India's entry into independence out of Colonial rule, or else he followed closely on its heels.)

In spite of these weaknesses, his vision and purpose remain clear. He argues for confidence, not triumphalism or rigidity. He writes that we must always be open to a measure of plurality while rejecting a forced, ideologically based pluralism which assumes that the "Christian virtues" gluing the social fabric together will always hold sway, even as the faith which grounded them is replaced by what claims to be religious neutrality. He warns against our seduction to the truth of some belief or other, merely because a large number of people hold such belief to be true. Truth is not determined by majority vote, as the crucifixion of Jesus by a rabble democracy clearly illustrates. Neither are we to ground our confidence in a political freedom which allows us to print and speak anything we believe. He explicitly questions whether such freedom can survive if it is not grounded in something (or someone) besides itself.

As I write this review, it is December. I prepare it for the Easter issue of the journal, and so I close with Newbigin's opening illustration in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. It is a Christmas story, of sorts, which demonstrates for me the urgency of the theological task before us as preachers, and the necessity of the same task, even as our own faithful church members become more and more bound to pluralism in their understandable hope for human unity and peace.

When I was a young missionary I used to spend one evening each week in the monastery of the Ramakrishna Mission in the town where I lived, sitting on the floor with the monks and studying with them the Upanishads and the Gospels. In the great hall of the monastery, as in all the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission, there is a gallery of portraits of the great religious teachers of humankind. Among them, of course, is a portrait of Jesus. Each year on Christmas Day worship was offered before this picture. Jesus was honored,

worshipped, as one of the many manifestations of deity in the course of human history. To me, as a foreign missionary, it was obvious that this was not a step toward the conversion of India. It was the cooption of Jesus into the Hindu worldview. Jesus had become just one figure in the endless cycle of *karma* and *samsara*, the wheel of being in which we are all caught up. He had been domesticated into the Hindu worldview. That view remained unchallenged. It was only slowly, through many experiences, that I began to see that something of this domestication had taken place in my own Christianity, that I too had been more ready to seek a “reasonable Christianity,” a Christianity that could be defended on the terms of my whole intellectual formation as a twentieth-century Englishman, rather than something which placed my whole intellectual formation under a new and critical light. I, too, had been guilty of domesticating the gospel.³

As the seasons of God’s supreme mercy approach (Christmas and Easter) I wonder as a twentieth century American how willing I am to place my domesticated understanding of these two holidays under the critique of the gospel. Both Christmas and Easter, American style, are carefully designed to ignore the massacre of Herod (omitted from the lectionary readings) as well as Good Friday, and then rush headlong into a bland peace and joy, crowned by consumption and greeting cards, which are neither for nor against anything that cannot be solved by sending in the Marines. Our celebrations observe no wrongs to be righted; no kingdom making its credible, though hidden, approach; and no baptism with fire, water, or Spirit as necessary for the maintenance of human life or political freedom. I wonder if the best of us do lack just the sort of faith conviction for which Newbigin reclaims a gospel that has power as well as form, a gospel about which the church can rejoice once again.

Lesslie Newbigin has given us Euro-Americans a great gift which will help us think and live our way into a multicultural and diverse church, even as the twenty-first century dawns in this world’s dark foreboding.

NOTES

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 5.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell, The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans), 37-8.

³ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 3.