

## Introduction

WHEN J. E. LESSLIE Newbigin retired from missionary service and returned to Britain in 1974, he discovered that his homeland was as much of a mission field as India. While he had been in constant contact with Britain and the West throughout his missionary career, what he saw upon his return ignited his missionary spirit and caused him to set out in retirement to discover the cause of the problem and propose an answer. It was not that he would discover something new; in fact, he had the answer all along but had to articulate it anew for the new context. The writings of Lesslie Newbigin have been available for decades, yet his importance has never been as recognized as it is today. He says what many missiologists and theologians believe needs to be said at this time in history.

While the Christian church has met with much success in evangelizing and discipling many peoples of the world, it has failed, many believe, to keep the Christian witness alive and vital in Western culture. Missionaries who feel so competent in their work outside the West return home to a situation that may perplex them. While excellent theologies and insightful missiological treatises continually pour off presses in the West, the general feeling is that the battle for faith on Western turf is being lost.

Newbigin's conclusion was that the Western world needed to be confronted with the gospel in a new and different way. It needed to be a *missionary* confrontation. Instead of the traditional approach to missions, however, Newbigin realized that it needed to be confronted *theologically*.

His observation of Western culture led him to conclude that the problem is its adherence to Enlightenment thinking that has led to a narrow *scientism*<sup>1</sup> and an epistemological dilemma. Modern science and the scientific method, in the form of *scientism*, added to the problem, making

1. A distinction is being made between a general view of science and the narrow, positivistic view of science that limits reality to the natural world and explains all phenomena as the effects of causes solely within the natural realm.

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human reason the measure of truth and limiting facts to only that which can be verified through controlled experiment.

Newbigin's contention is that the West is suffering from a loss of purpose because at the time of the Enlightenment it rejected a belief system that gave it purpose and also made it uniquely different from the rest of the world, particularly Asia. The Enlightenment reintroduced humanism and dualism into Western culture as well as the consequent problems Newbigin believes are associated with these two systems of thought. The most obvious result of these two systems of thought is the loss of purpose and the rise of skepticism.

He then set out to formulate a theology of mission which would engage the new context, calling for a missionary confrontation with modern Western culture. Throughout his career, Newbigin developed certain theological convictions that were expressed in his numerous publications. In seeking to confront the Western world, Newbigin utilizes these theological convictions as a means of evaluating the belief system of Western culture and as an answer to Western culture's spiritual problem, which is, Newbigin believes, central to Western culture's current situation. To fully understand Newbigin's approach it is necessary to articulate Newbigin's theological convictions and show how they were used by him to critique the belief system of the West.

The question that must be asked and ultimately addressed is whether Newbigin's vision for the restoration of the Christian worldview as the preferred worldview in Western culture is reasonable and adequate considering the present context.

As one reads Newbigin, two things became apparent: first, his post-1974 writings should be understood and analyzed theologically as well as missiologically, since the content of his writing is more theological than missiological. His writing is not so much about missionary method as it is about his theological convictions in contrast to the beliefs of Western culture. Second, what he writes is best described as a theology of mission. He is articulating theologically the missionary approach to Western culture.

There are certain characteristics that need to be taken into account when assessing Newbigin as a theologian of mission. First, he remained evangelical<sup>2</sup> in his theology while serving wholeheartedly in the ecumenical movement, a movement which at times has been dominated by

2. This term will be defined subsequently in the section that defines his theology.

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a radical and liberal agenda. Second, he writes as a theologian while fully involved as a missionary and ecumenical leader and not as an academic theologian. While never demeaning the role of the academic theologian, his theological insights are meant to complement academic theology. Third, while he never attempted a systematic theology, it is evident upon reading his work that he is a systematic thinker with certain core theological convictions that dominate his thinking.

It becomes apparent, after considering these preliminary observations, that what is needed is a critical exposition of Lesslie Newbigin's theology of mission to the Western world. There are two main poles around which Newbigin's theological writing in reference to the Western world turns: epistemology and the nature of reality. The epistemological question addresses how God is known, which, for Newbigin, also addresses the question of how one knows reality. Knowing God, Newbigin explains, is to be in contact with ultimate reality. Newbigin believes that the Christian understanding of reality is broader than what modern science would allow because the Christian view encompasses more than just the physical universe. When one truly knows God, the result will be a radical conversion of both mind and heart. Integral to Newbigin's theology of mission is the idea of radical conversion, where the person who recognizes that knowing God requires a change that can only be accomplished by God. This conversion must not only change the heart but also the worldview of the person converted.

Newbigin's theology of mission culminates in his ecclesiology. His strong emphasis upon the community of faith and the role it plays in understanding and witnessing to the truth of the gospel has some similarities to 'post-modernism' in that it recognizes the collapse of modernism and emphasizes the role of community as central to understanding and communication. Newbigin's contention is that the church, as a faith community, is the means by which the gospel is made known to the world, which includes the Western world. It is differentiated from post-modernism, however, in that the truth of the gospel has universal implications and ramifications. Newbigin's solution is to reintroduce the Christian belief system into Western culture which will restore purpose to humanity and put them into contact with true reality through Jesus Christ. This is to be accomplished as the church witnesses in the public arena to the superior rationality of the Christian belief system.

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While serving as a missionary to South Korea a few years ago, a Korean colleague of mine said he was praying for America. I was a little surprised. Since I was focusing on learning his language and culture, I had not thought much about my own homeland and certainly did not think of it as a mission field. His very insightful statement stuck in my mind and opened up for me a whole new way of thinking about Western culture. Reading Newbigin confirmed in my mind that America, as well as the whole Western world, was in need of a missionary witness.

I have seen the evangelical church in action in many parts of the world and it is bold, vigorous, and courageous. But when I turn to look at my own culture, I see something that was once a center for Christian faith and missions quickly becoming a continent in need of the gospel in a fresh and compelling way. It appears to be regressing into a pre-Christian paganism. I believe we need to hear what Newbigin has to say.

There are many who lament the situation in the West and may even suggest a certain approach for correcting a particular and specific issue but there are few who call for such a radical conversion of the core beliefs of Western thought and life as Newbigin has. Newbigin's vision for the recovery, re-conversion, and regeneration of Western society is very compelling. Before we make any judgments about the feasibility of such a missionary confrontation, we must first hear what Newbigin has to say. It is the intention of this book to introduce the reader to Newbigin's vision for mission to the Western church with the hope that you will find his vision compelling as well.