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George R. Hunsberger
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What is This?
Biography as Missiology:  
The Case of Lesslie Newbigin

GEORGE R. HUNSBERGER

Aspects of the biography of Lesslie Newbigin illustrate the variety of ways that missional vision and the practical details of life have bearing on each other. These include defining moments, such as his vision of the cross during university years; context as the backdrop against which ideas are expressed; choices made in consistency with fundamental principles; and responses to the challenge to "put up or shut up." In all of this, and more, Newbigin illustrates a life whose experience at the missional frontiers has in the end given him missionary eyes through which to view the church in each place and the place of each church.

Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) was one of the premier missionaries of the twentieth century whose life and thought will continue to influence missiology for decades to come. Born on 8 December 1909 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, J. E. Lesslie Newbigin was educated at Cambridge University and commissioned for missionary service in 1936 by the Church of Scotland. He went to southern India where he spent the better part of four decades.

Not long after his arrival in India, Newbigin became involved in the efforts to bring about a union church incorporating churches of the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, Dutch Reformed, and Lutheran traditions. At the formation of the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947, he was elected to be one of its bishops, serving first for more than a decade in the Diocese of Madura and Ramnad. During that period, and throughout his life, he was a passionate proponent of the visible unity of the church.

In 1959 Newbigin was given leave by the CSI for a special assignment to be first the General Secretary of the International Missionary Council (IMC) as it made its way toward integration into the World Council of Churches (WCC). Then from 1961 onward, he was the director of the newly formed Division of World Mission and Evangelism. In 1965 he returned to be Bishop of Madras until his retirement and return to England in 1974.

George R. Hunsberger is Professor of Missiology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. He is Coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America and the author of Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, an exposition and interpretation of Lesslie Newbigin's theology of cultural plurality.
Back in England, Newbigin taught mission theology at Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham until 1979, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until his death in 1998, he was instrumental in spawning a movement of missionary engagement with Western culture. Helen, his wife of more than 60 years, succeeded him in death in 1999. Their four children live in England.

Newbigin was a prodigious author, producing more than 30 books and hundreds of articles during his lifetime. For the most part, he wrote his missiological reflections "on assignment." There were exceptions. The Open Secret (1978) was a deliberate "sketch" of a missionary theology, growing out of his teaching at Selly Oak Colleges after his retirement. But most of his numerous writings responded to a moment, a circumstance, a debate, an invitation to give a lecture series, or a pastoral instinct about a word needed in a particular situation. He wrote ad hoc.

Invariably, then, the details of his life's engagements are intertwined with his missiological reflection. Each is incomprehensible without the other. Experience shaped his thought and vision, and his theological grasp of the church's mission guided his experience.

What we may learn about both mission and missiology in the life and character of Newbigin may best be seen in the subtlety of seemingly small things along the way, not in the notable appointments and positions he held and discharged. A number of these subtle features are traced here to illustrate the variety of ways that missional vision and the practical details of life have bearing on each other.

**Defining Moments**

Newbigin often told the story of what may have been the most defining moment of all for him. As a young university student full of ideals, Newbigin was spending his vacation working in a destitute part of South Wales at a men's recreation club organized by the Society of Friends.

For the last week of our stay we took about sixty of the men to camp under canvas near the sea at Llantwit Major. Things did not go well. One night the men managed to get a lot of strong drink into the camp, and before long they were roaring drunk and fighting with each other. I did not begin to know how to cope. When at a late hour we got some peace I went to my tent with the feeling of total defeat. I had nothing to contribute to the situation. As I lay awake a vision came to my mind, perhaps arising from something I had read a few weeks before by William Temple. It was a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. (Newbigin 1985:11-12)

Follow it he did. Making sense of the world in light of it was indeed his permanent vocation. "From that moment," he said, "I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost. I would know where to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage" (1985:12). The cross, he would know from then on, was "the one reality that can span the whole dimension, the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of human experience" (Newbigin 1968:23).
In one way, this was only a night of camping during which he could not control the drunken behavior of 60 destitute miners for whom he was responsible that led to a sense of personal failure. But in another way, the vision had a much larger significance. It gave him a lasting impression of the bankruptcy of the best social visions and programs of the time. The moment was not only the source of his own conversion, sending him back to Cambridge “a committed Christian” (1968:13). It proved as well to be the bedrock of his confidence when identifying the most fundamental of axioms upon which his life and thought rested.

Not far distant from the import of this vision of the cross was Newbigin’s notion that death mocks all our human achievements, that they are all destined for the rubble of history—or if they should last till the end, the judgment of God. In that light, our hope and confidence are to be found not in the fruit of our labor, but in the risen Christ. It is in the context of this angle of reflection that we can see the significance of moments in Newbigin’s life such as one that receives only the smallest mention. What might easily be passed over as an incidental comment looms much larger than that. It is made with a depth of pathos conveying a moment in which his fundamental conviction was both illustrated and galvanized.

In his autobiography, Unfinished Agenda (1985), Newbigin notes that while serving as bishop in the Church of South India’s Diocese of Madura, he instituted an innovative program for training emerging leadership within the fledgling congregations arising in many of the smaller villages. He reasoned, with strong urging from all that he had read of Roland Allen’s challenge to the missionary enterprise:

> When a new congregation understands from the beginning that the responsibility for its own life is a responsibility which it must discharge before God, it can stand on its own feet and propagate its own faith without the presence of a resident paid worker. On the other hand there is also abundant evidence to show that if, at the beginning, a new congregation is taught to lean upon a paid worker sent from outside, it will be almost impossible for it to outgrow that dependence. (1985:148)

The important work Newbigin was doing by approaching the nurture of new congregations in this way is notable. But the “moment” to which I point in this context is the small, almost throwaway comment he makes in his recollections of the experiment: “My successor did not approve of these ideas and the programme was not continued” (1985:148). There is a world of emotion that stands behind that single sentence, and in it there is a world of vision and perspective that touches on all our work. It must be heard in the light of what he would later testify with such frequency:

> [Death] is the outward expression of the fact that all the patterns we are weaving are flawed, that all our achievements are ambiguous, and that none of them leads directly to the perfection we seek. Death . . . is the outward sign of the fact that neither I nor my achievements are of themselves fit for the kingdom of God. (Newbigin 1978:118)

For Newbigin that was never a word of despairing but of hope. He acknowledged that “there is a chasm that cuts across the landscape between the place where I stand and the glorious vision of the holy city which I see on the horizon of my world.” Newbigin saw with special force that “in Jesus Christ, God has dealt with sin and
death, has opened a way that goes down into that chasm and leads out into the uplands beyond it, and has thereby released me from the dilemma in which I was trapped" (1978:118). That opens the way of hopeful action, "knowing that though I cannot create the city, God can raise up both me and my works, purged in the fire of judgment, to take a place in the life of the city" (1978:118).

Perhaps this simple comment of Newbigin's—"the programme was not continued"—seems so pregnant with pathos to this present writer because of a similar experience. It was Newbigin's encouragement that nourished hope then as it must have for Newbigin himself in the 1950s.

I myself pastored a congregation for five years that subsequently experienced a sad and destructive division and finally was dissolved altogether, and for me the realism which promised that my works will become rubble also affirms that for them to join that rubble now cannot negate their value and meaning. Their value lies in their connection to the living Jesus who has himself already descended into the chasm of death and come out on the other side in his resurrection. Far from discouraging action, this is a perspective that encourages it and enables it to flourish in hope, because hope lies in the living Christ rather than in any tangible permanence of our accomplishments. (Hunsberger 1998b:136)

Here biography touches biography, and with it one missiology touches the formation of another. The encouragement I had drawn from Newbigin's vision was deepened by discovering the companionship of his own experience with mine.

**Context as Backdrop**

If it is true regarding anyone, it is abundantly true of Newbigin that the context of his life shaped his theological affirmations. It is impossible to understand the deepest theological currents in Newbigin's thought apart from a sense of the voices ringing in his ears with their queries, questions, objections, and challenges regarding faith in Jesus as the Christ of God. Whether it had to do with reasons for believing in Christ or a rationale for a continuing missional vocation for the church (see Hunsberger 1998a), his responses were always set against the backdrop of the attitudes and debates of the moment.

Perhaps the most notable case in point is the way in which the Hindu setting of Newbigin's work functioned as the backdrop for his way of putting what he called the "missionary significance of the doctrine of election" (Newbigin 1983a:23-24). It can easily be demonstrated that his view, while there were pre-India antecedents for his way of thinking, responded in particular to the offense taken at the particularity of the gospel as that finds expression on the lips of Hindu persons.

The distinct way that Newbigin treats election as the fundamental logic of mission found expression early on in his writings. In his essay on "The Duty and Authority of the Church to Preach the Gospel" in the Amsterdam Assembly Series (1948), it is already clearly articulated. It is during the decade that followed that the marks of the Hindu context are most noticeable. He pressed the issue in response to the complaint: "How can it be that among all the tribes of the ancient world, one should be God's people? How can it be that the Christian Church, one particular strand of human history, should be the exclusive bearer of God's saving grace for
mankind?" (Newbigin 1961:78). And, “Why should I study the history of this obscure
and unattractive tribe? Why should I not study what God has done for my own peo-
ple and my own land? Can I not find Him in these things?” (Newbigin 1956:44). To
these he characteristically responded, “God deals with us through one another. One is
chosen to be the bearer of the message to another, one people to be God’s witnesses
to all people. Each of us has to hear the gospel from the lips of another or we cannot
hear it at all” (Newbigin 1961:79). This he saw to be the essence of the Christian mes-
sage. He asserted that in a particular election is to be found the very solution to a uni-
versality of the gospel, not its problem. A proper understanding of election contains
within it the liberation of that message from captivity to any culture’s embodiment or
expression of it. Thus, it critiques rather than justifies colonialism.

In his later writings, he continued to stress the logic of election. It is the central
thread of the missionary theology he articulates in The Open Secret (1978). By that
time he was responding to a wider range of voices, many of them from the Christian
West, asking similar questions. “Why not join with the sincere adherents of all reli-
gions in seeking the fullness of the truth to which they all aspire?” Or “Is your [mis-
sionary] enterprise not an offense against the unity of mankind?” (1978:14). The
accent is different. But even then,

…the more generalized form which the question takes when Newbigin addresses a
wider audience than the Indian one does not blunt the fact that it is a question he has
heard in the Indian context to which he is responding. Election, as the choice of one
to bear salvation to another, is the way universality and particularity are held togeth-
er. (Hunsberger 1998b:53)

Another major theme in Newbigin’s theological engagement took form upon his
“retirement” to Birmingham, England, in 1974. The last two decades of his life
became synonymous with the “missionary encounter of the gospel with Western cul-
ture.” Here again, the context is very telling. It provided the accents for his way of
assessing the culture and putting forth the challenge.

Upon arrival in Birmingham, he very quickly got caught up in the local contro-
versies surrounding the syllabus to be used for the compulsory religious education in
the schools. Here, more than anywhere else, he seemed to feel the impact of a soci-
ety that had become pluralist both in its composition and in its assumptions. He later
commented about it:

Pupils were to study religions “objectively” as aspects of differing cultures, not to
accept any of them as true accounts of how things are. It seemed obvious to me that
the alleged “objectivity” effectively concealed the real commitment of the practi-
tioner of this kind of teaching, a commitment to the accepted values of the consumer
society of which he was a part. . . . I did become involved in the critical debate on
the syllabus because it seemed to me to rest on altogether false assumptions.
(Newbigin 1985:244-245)

What Newbigin felt most keenly in the midst of the debate was the seeming
inability of Christians to do anything other than capitulate to the reigning assum-
ptions of rational objectivity and autonomous personal choice. His sense of the link
between conviction and knowledge, subjective commitment and objective descrip-
tion, led to his proposals in the local debate that religions be taught not just dispassionately as options for private consumption, but as life commitments held by adherents who believed them with "universal intent."

Perhaps it is one of the greatest of ironies that in the midst of the debates about the syllabus, Newbigin was placed on the local committee charged with responsibility to fashion it and that the person he replaced on the committee was John Hick! He, of course, took a very different position from that of Hick; he continued long afterward to contend with Hick's position regarding religious pluralism. Hick represented to Newbigin an admirable desire to be generous and tolerant, but Newbigin found his position to be after all no less a particular one than any other religious perspective. Time and again, Newbigin's missionary eye for understanding cultures led him to see that all proposals for unity or universality are particular and must be self-acknowledged to be so. In that regard, he found both Hick and post-Enlightenment modernity to be lacking.

Consistency in Choices
The biographical note that follows may appear more playful than anything else. But Newbigin always had a lot of fun mentioning it. When he retired from his work in India and returned to England, he realized that he had read portions of Karl Barth's writings, and other people's accounts of Barth, but he had never read Barth straight through. Now he would do that. So he spent the first six months of his retirement reading Church Dogmatics—backward! That is, he began with the last part on the assumption that in order to know the meaning of a story you have to know the end of it. So he started where Barth came out at the end and read his way backward through the whole of it.

This playful note about Newbigin's reading habits has a delightful correspondence with what he took to be the significance of eschatology. The end—the reign of God that is coming—is revealed and inaugurated in Jesus, and that is the clue to the meaning of the life of the whole world. Knowing the end is what gives meaning to the history of the world and to action in the present within that history. Something so simple as an odd way to read a major theological treatise becomes a further symbol of a vision so penetrating as the one Newbigin saw in the gospel of the coming reign of God.

It might help many contemporary readers of Newbigin to read him the same way he read Barth. For many Western readers, one of the most troublesome features of his proposals for the engagement of Western culture has been his emphasis on "the gospel as public truth" and especially the thesis that the Christian gospel alone can and should supply today's pluralist society with the basis for its unity and coherence. However much this may feel like a re-Christendomizing proposal, it must be understood in terms of where he himself takes the notion. The meaning of the proposal must be interpreted by the way the story ends.

Perhaps unlike many of those who join him in the proposal, he moves on to portray the way such a thing as a Christian society might come about. It will come not in the form of political fiat, but as a consequence of the presence of a vigorous and integrated and faithful church, missional in its recognition of its current pluralist setting and in its patterns of response to it. The portrait is one which includes Christian persons living the lordship of Jesus in an integrated way within their work worlds, a
church that genuinely believes in practice what its creeds have affirmed, a church of freedom and hope biblically understood, an evangelizing church able to help people come to the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. These are the places where his story line leads, and they need to be appreciated to provide a more balanced reading of the rest of the story.

In the end, his is not a proposal for some formal dominance apart from the actual life of a community of those who believe the gospel, but it is precisely a proposal for the renewal of a church that is genuinely the hermeneutic of the gospel among its companions. Such a community will supply a foretaste of the future God brings, a foretaste that is good for the society, even for a pluralist one.

Another biographical note that illustrates the kind of inner consistency Newbigin possessed has to do with the ecclesial position he held in the Church of South India. Newbigin’s compatriot Presbyterians, this writer included, have always had a bit of fun basking in the glow of the possibilities made visible when Newbigin the Presbyterian became a bishop! (The secret wish of every Presbyterian, perhaps!) Of course, the role of bishop in Newbigin’s hand took some turns that were new to the tradition. His was a missionary and pastoral image of what being a bishop must mean. But his position (status?) as a bishop in a union church did give him a place from which to encourage the visible unity of the church in all other places. Unity was a central passion in his life and an essential strand of his missionary theology.

It might have been natural, upon his move back to England, to accept the invitation of a friend in the Anglican Church to see his membership there. After all, it had been the tradition of the Anglican and the Methodist sides of the union forming the Church of South India that had brought to it the office of bishop. The Anglican Church, it appeared, stood ready to receive him and acknowledged him fully as a bishop. But here he found it a matter of conviction and consistency to do otherwise. He reasoned that since the churches united in the Church of South India (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Congregational, and some Lutheran) were themselves not united in England, he must work toward that end and do so from the community in which he had been reared and by whose tradition he had been formed. The church of his origin had been the Presbyterian Church of England, which by that time had itself united with the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ to form the United Reformed Church. It was to that church that he returned and in which he continued until his death.

"Put up or shut up"

It was inevitable, certainly, that there would come critical moments in Bishop Newbigin’s life when he would be faced with a calling that grew out of the force of his own convictions. Several illustrations of that are recounted here.

Newbigin had espoused a vision for the visible unity of the church from the beginning of his work in India, and throughout the 1950s, he had increasing opportunity to call the churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to take seriously the pursuit of such unity. At the same time, he pressed the missions associated with the International Missionary Council (IMC) for consistency with their own emerging principles for carving out a fresh sense of mission that moved beyond colonialist patterns and valued the identity and vocation of all the churches of the world. By conviction, he believed that the integration of the IMC into the WCC was essential for
both entities if they were to follow through on their commitments.

His outspoken support of the integration scheme (see Newbigin 1958) led many ecumenical leaders to put forward in the IMC and to Bishop Newbigin the proposal that he become the General Secretary of the IMC who would lead it as it entered into the WCC. Once integration was achieved, Newbigin would become the first director of the newly formed Division of World Mission and Evangelism in the WCC. While his ties to the people of India were strong and he was therefore reluctant to leave India, he accepted the post and was extended a leave from diocesan duties in the Church of South India for five years. In a very real sense, his own convictions, widely expressed, had demanded this of him.

On a smaller scale, but with as much significance, was the occasion in which Newbigin came into a part-time pastoral relationship with the small and struggling congregation of the United Reformed Church across the road from Winson Green prison in Birmingham, England. At a meeting of the Birmingham District Council of the United Reformed Church in 1979, over which Newbigin was presiding, it was being suggested that the church be closed. Pricked in his conscience about such an action, he “suggested to the Council that if the Church abandoned such areas in order to settle in the relatively easy circumstances of the suburbs it would forfeit the claim to be a missionary Church” (Newbigin 1985:248). His urging against closing the church turned into a call to be its pastor. To this he agreed, ultimately with the assistance of a missionary from north India who worked among the congregation of 20 people as well as among the large Indian population that lived in the vicinity of the church.

More than a few of Newbigin’s writings emerged in one way or another from the way he articulated a vision or principle in a meeting and as a consequence came away with a major drafting role for a report or position paper. One vivid example is the story of the origin of his first book to open up the gospel and Western culture agenda, *The Other Side of 1984* (1983b). Here again, writing the book was in a very real sense required of him by virtue of his growing conviction that a “missionary encounter” was called for as the source of the renewal of the churches in the West. As he gave voice to that perspective—so natural to his own missionary eyes and ears but so distant from the perception of others—the group that had been formed by the British Council of Churches to mark somehow the notorious year “1984” called on him to play out his line of thinking in more complete fashion. Much of the draft for the book was written on the train on the way back to Birmingham from London that day, the remainder by several weeks later. With its publication in 1983 by the WCC, followed before long by further full-length treatments of the agenda in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989), he spawned a movement whose momentum is still increasing and flowering after his death.

**Missionary Eyes**

Perhaps the most notable feature of Newbigin’s biography is also the most pervasive. He viewed every new context and every new challenge through a lens that saw everything in terms of the cross that spans heaven and earth and embraces the whole world. He approached the church’s dilemmas and opportunities of the moment with the keen sense that its very life is spawned by the calling and sending of God, and it is implicated by its very nature into the witness the Spirit gives regarding Christ.
Surely he took something of that with him, if only in embryo, when he went to Scotland to work for the Student Christian Movement and then on to India. But much more is it the case that it was the long years of wrestling with the gospel's intersection with every context of the moment that tinted his lens that way. By the end, he could not do otherwise than see through that angle whatever was before him. His missionary reactions upon his return to England in the mid-1970s were simply the most dramatic example of what had become a habit of life.

Newbigin's missiological reflections—scattered throughout his large body of published work and experienced face-to-face by a host of people in meetings and gatherings of all sorts—forged a rationale and vision for the missionary nature of the church poised to serve generations to come. He has turned the thinking of the churches of the West to a recognition of their lost heritage of missional identity by raising to view the missionary encounter of the gospel with their culture. He also has left a legacy of missional ways to survey and reflect upon the church in every place and the place of every church. He wore missionary spectacles with humility and grace and helped place them on all our faces.

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