



GRASPING TRUTH AND REALITY

Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of
Mission to the Western World

Donald Le Roy Stults

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to the Western World*

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James Clarke & Co
P.O. Box 60
Cambridge
CB1 2NT
United Kingdom
www.jamesclarke.co.uk
publishing@jamesclarke.co.uk

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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*¹ 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 evangelical² 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.

A Brief Sketch of Newbigin's Life and Work

EACH GENERATION SINCE THE modern missionary movement began in the eighteenth century has produced a few great missionary statesmen, persons whose thought and work were a major influence on the global missionary enterprise during their particular era and who have influenced subsequent missionary thinking as well. At the end of the twentieth century this honor, it would seem, fell upon Lesslie Newbigin, long time missionary to India and global ecumenical leader.

Before we address his theological and missiological thinking, we need to take a brief look at his life in order to get a clear understanding of the context that produced his theology of mission to the Western world.

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF NEWBIGIN'S CONTRIBUTION

The Church of England Newspaper, in a banner headline at the top of an article reporting the death of Newbigin, states that he was “one of the century’s foremost Christian statesmen,” an assessment shared by many.¹ While much of his missionary career was spent in India or somehow related to the ecumenical movement, the work for which he became best known began after he retired to Britain in 1974. Upon his return, he was confronted with a situation he had not fully anticipated, a church that seemed in retreat and a land, once thought to be Christian, which was in need of serious missionary work. With many decades of missionary experience behind him, Newbigin set out to approach ministry in the Western

1. *Church of England Newspaper*, “Lesslie Newbigin dies after a short illness,” 6.

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world with the same assumptions that he had in doing missionary work in Asia.

The same article states that “in any discussion of values in public life and faith and culture, Newbigin’s influence will remain seminal for years to come.”² David Jenkins, Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, is quoted as saying that Newbigin “will be remembered as an outstanding figure in the Church of the twentieth century. He has proclaimed unity with great courage, probed for truth in turbulent times and has led Christians deeper into faith.”³

George Hunsberger, the North American coordinator of The Gospel and Our Culture movement and author of a significant book on Newbigin, remarked that Newbigin’s “vision of modern Western culture was clear and incisive.”⁴ Newbigin’s theological thinking did not begin after retirement but began very early in his ministry and remained fairly consistent throughout his life.⁵ There is evidence of the development of certain themes that appear early but blossom later in the heat of the challenge of a missionary confrontation with Western culture. Additionally, some new themes appear in his response to Western culture that are not present in his earlier writings, primarily because they emerge as a result of the demands of the context.⁶ Vinoth Ramachandra believes that Newbigin “has mounted one of the most vigorous theological critiques of modern secular culture.”⁷

A FAMILY INHERITANCE

Newbigin was, as are all people, a product of his time but also a recipient of certain personal characteristics inherited from his parents. A description of his father’s personality leads one to believe that Newbigin

2. *Church of England Newspaper*, “Lesslie Newbigin dies after a short illness,” 6.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 1.

5. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 283. Chapter 1 of Wainwright’s book “A Man in Christ,” is an excellent introduction to Newbigin’s life.

6. For example, there is no need to discuss the influence of Descartes in the context of India where Newbigin spent so many years laboring. The most obvious change in Newbigin’s writings after 1974 is his discussion of Western philosophy and its influence upon the church and Western culture.

7. Ramachandra, *Recovery of Mission*, 144. Ramachandra holds both the bachelor and doctoral degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of London.

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inherited a great deal of his personal characteristics from his father. In his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, Newbigin mentions his father's energetic public life, which he somehow managed in addition to his work as a businessman. His father was a broad reader and 'radical' in politics, but, Newbigin observes, this "remarkably vigorous and effective public life was not what I perceived as a child."⁸ He may have not been aware of it as a child, but he apparently inherited this same knack for public life, because for much of Newbigin's life he served the church in public positions with enormous energy both in the West and in India.

Newbigin has been described as a "small, polite but insistent man, whom his colleague Martin Conway calls 'an indefatigable terrier' in pursuing his convictions."⁹ This characteristic can be observed as one reads his many books and articles. His vision is bold and his thinking is focused. His views are clear and repeated often with great force and passion. He does not seem to have a tentative bone in his body nor in his theological thinking. Geoffrey Wainwright, who first met Newbigin in 1963 and had the opportunity of seeing him on various occasions until 1996, says: "the physical and mental impression he made on me was one of disciplined energy."¹⁰ As Wainwright followed Newbigin's ministry over the years, he was impressed "by the strength and consistency of his vision and its practical enactment."¹¹ Wainwright's perspective of Newbigin reflects the enormous role that he has played and continues to play on the global missionary scene:

Throughout his life, his analytical penetration, his conceptual power, and his mental agility ensured the intellectual quality of his practical wisdom; and his ideas remain to be drawn upon by all those who still engage as he did in the tasks of commending the Gospel and defending the Christian faith, of the spiritual formation of individuals and the edification of the believing community, of reforming the Church and restoring its unity.¹²

8. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 3.

9. Stafford, "God's Missionary," 3.

10. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*, viii.

12. *Ibid.*, vi.

FORMATION OF NEWBIGIN AS A CHRISTIAN

Newbigin was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on the eighth of December 1909, the son of Presbyterian parents. He went on to attend the Quaker boarding school in Leighton Park where he recalls that he abandoned the Christian assumptions of his upbringing and his childhood. There was a strong deterministic view of history that was being advocated at the school at that time and he recalls a chemistry teacher remarking that “life is a disease of matter.”¹³ In the midst of such teaching, Newbigin’s faith seemed to disappear.

There were, however, some positive influences for Christian faith on him as well. A book entitled *The Living Past* by F. S. Marvin had a strong influence upon him during his last year of school. He was strongly influenced later by *The Will to Believe* by William James.¹⁴ James made a remarkable case for belief even though, Newbigin remarks, he was not convinced at the time.¹⁵ The seed was planted, however, and it would sprout many years later into a full blown, mature, and well-reasoned faith.

It was during this period when his eyes were opened to ‘structured sin.’ He came to realize the economic and social consequences of competition in the business world. If his father’s firm succeeded, he observed, it would mean the demise of another firm, thus putting people out of work. It was this awareness that would lead him later into the socialist political camp, at least in theory.¹⁶ In an actual social situation that Newbigin would later encounter, he saw the shortcomings of socialism, and this led him to reconsider faith as a radical answer to the social situations of the world. His predisposition to action required him to be interested and involved in the public arena.

It was during his Cambridge years (1928–31) that he re-entered the Christian stream, although he approached the whole thing with reluctance and some skepticism. There were two prominent student Christian groups at that time in Cambridge, the ‘evangelicals’ of Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) and the Student Christian Movement (SCM).¹⁷

13. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 5–6.

14. William James, *The Will to Believe*. New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1912.

15. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 6.

16. *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

17. The early histories of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) are intermingled, but later they separate, one

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Newbigin was not comfortable with the 'evangelicals' because they would try to 'get at him' to believe. He was more comfortable to join in with the SCM because of their openness to talk about difficult questions. Newbigin recalls: "They were committed to their faith and ready to talk about it, but also open to difficult questions and ready to take me as I was—interested but skeptical and basically uncommitted."¹⁸

His journey to faith, or at least the recapturing of faith, must not be lost at this point. He began to get up earlier in the morning to read the Bible and to pray, much like the 'morning watch' of the Student Volunteer Movement.¹⁹ He had learned from reading William James that it was not irrational to believe, and this idea came to the fore at this particular time to reinforce his move back toward real faith. Newbigin recognized the influence of James upon his thinking: "and with William James to support me I knew that I was not being irrational seeking the help of one of whose existence there was no proof."²⁰

Newbigin was influenced by Arthur Watkins, captain of the college rugby team, who exhibited an "extraordinary gift of friendship."²¹ Prayer was the focus of Watkins' life, and Newbigin felt impelled to learn how to make prayer a dominating factor in his life. Referring to Watkins, Newbigin observes: "He was the most vivid example I know of the fact that the grace of God is so overwhelmingly absurd that one can only laugh and sing."²² It is difficult to know if this was meant as a backhanded compliment or as a straightforward observation of how God had marvelously (beyond his ability to explain adequately) worked a miracle in Watkins' life. Nevertheless, it had an influence upon Newbigin's journey at that moment.

Subsequently Newbigin went to Rhondda Valley in South Wales, under the auspices of the Society of Friends, to work among the miners of that district. The difficult conditions of the miners caused Newbigin to rethink his view of a political solution. He began to see faith as the answer to the real needs and problems of the miners and felt strongly that the

eventually moving to liberalism, while the other remained conservative and evangelical.

18. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

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Society of Friends were not dealing with the real issues because religion had been excluded from the work. They needed to approach the situation from the standpoint of the Christian faith, the same faith “that was beginning to draw me.”²³

After a foray among the miners, Newbiggin felt defeated and was at a low point in his life. He had been reading a book by William Temple²⁴ at the time. The experience with the miners and the book by Temple seemed to be working on his mind and heart. One night he had a vision. Newbiggin describes it as follows:

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.²⁵

He saw the cross as the answer to the “sordid and hopeless of human history” and something that promised victory and real life. “I was sure that night,” Newbiggin recalls, “in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make sense out of the world.”²⁶

This experience changed his perspective and his life. He became involved in the Cambridge Evangelistic Campaign at Preston, which were open-air campaigns in towns in the Midlands and the North sponsored by SCM. On one occasion he visited a tenement house after the preaching services in Preston. The experience further convinced him of the futility of ‘the new social order.’ In one of these tenement buildings three families lived in one flat, one man dying of tuberculosis. This desperate situation led him to lose hope in a socialist solution: “When I struggled to find words for that situation I knew once and for all that a merely humanistic hope was not enough. At that point my talk about a new social order was

23. Newbiggin, *Unfinished*, 10.

24. Newbiggin does not mention what book he was reading but there were two that were published around this time. He was most likely reading *Christian Faith and Life*; the other possibility would be *The Universality of Christ*. William Temple was a philosopher, reformer, an early advocate of Christian unity, and an apologist for a reasonable faith. He was the Bishop of Manchester (1921–29) and later the Archbishop of Canterbury (1942–44). His influence upon the students of his generation is well known.

25. Newbiggin, *Unfinished*, 11–12.

26. *Ibid.*, 12.

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impertinent nonsense.”²⁷ When he went back to Cambridge at the end of this vacation period, he went back a committed Christian.²⁸

The influence of SCM grew steadily in Newbigin's life. People such as John R. Mott, Jack Winslow (of Poona Ashram), William Temple (in the pulpit at Great St. Mary's Church), and John Mackay of Lima and Princeton were just a few who came by Cambridge and left a powerful influence upon students of that time. Newbigin began to read the *International Review of Missions*, the missiological journal of his day. He would later become its editor.

CALL TO MINISTRY AND MISSION

Newbigin began to attend what was called the General Swanwick, the great SCM conference held for a week in the summer. He attended the conference in 1930 along with 600 other students and it was here that he experienced his call to ministry:

There was a tent set aside for prayer. On one afternoon near the end of the week I went into it to pray. No one else was there. While I was praying something happened which I find it hard to describe. I suddenly knew that I had been told that I must offer for ordination. I had not been thinking about this. But I knew that I had been ordered and that it was settled and that I could not escape.²⁹

A sense of certainty came over him. He knew that his life was in God's hands.³⁰

Newbigin's involvement with SCM intensified and he was invited to join the staff. He was a member of the University SCM Committee and was eventually sent to Glasgow as an SCM staff person. He was at Glasgow from 1931 to 1933 as SCM Secretary with responsibility for Glasgow University, two technical colleges, and an agricultural training college. At that time he obtained the eight-volume report of the Jerusalem

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 13.

29. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 15–16.

30. Ibid., 19. It must be noted that this statement at this stage of his life could reflect in many ways his approach to epistemology many years later. Knowing God (or in this case God's will) is not just a matter of reasoning, it is very much a “knowing” based on a relationship with God.

Conference³¹ and read it with enthusiasm. This was, it appears, the beginning of his intense interest in global missions.

Newbigin mentions that he spent a lot of time with Archie Craig,³² a chaplain at the University, and makes a remarkable statement about the influence of this man on his life: "I continued to visit Archie almost every day that I was in Glasgow and to receive from him a kind of theological training which was, I think, more significant than anything before or after."³³ Helen Henderson,³⁴ his wife to be, was a colleague of his at Glasgow and their interest turned to the India field, which is where, as it turns out, they spent much of their missionary career.

Newbigin attended the Edinburgh Quadrennial of 1933³⁵ and was influenced on a particular issue that would not come to the surface again until the 1970s. Unlike earlier quadrennials that were dominated by the needs of traditional mission fields, this particular one was dominated by the crisis within 'old Christendom.' According to Newbigin, J. H. Oldham³⁶ spoke of the Europe's radical departure from the faith in following Descartes and the Enlightenment.³⁷ Oldham introduced an idea that would become the passion of Newbigin's ministry after retirement. The 'Christian' world had become a mission field, Oldham asserted,

31. Jerusalem Meeting I. M. C. 1928. The Jerusalem Conference was the first major meeting of the International Missionary Council after its founding in 1921. See John A. Y. Briggs, "Jerusalem Conference (1928)," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 516.

32. Craig was later the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the first General Secretary of the British Council of Churches.

33. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 20–21.

34. Helen Henderson (later Mrs. J. E. L. Newbigin) is listed as a Scottish secretary (1930–32) of SCM in McCaughey, *Christian Obedience*, 218.

35. The SVMU (later SCM) decided to hold its first 'Quadrennial' in Liverpool in 1896. It was followed by another in London in 1900, Edinburgh in 1904, Liverpool again in 1908, 1912, and 1929, Glasgow in 1921, Manchester in 1925, and then Edinburgh in 1933.

36. When John R. Mott began to promote his dream of a world Christian student union, he traveled to Europe in 1891. When he visited Oxford (1894), his guide was an undergraduate student named J. H. Oldham, see Hopkins. *John R. Mott*, 91. Oldham was converted in an evangelistic meeting conducted by Moody at Oxford in 1892, see Keith Clements. *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham*, 18. He was also the General Secretary of the SVMU (Student Volunteer Missionary Union) before there was an SCM, as well as the organizer of Edinburgh 1910, see McCaughey, *Christian Obedience*, 48.

37. "A philosophical movement of the 18th century, concerned with the critical examination of previously accepted doctrines and institutions from the point of view of rationalism." *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition, s.v. "Enlightenment."

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and this thought would become Newbigin's focus some forty years later.³⁸ Newbigin comments on what had *not* happened in the intervening years since those words were spoken by Oldham and his retirement in Britain:

From the perspective of nearly a half century later I would dare to say that missionary thinking in Europe and North America had not yet met the challenge which Edinburgh gave to develop a genuinely missionary encounter with post-Enlightenment European civilization.³⁹

Newbigin moved to Edinburgh to serve Dundee, St. Andrews and Aberdeen for the SCM. His greatest joy was getting to know D. S. Cairns,⁴⁰ "that splendid, scraggy theologian whose own faith was a victorious battle against doubt" but who also was effective in preparing students for the "onslaught of a pseudo-scientific positivism."⁴¹ Newbigin moved back to Cambridge to receive his ministerial training at Westminster College, a Presbyterian College for training for ministry, where John Oman (1860–1939)⁴² was the principal and a friend of the family. Oman's lectures would make a contribution to Newbigin's thinking and development. Newbigin, however, was not entirely pleased with the theological education he received at Westminster College. Having been heavily involved in student ministry with SCM, which strongly emphasized spiritual life, and then studying at a theological college where this was not the case caused Newbigin to reflect on this weakness of the Reformed tradition of training ministers. The whole area of the interior life was, according to his observation, ignored.⁴³

38. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 26.

39. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 26–27.

40. Cairns was very involved in the SCM, became a close friend of J. H. Oldham, was professor and chair of Dogmatics and Apologetics at United Free Church College in Aberdeen (later renamed Christ's College), and then became principal in 1925 (retired in 1937 at 75 years of age). For the story of Cairns' life and career, see Cairns, *Cairns: Autobiography* (London: SCM, 1950).

41. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 27.

42. Oman translated (with critical commentary) Schleiermacher's *Addresses*. Stephen Bevans, in his book *John Oman and His Doctrine of God*, says of Oman: "Even among the members of his own tradition, the United Reformed Church in England and various branches of Presbyterianism in Scotland, Oman's work remains a relatively forgotten part of the British theological heritage." *John Oman*, Bevans (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

43. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 32.

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It did not, however, keep Newbigin from significant spiritual experiences. While reading a commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans by James Denney, Newbigin experienced a shift in his theological orientation that would further determine the direction and tenor of his life and ministry. He writes:

That was a turning point in my theological journey. I began study as a typical liberal. I ended it with the strong conviction about 'the finished work of Christ,' about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary. The decisive agent in this shift was James Denney. His commentary on Romans carried the day as far as I was concerned.⁴⁴

Newbigin was not happy with the interpretation of God's role in the redemption as espoused by Karl Barth in his commentary on Romans or with C. H. Dodd's *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. Dodd's approach was to downplay and explain away the wrath of God in order to dismiss the idea that Christ's sacrifice would somehow placate the wrath of an angry God. Newbigin felt that there needed to be a balanced view between God's wrath and God's love. Wainwright explains Newbigin's feelings at that time:

Newbigin was more persuaded by the tougher route to affirming the love of God followed by James Denney, the professor of systematic and pastoral theology at the Free Church College in Glasgow, in his commentary on Romans in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*. According to Denney . . . the mercy of God does not discount the holiness of God that cannot abide sin, and the freely given gift of righteousness to the sinner comes at a price to God.⁴⁵

Newbigin was very active in some form of ministry during these years in Cambridge. He served as the superintendent of the Sunday School at the York Street Mission of St. Columba's Presbyterian Church. He was asked to be the secretary of the Cambridge branch of the Student Volunteer Movement Union (SVMU) where he tried to rekindle some interest in foreign missions. He was asked to be the president of SCM for 1934–35. The Cambridge branch hosted many Christian leaders of that

44. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 30.

45. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 31. Denney was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College of Glasgow for three years (1897–1900) and then became Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology from 1900 until his death in 1917.

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era, among them were Hendrik Kraemer and J. H. Oldham, both of whom influenced Newbigin's thinking in regard to missions. He was camp manager for Swanwick in 1934 and was the speaker at the Scottish National Conference at Glenalmond in 1935.⁴⁶

TO INDIA AND BACK

In December of 1935, Newbigin was accepted by the Foreign Missions Committee of the Church of Scotland and was assigned to the Madras Mission. He was commissioned at the General Assembly in May 1936 and in July of the same year he was ordained by the Presbytery of Edinburgh. He and his wife, Helen, left Liverpool for Madras on the 26 September 1936 on *The City of Cairo*, which he described as a slow, one-class boat.⁴⁷

Newbigin aptly describes the next chapter in his life as "India: There and Back Again"⁴⁸ because of the events that were about to occur. After some Tamil language study and the passing of his first language exams, Newbigin was ready to for an assignment. His heart was given over to direct evangelism. He would be assigned to Kanchipuram where he would visit village congregations by camping out in the villages. Before going to Kanchipuram, however, he desired to pay a visit to Dharapuram, where there had been rapid church growth under J. J. Ellis, a Methodist missionary.⁴⁹ Soon after he boarded a bus to Dharapuram he was involved in an accident that smashed one of his legs. He had to undergo a series of operations in India and then finally surgery in Edinburgh.⁵⁰ As he was mending from his operations he became the Candidate Secretary for the Foreign Missions Committee of the Church of Scotland. While performing these duties he became troubled that the missionaries that he was recruiting were being sent out without any formal missionary training.

During this period he was in touch with J. H. Oldham who convened a discussion group called "The Moot." The purpose of the group was to "reflect upon the human situation from a Christian perspective."⁵¹ He wrote a response to a paper prepared for a meeting of The Moot by

46. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 30–38.

47. *Ibid.*, 39.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 45.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 48; See also Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 240.

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Middleton Murray, a response that did not please Oldham. There is no indication given by Newbigin as to the reason for Oldham's displeasure. This situation and many others that would occur in Newbigin's life reveal a character trait in which he is willing to state his convictions even though there may be strong opposition to his views. In his writings he refers to these occasions with an unusual objectivity and maturity that allowed him to continue to work with those he disagreed with.

FOCUS ON EVANGELISM

In 1939 Newbigin returned to India. He went to Kanchipuram, one of the seven most sacred cities of India. Newbigin had a high appreciation for the evangelistic work of J. H. Maclean. He had worked in and around Kanchipuram for forty years, not only tirelessly preaching the gospel in the streets but also supervising village churches and schools. Even though he was jeered at and occasionally attacked, he was held in high regard by most orthodox Hindus and was seen as a holy man.⁵² It is significant that Newbigin would hold such a person in high regard because, in many ways, his own life was a clear reflection of the idea of doing administrative work alongside the very strenuous but very rewarding work of street preaching, which Newbigin loved so much. Street preaching, for Newbigin, was important not only because the gospel was preached but also because it would be a confirmation to the parents of his students of what he was all about.

During this time, Newbigin met weekly with a study group comprised of Hindu scholars and Christians that met at the Ramakrishna Mission in Kanchipuram, a place known as a center for trained Hindu learning.⁵³ While Newbigin enjoyed this immensely he became convinced that the point of contact with Indian people would not be in such a religious setting as a monastery, but rather in the secular experiences of ordinary life.⁵⁴ It was in his visitation to the villages that Newbigin acquired a deep respect for the poor untouchables (called *Harijans* by Gandhi) who were subject to systematic humiliation at every point.

Newbigin loved to spend time in the villages also because it provided an opportunity to temporarily escape the pressure of administrative work. While over the years his ability at administration would become

52. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 52.

53. *Ibid.*, 58.

54. *Ibid.*

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evident in his work with the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches, he clearly indicates that his heart was in street preaching and not administration. In the chapter of his autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, "Kanchi: Beyond the Villages"⁵⁵ he laments that he was required to "move up" to administration and he also lamented the meaning that administration had taken in the church. To be in administration was held in high regard in the church, demeaning the work of preaching and service to the church.⁵⁶ Such an attitude, he felt, was unfortunate.

THE QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE

Another issue that is on Newbigin's mind at this time is the question of the Church and mission, and the question of independence. While the focus of this book is on Newbigin's theology related to mission to the Western world, it should be noted that he was also thinking and struggling with missiological questions. This question relates to the problem of dependency, when Western churches provide resources that can thwart local initiative, and independence that implies self-support. Newbigin is aware that it is not always so black and white. There are occasions when local ministries do not have the resources to be independent and so to cut off help prematurely is certain defeat for the mission. Consequently, even though there may be a workable general principle concerning independence and dependence, independence can be defined too narrowly, excluding any outside help and thus crippling the church in that locale.⁵⁷

THE BISHOP AND THE BROADER ECUMENICAL WORK

Newbigin's primary focus during the middle 1940s was, however, the attempt to create a unified church in South India. During the year 1946–47 he is at home in Britain where he is again the Candidate Secretary for the Foreign Missions Committee. An important opportunity to be the Secretary of the British Council of Churches comes his way, strongly recommended by Oldham and Archie Craig, a friend of Newbigin's from his university days who had become the first General Secretary of the British Council of Churches. He turns down this opportunity because of his strong love for India. It was also during this time that he had the

55. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 70–83.

56. *Ibid.*, 70.

57. *Ibid.*, 71.

time to promote the 'South India scheme,' the coming together of various denominations and churches in south India to form the Church of South India. The union took place and Newbigin was appointed a Bishop in the Church of South India on April 1947 at the age of thirty-seven.⁵⁸ He would serve in Madurai.

While his work as Bishop would require an enormous amount of oversight of the churches, he would also be busy on the ecumenical scene as well. He received an invitation to be a 'consultant' for the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches that would meet in Amsterdam in 1948.⁵⁹ He would attend the Lambeth Conferences of the Anglican Church in 1948 and 1958 in an attempt to achieve full communion with them, but this was not achieved, much to his disappointment.⁶⁰ In preparation for the World Council of Churches Second Assembly in Evanston, Illinois (1954), Newbigin led a group of twenty-five theologians whose job is was to prepare the theme of the conference. It was a group of some of the most well-known theologians in the world, including Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul van Dusen, and others.⁶¹ The theme was "Christ, the Hope of the World." In the initial meeting of the group, led by Paul van Dusen, there was considerable discussion about that the theme actually meant. The divide seemed to fall between the Americans and the Europeans. Newbigin had prepared a paper on the Apostolate of the Church, but it was attacked from all sides. He would have been utterly defeated except Barth came to his rescue with, as Newbigin explains, "all guns firing,"⁶² not so much because he agreed with Newbigin but because everyone was against him.

For nine months, beginning in May 1952, the Newbigin family made their home in Edinburgh. He had been a Bishop in Madurai for four years. Now had time to do some serious preparation for the Kerr Lectures, later published as *The Household of God*.⁶³ The book had a great influence in many quarters, being translated into French, German, Chinese, and Japanese. It also had an effect upon those who wrote the *Lumen Gentium*,

58. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 7.

59. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 111; Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 8.

60. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 9.

61. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 131.

62. *Ibid.*, 132.

63. Newbigin, *The Household of God*. London: SCM, 1957.

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a publication of the coming from the Second Vatican Council. However, when it came to the actual delivery of the lectures in Glasgow, they seemed to “fall completely flat.”⁶⁴

Newbigin's goal at the 1952 International Missionary Council conference at Willingen, which had the theme “The Missionary Obligation of the Church,” was “to challenge what I saw at the paralysis of missions, the practical exhaustion of the resources of the older churches propping up relatively static churches in the old ‘mission fields.’”⁶⁵

Not to be forgotten was Newbigin's continuing passion to train village teachers by providing books that they could study and reference. It was the motivation for writing the book *Sin and Salvation*.⁶⁶ In writing the book it caused him to think about the faith in which he was raised. He explains it in this manner: “I saw that the kind of Protestantism in which I had been nourished belonged to a ‘Christendom’ context. In a missionary situation the Church had to have a different logical place.”⁶⁷

Following the Second Assembly at Evanston, there were further consultations at McCormick Seminary in Chicago and at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Newbigin decided that Union was in danger of succumbing to a sort of a-historical Gnosticism. His view aroused much opposition; he “had to face an onslaught of angry criticism” that, Newbigin recalls, he had rarely experienced.⁶⁸ It confirmed to his mind the importance of what the committee of twenty-five was all about.

CHAIRMAN OF THE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY COUNCIL

In 1958 he was elected Chairman of the International Missionary Council and the Church of South India seconded him for five years as a Bishop without diocesan charge so he could work for the International Missionary Council.⁶⁹ His primary work was to lead the International Missionary Council into union with the World Council of Churches. He was very reluctant recipient of such an honor. He did not want to leave the ministry

64. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 137.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*. London: SCM, 1956.

67. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 146.

68. *Ibid.*, 151.

69. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 9.

of Bishop in India and expresses his dislike of becoming a bureaucrat—an “ecumenical office-wallah” as he called it.⁷⁰

He also gave the Noble Lectures at Harvard University in 1958 where he attempted to state the case for the missionary calling of the church in the context of the call for the unity of all religions. These lectures were published as *A Faith for this One World?*⁷¹

He took part in founding Assembly of the East Asia Christian Conference that took place at Kuala Lumpur. At the first assembly, D. T. Niles, the “main architect and driving force” behind the conference, instituted the John R. Mott lectures. Niles, Newbiggin, and two others gave the first set of lectures. Newbiggin dealt with the dilemma of needing to pull back foreign missionaries so the church can develop maturity but also recognizing the vast amount of evangelistic work yet to be done that requires the help of missionaries from the sending churches. Newbiggin’s missiology becomes apparent when he writes: “We have adopted wrong missionary methods, methods modeled on the style of colonialism and not on the sovereignty of the Spirit as the true agent of mission.”⁷²

Newbiggin confesses his feelings of inadequacy in leading the International Missionary Council. It was “a deep and perplexing situation.” It was difficult to know what to do. He admitted that his ignorance was “vast and profound.”⁷³ He laments: “There was immense faith in the validity of modern western technology as a tool for ‘development,’ but much less conviction about the validity of the Gospel as ‘the power of God for salvation.’ Mission has been absorbed into inter-church aid.”⁷⁴

In the summer of 1960 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. It was also the summer of the Conference at Strasbourg sponsored by the World’s Student Christian Federation. Everyone went into the conference with high hopes for the new generation to be fired by the vision of the earlier generation for church unity and missions, fortified by a strong theology. There was, however, a lot of indifference to theological issues. Newbiggin confesses that it was person-

70. Newbiggin, *Unfinished*, 158.

71. Newbiggin, *A Faith for this One World?* London: SCM, 1961.

72. Newbiggin, *Unfinished*, 166.

73. *Ibid.*, 170.

74. *Ibid.*, 168.

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ally painful especially since missions was held in contempt. It was “a very sobering indication of the difficulty of the way ahead.”⁷⁵

INTEGRATION

The final act of integration of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches occurred at the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 (New Delhi). After the integration Newbigin became the Director of the new Division of World Mission and Evangelism. He found the days in Geneva (where the WCC headquarters is located) difficult and perplexing. There needed to be a division within the World Council of Churches that would focus on evangelism. Newbigin had painful memories of planning sessions where there was a lack of enthusiasm for the unfinished task of evangelism.⁷⁶ He also worked as editor of the *International Review of Mission*.

His convictions regarding evangelism and social activism were outlined on a scrap of paper during a retreat. They give insight to just where he stood on the issue of evangelism. They are as follows:

1. That it matters supremely to bring more people to know Jesus as Saviour.
2. That our responsibility in the political order arises out of the love command.
3. That it does not arise out of the expectation of being able to anticipate the establishment of any particular social or political order.
4. That the New Testament teaches us (a) not to expect success in our cause; (b) to expect the sharpening of the issues and the coming of antichrist; (c) that there is no hope apart from Christ.
5. The ‘Rapid Social Change’ thinking had not developed any coherent theology and is in danger of identifying the movement of revolution with the work of redemption.
6. That in so far as it distinguishes these two things, it fails to show a clear understanding of the sense in which being in Christ is different from and transcends involvement in ‘Rapid Social Change.’⁷⁷

75. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 174; Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 11.

76. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 196.

77. *Ibid.*, 197.

The most telling statement is found in number 5, where Newbigin articulates what in fact did become the prevailing ideology and accounts for the resistance to evangelism that Newbigin encountered. These six convictions, in fact, clearly identify the difference between the convictions of the early framers of the ecumenical movement and where it was going in the 1960s and beyond. Social activism, even to the point of social revolution, was taking the place of the primacy of spiritual redemption.

In 1962 the BBC sponsored the first inter-continental debate about religious matters. The sponsors, Newbigin remarks, thought that “Honest to God” (the theme and title of a book by Bishop John A. T Robinson) was a new revelation of ultimate truth. They were disappointed with Newbigin and he was challenged to re-examine his most basic belief.⁷⁸ Newbigin realized that what was needed was a fully Trinitarian doctrine as a basis for missions. This view was not supported by Visser ’t Hooft nor his colleagues in the Division.⁷⁹ Ultimately Newbigin failed to achieve what he had hoped for in the integration. He had hoped to use the resources of a global organization in places where evangelism was the most promising.⁸⁰

In 1965 Newbigin returned to India as Bishop of Madras. A sermon preached at his installation service from Ephesians 4:11–12 gave him the opportunity to articulate his emerging ecclesiology. The Church is for the nation, he exhorted, not for withdrawing; a theme that would remain a pivotal point in his theology for the rest of his life.⁸¹ Interestingly such a belief was entirely the opposite of the Indian concept of religion. He made it clear that Christianity in India would not be formed in the mode of Indian religions.

Newbigin was a delegate to the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1968 and it was for him a shattering experience. The focus was not on global evangelism but on social radicalism. Making matters worse, according to Newbigin, was Donald McGavran’s “deafening barrage” to promote evangelism and mission that was counter-productive. It put evangelism in the position of be-

78. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 198.

79. *Ibid.*, 199.

80. *Ibid.*, 205.

81. *Ibid.*, 214.

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ing aligned with high-pressure propaganda of the Church Growth Movement.⁸²

After a memorable trip home at the time of his retirement (a leisurely trip overland from India to Europe), the Newbigin family spent the three summer months of 1974 in Edinburgh. Here Newbigin read Barth's *Dogmatics*. His response was summed-up in one word: "enthral-ling."⁸³ But his realization regarding the spiritual condition of Britain was less than enthralling; he found a lot of contempt for the gospel.⁸⁴ For the next five years he was on staff at Selly Oak Colleges. Among his teaching responsibilities was a course on the Theology of Mission. He found that most courses on Theology of Mission were actually courses on Third-World theologies. This inspired him to write his own Theology of Mission textbook, eventually published as *The Open Secret*.⁸⁵

In 1977 Newbigin was elected, much to his surprise, moderator of the United Reformed Church for one year. In 1979, Newbigin, now seventy years old, accepted the position of part time pastor of an "old slum church across from the gloomy walls of Winston Green Prison," near Birmingham, in order to keep the church open. He pastored for eight years, with the help of a young Indian pastor named Hakkim Singh Rahi.⁸⁶

At the beginning of the next decade, a committee of the British Council of Churches had difficulty trying to define what a conference that would deal with the relationship between Church and Society should focus upon. Newbigin offered to try to provide assistance and in ten days presented the first draft for *The Other Side of 1984—Questions for the Churches*.⁸⁷ It was a success and sold around the world. It was the beginning of a new era for Newbigin.⁸⁸ Timothy Yates describes this new era: "Newbigin has embarked on a whole fresh missionary project in relation to societies living in the shadow of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century"⁸⁹

82. Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 12; Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 232.

83. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 241.

84. Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us," 25; Shenk, "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution," 62.

85. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, Revised Edition, 1995.

86. Stafford, "God's Missionary," 26; Wainwright, *Theological Life*, 14.

87. Geneva: WCC, 1983.

88. Conway, "Profile: Lesslie Newbigin's Faith Pilgrimage," 29.

89. Yates, *Christian Mission*, 237.

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It was the beginning of a new aspect of mission that, although he had been introduced to the idea in the 1930s, he couldn't have anticipated. It was a very productive era as Newbigin sought to answer the question, "Can the West be Converted?" Wilbert Shenk identifies the quality that makes Newbigin's writings so appealing: "I suggest that makes Newbigin consistently worth listening to is his keen sense of context and his capacity to identify with his audience. He had the ability to articulate what for others remained only subliminal until he expressed it for them."⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to show the path that led Newbigin to his work as a missionary to Asia and the events that turned his focus toward the Western world as a place for serious mission. His post-retirement realization of the spiritual condition of Britain and the memory of J. H. Oldham's challenge regarding the need for a missionary engagement with the Western world provided the basis for Newbigin's new endeavor. His theological and missiological passions merge to help him develop his theology of mission to the Western world.

In the next chapter we will go into more detail regarding the events of Newbigin's life and how they shaped his theological and missiological thinking, especially in regard to Western Culture.

90. Shenk, "Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution," 60.

Missionary Theologian

BEGINNINGS OF THE MISSION TO THE WESTERN WORLD

J. H. OLDHAM, ONE of early twentieth century's greatest missionary statesmen, planted in Newbigin's mind the idea that the Western world is a potential place for mission. Oldham was present at the ecumenical conference held in Jerusalem in 1928 and he began to raise questions about the gospel and secular culture, but they were not perceived as central to the missionary concerns of the time. They reappeared at The Edinburgh Quadrennial of 1933. Newbigin recalls:

J. H. Oldham, in a profound and prophetic address, spoke of the radical departure of Europe from the Christian faith when it followed Descartes and the pioneers of the Enlightenment. In other words—though it was not said so bluntly—the mission field was here in the 'Christian world.'¹

J. H. Oldham was a missionary statesman who greatly influenced the global missionary movement in the first half of the twentieth century, even serving as the organizing secretary for the great World Missionary Conference that became known as 'Edinburgh 1910.'² He was converted in an evangelistic meeting conducted in Oxford by Dwight L. Moody and dedicated his life to mission as the result of hearing an 1884 address by Robert Speer³ on the motto of the SVMU, "The Evangelization of the World

1. Newbigin, *Unfinished*, 26; also in "Mission in the 1990's: Two Views, Part II Lesslie Newbigin," 101.

2. Information on Oldham's life and career comes from Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*.

3. Robert Speer was, along with John R. Mott and Sherwood Eddy, an early leader in