

Authentic Evangelism? Revelation, truth and worship in late modern, pluralistic Europe

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SUMMARY

This article on evangelism in a European context explores the relationship between the revelation of God in Christ the word of God, our words about him as we seek to express the Gospel and the corporate worship of the local congregation. The article draws heavily from the

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel über Evangelisation in einem europäischen Kontext untersucht die Beziehung zwischen der Offenbarung Gottes in Christus, dem Wort Gottes, unseren Worten über ihn im Bemühen, dem Evangelium Ausdruck zu verleihen, und dem gemeinschaftlichen Lobpreis der Ortsgemeinde. Die Abhandlung schöpft zu

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de l'évangélisation dans le contexte culturel européen. Il explore les relations entre la révélation de Dieu en Christ, Parole de Dieu, nos paroles humaines sur Dieu lorsque nous exposons l'Évangile, et le culte communautaire de l'assemblée locale. Il tire

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Postmodern Europe?

I was asked to engage with the concept of Europe as a pluralistic and postmodern context.¹ I am convinced that Europe is a pluralistic continent – the raw data on demographic and migratory shifts point to increasing diversity of religious beliefs in Europe.² However, I would like to make a small caveat about the description of Europe as a postmodern context. Ernest Gellner, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, states that: 'Post-modernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil

work of Leslie Newbigin whose missiological project directly interacted with these three aspects of the doctrine of revelation. Newbigin's belief in a homogenous European culture, however, is first discussed and found wanting. His emphasis on the role of the Church is still very valuable.

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einem großen Teil aus dem Werk Leslie Newbigins, dessen missiologisches Konzept sich unmittelbar mit diesen drei Aspekten der Offenbarungslehre auseinandersetzt. Zuerst wird jedoch Newbigins Idee einer homogenen europäischen Kultur zur Diskussion gestellt und als mangelhaft befunden. Doch seine Betonung der Rolle der Kirche ist immerhin sehr beachtlich.

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abondamment profit des travaux de Leslie Newbigin dont le projet missiologique attribuait une place importante à ces trois aspects de la doctrine de la révélation. L'auteur commence cependant par exposer la conception de la culture européenne comme une culture homogène chez Newbigin et la juge déficiente. Son accent sur le rôle de l'Église reste par contre très pertinent.

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it is.³ The term postmodernity is notoriously difficult to define but it does seem to intimate a definite break or leaving behind of modernity. Yet Vinoth Ramachandra argues that postmodernity

is best understood as a continuation of the process of modernisation but with increasing intensity and scope... the result of that intensification has been to erode the stability of modernity and throw it into some confusion.⁴

Rather than moving beyond modernity, Ulrich Beck describes the phenomenon as 'modernity turning upon itself'⁵ resulting in 'reflexive-modernity'.⁶ Zygmunt Bauman argues that postmodernity is the

modernisation of modernity.⁷ Jean François Lyotard's oft-quoted definition of postmodernity as 'incredulity regarding metanarratives'⁸ fits within this description of reflexive modernity as the critical tools of modernity are being applied to the very assumptions of modernity itself, resulting in scepticism towards all overarching descriptions including that of modernity itself. This article assumes a reflexive understanding of modernity and thus, following Anthony Giddens,⁹ the term late modernity will be adopted in preference to postmodernity.

The doctrine of revelation

The starting point for this article is that the doctrine of revelation can provide a useful framework for the nature of evangelism in the current European context. The doctrine of revelation might seem a strange place to explore the nature of evangelism because evangelism – if it receives any theological analysis at all – is usually placed within the confines of practical or pastoral theology.¹⁰ However, there are a number of problems in placing evangelism under the rubric of practical theology. Firstly, it suggests an implied division of theology into practical and non-practical – or even worse 'impractical' – theology! The existence of a discipline known as practical theology calls into question the nature and purpose of theology in general, a subject too vast to be explored here. Suffice it to say that all Christian theology should serve God's purposes, which are intrinsically tied to the *Missio Dei* of which evangelism is a central facet. Secondly, by separating evangelism from the mainstream of theological reflection it is often left bereft of the resources of the centuries of systematic theological reflection and instead becomes allied to pragmatism.

At first sight locating evangelism as a subset of the doctrine of revelation seems to be unorthodox but there is a worthy precedent provided by the magisterial figure of Karl Barth. In his seminal *Church Dogmatics* Barth expounds the theme of the word of God by characteristically starting with God's revelation in Christ, then exploring the revelation of God through Scripture and finally exploring God's revelation through the preaching of the Church.¹¹ Although he does not embark on a full-scale theology of evangelism, his location of the preaching of the Gospel by the Church within the remit of the doctrine of revelation provides sufficient historical precedent to locate evangelism here.

Evangelism in Europe: Is there a European mindset?

The title I was given assumes that Europe is a 'postmodern context' for evangelism. There is an implicit assumption that there is such a thing as a European mindset. This echoes an assumption made by Lesslie Newbigin's programmatic essay 'Can the West be converted' published in 1985:

If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the Church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the Church... Can there be an effective missionary encounter with this culture – this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as 'the coming world civilization'.¹²

Newbigin asked both a prophetic and a culturally naive question. He offered a clarion call to missiologists who had been so busy engaging with the cultures of the non-western world that they had neglected an adequate missiological engagement with European cultures. But Newbigin seems to assume there is such a thing as a monolithic western culture. He argues this point specifically when he writes:

... our culture – not our culture in the multi-cultural sense but in its more mono-cultural sense... I mean that whatever may be the varieties of culture that are represented in our society we share what sociologists call 'a plausibility structure'.¹³

Despite his misappropriation of Peter Berger's 'plausibility structure concept'¹⁴ this quotation demonstrates Newbigin's conviction that there is an overarching homogeneity to western societies despite their apparent multi-cultural diversity. Newbigin assumes that all the inhabitants of a society – regardless of their individual cultures – share a common 'plausibility structure'. He goes on to argue that 'this plausibility structure – determines whether in any society any particular belief is plausible or not'.¹⁵ Thus for Newbigin it is the common plausibility structure that ultimately homogenises society and acts as the arbiter of what is held to be true by all the members of the society.

The above are not isolated quotations. In another paper addressing the issue of mission in a

pluralistic society¹⁶ Newbigin's opening statement is that 'No society is totally pluralist.' In every society there is what Peter Berger calls a 'plausibility structure'.¹⁷ Note the reference to a single plausibility structure which diminishes the importance of subcultural particularities.

Newbigin's failure to grasp the degree of diversity that is present within western society is hard to explain. The idea of homogenised western multicultural societies may be attributed to an assimilation model of cultural diversity. For example, despite the British government's commitment to multicultural policies that 'advocated integration rather than assimilation',¹⁸ where assimilation was seen as a 'flattening process' and integration promoted 'equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance',¹⁹ there is a homogenising tendency in British society. Being British does have an impact on all immigrants but to argue that it becomes the defining characteristic of the intellectual life of those immigrants is, I believe, naïve.

It is also true that globalisation often means westernisation²⁰ but this globalisation thesis is too simplistic an approach. It fails to take into consideration the way that 'non-western ideas also travel... back'²¹ and the way in which the perceived westernisation effect of globalisation has produced a culturally conservative backlash in some parts of the world.²² The same process can be seen in microcosm within western societies, as Konrad Raiser writes:

While there is the fear that globalisation will lead to the imposition of a unified culture based on the Western clause of consumerism, there is also growing evidence of the resistance of local communities defending their own culture or of migrants and indigenous communities trying to recover their cultural values and mark their difference from the dominant environment.²³

But by focussing virtually exclusively on a presumed shared Enlightenment bifurcation between fact and value, Newbigin underplays the significance of the cultural diversity within western societies. At first sight it might seem that he has fallen prey to what Graham Huggan describes as 'virtual multi-culturalism',²⁴ that is, Newbigin has adopted the unintentionally optimistic, and often politically motivated, skewed depiction of cultural integration. But his own experience of life in Winson Green, Birmingham, where he describes the relative openness of migrants to the Gospel²⁵

in comparison to people of English heritage, and his writings on Islam in Britain, demonstrate his awareness of the depth of cultural diversity. He also writes in a very different tone in a book that was published in the year of his death. In a chapter entitled 'Multiculturalism and Neutrality'²⁶ Newbigin writes:

... we are a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. The histories our children learn in school... are not coherent but vastly diverse. Whether at school or in the mosque, temple or gudwara, children learn many different histories and are shaped thereby into different identities. There are agonising tensions.²⁷

He was also well aware of the extent to which cultures shape concepts of identity and rationality due to the influence of both Berger and Alasdair MacIntyre on his epistemology and his approach to cultures. We can conclude that Newbigin was aware of the tensions between cultural groups in western societies. Why then does he so often write in a generalising way about supposed commonalities and not about the specifics of individual cultures? It may well be that he simply sought for a short-cut to engaging western cultures with the Gospel and therefore chose to ignore their diversity. But if the Church does not take into consideration the cultural uniqueness of the various ethnic groups in western societies it aligns itself with a new form of hegemonic imperialism. The Gospel demands to be contextualised into the subcultures of Europe. There is not a single articulation of the Gospel that is going to connect with the pluralism of the continent. Indeed, the European Values survey of 2008²⁸ shows an enormous variation in degrees of secularity. For example, the answers to the question about belief in God ranged from 95% affirmative answers in Turkey to just 16% in the Czech Republic and Estonia! The average affirmative response was 52%, exhibited in Austria and Lithuania. The suggestion that there is a single European mindset goes against the figures.

Late modernity and mission

Without either endorsing Newbigin's commitment to a single western 'plausibility structure' or discounting his vast missiological wisdom, his programmatic essay 'Can the West be converted?'²⁹ will be explored for its implications for contemporary European evangelisation. Newbigin sets out the contours for a missional engagement between

the Gospel and western culture. He points out that the key area of contention in this engagement is the nature of religious belief and specifically the bifurcation between the public world of facts and the private world of values. This observation plays such a significant part in his missiological project that it is worth exploring some of its implications for his doctrine of revelation and in particular for his theology of evangelism.

Newbigin argues that the Enlightenment was the decisive moment in the dichotomy of western thought into the public and private. Thus a central element in his apologetic approach is to tackle head-on this public/private dichotomy. Newbigin asks:

... what in our culture is the meaning of the word 'fact'? In its earliest use in the English language it is simply the Latin *factum*, the past participle of the verb 'to do', something which has been done. But plainly it has acquired a much richer meaning. In ordinary use 'fact' is contrasted with belief, opinion, value. Value-free facts are the most highly prized commodities in our culture.³⁰

The public/private division in knowledge continues in many European public discourses to this day.³¹ there is a distinction between, for example, religious truth and scientific truth, as Newbigin argues:

Our values, our views of what is good and bad, are a matter of personal opinion, and everyone is free to have his own opinions. But on the facts we must all agree. Here is the core of our culture.³²

This distinction between scientific truth and religious values continues despite contemporary philosophical deconstructions of the myth of scientific objectivity by philosophers of science such as Karl Popper³³ and Thomas Kuhn.³⁴ Newbigin argues that this dualistic approach has

at least from the eighteenth century... been the public culture of Europe, and has – under the name of 'modernisation' – extended its power into every part of the world.³⁵

Objective facts are for the public realm, taught at school and presented without the need for the preface 'I believe', while subjective values belong to the private world of religion and ethics.

With respect to what are called 'facts' a statement is either right or wrong, true or false. But with respect to values, and supremely with respect to

the religious beliefs on which these values ultimately rest, one does not use this kind of language.... They are matters of personal choice.³⁶

The empiricist movement effectively made science the arbiter of truth. Along with this came the 'corresponding downgrading of non-scientific systems of belief'.³⁷ This scepticism with regard to non-scientific truth claims can be clearly seen in the dismissive writings of David Hume:

If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.³⁸

Hume limits real knowledge and hard facts to mathematics and empirical science whilst relegating ethics and theology to the irrational and subjective world of personal values. This same approach is described by Newbigin in his analysis of contemporary western cultures. The fact/value dichotomy between science and religion became and was to remain a prevailing characteristic of modernity. The reaction to the elevation of science at the expense of values was that every other discipline tried to justify its existence by claiming to be a science. Paul Hiebert shows how many of the systematic theologies produced in the first half of the twentieth century reformulated theology in scientific terms.³⁹ Having been dismissed into the realm of the subjective, Christians reacted by defending the truth of Christianity through appealing to the objective facts of the resurrection or through arguing for the concrete existence of God through rational, self-evident proofs. This approach is still evident in popular apologetic literature.⁴⁰ It can also be seen in the way in which much preaching (including evangelistic preaching) is undertaken – we seek to boil a passage down to its basic components so that we can turn a biblical narrative into a series of bullet points. The very popular 'Four spiritual laws' presentation of the Gospel is a case in point. The introduction to this four point Gospel presentation is 'just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern your relationship with God'.⁴¹

In contrast, late modernity has a pessimistic view of the ability of the human mind to grasp reality. This leads to the view that truth is a mind-

dependent projection based on the context of the beholder in time and space. James Sire explains that under late modernity, truth cannot be objective because the 'ontological substructure'⁴² of the universe is not available, since an individual's mind looks at the world through a skewed perception of reality. Betty Craige illustrates this point when she writes, 'Things and events do not have an intrinsic meaning. There is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world.'⁴³

Newbigin and others provide this picture of the West, influenced by the late modern Enlightenment. But it is not a homogenous picture: Generationally, ethnically and geographically there is a huge diversity of worldviews across Europe.⁴⁴ Perhaps Newbigin's description best describes the predominant worldview accepted in some of the corridors of power across the continent, such as the European Parliament building in Brussels, the headquarters of MTV in Warsaw and the BBC World Service in London.

It is into this broad 'public European culture' that the Church seeks to carry out its mission. The rest of this article will explore two key missiological relationships that are vital to negotiate. Firstly, how do Christ, the Word of God and the words of the Gospel relate together? Secondly, what is the relationship between the words of the Gospel and the worship of the Church?

The word of God and the words of the Gospel

An Albanian church leader was asked to go on a fundraising trip to the United States for a campus based ministry whose two main evangelistic tools are a video presentation of the life of Christ and a four point Gospel outline. Standing in front of a crowded room of prospective supporters he said: 'For God loved the world so much that he sent, not a video, not a tract, but his Son.'⁴⁵ To be sure, things did not go as well as expected on the fundraising side; but this Albanian theologian raises an important question: What is the relationship between Christ's incarnation as the 'central revelatory act of God'⁴⁶ and the preaching of the Gospel? In the current phase of salvation history, how can one know the revelation of God in Christ? It does seem that according to the New Testament the normative post-ascension means of coming to know Christ is through the preaching of the Gospel. Jensen argues that the

...earliest Christians regarded [the Gospel] as the power of God for salvation, the indispensable way to the knowledge of God. For them it was primary revelation, the initial and fundamental way into the presence of God.⁴⁷

Jensen's argument is convincing; Paul in his epistles uses the terms Gospel and Christ interchangeably.⁴⁸ This is possible because the New Testament conception of the Gospel, as will be demonstrated, is preaching the person of Christ including the significance of his words, deeds and life.

But the Albanian's dissatisfaction with the *modus operandi* of the proclamation of the Gospel as merely a video to be broadcast or a set of bullet points to be transmitted from one person to another is still worth exploring especially as we sense a shift in the public discourse of Europe. Not every articulation of the Gospel is an accurate, appropriate or accessible presentation of the Gospel. The dissatisfaction with pre-packaged, impersonal regurgitations is worth exploring. I would like to suggest three signposts provided by Lesslie Newbigin's missiological project that have assisted my own evangelistic practice in European university missions and churches.

1. The Gospel and story

The recent emphasis on narrative in contemporary theology and preaching owes much to the post-liberal writings of people like Hans Frei and I believe also to Newbigin. Newbigin was ahead of his time in engaging with the narrative nature of the Gospel message. However, this emphasis was not always present in Newbigin's theology. In *What is the Gospel?*⁴⁹ Newbigin – in a similar vein to C.H. Dodd – sought a lowest common denominator approach to the Gospel, in which the key elements of the Gospel were distilled out of Peter's Pentecost sermon in an apparent bid to work out the minimal noetic elements of the Gospel. But Newbigin's evangelistic appropriation of the post-liberal approach to narrative theology led him to assert later:

The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story... here I think the eighteenth century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man... Any defence of the Christian faith... must take a quite different route. The Christian faith, rooted

in the Bible, is... primarily to be understood as an interpretation of the story – the human story set within the story of nature.⁵⁰

Newbigin identified for me the inadequacy of much of the apologetic literature that I had been devouring. I had tried to use the classical arguments for the existence of God with little fruit. My two-step process meant that I had to convince the listeners that a first cause, moral lawgiver or designer existed using pure reason and then also convince them through the use of historical and biblical evidence that this God was the Triune God of the Bible. Whereas this approach may have engaged some people from a monotheistic religious background such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims, it completely failed to engage anyone influenced by the late modern critique of the objectivity of rationality. Newbigin undercut this approach recognising, along with Alasdair MacIntyre, the need to ask the question, 'Which Justice and Whose Rationality?'⁵¹ If a supra-cultural rationality is not available to us then the idea that there would be a watertight apologetic argument that will work in every context is a myth.

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

2. The Gospel as public truth

Sometimes those who emphasise the narrative approach to theology underplay the historicity of the Jesus story. Newbigin shows how the two elements need not contradict each other. In his later books we find assertions such as:

It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story.⁵²

The gospels are 'human perceptions of the things that really happened'.⁵³

His thinking in this area was altered after a specific encounter of interreligious dialogue in which a Hindu commented told him:

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion... I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of human history...⁵⁴

As a result Newbigin was forced to reconsider the pietism, the ghettoisation and the reductionism of much evangelism. He was also provoked to think beyond the bifurcation between the subjective world of private values and the objective public world of facts that he attributed to the Enlightenment. Once again influenced by Michael Polanyi's philosophy of science, Newbigin debunks the myth of scientific objectivity. He commandeers the philosophy of Polanyi to argue against the alleged pure objectivity of the scientific process but he also wants to argue for the historicity of the Christian story. This not only refutes the Enlightenment's privileging of scientific knowledge but also refuses to allow Christians to reduce the Gospel to personal piety. Newbigin carefully avoids the excesses of rationalism without falling into absolute subjectivism. This approach revolutionised my own understanding of the Gospel – I find that I am less comfortable with approaches that focus solely on helping people to know that they are going to heaven when they die. (More recently, N.T. Wright has further helped my thinking in this respect.⁵⁵) I also find it imperative to talk about the implications of the Gospel not just for personal piety but also for politics, community, relationships, economics and justice. Our public as well as our private life is radicalised by the Gospel of grace. The words we speak in evangelism must accurately portray Christ, the word of God, who is not just a personal saviour but the cosmic Christ, Lord over all creation.

3. The Gospel in four dimensions

In *Sin and Salvation* Newbigin explained how sin amounts to four dimensions of alienation.⁵⁶ In a chapter entitled 'What is Salvation?' he outlines this four-dimensional schema as follows:

- Humankind is in a state of contradiction against the natural world

- Humankind is in a state of contradiction against his fellow human
- Humankind is in a state of inner self-contradiction
- Humankind is in a state of contradiction against God⁵⁷

Far from reducing the Gospel to four bite-size chunks, this schema points us to recapturing the immensity of the Gospel in four grand-scale dimensions. Newbigin then goes on to show that salvation can be understood as the repairing of these four fractured relationships which leads to 'the restoration of creation to its original purpose'.⁵⁸ Using this outline, the Gospel story can be expanded by following through how each of these four dimensions of salvation is worked out through creation, fall, redemption and consummation – a theme that I developed in my own evangelistic book.⁵⁹ This approach resonates well with younger adults, as there is recognition of the sense of the connectedness that exists between all things, and it naturally calls people to receive from God his gracious gift of reconciliation. It presents the need for integrity rather than for a dualistic soul insurance. It also calls people to join the adventure of participation in the *missio Dei*.

The Gospel according to Newbigin challenged my own understanding of the Gospel as simply a message that needed to be intellectually assented as a means to avoid eternal damnation. Of course, the Gospel is of immeasurable importance to the individual, with the need for personal faith and a personal response to God's call. But when salvation looks like the private rescue of an individual soul for an ethereal eternity rather than the radical restoration of all things we can fall into a number of traps. Sometimes we minimise repentance and the importance of the atonement, sometimes we underplay the resurrection and the social implications of the Gospel, sometimes we fail to pass on the importance of Church, community and ecology. Newbigin opened my eyes to the fact that the Gospel is bigger than we think and needs to include all four aspects of salvation. And in my experience, instead of putting people off the faith, the scale of the thing actually draws people in. Instead of being a lifestyle choice, Christianity returns to being a cause to live and die for which transforms relationships and the environment as well as our personal eternal destiny.

The words of the Gospel and the worship of the Church

... evangelism is the activity of the redeemed community seeking to share with all men the joy of redemption, and to welcome all men into the fellowship of those that share that joy. Much harm has been done by the wrong kind of individualism. The human element in evangelism must be the fellowship.⁶⁰

Pre-Newbigin my apologetics usually included an apology for the state of the Church. I argued that the personal relationship with God was central, not experience or impressions of the Church. I would compare the Church to a school orchestra generating a cacophonous noise playing a Mozart concerto and challenge people to conclude that either Mozart was a terrible composer or the performance was flawed. But Newbigin rightly argues that the Church is the chosen means of God's revelation of the Gospel – 'the hermeneutic of the Gospel'.⁶¹

A communal approach to apologetics and evangelism could have a profound impact on the church in Europe. The various commonly accepted modes of evangelism are individualistic: the platform apologist addressing a large crowd of sceptics and the individual Christian talking about the Gospel at a coffee break at work. But evangelism without respect for the Church and an understanding of the need for renewal and reformation of the Church is counterproductive. The evangelist Newbigin invested much of his life into ecumenism, arguing consistently and passionately that the Gospel is best served by a unified Church. In my own experience it is sadly often those who are most concerned about evangelism who are the least concerned about unity. This is probably an outworking of the minimalist, personalised Gospel that is preached.

In *The Reunion of the Church* Newbigin gave a theological defence of the 1947 Church of South India (CSI) unification scheme in which he played a strategic role.⁶² The CSI was the unification of the South India United Church (made up of Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches), the South Indian Methodist Church and Anglicans from the Church Missionary Society to form one visible institutional church. Newbigin saw that disunity undercut the Gospel in three key ways: firstly, division contradicts Christ's sufficiency; secondly, division contradicts the reconciliatory purpose of God; and thirdly, division contradicts the eschatological destiny of redeemed humanity.⁶³ Newbigin's powerful arguments chal-

lenged me to cross the tribal boundaries of evangelicalism as I worked with churches as diverse as Baptists, Brethren and Anglicans, with conservatives, charismatics and café-style church-planters. Ultimately it led me into my current position seeking unity for mission through the British Evangelical Alliance.

Newbigin was not an armchair theologian or a missiological number-cruncher working in an office block. He was a reflective practitioner – an idealistic prophet who called for the reformation of the Church with his feet firmly planted on the ground both when he was a bishop who equipped his diocese in Madras to be at the cutting edge of poverty relief, evangelism and apologetic engagement and when he was an aging missionary church leader in Winson Green, Birmingham.⁶⁴

Reconciliation

Understanding the significance of the local congregation as the hermeneutic of the Gospel has an important implication. If Newbigin's articulation of the four dimensional Gospel is accurate, a reconciled community is the best medium for the message of reconciliation. Newbigin argues this in his defence of his evangelistically motivated ecumenism:

A gospel of reconciliation can only be communicated by a reconciled fellowship... it will be communicated by the way of election, beginning from one visible centre and spreading always according to the law that each one is chosen in order to be the means of bringing the message of salvation to the next.⁶⁵

If the Gospel is the offer of individualised salvation, it is fitting for an individual with a privatised Gospel to be the basic unit of communication. But if the Gospel is the mystery hid before the ages, the multifaceted wisdom of God, if it is the secret of how Jews and Gentiles can be reconciled with God and with each other – as Ephesians declares it to be⁶⁶ – then the local church living out the Gospel as living attestation is a more fitting basic unit.

Worldview

N.T. Wright's approach to worldview function and maintenance highlights four interrelated axes which connect the elements of *story*, *questions*, *praxis* and *symbols*.⁶⁷ Firstly, 'worldviews provide the *stories* through which human beings view reality'.⁶⁸

Secondly, 'from these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic *questions* that determine human existence'. Thirdly, the answers that the stories provide to basic questions are expressed in cultural *symbols*. Fourthly, worldviews include 'a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world'.⁶⁹ The local congregation is the place where the Gospel can be experienced in all four dimensions and thus function as a hermeneutic of the Gospel.

Firstly the proclamation, study and meditation on God's word are vital for establishing as well as for maturing faith. It is how the Church knows its *story*. There is an urgent need for the Church to recapture clarity and confidence in the retelling of the biblical story, not as a set of atomised proof texts but as a real story of which every human being and indeed all of creation is part. Secondly it is in the faithful retelling of the story that people's *questions* about their existence will be answered. There is a dynamic interplay between these two axes of story and questions. If the questions of a culture dominate the teaching of the congregation there is the danger of compromising the integrity of the telling of the story of God – as the culture may centre on a set of questions that God's word subverts. Allowing a culture to set the agenda for the story can lead to distortion and corruption of the story. However, to ignore the cultural questions can compromise the communication of the Gospel; the listeners can end up dismissing the Gospel as irrelevant or insufficient because it seems to offer no answers to the questions that drive them. There is a need to practice 'faithful relevance', making sure the double listening takes place that preachers like John Stott have constantly called for.⁷⁰ In the answering of questions there is of course room for straight apologetics but the answers must be embodied in the life of a believing community – in other words, apologetics and systematic theology must be grounded in the third aspect – the *praxis* of the church.

According to Wright, the third aspect of worldview creation and sustenance is crucially connected with the life of the congregation. It is the translation of the word of God into the *praxis* of the church life. This is vital for the credibility and intelligibility of the Gospel. It is in the communal life of the church that people experience for themselves the praxis of the Gospel – in compassionate acts, in pastoral care one for the other, in the ethos of the common culture of the church's life together, in conversation, prayer for one another, in the models provided for raising children, in political engage-

ment, in the church's unwritten curriculum, in the simple and unintentional 'way things are done around here'.⁷¹ This praxis of the communal life is shaped and informed by the congregation's grasp of the story of God's dealings with his people and his planet as revealed in Scripture.

The fourth and final axis is that of *symbol*. The sacraments are a key aspect of how the communal life of the congregation embodies the story of the Gospel and provides tangible, multisensory experiences that underline the answers that the Gospel story provides to the questions of the culture. Baptism and Communion are deliberately corporate sacraments so that they provide another mechanism for the congregation to act, as Newbigin describes it, as the hermeneutic of the Gospel.

These four aspects of worldview construction and maintenance work synergistically. Hence in the life of the local church there is a need to reform all four areas to maximize the ways in which the corporate life of the church communicates the Gospel. As a communal apologetic is emphasised, the enlightenment bifurcation of fact and value, personal and public, is countered. The storied nature of the Gospel of Jesus is underlined. The potential of the multi-dimensional Gospel that presents spiritual, personal, social and environmental implications of the death, resurrection and return of Christ to be fully embodied in a people can be realised.

If the Gospel is simply the transfer of information from one person to another then the basic unit of Gospel communication can be a tract, a video or a sermon. But if the Gospel is both the announcement of the good news that universe transforming events have taken place and the working through of the implications of that news in repentance and faith at both an individual and corporate level, then it includes the renewal of minds, the transformation of affections away from idols to the true and living God, and the rethinking of how resources are used and distributed – to name but a few elements. Then we are talking about worldview transformation which is best achieved not just in oral, written or cinematic form, but through the embodied life of a congregation. A congregation provides the concrete set of relationships that not only allow for the speaking of Gospel truth but also for the practices that make the Gospel plausible and for the experience of participating in sacraments that were instituted to both proclaim and experience the Gospel. This approach makes sense of the heavy emphasis on ecclesiology in the New Testament, of the Early Church's strategy of church planting,

and of the insistence on Communion and Baptism as constituting practices of the Church.

Conclusion

In the complex missional context of pluralistic Europe with its overlapping mix of pre-modern, modern and late modern worldviews which compete with each other for superiority, Newbigin's missiology helps to call the Church back to biblical evangelism which clearly proclaims the biblical story as the true story about the whole of creation that is grounded in the public life of the whole Church as an embodiment of the Gospel message. Only when the Church faithfully communicates Christ, the Word of God, through preaching and enacting the biblical story will we effectively communicate the Gospel. In short, Newbigin calls the Church back to the practice of the Early Church which appeared to be no more than a powerless minority in a pluralistic society yet still dared to share the Gospel of Christ with great confidence and courage. Let us follow in their footsteps for the re-evangelisation of our continent.

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Notes

- 1 This article is the edited version of a paper presented at the 2010 conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) in Berlin.
- 2 P. Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); see also the European Values Study cited later.
- 3 E. Gellner, *Post-modernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992) 22.
- 4 V. Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail – Modern Idolatry and Christian mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) 3.
- 5 Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) 6.
- 6 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 6.
- 7 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 28.
- 8 J.F. Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition; a report on knowledge* (Theory and History of Literature Volume 10; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) xxiv.
- 9 A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 70.

- 10 For example J. Woodward and S. Pattison (eds.), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) contains not a single reference to mission or evangelism in its extensive index. There is a single fleeting reference to mission and evangelism on page 83.
- 11 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2: The doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958) 743-853.
- 12 L. Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted', *Princeton Seminary Review* 6 (1985) 25-37.
- 13 L. Newbigin, 'Evangelism in a Multi-cultural Society' – unpublished transcript made of Newbigin's address to the Hitchin Council of Churches on February 20, 1991 [Lesslie Newbigin Papers held in care of the Orchard Learning Resources Centre, Information Services, The University of Birmingham, Hamilton Drive, Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6QW, U.K.] page 1.
- 14 Berger means by the term 'plausibility structure' a form of group legitimisation and thus the social structure of religious practice. Newbigin uses it as a synonym for worldview. See P.L. Berger and T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).
- 15 Newbigin, 'Evangelism in a Multi-cultural Society', 1.
- 16 L. Newbigin, 'Mission in a Pluralist Society', a contribution to the Festschrift for Lukas Vischer, re-published in E. Jackson, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 158-176.
- 17 Newbigin, 'Mission in a Pluralist Society', 158.
- 18 G. Huggan, 'Virtual Multiculturalism: the case of contemporary Britain', *European Studies: A Journal of European Culture, History and Politics* 16 (2001) 70, citing the 1966 speech of Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary under the Wilson government in Great Britain.
- 19 Huggan, 'Virtual Multiculturalism', 70.
- 20 B. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism – cultural diversity and political theory* (London: MacMillan, 2000) 164.
- 21 Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, 164.
- 22 S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Touchstone, 1997).
- 23 K. Raiser, 'Opening Space for a Culture of Dialogue and Solidarity – the missionary objectives of the WCC in an age of globalisation and religious plurality', *International Review of Mission* 88 (1999) 199.
- 24 Huggan, 'Virtual Multiculturalism', 19.
- 25 L. Newbigin, 'The Pastor's Opportunities: VI. Evangelism in the City', *Expository Times* 98 (1987) 356.
- 26 L. Newbigin, J. Taylor and L. Sanneh (eds.), *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in a 'Secular' Britain* (London: SPCK, 1998) 3.
- 27 Newbigin et al., *Faith and Power*, 3.
- 28 <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs>
- 29 Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted?', 13.
- 30 Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted?', 30.
- 31 There are of course notable exceptions such as the uproar after the cartoons of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper Politiken. In 2010 the paper made a public apology for this. But this was certainly not a case of privatised belief bowing to the public discourse of fact; in fact, quite the reverse. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/26/danish-cartoons-muhammad-politiken-apology> [accessed 10/08/2010].
- 32 Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted?', 30.
- 33 K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: the growth of scientific knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).
- 34 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1970).
- 35 Newbigin, 'Can the West be converted?', 30.
- 36 L. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: the gospel and western culture* (London: SPCK, 1986) 16-17.
- 37 J. Taylor, 'Science and Christianity and the Post-Modern Agenda', *Science and Christian Belief* 10(2) (1998) 163.
- 38 D. Hume (1777), *Enquiries concerning human understanding and concerning the principles of morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- 39 P.G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 19.
- 40 N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) and J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City – a defence of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
- 41 www.godlovestheworld.com, the website of Global Media Outreach, an internet ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.
- 42 J. Sire, 'On being a fool for Christ and an idiot for nobody' in T.R. Phillips and D.L. Okholm (eds.), *Christian Apologetics in the Post-modern World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995) 102.
- 43 Quoted in Sire, 'A fool for Christ', 104.
- 44 Indeed many staff workers of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students can testify to this through the heavy utilisation of the worldview survey across campus ministries.
- 45 Zeff Nikolai, General Secretary of BSKSh, Albania.
- 46 K. Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 1.
- 47 P. Jensen, *The Doctrine of Revelation* (Leicester: IVP, 2002) 43.
- 48 In Philippians 1:15, 17, 18 Paul describes evangelism in terms of preaching 'Christ' whereas in Romans 1:9, 15 he talks of preaching 'the Gospel'.
- 49 L. Newbigin, *What is the Gospel?*, SCM Study Series

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 - 52 L. Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1996) 40.
 - 53 L. Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1999) 4.
 - 54 Newbigin, *Walk*, 4.
 - 55 N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2008).
 - 56 L. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1956).
 - 57 Gender-inclusive language added – ed.
 - 58 Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, 124.
 - 59 K. Kandiah, *Destiny – Finding the life you always wanted* (Oxford: Monarch, 2007).
 - 60 L. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme* (London: SCM, 1948) 32.
 - 61 Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, 223.
 - 62 Newbigin, *Reunion*.
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 - 65 L. Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1953) 141.
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 - 68 Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, 123, emphasis added.
 - 69 Wright, *New Testament and People of God*, 124, emphasis added.
 - 70 J.R.W. Stott, *I believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).
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