

AN EVANGELICAL EVALUATION OF KEY ELEMENTS
IN LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S APOLOGETICS

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PREFACE

Lesslie Newbigin is an impressive writer and thinker. His analysis of western culture is clear and readable. He writes with a passion for his topic and with a clear sense of mission to encourage the church to defend the lordship of Jesus Christ boldly before the world. My interest in Newbigin was piqued by the opportunity to write a paper on his understanding of the uniqueness of Christ and the mission of the church for Dr. John Newport's seminar on contemporary philosophical issues. I was intrigued by Newbigin's insistence on the gospel as truth for all of humanity and on Jesus Christ as Lord of all of life, especially as there were areas where his defense did not seem to support the full breadth of orthodox faith. This dissertation is the result of my investigation into why Newbigin's defense of Christian truth claims stops short of affirming all of those truths that have been so important for Christians historically.

I would like to acknowledge those who encouraged my intellectual and spiritual formation. My mother stimulated in me from early childhood a love for reading and enthusiasm for intellectual pursuits. My professors at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary and at Southwestern Seminary encouraged me to love and understand the word of God and to refine my doctrinal commitments.

Thanks are in order to many whose help made this dissertation possible. Dr. John Newport gave me the opportunity to study seriously Newbigin's thought during the seminar, "Contemporary Philosophical Issues." Dr. Douglas Blount pointed me to Alvin Plantinga's defense of reformed epistemology which helped refine and strengthen my convictions regarding the essential role of presuppositionalism as a method of defending Christian truth claims. Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr. provided background and encouragement. The staff of the A. Webb Roberts Library have always be ready and able to assist, and for this I am grateful. My wife, Laverne, has been a continual source of encouragement and insight as well as a sounding board for ideas. She is my friend, companion, sweetheart, and a dedicated servant of Jesus Christ. Finally, Dr. Keith Putt, the dissertation supervisor, has more than once helped me refine my thinking. He has encouraged me to write about those aspects of Newbigin's thought that I believed were really important, and has kept me from chasing numerous interesting but irrelevant "rabbits."

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INTRODUCTION

The western world is in a time of transition. Modernity is giving way to post-modern understandings of reality. Western dominance is being challenged as third world countries develop. The baby-boom generation has matured and American culture is increasingly driven by Generation X. An industrial society is giving way to an information-based society, and traditional understandings of morality, truth and value are being challenged.

Evangelicalism is in a period of transition as well, marked by numerical growth and a deeper examination of its relationship to the larger world. Alister McGrath has spoken of an “Evangelical Renaissance,”¹ pointing to Evangelicalism’s growth, numerically and in terms of influence. The body of solid evangelical scholarship has grown and evangelical scholars are examining Evangelicalism’s doctrinal, cultural, and practical commitments at many levels. In addition, evangelical scholars recognize that the gospel must be defended before a western world that is far different from the world of the previous three centuries. They have attempted to analyze the philosophical and cultural changes that confronts the church today in order that the Christian faith might be better defended.² There is general agreement among evangelical scholars that the Enlightenment program has failed and the crisis this precipitates must be understood if Christians are to defend the gospel knowledgeably and effectively in the coming decades.

The church must carefully examine every serious proposal for defending the gospel.

¹Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 17-51.

²Typical efforts in this direction include: Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968); Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death: A Critique of the Establishment and the Counter Culture--and a Proposal for a Third Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973); Stanley Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992); William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994); Richard J. Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

Recently, Lesslie Newbigin, a prominent figure in the mainline ecumenical movement, has sought to call the attention of the western church to the realities of the cultural crisis. He defends Christianity against pluralism insisting that the biblical worldview and the gospel are true for all and everyone.³ Newbigin wants the church to understand the cultural milieu in which it finds itself, how the Bible functions as authoritative in that situation, and how the church may effectively bring the gospel to bear on the larger world. The concerns that Newbigin raises, and the defense he offers is worthy of careful and critical hearing within Evangelical circles.

Newbigin's analysis of these matters is important because he presents an approach that looks plausible on the surface, and which is similar to approaches taken by some evangelical scholars in recent years. At first, one is eager to embrace Newbigin's words about confidence in Scripture and in the historicity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His thought, however, requires a careful evaluation to discover exactly what he means by these things and their implications for the self understanding of Christianity as it confronts a changing world. Such an evaluation will be enhanced by an understanding of his life, and of the forces which shaped his thought.

Lesslie Newbigin's Life

Newbigin was born on December 8, 1909⁴ "in Northumbria, the son of a Presbyterian businessman in shipping and a Scottish mother."⁵ His was a home that encouraged education, appreciation for the arts, and the courage to defend convictions that may not always be popular.⁶ By the time he reached college, he had abandoned Christian beliefs

³Lesslie Newbigin, "Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 44:2 (November 1993): 339-50.

⁴Bernard G. Thorogood, "Apostolic Faith: An Appreciation of Lesslie Newbigin, Born 8 December 1909," *International Review of Mission* 79, no. 313 (January 1990): 66.

⁵Martin Conway, "God-Open, World-Wide, and Jesus-True: Lesslie Newbigin's Faith Pilgrimage," *Midstream: An Ecumenical Journal* 34 (January 1995): 22.

⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (London: SPCK, 1985; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1-4.

though he was open to the fact that “Christian faith was not irrational.”⁷

While a student at Queens College, Cambridge, he came to faith in Christ through the ministry of the Student Christian Movement and later became a secretary for SCM.⁸ A few years later, he sailed for India “as a missionary of the Church of Scotland,”⁹ and became involved in the efforts which led to the formation of the Church of South India, a union of three denominations.¹⁰ This experience must have had a profound influence on Newbigin, as the union of these churches must have seemed like a harbinger of the hopes that drove the World Council of Churches. Ecumenism, and a general concern for bringing various Christian groups together around the gospel to some extent drove his apologetic.¹¹

In 1959, he became General Secretary of the International Missions Council, which was even then on its way to becoming the World Council of Churches. After the International Missions Council’s formal incorporation into the World Council of Churches, he became director of that body’s Commission on World Missions and Evangelism.¹² A missionary at heart, Newbigin could not resist the opportunity to return to the field, which he did in 1965 as Bishop of Madras for the Church of South India.¹³

At age 65, in 1974, Newbigin retired from mission service and returned to England. It is a testimony to his vigor at that age that he and his wife chose to make the trip overland

⁷Ibid., 6.

⁸Ibid., 8-21.

⁹Conway, 22.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Christian Mission and Culture, ed. Alan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin and Wilbert R. Shenk (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 32-34. Newbigin believed that a proper understanding of the gospel would unite the liberal and conservative wings of the church, and that a united Christianity would more effectively defend the gospel.

¹²Conway, 23.

¹³Thorogood, 70.

through Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, and on into Europe.¹⁴ In addition, he could not remain “retired” for long. He taught missions at Selly Oaks Colleges, Birmingham, and, in order to prevent its being closed down, took the pastorate of an inner city church in Birmingham.¹⁵ Many of his most important books and articles were written after he was 70 years old. Newbigin’s experience with the Birmingham church brought home to him how deep the crisis in the west had really become. In the community surrounding the church, Newbigin encountered a situation more difficult than he had faced in India. As he described it at the time, he discovered

a cold contempt for the gospel which is harder to face than opposition. As I visit the Asian homes in the district, most of them Sikhs or Hindus, I find a welcome which is often denied on the doorstep of the natives. I have been forced to recognize that the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world is the one of which the churches have been--on the whole--so little conscious, the frontier that divides the world of biblical faith from the world whose values and beliefs are ceaselessly fed into every home on the television screen.¹⁶

Having been confronted with the harsh realities of the post-Christian west, Newbigin was eager to begin the work which would make him known to a much wider audience--defending the gospel to a post-Enlightenment culture. He remained a vigorous advocate of a bold defense of the gospel until his death on January 30, 1998.¹⁷

Lesslie Newbigin as Apologist

Newbigin’s experience as a pastor in Birmingham turned his attention to the realities of the post-Christian west. As he wrote, “England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest

¹⁴Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 224-39.

¹⁵Thorogood, 72.

¹⁶Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 249.

¹⁷Obituary of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin; available from <http://churchnet.ucsm.ac.uk/news/files2/newbigin.htm>; Internet.

intellectual and practical task facing the Church.”¹⁸ His concerns, therefore, turned more philosophical, and to defending a specific perspective on the gospel, one which he believes the church should adopt if it is to be effective in decades to come.

Three key elements are found in Newbigin’s apologetic, and they form the substance of this dissertation. These elements are very important to Newbigin and to Evangelicals as well. The elements are his conception of how truth is understood in western culture and its relationship to the gospel, biblical authority, and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

The Enlightenment has shaped how the modern world perceives truth, and is thus a matter of genuine concern for a defense of Christian faith. Evangelicals contend that the gospel is historically and doctrinally true. Newbigin critiques the Enlightenment’s understanding of truth as grounded solely in the scientific method and mathematics. This, he believes, restricts truth to a range too narrow for the truth claims of the gospel to be accepted. Like Evangelicals, Newbigin believes that the truthfulness of the gospel is essential. It cannot be merely a story; it must be something which actually happened and which touches the real world.

The second element considered in this dissertation is Newbigin’s understanding of biblical authority. The Bible, Newbigin believes, derives its authority from its historical situatedness. Far from being an argument against Scripture’s claim to universal validity, this for Newbigin actually undergirds it. Since the events recorded in the gospels actually happened in history, they are part of public facts, and everyone must reckon with them. The third element is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his role in the church and in the world. Newbigin defends the lordship of Christ and his essential role in human history and destiny. These matters are essential, and Newbigin defends his views on them with passion, clarity and a sincere desire to see the church fulfill its role as a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God in the world. Evangelicals share this passion even as they may disagree with Newbigin’s approach to these questions. Newbigin gives all Christians a call to boldness and conviction, and to personal and intentional understanding of the issues as they seek to live out and proclaim the truth of Christianity at the cusp of a new century.

¹⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER ONE
NEWBIGIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF MODERN
WESTERN CULTURE AND THE GOSPEL

Lesslie Newbigin encouraged Christians in the west to look at their world as if they were missionaries to an alien culture. The western church, which has sought to challenge other cultures from a biblical perspective, has failed to realize the extent to which its own culture is “foreign” to the biblical worldview. The western church has been too much a part of its own culture and looks at the gospel from that perspective. It must begin to critique the larger culture from the point of view of the gospel if it is to communicate the gospel effectively in the church’s own setting.¹ Without understanding this culture from an outsider’s perspective, the church will have no basis for challenging the “post-Christian paganism” that pervades modernity.²

Newbigin contends that the church must commend the gospel to the western world as truth, as the way reality functions, not as just another religious option. It will not do merely to be an enclave, he says, for the very nature of the gospel will not allow that. The gospel asserts that God has done certain things in history, and that all of reality is to be understood in the light of God’s actions and purposes.

Newbigin’s critique of the west focuses on the matter of epistemological method, how modern people believe that truth is discovered and verified.³ He “questions whether the whole thrust of modernization is not philosophically and theologically wrong, a contradiction of the gospel.”⁴ He recognizes that the modern enterprise rests on a rationalist and empirist

¹Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 22.

²Charles C. West, “Mission to the West: A Dialogue with Stowe and Newbigin,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 4 (October 1988): 154.

³John Williams, “The Gospel as Public Truth: A Critical Appreciation of the Theological Programme of Lesslie Newbigin,” *Anvil: An Anglican Evangelical Journal for Theology and Mission* 10, no. 1 (1993): 14.

⁴David M. Stowe, “Modernization and Resistance: Theological Implications,”

foundation, which leaves no room for religious truth. He wants to replace the western rational and empiricist conception of truth with one in which the gospel may be seen as true.

Modern Western Culture

Its Source: The Enlightenment

Western culture stands captive to “a false faith derived from the humanist confidence of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment”⁵ The Enlightenment, Newbigin believes, was “a shift in the location of reliable truth from the story told in the Bible to the eternal truths of reason.”⁶ This that has had ramifications, not only for technology, but also for political, social, and religious life. The western world of the late twentieth century is the western world produced by the Enlightenment and its method of discovering truth. While he is aware that the Enlightenment has not been entirely evil,⁷ he believes that it was an epistemological turn in the wrong direction.

The Enlightenment was not so much one movement as “a family of philosophies.”⁸ Its key lies more in “how men thought than in *what* they thought.”⁹ Newbigin properly focuses his critique on Enlightenment epistemology. The problem which the west faces today, he believes, began when truth was established on the wrong foundation.

International Bulletin of Missionary Research 12, no. 4 (October 1988): 147.

⁵West, “Mission,” 154.

⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 73.

⁷In fact, he says “we must gratefully acknowledge the imminent achievements of these past two centuries.” The Enlightenment has, in fact, “been the most brilliant period in human history thus far . . .” (Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 1 [January 1987]: 5).

⁸Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation--The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), x.

⁹Lester G. Crocker, “Introduction,” in *Blackwell's Companion to the Enlightenment*, ed. John W. Yolton *et al.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 1.

Newbigin recognizes that the Enlightenment was a conversion, a turning point in history. There was at that time an “exhilarating feeling that light has come into the world and banished the darkness.”¹⁰ New ways to understand reality came into play, and older ones were scrapped. Europe emerged from a dark hole into the sunshine of reason and truth.¹¹ This “volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science”¹² was led by men who were aware they were recreating the world along new lines.

Specifically, the Enlightenment attempted to replace ancient authorities as the locus of truth with pure reason and empiricism.¹³ Enlightenment thinkers established the principle that “reliable knowledge is to be had by the relentless exercise of the critical method. Dogma can no longer be accepted on its own terms.”¹⁴ Appeal to ancient authority, “the iron grip of dogma,”¹⁵ was replaced by the “promise of the universal reign of reason over all peoples and cultures.”¹⁶ Old ideas were submitted to rigorous scrutiny “using the tools of critical thought to dissolve what had hitherto been taken for granted.”¹⁷ Every previously accepted idea was reexamined and, in the main, discarded, since “the human mind is equipped with a power of reason which is capable of discovering the real facts and so

¹⁰Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 23.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Gay, *Interpretation*, 8.

¹³Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 11.

¹⁴Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 29.

¹⁵Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 23.

¹⁶Lesslie Newbigin, “Gospel and Culture--but Which Culture?” *Missionalia* 17, no. 3 (November 1989): 214.

¹⁷Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 347-48.

liberating us from mere tradition and superstition.”¹⁸ The result, its leaders were certain, would be “a single civilization moving progressively toward universality.”¹⁹

Newbiggin is aware that such a startling change did not come about suddenly and without warning. There were certainly antecedents to the Enlightenment, situations which broke up the intellectual soil and prepared it for new paradigms. Any movement as complex as this one can have no simple explanation, and this is certainly true of the Enlightenment.²⁰ Recognizing this, Newbiggin identifies several precursors of the Enlightenment.²¹ The earliest of these was the translation of texts from the ancient world into Latin.²² These had survived in Arabic translations, and their translation grew out of greater interaction between the Muslim and Christian worlds of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These texts and the commentaries on them produced by Muslim philosophers such as Alfarabi and Avicenna led to the incorporation of Aristotelian philosophy into Christian thought.²³ Thomas Aquinas was probably the most significant medieval thinker to be influenced by these newly available texts. Reacting to Muslim work on Aristotle, he formulated his proofs of the existence of God. To some extent he derived his proofs from Muslim, Jewish and other sources,²⁴ but his God was the God of Aristotle’s unmoved mover. His proofs came to be seen as too fragile to work and “the centuries following Aquinas saw the shadow of skepticism spreading across the mind of Christendom.”²⁵ By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, skepticism was

¹⁸Newbiggin, *Truth to Tell*, 21.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰Crocker, 2.

²¹Newbiggin, *Foolishness*, 23.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Newbiggin, “Certain Faith,” 341.

²⁴Norman L. Geisler and Winfred Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 158.

²⁵Newbiggin, “Certain Faith,” 342.

“almost overwhelming.”²⁶ While Newbigin may be overstating his case, certainly the work of Aquinas and others who interacted with classical authors and their Muslim commentators encouraged the development of the western commitment to rationalism.²⁷

This intellectual ferment led to “the founding of the great Medieval Universities,”²⁸ further contributing to an environment conducive to the Enlightenment. In addition, the Renaissance with its emphasis on humanistic ideals, and the Reformation which contributed to the breakdown of religious consensus and a critique of the value of tradition also helped set the stage for the Enlightenment.²⁹

He finds two focal centers of Enlightenment epistemology: the new way of seeing reality that resulted from the rise of modern science and the “new method in philosophy opened up by Descartes.”³⁰ Both rested on empiricism, the idea that one discovers truth through personal investigation. “The new development in science associated with the names of Bacon, Galileo and Newton”³¹ opened up new methods of gaining knowledge and demonstrated that the world is not always as it seems.³² Bacon sought to replace metaphysical speculation with hard facts.³³ He rejected Aristotelian teleology, the idea that all things have a proper end or purpose.³⁴ The early astronomers, including Galileo, “shattered the world in which the inhabitants of western Europe had felt themselves at home

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 341.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 23.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 25.

³³Ibid., 21; idem, *Foolishness*, 76.

³⁴Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 76.

for 1000 years,”³⁵ by demonstrating that the planets looked different through his telescope than they appeared to the unaided eye.³⁶

Equally important for the future development of science was “the vision of the nature of reality opened up . . . by the work of Isaac Newton.”³⁷ Newton’s “brilliant vision” of a world governed “not by purpose but by natural laws of causes and effect”³⁸ created the modern scientific worldview. Newton sought to formulate these laws mathematically. His work was a complement to Bacon’s method which focused on rigorous empiricism to discover the facts regarding the natural world. Newton’s mechanistic laws and Bacon’s insistence on “facts” led to efforts to explain the universe “in natural terms”³⁹ rather than in terms of divine purpose. Causality, not purpose, drove the efforts of seventeenth century scientists who laid the foundations for modern science.⁴⁰ Newton and others replaced the Greek and Medieval concept of purpose at work in nature with a new understanding of a world moved by natural laws of cause and effect.⁴¹ For example, the rotation of the planets is no longer explained in terms of “the perfection of the divine will, but the uniform operation of the laws of inertia and gravitation.”⁴² Everything could be “explained by the causes that produced them.”⁴³

³⁵Newbiggin, *Truth to Tell*, 25.

³⁶It was Galileo who discovered the rings of Saturn, dispelling the idea that all the planets looked essentially alike.

³⁷Newbiggin, *Foolishness*, 23-24.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 24.

³⁹Crocker, 4.

⁴⁰Newbiggin, “Can the West,” 6.

⁴¹Newbiggin, *Foolishness*, 24.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

It is on the matter of purpose that Newbigin is most critical of science.⁴⁴ It eliminates an entire area of truth. When purpose is excluded from questions regarding truth, the universe is explained in impersonal mathematical terms leaving no place for One who has designed it with intent in mind. Science, because of its method, cannot discover purpose, having already eliminated it as a category. Purpose is discovered, not by investigating and describing processes and states of being, but “by listening to the person whose purpose it is.”⁴⁵ An understanding of the universe, which excludes the concept of purpose, is one in which religious truth claims have no place.

This revolution in science did not take place in an intellectual vacuum. Behind it lay Descartes’ philosophical method.⁴⁶ This occupies a key place in the development of western thought and, as Newbigin describes it, “we in our particular culture are all heirs of Descartes.”⁴⁷ Descartes “exalted the ‘critical principle’ to a position of priority in the search for reliable knowledge.”⁴⁸ He lived in a time when skepticism was growing, largely, Newbigin believes, as a result of the failure of Thomist thought to provide a rational basis for truth and for the existence of God. Efforts were being made at that time to overcome skepticism and to reestablish a sure basis for knowing.⁴⁹ Descartes himself sought “to find a fresh starting point for thought,”⁵⁰ to clear away tradition and dogma and establish truth on indubitable foundations.

⁴⁴Cause and effect, having replace teleology as a concern under the scientific method (Ibid., 23), did produce some positive results. It “gave unlimited scope for probing, dissecting, exploring and experimenting” (idem, “Can the West,” 6).

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 23.

⁴⁷Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 27.

⁴⁸Lesslie Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach,” *Studia Missionalia* 42 (1993): 231.

⁴⁹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 20.

⁵⁰Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 25.

Descartes' method begins with doubt.⁵¹ At this point Descartes' thinking reversed Augustine's which had begun with faith (*credo ut intelligam*). For Descartes, "the way to certain knowledge is not faith, but doubt."⁵² He believed that one should doubt anything that is not established as certain by the individual knower. Nothing, he believed, should be accepted on authority originating outside the self. From this beginning, Descartes engaged in a process "involving three steps."⁵³ The first was to "begin with something which is self evident and indubitable."⁵⁴ For Descartes, this was his own existence as a thinking mind⁵⁵ which was proven to him by the fact that he could not doubt his own thought processes.⁵⁶ The second step for Descartes was to continue "by deductive reasoning"⁵⁷ seeking to develop "propositions which can be demonstrated with the precision, clarity and certainty of mathematics."⁵⁸ Starting from himself, Descartes believed that he could reason his way to any number of propositions that would be indubitably true. He determined that he would

⁵¹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 20-21. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated*, 3d ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 17. Descartes determined to reject "everything that admits of the least doubt, as if I had discovered it to be completely false. I will stay on this course until I know something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least know for certain that nothing is certain."

⁵²Newbigin, "Certain Faith," 343.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 342.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*; idem, "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach," 231.

⁵⁵Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 26; idem, *Proper Confidence*, 36.

⁵⁶For Descartes, the first indubitable fact was that he was a thinking being, expressed in the *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am" (René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* [New York: Liberal Arts, 1950], 21). The second was the intuitive realization that God exists, which he defended in a manner similar to that of Anselm's ontological argument (*Ibid.*, 22-25, and more fully in idem, *Meditations*, 24-35).

⁵⁷Newbigin, "Certain Faith," 342.

⁵⁸Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach," 231.

hold to no conclusions that could be doubted in any way.⁵⁹ Third, he determined to test his conclusions by the critical method. Descartes used the “critical principle to filter out all that is dubitable.”⁶⁰ Whatever did not rise to the level of certainty was not knowledge but belief. The critical principle guaranteed certainty on all matters of knowledge.

This method of thinking fit in well with the empirical scientific method developed by Bacon and the concept of natural law established on mathematical principles which Newton helped engender. Descartes influenced the next generation of thinkers and scientists, and his methods dominated “the development of thought in Europe for three centuries.”⁶¹

Descartes’ influence, Newbigin believes, led to three dualisms which have damaged the ability of the western world to understand and appreciate biblical truth.⁶² The first of these dualisms exists between the world of the mind and the external or physical world, the world of matter. Descartes established here a physical-mental dualism similar to the Platonic dualism of sensible world and world of ideal forms.⁶³ The mind does not have extension in the world, but “looks in on the cosmos from outside.”⁶⁴ According to Newbigin, this leads to the conclusion that God, as part of the non-material world, cannot interact with the physical world, “the world of material things and historical happenings.”⁶⁵ This begins the process of removing God as a factor in the physical world. The second dualism is the “divorce between the objective and the subjective poles in human knowing.”⁶⁶ This led to science becoming

⁵⁹Descartes, *Discourse*, 12.

⁶⁰Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 343.

⁶¹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 22.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 36-38.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁴Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 344.

⁶⁵Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 22.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

the arena of “Truth” while other areas of knowledge were dismissed as less valid.⁶⁷ Thus, “in the 19th Century, popularizers of science as an alternative to religion propagated the idea that ‘scientific knowledge’ was ‘objective’ and that other claims to knowledge . . . were subjective.”⁶⁸ The west has “been dominated by the ideal of a kind of knowledge that is objective in the sense that it involves no personal commitment on the part of the knower.”⁶⁹ The third dualism is “the dichotomy . . . between theory and practice.”⁷⁰ Newbigin believes that this contradicts Scripture’s claim that believing and acting are one. His example of this is Jesus’ words to Peter, “Follow me.”⁷¹ Peter’s action of leaving his nets and following Jesus is an act of faith. What is popularly called “head knowledge,” Newbigin contends, is a product of this dualism and forms no part of the Bible’s understanding of truth.

Newbigin concludes that the Cartesian project failed. Descartes’ “fatal flaw” was that “he sought a basis of certainty in his own mind and not in the faithfulness of God.”⁷² In addition, Descartes, by reversing Augustine’s approach, elevated doubt “to a principle of honour” while dogma was “reduced to a rude word.”⁷³ Descartes’ “false ideal of a kind of

⁶⁷Ibid., 37-38.

⁶⁸Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 344.

⁶⁹Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 33.

⁷⁰Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 23.

⁷¹Ibid., 38-39.

⁷²Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 25. According to Newbigin, Descartes grounded his proof of the existence of God in his own mind, not in God’s revelation of himself (Lesslie Newbigin, “Truth and Authority in Modernity,” in *Faith and Modernity*, ed. Philip Sampson, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden [Oxford, UK: Regnum, 1994], 6). The result was a part of the overall shifting of the locus of truth away from God and toward the individual thinker. This contention is less clear than Newbigin makes it. God, for Descartes, was the *cause* of Descartes’ conception of God. In this sense Descartes would argue that his proof of God is grounded in the reality of God’s existence. Further, it may be argued that Descartes sought to ground epistemic certainty in the faithfulness of God who, as creator, set up the world, and the individual who investigates it, and who has no intention of deceiving his creatures (Descartes, *Meditations*, 36).

⁷³Douglas Spanner, review of *The Other Side of 1984*, by Lesslie Newbigin,

knowledge which is immune to doubt”⁷⁴ is ultimately unattainable. Doubt is the beginning point and every concept “must be open to criticism.”⁷⁵ The result has been “a prejudice in favor of doubt over belief.”⁷⁶ The skepticism that Descartes sought to eradicate has instead become the reigning factor in the western approach to truth. This “shadow of skepticism” has been “most pervasively present in the affirmation of Kant that we cannot know the realities with which we have to deal but only their appearances.”⁷⁷ This, Newbigin points out, is a contradiction in itself--the claim to “know” that ultimate reality is “unknowable.”⁷⁸ The Enlightenment has been called the “Age of Reason”⁷⁹ because the leaders of the movement were committed to reason as the final arbiter of truth. They defined reason as “those analytical and mathematical powers by which human beings could attain (at least in principle) to a complete understanding of and, thus a full mastery of, nature.”⁸⁰ The reasoning mind, guided by Descartes’ method, “cannot bow before any arbiter other than what it calls the facts.”⁸¹

Churchman 104, no. 4 (1990): 372.

⁷⁴Lesslie Newbigin, “Religion, Science, and Truth in the School Curriculum,” *Theology* 91, no. 741 (May 1988): 192.

⁷⁵Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 23.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 343.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 25.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

Its Result: The Fact/Values Distinction

The results of the Enlightenment program have been profound especially in emphasizing and defining the realms of fact and values. Descartes' method and the dualisms it set up led to a distinction between two worlds, one public and the other private.⁸² These are "a world of what are called 'facts,' which is the world of public life, politics, business, education; and a world of values which are matters of personal choice."⁸³ Science is the realm of facts; all other fields are "merely subjective."⁸⁴ As a result, Europe became a place where "reason" and "facts" ruled the public sphere while "religion" was confined to the private sphere.⁸⁵ Facts can be shown to be true or they are not facts at all. Values, having no relation to truth, cannot be true or false in any way.⁸⁶ Facts are what is known; values are "what some people believe."⁸⁷ Everyone agrees to what the facts are because they are verified by reason and the scientific method. Facts form the "public world" of modern life.⁸⁸ The private world is a world of opinions and personal preferences on matters related to religious values and ethical and lifestyle choices.⁸⁹

These two realms, completely separate in the minds of westerners, offer the key to modern culture.⁹⁰ No value, no moral or religious truth claim may be absolutized, for these

⁸²Lesslie Newbigin, "Religion for the Marketplace," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) 136.

⁸³Lesslie Newbigin, "Episcopacy and Authority," *Churchman* 104, no. 4 (1990): 336.

⁸⁴Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 22.

⁸⁵Newbigin, "Religion for the Marketplace," 136.

⁸⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 17.

⁸⁷Newbigin, "Religion, Science and Truth," 189.

⁸⁸Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 18-19.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁰Timothy Phillips, review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27 (April 1991), 207.

“are a matter of personal opinion and everyone is free to have his own opinions.”⁹¹ Facts, the conclusions reached by empirical science, are, conversely, something on which “we must all agree.”⁹²

This distinction between facts and values, Newbigin believes, has its source in the Enlightenment’s commitment to reason and to the “inductive method” of science which “has been basic to the whole development of the modern scientific worldview.”⁹³ has led to this problem. Again, the abandonment of purpose or end as a concern for science becomes a factor.⁹⁴ The Enlightenment abandoned Aristotelian teleology as relevant to truth, and matters of “fact” have now become “value-free, because value is a concept related to the purpose for which a thing either is or is not well fitted.”⁹⁵

Newbigin cites an example from MacIntyre of a watch. If the watch keeps exceptionally good time, this may be measured and empirically verified. One may conclude that it is a “good watch” on this basis only if one understands that the purpose of the watch is to keep time. If one understands the watch only as a collection of parts, “bits of metal which can be used according to the personal preferences of its owner,” then it is only a matter of individual opinion whether “it is a good watch or not.”⁹⁶ From a scientific perspective, one can only describe the watch, measure it, delineate the various parts and functions. This illustrates how the scientific method, while providing much information, actually excludes the most important facts. This, Newbigin says, is precisely what modern culture has done in excluding religious and moral truth claims from serious consideration.

⁹¹Stowe, 148.

⁹²Newbigin, “Can the West,” 5.

⁹³Ibid., 4. Newbigin credits “Lord Bacon who advised his contemporaries to abjure speculation and collect facts,” with being the progenitor of the modern understanding of what a “fact” is (Ibid.). See also idem, “Certain Faith,” 345.

⁹⁴Ibid., 6.

⁹⁵Ibid., 5.

⁹⁶Ibid. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 55-57.

Facts, Newbigin believes, have become “the centerpiece of the plausibility structure by which our culture seeks to sustain itself.”⁹⁷ The sociologist Peter Berger coined the term “plausibility structure” to describe the set of assumptions and ideas which are foundational to the way a culture sees reality. It determines what ideas and beliefs may be accepted within that culture.⁹⁸ Berger “argued that the distinctive feature of this culture is that there is no generally acknowledged ‘plausibility structure’.”⁹⁹ Newbigin contends, however, that there is a plausibility structure in the west; one where “facts” are what is true and indisputable, verifiable according to the scientific method, but “values” are wholly private, unverifiable, and neither true nor false in any transcendent sense.¹⁰⁰ This plausibility structure “is the belief that the scientific method--which has been so enormously fruitful for human life--is the only reliable way to understanding the total human situation.”¹⁰¹ This shapes the way reality may be described. Certainty ascribes to facts which all must accept, but on matters of value, one incurs “the charge of bigotry” if one treats them in the same way.¹⁰²

This fact/values distinction shows up in modern culture in a variety of ways. For example, morality and ethics have become arenas where “there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ styles of life. Perhaps the only thing that is really wrong is condemning as wrong the

⁹⁷Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 17.

⁹⁸Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 16-18. Thus certain beliefs are automatically excluded from consideration simply because they do not fit into the plausibility structure of the society (Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 135).

⁹⁹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 10.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 16. Newbigin points out that Berger himself accedes to the plausibility structure of the west in that he proposes that the best response by Christians to the cultural situation of the west is an inductive approach--the approach advocated by Bacon and Descartes which led to the fact/values distinction.

¹⁰¹Andrew Walker, ed., “Interview with Bishop Lesslie Newbigin,” in *Different Gospels* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 32.

¹⁰²Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 340.

lifestyle of another.”¹⁰³ This manifests itself in the “politically correct” movement in the United States, and in the “Gay Rights” movement. Newbigin cites Alasdair MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue* which claims “that all attempts to ground ethical precepts in the ‘facts’ as science understands them have failed.”¹⁰⁴ Newbigin points out that “no ‘factual’ statement can be made about what kinds of behavior are good or bad.”¹⁰⁵ As a result, “we do not talk of right and wrong; we speak of values.”¹⁰⁶

Religious claims are omitted from the realm of facts as well. Newbigin points out that for modern westerners the purpose of human life expressed in the Westminster Catechism, “that human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever, is not a fact. It is an opinion held by some people. It belongs to the private sector, not the public.”¹⁰⁷ This applies to all assertions regarding the purpose of human life.¹⁰⁸ Newbigin cites the debate between science and religion as an area where this division operates. In court cases which

¹⁰³Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 19. Newbigin is not alone in pointing this out. In a sermon at the 1996 Southern Baptist Convention, Josh McDowell condemned the kind of tolerance that does not permit anyone to make truth claims as to right or wrong lifestyles, religious truth claims and so forth. He pointed out that whereas at one time the claim that Jesus is the only one who can save would have been challenged as erroneous thinking, today it would be challenged on the grounds that to make the assertion is to be intolerant. Similarly, anyone who makes assertions that call into question moral choices is considered to be intolerant. (Josh McDowell, *Tolerating the Intolerable: A Mandate to Love*, 1996 Southern Baptist Convention Message [New Orleans, LA: Southern Baptist Convention/Josh McDowell Ministries, 1996], sound cassette).

¹⁰⁴Newbigin, “Can the West,” 5. See also MacIntyre, 49-59.

¹⁰⁵Stowe, 148. This is the result of the scientific method, but it is not to say that there have not been efforts to overcome it. John Dewey sought to ground all of education in the method of the natural sciences, and sought a scientific way to arrive at ethical judgements. See the discussion of Dewey’s philosophy and its epistemological basis in Morton White’s *Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought from Jonathan Edward to John Dewey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 266-310.

¹⁰⁶Newbigin, “Religion, Science and Truth,” 191.

¹⁰⁷Newbigin, “Can the West,” 5.

¹⁰⁸Lesslie Newbigin, “Whose Justice?” *Ecumenical Review* 44 (July 1992): 309.

challenged laws requiring the teaching of creation along with evolution in public schools, these laws have been struck down, not because creation is “false,” but because it is a “religious” idea rather than a “scientific” truth claim.¹⁰⁹ Science is part of the plausibility structure of the modern world; religion is not.

This fact/values distinction has led to deep problems in modern culture, because it has divided the realm of knowledge in ways that are foreign to the biblical worldview. Danger is inherent in this division. “Values” become “a matter of the will. They are what some people *want*.”¹¹⁰ Values “can be asserted only with the strength of someone’s desire; they cannot be grounded in a perception of reality.”¹¹¹ The door thus opens for a tyranny of the majority, for a world in which the will to power obliterates transcendent truth claims.

“It will no longer do,” Newbigin says, “to accept the dichotomy between a public world of so-called ‘facts’ and a private world of so-called ‘values’.”¹¹² He insists on “removing the wall and recovering the unity of human knowledge, of the endless and enchanting enterprise of discovering how things really are.”¹¹³

Its Problem: A Restricted Arena for Truth

Newbigin asserts that the fact/values distinction and indeed the entire Enlightenment program has led to serious restrictions on what may be regarded as “Truth” in western culture. A plausibility structure which excludes any truth claims that are not founded on empirical and mathematical data must inevitably exclude important areas of concern. It was Nietzsche, Newbigin claims, who first saw “that the operation of the modern critical scientific method must make it strictly impossible to assert of any course of conduct ‘That is

¹⁰⁹Newbigin, “Religion, Science and Truth,” 187.

¹¹⁰Lesslie Newbigin, “Response to David M. Stowe,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 4 (October 1988): 152.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Newbigin, “Can the West,” 6.

¹¹³Newbigin, “Religion, Science and Truth,” 193.

right’.”¹¹⁴ It may be possible to call it pleasing, or sensible, but to call it “right” without a transcendent concept of rightness is impossible. This leads to restrictions in how facts may be conceived.

The scientific worldview inevitably makes implicit assertions about ultimate reality and seeks to explain it fully. Mechanistic models of reality, derived from Newton, dominate in the sciences,¹¹⁵ and thus determine how science describes ultimate reality. For example, “the enormous advances in our knowledge of the structure and functioning of the brain have been used to disseminate the idea that the objects we call minds have no real existence.”¹¹⁶ Mental events are explained entirely in terms of neurons firing in the brain. No room is left for an immaterial “soul” that might actually cause a mental event and somehow affect the brain.¹¹⁷ Whole areas of truth are left out, because science, despite its intentions, cannot cover all areas of reality.¹¹⁸

This exclusion of certain areas of concern from the realm of truth shows up readily in matters of religion. The claim that God has revealed himself in history at some point is not considered by moderns as something which might be “true” or “false.” “It has been silenced

¹¹⁴Ibid. Newbigin cites Alan Bloom for his interpretation of Nietzsche’s insight. See Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 143-44, 146-48, 155-56.

¹¹⁵Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 73.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁷It is interesting that Descartes, to whom Newbigin largely attributes the fact/values distinction, was himself a mind/body dualist, though he never solved the problem of how immaterial substance (the soul or mind) could interact with material substance (the body). See Descartes’ *Meditations*, especially “Meditation Six: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction between Mind and Body,” 47-59 for his discussion of this. A good modern defense of dualism may be found in J. P. Moreland, “A Defense of a Substance Dualist View of the Soul,” in *Christian Perspectives on Being Human*, ed. J. P. Moreland and David M. Ciochi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 55-79, and Robert Saucy, “Theology of Human Nature,” in idem, 17-52.

¹¹⁸Newbigin, “Religion, Science and Truth,” 191.

by co-option into the modern scientific world view;” it is a “fact” about the beliefs of one faith that may be studied under the heading of religious experience.¹¹⁹ In this the church has too often acquiesced, says Newbiggin. It has been “conned by the assumptions of our culture, which regards Christianity as one among a body of things called religions which are about personal opinions and personal experiences, not about public facts.”¹²⁰

Trends in education demonstrate this restriction on truth claims most clearly. All education, Newbiggin asserts, involves making claims about what “reality” is. The exclusion of religious truth claims from reality affects the way subjects are taught in public schools. Newbiggin cites a survey commissioned by the National Institute of Education, which examined elementary school textbooks issued by thirty-one publishers. The researchers reported “‘a pattern of censorship’ which has eliminated almost all references to the role of religion in American history and in the human story generally.”¹²¹ Publishers, wanting to stick to “verifiable facts” and without seeming to advocate “merely subjective” religious truth claims, erred in eliminating religion completely. In addition, researchers found “not a single reference to marriage, husbands or wives.”¹²² These cultural assumptions have also affected other course material. Newbiggin cites a high school teacher in England who said “that he now found it impossible to teach Milton to any of his pupils except the Muslims. For them there were still the concepts of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell; for the native English, no more. Milton was incomprehensible.”¹²³ Students who had never encountered these ideas were unable to comprehend them. Newbiggin is well aware of just how difficult this makes not only the process of liberal arts education but also the

¹¹⁹Newbiggin, “Can the West” 4.

¹²⁰Lesslie Newbiggin, “Confessing Christ in a Multi-Religion Society,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 125.

¹²¹Newbiggin, “Religion, Science and Truth,” 188. Thus, “the introduction of ice-hockey at Yale University is a significant event which earns a place in history; the fact that missionaries from the United States were working in every part of the world is not” (Ibid.).

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., 190.

presentation of the gospel. Enlightenment abandonment of teleology leaves no room for value judgements to be matters of fact and thus matters for educational curricula. Unfortunately, this restriction on what may be seen as truth has influenced the way churches have pressed the truth claims of the gospel. Churches have allowed religion to be made trivial in modern life by not boldly proclaiming the gospel as “public truth, the most important fact and value of existence.”¹²⁴ The church has instead timidly almost apologized for holding the claims of the gospel to be “true” at all.

Its Failure: Postmodernity

Newbigin believes that the Enlightenment failed to achieve its goals.¹²⁵ “Descartes’ method,” he claims, “has been found to have in itself the seeds of its own destruction. For the critical principle turns upon itself and eventually destroys itself.”¹²⁶ This has led to “postmodernism, a breakdown of the self confidence of modernity and the widespread acceptance of a total fragmentation in human perception.”¹²⁷ The Enlightenment, while it has done so much for human life in terms of technological and material advances, “has now left us in the lurch,”¹²⁸ unable to achieve the very certainty that Descartes so confidently predicted his method would offer.

Newbigin is extremely critical of the resulting postmodern paradigm because it replaces “timeless truths” with “metanarratives which falsely claim to explain the human story as a whole, but which are in fact themselves simply products of particular human histories.”¹²⁹ What is left is a “vapid subjectivism”¹³⁰ that offers no hope of validating any

¹²⁴Rodney Clapp, review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Christianity Today*, January 14, 1991, 36.

¹²⁵C. Leonard Allen, review of *Truth to Tell*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Restoration Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1992): 127.

¹²⁶Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 343.

¹²⁷Lesslie Newbigin, “Ecumenical Amnesia,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 1 (January 1994): 3.

¹²⁸Spanner, review of *The Other Side*, 371.

¹²⁹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 74.

truth claims whatever. Newbigin sees postmodernism as a direct result of the Enlightenment effort to achieve total certainty and of the fact/values distinction. The values side has been so subjectivized, he believes, that any statement that cannot be verified empirically or mathematically must be only a matter of opinion, or worse yet, a result of “the will . . . asserted only with the strength of someone’s desire.”¹³¹

Postmodernism has its roots in the work of Frederich Nietzsche who “saw the inevitable outcome of the program of Enlightenment.”¹³² Truth claims, being divorced from transcendent moral or religious values, have been reduced to no more than assertions of the “will to power.” Newbigin points to Foucault as one who has developed the idea that history has been a process by which different “regimes of truth” have followed one after the other, each seeking to “displace their predecessors and impose their own ‘truth’ upon society, but there is no ‘metanarrative’ which provides an over-arching truth by which they might all be judged.”¹³³ The end of this, according to Newbigin, “is nihilism into which our society is visibly sinking around us.”¹³⁴ Newbigin fears that Postmodernism’s insistence on “the culturally conditioned character of all truth-claims could lead to the abandonment of all belief in the possibility of knowing the truth; that is what is happening in contemporary Western Culture.”¹³⁵ In place of truth are merely competing worldviews, useful for utilitarian purposes, and easily exchanged for others as the need dictates.

¹³⁰Allen, 127.

¹³¹Newbigin, “Response to Stowe,” 152.

¹³²Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 73.

¹³³Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 343. Newbigin is not alone in this. “It has been largely recognized that Derrida and Foucault are dependent, at least in part, on Frederich Nietzsche” (Alan D. Schrift, “Poststructuralism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Supplement*, ed. Donald M. Borchert [New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996], 452-53).

¹³⁴Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 343.

¹³⁵Lesslie Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” in *Many Other Ways?: Questions of Religious Pluralism* (Delhi, India: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1992), 70.

A society that sees truth in this way cannot long “sustain its integrity in the face of the claims of those who have a firm commitment to some vision of truth.”¹³⁶ In other words, western society could become captive to whatever vision of reality is most forcefully championed, whether Islam, Marxism, or some other agenda. Newbigin fears for the future of a society that cannot weigh and examine truth claims. In addition, Newbigin fears that a society which cannot conceive of truth apart from mathematical certainty cannot hear and believe the gospel. The gospel becomes nothing more than just another competing metanarrative, an idea which works for some but not for others. It becomes one of many options an individual may choose, but which no one would ever claim was “true” in any universal sense. This is the situation of the west which the church faces today. Newbigin wants to defend the gospel as true for everyone in that situation. In order to do that, he must redefine truth itself.

Newbigin’s Defense of the Gospel as Public Truth

Newbigin’s critique of modern western culture reveals a difficult situation in which to preach the gospel. The fact/values distinction which is a product of the Enlightenment approach relegates all religious claims to the area of private personal preference. Postmodernism has seemingly validated the fact/values distinction as the only way to describe reality. These things make pressing the truth claims of the gospel very difficult. If one insists that everyone must acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, that person is either regarded as bigoted or ignored as eccentric.

Yet, Newbigin insists that the church must proclaim the gospel as truth. Its mission “is justified based on the truth found in Christ.”¹³⁷ Newbigin wants to defend the truths of the gospel as facts--“public truth”--not merely private opinion or private preference. In order to do this he must first establish a definition of truth that can encompass religious truth claims.

¹³⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1989; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 244.

¹³⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 15.

Newbigin believes that “the basic question is epistemological. Can reality be known?”¹³⁸ Is it possible to make assertions about reality, about the way the world works, that can be regarded as certain? Newbigin asserts that a “yes answer to these questions is imperative.”¹³⁹ Newbigin realizes that every statement, not just scientific ones, about “what is the case” is either true to the real world or it is not. One cannot be content to simply regard all opinions as equal.

Newbigin’s proposal to heal this split involves taking an epistemic step backwards from the Cartesian experiment. This is not a backward step away from truth nor is it an effort to include subjective matters, but rather a step back to enlarge the field of what may be seen as objective truth. It is as if one were so focused on a few leaves of a shrub that one cannot appreciate the whole landscape. Both the shrub and the landscape of which it is a part are objectively real, but one must take a step backwards to see it all.

Newbigin wants to establish truth on a foundation that will include both scientific and religious truth claims as equally objective. Newbigin begins by attacking the foundation of Cartesian certainty on which science rests. Newbigin points out that “every plausibility structure rests on faith commitments.”¹⁴⁰ If this is true, then scientific certainty has no special place epistemologically. Science rests on a faith commitment as do all truth systems.¹⁴¹ Those who accept scientific truth claims as valid have no ground for saying that truth claims arising out of other faith commitments are automatically invalid on that ground alone.

Newbigin’s Understanding of Truth

¹³⁸Newbigin, “Religion for the Market Place,” 137.

¹³⁹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 35. Newbigin here of course means assertions regarding its purpose, metaphysical nature, and ultimate destiny--the matter of religious truth claims. He recognizes that scientific/mathematical models do describe reality accurately as far as they go.

¹⁴⁰Walker, 31.

¹⁴¹Stowe, 148.

Newbigin's epistemic step backward involves two parts. First, he wants to rob science of its pretention to objectivity, to having a monopoly on "truth." The second phase of Newbigin's step backward is to put Christian truth claims on an equal footing with scientific truth claims. He does not deny that scientific facts relate to an objective reality and that science describes that reality very well. The gospel also relates to an objective reality which, from various points of view, is described accurately in Scripture. The argument that the gospel is historically situated and involves religious value judgements is for Newbigin no argument against its factuality. Since all knowledge is culturally situated and yet has an objective reference point in the real world "out there," the gospel is no different from other truth claims.

He begins his effort to refute science's claims to absolute objectivity by seeking to demonstrate the role of the person in knowing the truth "aided by the epistemological insights of Michael Polanyi."¹⁴² Newbigin, like Polanyi, believes that ultimately all facts are known from within the perspective of the knower, and that there is an inevitable unproven foundation for all of knowing. Thus, scientific method has a strong subjective element in it, and scientific knowledge would be impossible without some concepts accepted "on faith" and as "culturally given." Polanyi challenged the idea that knowledge is "impersonal, universally established, objective."¹⁴³ He sought to show "that the objective/subjective dualism is false."¹⁴⁴ The knower participates in the act of understanding.

Polanyi's proposal relates to how knowledge is gained in general, especially as seen from Newbigin's perspective. Newbigin summarizes Polanyi's effort in a series of propositions. First is the reality that scientists work from within an "apprenticeship to a tradition of knowledge."¹⁴⁵ Major scientific advances are often made in areas of Europe

¹⁴²Lawrence Osborn, review of *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Theology* 99, no. 778 (March/April 1996): 143.

¹⁴³Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), vii.

¹⁴⁴Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 39.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 40.

where the scientific method first began to be used. There, scientists are most deeply immersed in the scientific mindset and tradition. These gains are made despite more money, more laboratories, and better equipment elsewhere. Had there been no migrations of European scientists to other parts of the world, as well as students coming to Europe to gain advanced education, “research centres overseas could hardly ever have made much headway.”¹⁴⁶

Second, “scientists work by ‘indwelling’ this tradition.”¹⁴⁷ Science is not, Polanyi believes, something which can be demonstrated apart from its own tradition. Its presuppositions cannot be verified from a stance that does not already presuppose them beforehand.¹⁴⁸ The rules of science are affirmed by the body of knowledge which science has accumulated. The scientist indwells a system and a tradition that encompasses a vast body of knowledge, and traditional presuppositions and methods that work together in a circular fashion.¹⁴⁹ Acceptance of the system is a faith commitment.¹⁵⁰ Thus, as Newbigin points out, “the whole scientific tradition is a ‘fiduciary framework’.”¹⁵¹

Third, science advances because scientists recognize a problem and attempt to solve it. This effort is naturally intuitive.¹⁵² Solving the problem involves “the personal

¹⁴⁶Polanyi, 53. One wonders whether the United States’ space program would have happened at all in the late 1950s had not German rocket scientists escaped from Nazi Germany in the 1940s. Germany was way ahead of the United States in rocket research during the second world war and would perhaps have continued to lead for decades in this field had not their best rocket scientists defected at that time.

¹⁴⁷Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 40.

¹⁴⁸Polanyi, 171.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Ibid. “Science is a system of beliefs to which we are committed. Such a system cannot be accounted for either from experience as seen within a different system, or by reason without any experience” (Ibid.).

¹⁵¹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 41.

¹⁵²Polanyi, 130.

commitment of the scientist”¹⁵³ whose insights and decisions are as much intuitive as rational. All knowledge, therefore, involves the commitment and involvement of the knower. Polanyi cites an example from astronomy. The Copernican revolution was not a shift from an emphasis on subjective sense impressions to an objective description of facts, but rather a change in subjective perspective, from earth to sun centered. This was done to satisfy an intellectual need for abstract theory over empiricism. The shift met a human need. Thus, “the new Copernican system was as anthropocentric as the Ptolemaic view.”¹⁵⁴ Yet no one would claim that the heliocentric picture of the solar system is merely a subjective interpretation.

The fourth proposition involves what Polanyi calls “the tacit coefficient of knowing,”¹⁵⁵ the vast body of knowledge which human beings partake in, more or less.¹⁵⁶ Without this dimension of knowing, any significant knowledge at all would be impossible. Knowledge of all the facts about the atomic particles that make up physical reality would actually be knowledge of nothing at all. Interest in atomic particles arises at all “only because of the part they play in the shaping of a world we know as human beings and before we know anything about physics.”¹⁵⁷

Fifth is the assertion that any idea that science will eventually develop laws that will explain everything “is an illusion.”¹⁵⁸ Newbigin points out that reality shows levels of knowledge not always explainable in terms of more basic levels. Physical laws set limits to the possibilities of chemical combinations but cannot in themselves explain chemistry.

¹⁵³Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 41.

¹⁵⁴Polanyi, 3-4.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 373.

¹⁵⁶Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 41-42.

¹⁵⁷Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 65.

¹⁵⁸Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 42.

Physical and chemical laws set limits to the behavior of biological tissue, but cannot explain biology.¹⁵⁹

Polanyi's analysis leaves open the possibility that science is just as subjective as theology or literary criticism. This Polanyi denies emphatically:

[T]his does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps inconceivable) true implications.¹⁶⁰ The scientist makes truth claims with the intent of describing reality in ways that are universal. In addition, "the truth of the claim will or will not be validated depending on whether or not it leads to further truth."¹⁶¹

Polanyi likens scientific theory to a "map extended over space and time."¹⁶² It serves as a guide through uncharted territory. The map could be right or wrong, and if one makes a mistake, it will be attributed to problems with the map, not the individual. The knowledge gained through the theory is objective knowledge "insofar as it is not I, but the theory, which is proved right or wrong when I use such knowledge."¹⁶³ Since the "map" provided by Copernicus' theory serves better to guide astronomers (and spacecraft) through the solar system, it must therefore be better than Ptolemy's. In this sense, Copernicus' subjective "personal" approach has led to objective truth.

Newbigin "argues that a concept of personal knowledge," such as Polanyi advocates, "is a more appropriate for Christian theology than the certain knowledge beloved of western

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰Polanyi, vii-viii.

¹⁶¹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 43.

¹⁶²Polanyi, 4.

¹⁶³Ibid.

philosophy.”¹⁶⁴ For Newbigin, the truth claims of the Christian faith offer a better “map” of reality and of the ultimate issues of life than any other “map” that has been offered.

The parallels between scientific and religious truth claims are, for Newbigin, obvious. Having shown from Polanyi’s work that science rests on faith commitments and on subjective factors, and yet claims to have objective knowledge, Newbigin believes he can now assert that religious knowing rests on an equally well grounded foundation. Since all knowledge is “personal knowledge,” knowledge gained from within the faith commitments of the knower, then religious truth claims deserve equal consideration with other kinds of truth. Since it is not possible to explain one level of scientific truth in terms of a lower level, then it may be that religious truth claims can be sustained without resting on any kind of Cartesian certainty.

The point of contact between scientific and Christian truth claims is the objectivity of the subject matter. Objective facts serve as a check on what scientists may claim as true, and Newbigin wants to establish Christian truth claims on the objectivity of the facts surrounding Jesus Christ. On this basis, Newbigin is ready to assert the truthfulness of the gospel. The question of pluralism, however, must first be considered. It logically follows from what Polanyi has said that since all religions claim to explain reality, and all rest on fiduciary bases, that all are equally valid. This Newbigin explicitly denies this because pluralism undermines the whole concept of truth in religious explanations of reality.

Newbigin’s Rejection of Pluralism

Newbigin rejects pluralism unequivocally. It is unacceptable, he believes, “to live in a society where everything is subjective and relative, a society which has abandoned the belief that truth can be known and has settled for a purely subjective view of truth--‘truth for you’ but not truth for all.”¹⁶⁵ “Wandering about in a twilight where all cats are grey”¹⁶⁶ is not a workable option. It runs counter to the basic religious concern to explain ultimate

¹⁶⁴Osborn, 143.

¹⁶⁵Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 244.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 12.

truth, and spells danger for the culture as a whole. Newbigin asserts that a culture may respond to different worldviews in any of four different ways. A culture may adopt a fortress mentality which utterly rejects the new paradigm, or it may surrender, causing the old paradigm to collapse. A third strategy involves reforming of the present worldview in light of insights gained from the new one. The fourth option embraces pluralism, the rejection of any concept of an accepted structure of reality that is true for all. The third reaction, which involves open-mindedness and a real belief in truth, “is what a living culture will choose; the fourth . . . is the sign of approaching death.”¹⁶⁷ Such pluralism, Newbigin believes, “will simply crumble in the presence of a confident and vigorous claim to know the truth--such a claim as Islam is at present making with increasing vigour in the contemporary world.”¹⁶⁸

Newbigin rejects the possibility that what “we affirm in the Christian creeds” is no more than “one among a number of different points of view.”¹⁶⁹ To regard it as such threatens the survival of Christianity because it involves “the denial of what has from the beginning been its central affirmation.”¹⁷⁰ He recognizes that every religion offers a way of salvation, but they can do this “only because they make truth claims, affirmations about what is the case, and these claims are in many cases mutually irreconcilable.”¹⁷¹ Since they cannot be affirming the same reality while saying completely different things, they cannot all be equally true.

Newbigin’s desire to treat religious truth claims as comparable to scientific ones gives impetus to his concern. Science is not pluralistic. Scientists “are in the habit of making confident claims about what is the case without apparently being troubled by the charge of arrogance.”¹⁷² In fact, scientists make no room for pluralism in their understanding

¹⁶⁷Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 135.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 143.

¹⁶⁹Newbigin, “Confessing Christ,” 128.

¹⁷⁰Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 137.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 143-43.

¹⁷²Newbigin, “Certain Faith,” 339.

of their work. Newbigin points out that “when two scientists, one in Chicago and the other in Tokyo, conduct the same experiment but come up with radically different results, they do not take it as an opportunity for celebrating the joy of living in a pluralist society.”¹⁷³

Newbigin cites the Copernican revolution as an example of what happens. Ptolemy’s system had been around for centuries. Copernicus’ proposal was hotly debated and eventually won out. No one even considered the possibility “that the argument might be ended by agreeing that there is a common search for truth or that the different views should be ‘pooled’ [T]here was a common concern for truth and a belief that it could be known.”¹⁷⁴

Religious truth claims should be regarded in the same way, and religious truth taken just as seriously. Even though modern society is not pluralist at all on scientific matters, on the values side of the equation pluralism holds sway.¹⁷⁵ The objective pole of knowledge is removed. The subjective pole remains alone.¹⁷⁶ This, Newbigin contends, is a tragic result of the fact/values distinction. It is, he believes, imperative that the proposals for religious pluralism be examined and rejected.

Newbigin focuses much of his attention on John Hick’s proposal for a pluralist theology of religions, and rightly so as Hick has been the foremost influential advocate of it. Hick’s “Copernican Revolution” proposes that “God” not Jesus Christ should be the center of theological understanding.¹⁷⁷ He insists that all major religions are in touch with the same spiritual reality. As a younger man, Hick visited worship centers of various religious groups and found in them the same sorts of phenomena.¹⁷⁸ He concluded that it was culturally

¹⁷³Ibid., 340.

¹⁷⁴Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ” in *Many Other Ways*, 73. Newbigin cites Harold Turner as his source for this illustration.

¹⁷⁵Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” in *Many Other Ways*, 72.

¹⁷⁶Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 138.

¹⁷⁷Lesslie Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no. 2 (April 1989): 50.

¹⁷⁸John Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's New Religious Pluralism* (London:

myopic to insist, as Christians do, that Jesus Christ is God's only and ultimate revelation of himself. Hick wants to normativize other religious claims to have divine revelation. To do this he takes the incarnation to be metaphoric¹⁷⁹ and assumes that the religious experiences of non-Christians have equal validity with Christian experience.¹⁸⁰

Newbigin rejects Hick's position on the grounds that it is too subjective and leaves no room for any overarching critique. It places at the center one's own subjective concept of God, rather than "God as revealed."¹⁸¹ The idea that each religion somehow touches a common core of transcendent reality is not tenable because "transcendent" becomes an empty term into which one may place any content. Hick has not so much helped the religious world understand their conceptions of God as he has offered his own concept in their place. Hick's god is his own creation to which he has given his own content. Newbigin does not dispute the fact that the being of God is beyond human comprehension, but "this does not mean that we are free to make our own image of God."¹⁸²

Hick's position cannot be critiqued from an objective standpoint other than from within the various religious traditions that Hick attempts to incorporate. To accept Hick's position would, for any of the other traditions, be to reject their own ultimate claims. This is certainly no less true for Christianity than for other religions.

Newbigin also rejects the pluralistic proposal of Paul Knitter, a student of Hick. Knitter, Newbigin says, wants to move beyond Hick's God-centered approach to a salvation-centered approach.¹⁸³ Newbigin sees this as focused too much on human need. The center

Macmillan, 1980), 5.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., 6.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 7. See also idem, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1988); John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1993).

¹⁸¹Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," in *Many Other Ways*, 73.

¹⁸²Newbigin, "Religion in the Marketplace," 138.

¹⁸³Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 50-51.

for truth, Newbigin insists, “is not me and my need of salvation, it is God and his glory.”¹⁸⁴ Newbigin wants to treat the various truth claims of religions in a manner similar to scientific pronouncements and judge them on the basis of what makes the best sense of reality, in much the way that Copernicus’ proposal better explained the movements of the planets than did Ptolemy’s. He contends that Christianity, more than any of the others, achieves this goal. Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards is an attempt to move the line of the fact/values distinction over so that religious truth claims can be heard and considered fairly, as facts, and not as mere opinion. He insists that this is imperative since the gospel makes claims that involve “the entire public life of mankind and the whole created world.”¹⁸⁵ If it is true that humans beings exist for God and in community with one another under God, then the church must proclaim this as fact, and call people to responsible life as his people, regardless of what majority opinion on the matter may be.¹⁸⁶

Newbigin, having challenged the foundations of the Enlightenment with its starting point in human reason and scientific method, wants to begin at a new starting point--the lordship of Jesus Christ. Such a starting point is “a personal commitment to a faith which cannot be demonstrated on grounds established from the point of view of another commitment.”¹⁸⁷ Thus it serves as a new starting point for understanding reality.

The Gospel as Truth

Newbigin is concerned about “a loss of confidence in the uniqueness and importance” of the gospel.¹⁸⁸ He wants the church to defend the gospel, not as one of many possible ways to explain reality, but as the only way that reality can be rightly understood. His term for this

¹⁸⁴Newbigin, “Religion in the Marketplace,” 139.

¹⁸⁵Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17.

¹⁸⁶Newbigin, “Response to Stowe,” 152.

¹⁸⁷Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17. “If it is indeed an ultimate belief, then it cannot be validated by something more ultimate” (idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 243).

¹⁸⁸Newbigin, “Episcopacy and Authority,” 336.

is “public truth.”¹⁸⁹ For Newbigin, “the gospel [is] truth, objective and to be received and proclaimed publicly as such, as real knowledge.”¹⁹⁰ The center of the gospel is Christ and “belief in the uniqueness of Christ is absolutely necessary.”¹⁹¹ For this reason, Newbigin opposes “meaningless dialogue, and . . . a type of ecumenism without substance that would subvert the uniqueness of Christ.”¹⁹²

Newbigin points out that this is how the gospel functioned foundationally for the early church. The Greco-Roman world was challenged by “a new *arche*, a new starting point for all human understanding of the world.”¹⁹³ The current situation in the west, in a post-Christian world, is analogous to that earlier culture. Religious truth claims have been relativized, and rationalism has run its course, as it had for the Greek philosophers. In this situation, the gospel again has the opportunity to be defended as a new starting point.

Newbigin defends the gospel as truth on the grounds that it is historical. It tells of events that happened in real history at a real place.¹⁹⁴ Like all history, the story of Christ has a meaning; it has significance. God’s action in Christ, because it happened in the real world,

¹⁸⁹Lesslie Newbigin, “The Gospel as Public Truth,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 1-2.

¹⁹⁰Douglas Spanner, review of *Truth to Tell*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Churchman* 106, no. 4 (1992): 362.

¹⁹¹Lesslie Newbigin, “Way Out West: The Gospel in a Post-Enlightenment World,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Ecumenical Orthodoxy* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 23.

¹⁹²*Ibid.* This is not to say that Newbigin opposes religious dialogue at all. He has set forth principles for dialogue which he believes allows it to proceed with integrity for both sides. See also H. D. Beeby and Lesslie Newbigin, “The Bible and Inter-Faith Relations,” in *Using the Bible Today: Contemporary Interpretations of Scripture*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (London: Bellew Publishing, 1991), 180-87; *idem*, “The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30, no. 3 (1977): 253-70; *idem*, “Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach,” 227-44; *idem*, “Confessing Christ,” 125-36.

¹⁹³Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 4. Newbigin attributes this to Athanasius.

¹⁹⁴Newbigin, “The Gospel as Public Truth,” 1.

“has to be the thing that controls everything else.”¹⁹⁵ Some refute this claim on the grounds that God would not restrict his revelation to one place and one time, and that the historically conditioned nature of the biblical narrative counts against its having significance for other times and places. Newbigin points out, however, that if God is at work in history--if he wants to redeem history, not just individuals--then “a single happening in a particular time and place can be of decisive significance to all.”¹⁹⁶

Newbigin argues for the importance of the historicity of the New Testament by pointing out that what people do is as important as what they believe. Faith is lived out in action as well as being a matter of the heart and mind. In the same way, what people in the New Testament did is important, not merely what doctrines they believed. Therefore, the historical account of what happened is as significant as the spiritual truths which underlay it.¹⁹⁷ He contrasts this with the situation in Hinduism, where they “can speak of many *avatars* because none of them is a part of public history; they are all ideas in the mind.”¹⁹⁸

The gospel is universally significant.¹⁹⁹ Its claims to be a revelation of God. If God has indeed revealed himself in Christ, “it has to be the thing that controls everything else. It cannot be regarded as one of a series of interesting facts . . . but has to be that which shapes, determines, evaluates everything.”²⁰⁰ The gospel cannot make the claims that it makes and still be no more than just one of many different perspectives on reality, one more metanarrative. It cannot be just something interesting, useful to those who find satisfaction in it, but no more than that. By its very nature it claims to be more than just an option.

¹⁹⁵Newbigin, “Confessing Christ,” 127.

¹⁹⁶Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 57.

¹⁹⁷Lesslie Newbigin, “The Centrality of Jesus for History,” in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 203.

¹⁹⁸Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Christ,” in *Many Other Ways?*, 77.

¹⁹⁹Newbigin, “The Gospel as Public Truth,” 1.

²⁰⁰Newbigin, “Confessing Christ,” 127.

In addition, Newbigin asserts that to be committed to the gospel is to be committed “to a belief about the meaning of the whole of human experience in its entirety.”²⁰¹ The gospel is not just about what happens when someone dies, nor is it restricted to what one does on Sunday mornings. The gospel message touches all of life, work, family relationships, matters of social justice, and ethical behavior toward neighbors.²⁰² As Christian faith lived out touches every area of individual life, it touches every area of community life as well, and cannot be, in any sense, a “private opinion.”

Newbigin points out that the early church could have had the protection of the Roman government had they been willing to allow the gospel to be seen as just one more option for religious belief. Rome was tolerant of religions generally and allowed them to flourish throughout the empire. The early church did not avail itself of this protection because it did not see the gospel as a private faith. Their message “concerned the destiny of the whole human race” and was of “vital concern to every human being.”²⁰³ The church today, Newbigin believes can do no less.

Newbigin sees several important implications to the gospel story being true. It implies that belief in the gospel is not to be “ensured by the use of political power.” It was the political and religious powers of Jesus’ day, along with “public opinion,” that put him on the cross. In addition Jesus will be judge of all and cannot be identified with any one political power or system.²⁰⁴

Another implication is that since the gospel is universal in its import, then “all human beings wherever they are, are embraced in that love of God” which is proclaimed in what God did in Christ.²⁰⁵ Newbigin is not a universalist, but he does take seriously the fact that

²⁰¹Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 17.

²⁰²*Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰³Newbigin, “The Gospel as Public Truth,” 1.

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*

God being at work in Christ must in some way be continuous with God being at work in the world.

Third, the universal nature of the gospel implies that it will be shown to be true in that “it proves itself more adequate to the totality of human experience than its rivals.”²⁰⁶ Any claim to ultimate truth, if it is to commend itself to the loyalty of humanity, must meet this test. A gospel which cannot meet the demands of all of human life cannot claim significance for all of human life. This is key in light of Newbigin’s epistemology. The gospel is true in part because the gospel better explains reality than any other religious system. Newbigin believes that final verification of the gospel comes in the eschaton,²⁰⁷ but again this relates to its universal significance. If Jesus, as judge of all humanity, will verify the truth of the revelation which the church has lived out and proclaimed over the centuries.

Newbigin asserts that the truth of the gospel story is essential to the ministry of the church. If God has not really offered reconciliation in Christ, then the effect to present it to the world as true is meaningless.²⁰⁸ The church cannot offer a gospel that it does not believe, nor can it offer the gospel as it is presented in Scripture and accept the idea that it is merely one among many different views. Either the gospel is true, or it is a waste of time to go on proclaiming and believing it. Newbigin believes that, based on his epistemic step backwards, the church can proclaim the gospel as public truth and gain a hearing for it. The church must do so. It has no other alternative. Perhaps nothing is more characteristic of evangelical thought than its defense of biblical authority. Evangelicals oppose doctrinal formulations that run counter to the teaching of Scripture, and they oppose destructive higher criticism because of its attack on the Bible’s authority.²⁰⁹ For Evangelicals, the authority of Scripture

²⁰⁶Ibid.

²⁰⁷Ibid.

²⁰⁸Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 127.

²⁰⁹Examples of evangelical defenses of the Bible are numerous. A representative sample includes Gleason Archer’s defense of the Old Testament against the documentary hypothesis (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* [Chicago: Moody, 1974], 83-182); Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983);

is foundational to a proper understanding of the Christian faith. Newbigin's understanding of the authority of the Bible is thus an important matter to Evangelicals who wish to understand his defense of the gospel before the world.

several chapters in Paul Little's popular apologetic *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968); Schaeffer, *God*; Norman Geisler and William E. Nix's *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986) ; and Josh McDowell, *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 2 (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1975).

CHAPTER TWO

NEWBIGIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Perhaps nothing is more characteristic of evangelical thought than its defense of biblical authority. Evangelicals oppose doctrinal formulations that run counter to the teaching of Scripture, and they oppose destructive higher criticism because of its attack on the Bible's authority.¹ For Evangelicals, the authority of Scripture is foundational to a proper understanding of the Christian faith. Newbigin's understanding of the authority of the Bible is thus an important matter to Evangelicals who wish to understand his defense of the gospel before the world.

Even a cursory reading of Newbigin's work will indicate that he "accepts the essential authority of Scripture."² He devotes major sections of his works to defending the authority of Scripture and promoting a proper understanding of its function in the church.³ Newbigin asserts that the Bible offers "a new starting point for thought,"⁴ a departure point that makes more sense of the real world than that offered by the Enlightenment. This departure point has a divine origin, Newbigin believes. While he recognizes that God is far

¹Examples of evangelical defenses of the Bible are numerous. A representative sample includes Gleason Archer's defense of the Old Testament against the documentary hypothesis (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* [Chicago: Moody, 1974], 83-182); Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); several chapters in Paul Little's popular apologetic *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1968); Schaeffer, *God*; Norman Geisler and William E. Nix's *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1986) ; and Josh McDowell, *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 2 (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1975).

²Arthur F. Glasser, "Reconciliation between Ecumenical and Evangelical Theologies and Theologians of Mission," *Missionalia* 7, no. 3 (1979): 102.

³Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 91-101; idem, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 32-43, 64-83; idem, *Foolishness*, 10, 42-64; idem, *Proper Confidence*, 79-102; idem, *Truth to Tell*, 6-11, 17-23, 28, 41-50; idem, "Text and Context: The Bible in the Church," *Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (April 1982): 5-13.

⁴Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 17, 20, 23, 28.

beyond human comprehension, he finds no ground for saying that God himself could not reveal His purposes to His creatures.⁵ God's revelation, disclosed in the pages of the Bible, is an integral part of the Christian commitment. One cannot be committed to Christ without seeing the book that is the primary revelation of Christ as authoritative and unique.⁶

Newbigin holds to an orthodox Protestant understanding of the extent of Scripture. The closing of the canon implies a higher level of authority for what is included than for those documents which were excluded. Those books which make up the canon are normative for all of the later tradition of the church and play a primary role in shaping it.⁷

The Bible is not merely a textbook of eternal theological principles; it is more like a personal letter or testimony. Newbigin disagrees with those who seek to describe the Bible as a body of objective truths in which human subjectivity is omitted.⁸ The Bible is not a set "of factually inerrant propositions."⁹

Newbigin is also critical of those who see in Scripture no more than a record of the subjective religious experiences of one people.¹⁰ This view seeks to relativize the world presented in Scripture and "absolutizes a certain twentieth century world view,"¹¹ one which sees religious truth claims as no more than subjective, personal perceptions which are excluded from the realm of truth. These two approaches, one which sees Scripture as objective propositions, and the other which sees Scripture as subjective experience, relate to the Cartesian duality between the objective and subjective poles of knowledge, Newbigin

⁵Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ" in *Many Other Ways*, 74.

⁶Newbigin, "Text and Context," 13.

⁷Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 47.

⁸Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 42; idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

⁹Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

¹⁰Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 32-33; idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

¹¹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 47.

believes. In the way that the Bible challenged Greek dualism between the material and the mental, so also it may challenge the duality of objective and subjective poles of knowledge in the modern world. Newbigin bases his understanding of the Scripture unites these poles on Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge. Just as objective and subjective aspects come together in science, so also they come together in Scripture.

Newbigin also rejects the approach that finds Scripture's authority only in the moral principles it contains. The fact that such principles are found in the Bible does not render them authoritative, as their authority comes from their "intrinsic rightness."¹² This approach renders the story told in Scripture trivial, and for Newbigin, the story is the main focus. Newbigin recognizes three roles that Scripture traditionally plays in its function as authority for believers. Scripture provides a worldview for believers; it gives ethical rules for the conduct of one's affairs; and it provides spiritual nourishment for individuals. Scripture's role in shaping the west's worldview has been supplanted by the rise of science with its mechanistic cause and effect view of reality. Scripture's role in providing ethical rules lasted long after the scientific worldview arose, but has lately given ground to experiential and common sense based understandings of individual ethical relations. The Bible's third role, that of nurturing the faith of the church, has not been completely replaced but has been questioned since the rise of modern theology.¹³ Newbigin believes that it is essential for the church to affirm all of these roles if it is to live out and proclaim the message of the gospel in a meaningful way.

Newbigin discerns a personal dimension to God's revelation.¹⁴ God has revealed not just "Truth" but himself. One recognizes the truth and authority of that revelation only as a result of a personal commitment to the one who has thus revealed himself. Revelation is the

¹²Ibid., 47-48.

¹³Newbigin, "Text and Context," 6-7.

¹⁴George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 268-69; V. Matthew Thomas, "The Centrality of Christ and Inter-Religious Dialogue in the Theology of Lesslie Newbigin" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College [Canada], 1996), 129-30.

only way to disclose oneself to another person.¹⁵ When someone questions another person, personal disclosure, or revelation, is the only way those questions can be answered. So also, when one seeks to know God, this must come through revelation.

Scriptural authority is not only grounded in God's revelation of himself, but also in the church's experience as a community shaped by the Book. Scripture is authoritative only within a community that believes and obeys what it teaches in all areas of life.¹⁶ The community carries out its internal relations, its external relations, and its relationship with God based on the story told in the Bible. The church is "a community which remembers, rehearses and lives by the story which the Bible tells."¹⁷ The Bible thus functions dynamically for the community of believers.¹⁸

Newbigin's epistemic step backwards shapes the way he sees the authority of Scripture. Newbigin, wanting to defend the gospel as true, must defend the historical account of it given in the Bible as true. It is natural that he should focus on defending those claims which have an objective reference point in historical events. The Bible presents itself, in Newbigin's view, as a historical account that is as true as any other historical account. It functions to shape and give direction to the community that believes it. Objectively, it is history--significant history; subjectively, it shapes the community's worldview.¹⁹ These two aspects are the pivots around which Newbigin's understanding of Scripture turns. It is historical in nature, the story of God's actions in the world, and it both produces and guides the community which is committed to that story. An understanding of how these two aspects work in Newbigin's thought is, therefore, essential.

*Biblical Authority Arises from within
a Historical Situation*

¹⁵Thomas, 129-30.

¹⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 58.

¹⁷Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 147.

¹⁸Hunsberger, *Bearing Witness*, 269-70.

¹⁹Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 41-54.

Newbigin rejects the overwrought emphasis in modern biblical criticism on the purely subjective side of Scripture.²⁰ Such a tendency, to focus on the Bible's purely subjective and personal significance to the exclusion of the matter of factual accuracy is to move in the wrong direction.²¹ There is no "Christ of faith" different from the "Jesus of history" in Newbigin's thought. These are one and the same. Faith must lie in the truthfulness of the story, if its spiritual significance is to be relevant at all. The Bible specifically addresses what God has done in history.²² Without the reality of the events, God has done no authoritative acts and Scripture's authority is undermined.

Newbigin's Understanding of the Bible as a Historical Account of the Acts of God

Newbigin rejects the idea that the Bible may be seen as merely a story that somehow illustrates general truths.²³ He is critical of "all those theological ventures that dissolve the link between faith and the historically affirmed events of the Bible."²⁴ It is wrong, he believes, to use the Bible as a source book for moral or theological illustrations if such illustrations have no basis in history.

While the Bible records human experience, and especially human religious experience, these experiences illuminate objective reality.²⁵ As science is limited in what it can claim by what actually happens empirically, so also what has happened historically conditions and limits what sorts of experiences are recorded in Scripture. Newbigin's epistemic step backward allows the historical narrative of Scripture to be regarded as true in the same sense that scientific data are regarded as true. The historical truth of the events is

²⁰Ibid., 44.

²¹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 46.

²²Thomas, 134.

²³Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 66-67; Thomas, 134.

²⁴Thorogood, 76.

²⁵Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 44-45.

essential since the subjective experiences recorded in Scripture are not necessarily unique in themselves. Others, he asserts, have had similar religious experiences.²⁶ It is not the experiences that are unique, but the story told in Scripture.²⁷

Newbigin rejects the idea that Scripture's truth is unimportant because it is narrative in form.²⁸ Faith in Christ implies accepting the Bible's story as true in the same sense that any other historical narrative would be accepted. If the story the Bible tells is nothing more than legend or illustrations of moral and spiritual principles, then it may be placed alongside such stories in every other religion. It has nothing unique to offer.²⁹ This is not the same seeing the Bible as inerrant. Newbigin asserts that the Bible is not in every instance "a factually accurate account of creation and history."³⁰ The kind of historicity that he argues for is the same as the historicity of any other account of events. It is subject to verification; it is a selection and interpretation of events which cannot be exhaustive. It retains, however, the same level of truth value as any "secular" history that is true to the facts it records. Newbigin believes that the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament, arise from "combining materials which in their original form represented quite different and even contradictory beliefs."³¹ These have been brought together, he believes, in a way that offers a comprehensive understanding of God's purposes. Newbigin also finds discrepancies between the Gospels, but he contends that they are "varying accounts of the same events and

²⁶Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 40.

²⁹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*, with a postscript by Wesley Ariarajah (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1983), 50.

³⁰Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 45.

³¹Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 44.

sayings.”³² The different Gospel writers gave their own account of something that “really happened.”³³

Historicity does not extend, however, to the creation and eschatological accounts. Newbigin recognizes that no one saw the creation of the world, and no one has yet seen its end. These descriptions recorded in Scripture are the result of “imaginative interpretation” based on what the writers knew of God and of what he is doing to redeem the world.³⁴ Thus, their authority rests on the same worldview as the interpretation of history offered elsewhere in Scripture.

The Bible is, however, more than a record of historical events. Newbigin recognizes the role of the writer who has selected and interpreted those facts in light of a theocentric worldview. The facts which underlie the interpretation are essential if the interpretation is to have any real validity. As a scientist interprets raw but factual data, so the biblical authors offer an interpretation of reality based on real events, not just on logical or philosophical propositions. The Bible’s does not teach theology or philosophy in an abstract sense, divorced from any involvement in reality. These theological and philosophical truths are tied to specific places and specific historical events and people. The Bible offers an interpretation of the human story in the real world, based on what God has done to reveal himself and his purposes.³⁵ It is the story of God acting in the world.³⁶ If it did not make contact with the real world at some point, the Bible would not impact the real world nor have

³²Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 40-41.

³³*Ibid.*, 41.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 13.

³⁶Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 4-8.

significance for daily life.³⁷ What God did in Christ, he did “on the public stage of world history.” His acts, therefore, are open to verification, and interpretation.³⁸

Christians, Newbigin contends, must inevitably view history differently from the way it is viewed by the larger world. Christians inhabit a different plausibility structure, one that is portrayed and advocated in the pages of Scripture. This plausibility structure includes the supernatural, especially as it relates to God’s purposes for the world. Christians are not thinking mythically when they speak of “God’s power acting in world history.”³⁹

Newbigin recognizes that while God has revealed himself in history, “not all history reveals God.”⁴⁰ This is the “scandal of particularity.”⁴¹ God has acted willfully to reveal himself in a particular place, to a particular people at a particular time. Newbigin draws an analogy to a human being who acts willfully. Some of that person’s actions will be more important than others. Likewise, when God acts to reveal himself, or to work in the world, the revelation may not always be received or recognized. The people to whom God reveals himself may choose to act according to God’s purposes or to rebel against him.⁴² God chooses certain people to work through them to effect his purposes for the whole world. The

³⁷Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 44.

³⁸Newbigin, “Response to Stowe,” 153. This line of thinking is important for Newbigin perhaps because he is reacting to so much of Hindu thought which is not situated in history at all. Many of the events recorded in Hindu sacred writings are not meant to be historical but are indeed illustrations of spiritual ideas. Much of Hindu writing relates to the nature of ultimate reality, and how one approaches it, but does not relate to actual events. For example, no one supposes that Arjuna in the *Baghavad Gita* was a historical person, nor that his conversations with Krishna were historical events in the way that Moses’ conversations with God on Mt. Sinai are presented. Moses’ conversations are a part of Israel’s journey to Canaan, and are tied inextricably to the entire event.

³⁹Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 62.

⁴⁰Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 71.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 72.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 73.

Bible is selective in the history it presents in so far as God has been selective in where and how he has revealed himself.

The fact that a basic form of revelation in the Bible is story or narrative is evidence that biblical authority arises from within a historical situation. The Bible interprets history as the story of how God dealt with his people and established a relationship with them.⁴³ The Bible is a story, a true story, which is to be received and accepted and which the hearer uses to interpret reality. It should be read in the same ways as “secular history,” the story of what has really happened in the world.⁴⁴ The history told in the Bible tells how God has acted in the world, thus revealing his nature.

The history related in the Bible has universal significance. If God wants to redeem history, and not just individuals; if the gospel impacts corporate life, not just the interior life of certain people, then “a single happening in a particular time and place can be of decisive significance to all.”⁴⁵ Newbigin believes that God’s purposes touch human culture, and that his purposes go beyond the salvation of individual souls. The events of a particular time and place in the Bible reveal his plan for the world in its entirety. God’s revelation thus touches his total purpose for his creation.⁴⁶ This is in contrast to science which describes what happens, but can make no assertions about purpose. A whole area of knowledge is excluded when science is the only arena of truth. Scripture answers the question of purpose that is not answered by science. Because God is faithful, his character never changes. What he has done offers an interpretive key to what he is doing and will do. Scripture answers the question of why the world is as it is and offers the only clue to make sense of life. It offers to humanity a new starting point for thought, centered in “God’s revelation of his being and purpose” which focuses on the events surrounding Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ God’s purpose, revealed in

⁴³Thomas, 135.

⁴⁴Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 61.

⁴⁵Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 57.

⁴⁶Thomas, 130.

⁴⁷Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 28.

Scripture, is preserved and interpreted by the recipients. This revelation can be understood rationally and makes sense in relation to the overall framework of reality because its significance has been recognized in relation to some “tradition of rational discourse.”⁴⁸ Whereas scientific thought begins with the phenomena of the world and with a set of presuppositions about it, Christian thought begins “by attending to what God has done” in Christ.⁴⁹

Newbigin is aware that the affirmation of the historical veracity of Scripture involves certain difficulties. The “modern scientific worldview” creates problems with such an affirmation being received. The idea of cause and effect as explanation for every event leaves out the supernatural element which Scripture often invokes to explain events. In addition, the scientific attempt to see reality from “outside” in a Cartesian sense presupposes that the universe is a closed system which can be understood without recourse to anything outside, in much the way that a scientist looks at a frog or a tree from outside of it and seeks to explain it only in terms of itself.⁵⁰ Both the presuppositions and the method of science work against taking the testimony of Scripture seriously. Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards allows for both scientific and historical propositions to be accepted, he believes, because both science and history involve the knowing subject investigating the real world and making assertions about what is observed. In addition, scientific presuppositions are not absolute, but are part of a culturally conditioned worldview which cannot explain everything despite its universal claims. The difficulties which science raises are not an absolute argument against Scripture’s testimony but point to the inadequacies of science as the final arbiter of truth. Historical accounts can be authoritative, even if they invoke possibilities foreign to science. The limitation is epistemic and leaves science in a position where it is unable to see the total range of truth.

⁴⁸Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 76.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 69-70

Scripture provides an account of what happened, Newbigin believes, that can be accepted as credible as any other history. Like other histories, it has been selected and interpreted according to a particular worldview. That worldview and its source in God's activity is what gives the Bible's account of history a unique level of authority. This leads then to the assertion that the Bible's historicity is more than incidental. It is a necessary part of the Bible's claim to authority in the world.

Newbigin's Defense of The Bible as
Necessarily Historically Situated

Newbigin's argument goes beyond merely contending that the biblical revelation is historical to defend the idea that its historicity is a necessary part of its claim to authority over life. As an account of God's activity, the historical account given in the Bible has a claim to universal significance which no other history can match. Newbigin's epistemic step backwards allows for historical truth to be admitted along with scientific truth, and like science, the Bible's truthfulness stands with its historical veracity. Just as a scientist puts faith in the world as a place wherein natural laws operate, so the reader of the Bible must put faith in the account of history given therein.⁵¹ This is closely associated with Newbigin's claim that the gospel is "public truth."⁵² The gospel is not fiction but claims to be something which actually happened and which has universal significance. Such a claim, Newbigin believes, should not be lightly dismissed.

The concept that Scripture is true in this public sense is tied to the nature of the biblical documents themselves. Scripture must "speak for itself." It is something akin to a genre error to insist that the Bible be treated as something which it is not.⁵³ One cannot just ignore the text itself. There is no "truth" in the Bible apart from the narrative in which it is embedded.⁵⁴ The Bible is not a philosophical treatise; nor is it a collection of sayings like

⁵¹Ibid., 100.

⁵²Williams, 16.

⁵³Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 48.

⁵⁴Ibid., 50.

unto those of Confucious. The Bible presents itself to the world in narrative form, telling a story about things that have happened. It must be dealt with on the level of story or narrative.

The human cultural situatedness of the writers, their supernatural worldview, does not work against the Bible's historicity. Newbigin admits the Bible is a record of human religious experiences which are embedded in a particular culture and a particular situation. He asks, however, "what other kind of human experience could there be?"⁵⁵ Of course, the Bible comes out of a particular setting. How else could it have been produced? The Bible exists as a product of real processes in the real world.⁵⁶ Those who say the Bible's cultural setting and the obvious bias of the writers mitigates against its historicity fail to see that they are judging Scripture from within a particular perspective, as well and that this conditions their view of the text.⁵⁷

As a historical document, the Bible provides the hermeneutical window "to the meaning and purpose of history."⁵⁸ The two hermeneutical focal points in Scripture, the Exodus and the events surrounding Christ, are both narratives. The cultural conditioning of narrative documents does not, in itself, demonstrate that what is recorded is not truth. To contend that what is recorded in Scripture cannot be a record of what God has done merely because of the situatedness of the authors is baseless. Newbigin asserts that a revelation not embedded within a particular culture "would not be part of human history and could have no impact on human history."⁵⁹

In addition, the Bible is necessarily historical because of the nature of the human readers. The reader approaches a text with an understanding of the language and of how

⁵⁵Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 44.

⁵⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 50.

⁵⁷Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 44.

⁵⁸Williams, 16.

⁵⁹Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," in *Many Other Ways*, 70.

things work in the world that is necessarily historical.⁶⁰ Reality is understood through human language which embodies the ways a community sees the world.⁶¹ The Bible, as narrative, speaks historically to the reader who lives “within existing structures of life and thought,” in much the way the same reader will read a science book and receive what it says from within a framework that accepts it.⁶² Newbigin therefore rejects the claim that Scripture is less true than a science book because Scripture speaks to a certain cultural situation while the science book is objective. Both are accounts of how things are, and both must be evaluated by the reader on their merits and insofar as they square with the actual situation of the world.

Cultural relativity does not destroy the truthfulness and significance of the account because objective reality serves as a check on both reader and writer. Changes in the rational structures a society accepts happen because of “an effort to make sense of the real world.”⁶³ A society will evaluate new paradigms in light of its experience and awareness of reality. While this does not always move in the direction of greater accuracy, it does point to the fact that there is only one real world “out there,” and a society’s understanding of it is controlled by that reality as much as by subjective factors.

The Bible is also seen as necessarily historical because it contains testimony. Scripture records what someone has seen and experienced. The account is necessarily personal and is necessarily an account of what someone believes happened and the significance of that event to that person.⁶⁴ A witness offers testimony believing it to be true. This distinguishes the testimony from mere story or legend. Jesus’ parables are told as stories to illustrate a point, not as an account of events, but the Gospel writers’ record of

⁶⁰Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 76.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁶²Lamin O. Sanneh, “Particularity, Pluralism, and Commitment,” review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Christian Century*, 31 January 1990, 103; Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 141.

⁶³Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 55.

⁶⁴Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 50.

Jesus telling the parables recounts something that someone saw and heard and which made an impact. It is a part of the real world, and must be considered as a reliable account of facts. The same is true of the other events in the life of Christ. Newbigin recognizes that, as testimony, the truth of Scripture cannot be “proven” in the sense that a mathematical or logical point may be. A testimony may be disputed, its certainty being based on the character of the one giving it. The ultimate proof of Scripture’s truth lies at the end of time when the Judge will render the verdict.⁶⁵

The kind of events recorded in Scripture attests as well to its unique authority. The Bible is “that body of literature which . . . renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God.”⁶⁶ The events recorded in the Bible, while they are events of history, reveal “in a unique sense” the reality of God and his working in the world.⁶⁷ As such the testimony given in Scripture is unlike any other and therefore must be given consideration by anyone who seeks to make sense of the world. God necessarily reveals himself in historical acts because he is as much “the God of nature and of history as he is of the human soul.”⁶⁸ He is “the author and sustainer of all things,” and as such he must act in the real world if he is to be known by his creation.⁶⁹ In the events of history, God “meets us and summons us.”⁷⁰ For example, at the burning bush, Moses met a real being, not merely a concept or abstract entity. Moses encountered the God who acts in history and who was preparing to act in a significant way, with Moses’ cooperation.⁷¹

⁶⁵Ibid., 50.

⁶⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 59.

⁶⁷Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 49.

⁶⁸Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 60.

⁶⁹Ibid., 59.

⁷⁰Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 51.

⁷¹Ibid., 50-51.

Since God has acted in history, in ways that make significant statements about the meaning and goal of history, then what he has done “has to be the thing that controls everything else.”⁷² Since God’s purposes will be worked out, his activity in the world provides the key to what will happen. The Bible’s interpretation of events and their significance must be accepted as true over against secular interpretations of history.⁷³ This does not mean that God and his purposes are revealed exhaustively in Scripture. What is found there are “traces” of God’s presence, since God cannot be encompassed in any statement.⁷⁴

Newbigin points out areas of experience which “can only come to us through created things and contingent happenings.” Examples include such experiences as beauty and love. These things cannot be really understood abstractly. Since the Bible reveals God’s presence and reality and offers an understanding of history from his perspective, it provides a testimony of his love that draws the reader to himself. Newbigin contends that only in response to that testimony can people experience the love of God.⁷⁵ Scripture is the means of establishing, not merely truth, but a “personal relation” with the one revealed in it.⁷⁶

*Biblical Authority Demonstrated in Scripture’s
Effect on the Interpretive Community*

While historicity is essential to Scripture’s authority, it is not the only factor involved according to Newbigin. The Bible is more than just an ancient document that tells a true story. It is “the book of a community,” the church.⁷⁷ Scripture’s ability to act as authority

⁷²Newbigin, “Confessing Christ,” 127.

⁷³Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 61.

⁷⁴Newbigin, *The Other Side*, 50.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 52.

⁷⁶Thomas, 130.

⁷⁷Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 55-57.

can only be actualized “within a community that is committed to faith and obedience.”⁷⁸ The church’s responsibility is to interpret and understand the story told in Scripture and to interpret the world in which it lives in light of that story. Scripture’s authority is shown in how the encounter between the church and the world is affected by the encounter between the church and the Bible and between the Bible and the world.

The Bible Challenges Other Worldviews

The Bible functions as authority because it tells a story that is significant for more than any one culture or for the interpretive community itself. It offers a view of the nature and purpose of reality which challenges other worldviews and which interprets reality in ways that the reader must consider. The story told in the Bible “is to be understood as the clue to history, to universal history, and therefore to the history of each person.”⁷⁹ This story “claims to be *the* story, the true story both of the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos.”⁸⁰ It cannot be dismissed as merely the cultural record of one people, interesting for its historical significance only. The Bible claims a certain universality for the story it tells and issues a call to people everywhere to come to terms with what it says. It cannot be fit into any other worldview without being distorted.

While the story told in the Bible has universal significance, it is not just a general story told to illustrate a broad and unfocused view of reality. As historical fact, it couches its worldview in “the story of a particular people and of a particular man among that people.”⁸¹ The center of the story is Jesus Christ and the events which surround his life, death and resurrection. Because God sent his Son to die for the sins of humanity, “and did it on the public stage of world history,” this fact must be “the master clue” to reality and to God’s

⁷⁸Ibid., 58.

⁷⁹Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 128.

⁸⁰Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 85.

⁸¹Ibid.

purposes in it.⁸² One can begin nowhere else once the gospel story has been understood. It cannot be one more story among other equally significant stories. Christ died “for the sins of the world,” not just for the sins of Israel, or for the sins of the people of his own time and place.

As a story which challenges other worldviews, it shapes the mission of the church. Since the Bible tells the meaning of life and of history, the purposes of God in this world, and since it tells the truth about these matters, it must be told everywhere to everyone. It cannot be the perspective of a single sect, of a religious social club which finds it pleasing. When it is shared with other people, it brings them to a place where they can know what is really true about themselves and their world. The church preaches the gospel story as those who know the meaning of life, the real answers to the ultimate existential problems of humanity.⁸³ The “gospel worldview” therefore must be “confidently published and commended with a view to dialogue in the marketplace of ideas.”⁸⁴ Preaching must do more than offer helpful tips for getting along in the world. The story must challenge people’s understanding of the basic nature of life and reality.⁸⁵ The Bible is able to do this because of its universal scope, and its claim to universal significance for the story it tells. The church cannot be content to mine the Bible for moral or theological illustrations. The church’s mission must be to challenge, from Scripture, the way any and every human culture views reality.

This does not happen automatically. Just because the Bible has the ability to challenge other worldviews does not mean that it will inevitably do so. The Bible must be proclaimed and lived out within a community which has “continuity with the biblical actors and witnesses” and which “indwells the story the Bible tells.”⁸⁶ Indwelling the story means

⁸²Newbigin, “Response to Stowe,” 153.

⁸³Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 125.

⁸⁴Williams, 23.

⁸⁵Walker, 32.

⁸⁶Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 97.

to see the world in terms of the story told in the text of Scripture. Newbigin uses the example from John's Gospel where Jesus told his disciples to "abide" in him. The church is to look at the world through Christ and to live out of the version of reality which has him as its center.⁸⁷ The community of believers thereby becomes a living challenge to other worldviews. In addition, as the community does this, its own worldview will be shaped by the Bible.

The Bible Shapes the Worldview of the Interpretive Community

The Bible has an impact on the community which accepts its picture of reality directly as well as giving it a basis for challenging other worldviews. People are "shaped" by the things they contemplate and experience. The Bible story will thus "shape" the minds of those in the church,⁸⁸ because Scripture "speaks to us in its own terms with a challenge to our very selves."⁸⁹ This challenge moves the community, the church, to interpret the world in line with what Scripture says. Scripture can do this because it offers a comprehensive worldview within its pages. Newbigin uses the example of someone who comes into the church from the larger culture which surrounds it. In the church the Bible is read, preached, and lived out. The new Christian experiences the Bible from the perspective of the host culture at first, but finds previous cultural assumptions challenged by the Bible and by the church which is formed by its assumptions.⁹⁰ A new understanding of reality gradually emerges for the new Christian as for all who have found in the Scriptures a new place for grounding their understanding of reality.

Historically, Scripture has functioned this way and especially so at times of crisis. The church fathers found "a new starting point" for understanding the world "because God

⁸⁷Ibid., 98-99.

⁸⁸Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 91

⁸⁹Thorogood, 79.

⁹⁰Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 87.

had acted and spoken in the events which form the substance of the Scriptures.”⁹¹ Using the Bible as their interpretive key to reality, the early Christians were able to develop “a vision of the human story . . . which was vivid and powerful enough to sustain the Church through the horrors of the Dark Ages.”⁹²

Newbigin believes that the way the Bible does this is best understood in terms of George Lindbeck’s “cultural linguistic model” of the way Scripture functions.⁹³ Lindbeck defines religion as “a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.”⁹⁴ Lindbeck’s concern is to define how doctrines function in the life of the church, especially as they are reformulated over time. He discusses several ways this can be perceived. The first emphasizes the “cognitive aspects” of doctrine, wherein doctrines consist of “propositions or truth claims about objective realities.”⁹⁵ While Lindbeck does not deny the propositional aspect of doctrine, he does not believe that it adequately explains the vitality of doctrinal formulation in a living religion. This approach, he believes, has “discredited” doctrine in the eyes of many. In addition it ignores the matter of historical development and hinders reinterpretation of doctrine in new situations.⁹⁶

Another possibility Lindbeck considers focuses on the “experiential-expressive” aspects of religious faith. This approach views doctrine as arising out of reflection on religious experience.⁹⁷ Lindbeck rejects this on the ground that one cannot really have an experience or articulate it, especially a religious experience, without a set of grammatical and

⁹¹Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 23.

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 83. Newbigin is citing George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

⁹⁴Lindbeck, 33.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 16.

symbolic parameters.⁹⁸ Language and the interpretive framework precede the experience, although Lindbeck recognizes that the reciprocal relationship here.⁹⁹ Lindbeck also examines and rejects an effort to combine these two in a rather complex manner.¹⁰⁰

Lindbeck proposes that doctrine should be seen in terms of a “cultural-linguistic” model of the formulation and development of doctrine. This model emphasizes the fact that experience is “shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms.”¹⁰¹ The linguistic aspect involves how language is used and the possibilities for an idea or experience being shaped by linguistic parameters. By “grammar” he means more than just rules of word usage. He has in mind a grammar of conceptual possibilities shaped by a religion. He uses, however, grammatical terms to describe his model.¹⁰² Members of a religious group learn the “language of a religion, its ‘symbol system’ in order to experience reality in terms of that religion.”¹⁰³ Lindbeck believes, therefore, that cognitive truth claims are not primary. They are shaped by the “conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine the kinds of truth claims a religion can make.”¹⁰⁴ The cultural source of doctrine lies in narrative. The story that is told in a religion and the way that story is used is the permanent matter, not the propositional truth that arises from it.¹⁰⁵ For Christians “the

⁹⁸Ibid., 34.

⁹⁹Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 16.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 34.

¹⁰²Ibid., 33. Among terms he uses here are “vocabulary,” “grammar,” “idiom.” He describes religions as sources of “an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs . . .” (Ibid.).

¹⁰³Ibid., 34.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 80. Lindbeck asserts that “it is the framework and the medium within which Christians know and experience, rather than what they experience or think they know, that retains continuity and unity down through the centuries” (Ibid., 84).

‘framework’ within which Christian affirmations are made and in which Christian experiences happen” is supplied by the biblical narratives.¹⁰⁶

Following Lindbeck, Newbigin calls Scripture the “cultural linguistic framework” for the church as it seeks to live out the gospel and make sense of the world around it.¹⁰⁷ The story told in the Bible “structures human experience and understanding,”¹⁰⁸ because the reader’s ability to know is tailored by language and by an existing “framework of understanding.”¹⁰⁹ The Bible reshapes this framework and even the reader’s understanding of the language by giving new content to the meaning of words. In addition, the Bible defines the parameters of meaning by which one’s life experiences may be understood. The believer is able to understand his own experience and interpret events in the world around him because they share features with the story told in the Bible, and because the Bible leads the believer to see life in terms of God’s overall purpose.

Closely related to this is Polanyi’s concept of the “fiduciary framework,” which is “the starting point for all exploration and questioning.”¹¹⁰ Polanyi has shown that all knowing takes place from the perspective of the knower who indwells the fiduciary framework and understands truth from within it.¹¹¹ Without some kind of framework for reality that the knower trusts in apart from demonstration or evidence, knowing would not be possible. One must have faith in something to know anything. The knower makes sense of the surrounding world because of the existence of this fiduciary framework, this set of assumptions about how reality is structured. The “knowing subject” is involved in the act of knowing in that the subject brings this framework to the enterprise of knowing.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁷Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁸Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 38; Lindbeck, 3.

¹⁰⁹Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 83.

¹¹⁰Williams, 19; Polanyi, 266-68.

¹¹¹Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 45-46.

The church, as it functions properly, knows the world through the fiduciary framework given to it in the Bible.¹¹² It sees the world, its needs, and its purpose in light of how Scripture treats reality. Each member of the church makes sense of what is happening in light of what God has done in the past as revealed in Scripture, and in faith that God will be faithful to his purposes in the world today. Scripture “functions as the true story of which our story is a part, and therefore we do not so much look *at* it as *through* it in order to understand and deal with the real world.”¹¹³ This happens in much the same as the way that language functions generally. When one gives attention to a matter of communication one does not “attend to the words” so much as one “attend[s] *through* the words *to* the matter at hand.”¹¹⁴

Newbigin recognizes that he is thinking in ideal terms. The Bible functions in the church ideally as Newbigin has stated, but reality often falls short of this. Newbigin’s major concern is that the church too often allows the “cultural-linguistic framework” of the Enlightenment rather than Scripture to provide its grammar and interpretational model for understanding reality.¹¹⁵ Newbigin therefore exhorts Christians to change their way of thinking and attend to the world through the Scriptures. The church must “interpret . . . what God is doing in the secular world and in the world of religions” in light of the word of God.¹¹⁶ The Bible should be the “lens” the church uses to understand the world.¹¹⁷

¹¹²Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 83. The Bible should be, in Polanyi’s words, the “tacit component” in the church’s attempt to understand the world (Ibid.). See Polanyi, 69-245.

¹¹³Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 42.

¹¹⁴Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 83.

¹¹⁵Lindbeck recognized this problem too. He points out that this has happened earlier in the church’s history, as when Christian Gnosticism interpreted the Christian story through the lenses of Hellenistic thought (Lindbeck, 118).

¹¹⁶Lesslie Newbigin, “The Secular-Apostolic Dilemma,” in *Not without a Compass* (n.p.: Jesuit Educational Association of India, 1972), 63.

¹¹⁷Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 47.

Christians “should not so much look *at* it as *through* it” to interpret the world.¹¹⁸ Only as the Bible serves as this “lens” can people interpret their world in terms of God’s purposes. Then the church can fulfill its function in the world by truly living out and proclaiming the gospel.

Indwelling the text, seeing the world from its interpretive perspective, will preserve Christians from two problems. The first problem is closed mindedness. The Bible leaves much unsaid about reality. It leaves room for much truth seeking in the world. It is, after all, a framework for understanding reality, not an expression of all there is of reality. The second problem is being too open to any idea that comes along. Scripture protects the believer from this by offering sufficient structure to the meaning and purpose of reality to warn believers of false paths. The Bible offers enough structure so that it is impossible to regard every truth claim as carrying equal weight.¹¹⁹ The reader will stay on the right path using the Bible but will not find so much structure that there is no need to look at the real world at all.

Ultimately, Scripture reveals God’s purpose for the world.¹²⁰ Since God has created the world, he is the one who should reveal the purpose for it.¹²¹ This is not done statically and propositionally. The Bible brings the reader into a narrative encounter with real events in which people acted upon real assumptions about reality, and in which God plays a significant role in bringing about his purposes. Scripture, read in this way by the church, functions to shape the practice and activity of the church which then “struggles to live out its meaning in the public world.”¹²²

The Bible Functions Dynamically
for the Interpretive Community

¹¹⁸Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 42; idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 98-99.

¹¹⁹Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 91-92.

¹²⁰Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 22.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 23.

¹²²Williams, 17.

The Bible not only shapes the worldview of the church, it also functions dynamically in the life of the church. Scripture has the effect of leading the church into truth, and helping the church to see truth dynamically rather than statically. This is where the hermeneutical circle becomes applicable for Newbigin.¹²³ He recognizes that no one begins reading the Bible from a purely neutral perspective. Everyone comes with an existing worldview.¹²⁴ Problems occur, Newbigin believes, when the reader insists on the worldview of the larger culture as a hermeneutical key to Scripture. His example of this is Rudolph Bultmann, who accepted “uncritically the so-called scientific account of nature and history that claims to provide secure knowledge of objective facts.”¹²⁵ Such uncritical acceptance of a worldview, which is foreign to that contained in Scripture, does not allow Scripture to function as authority. The reader must “allow the text to speak in its own way, and accept the possibility that the pre-understanding will be changed into a new understanding.”¹²⁶

Believers read the Bible and this shapes their worldview. They approach both the Scripture and the world from that new perspective. That perspective is again shaped by Scripture and the circle continues.¹²⁷ A dialogue occurs between the church, the Bible, and the world outside. This dialogue has two dimensions: one chronological and the other horizontal.

The chronological dimension involves tradition, the church’s own past. The church reads the Bible as a story in which it plays a continuing part. As it reads, it interacts with the story out of a tradition of understanding handed down by those in the past who have read it as their story and who made sense of the world through it. This “continuing conversation between the present and the past” helps shape the church’s understanding of itself and of the

¹²³Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 51-58.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 49.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 51.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 56.

world.¹²⁸ The past gives the church its language, its tradition of rational discourse, its hermeneutical compass. It brings to the Scriptures “an ever continuing exegesis of the story which is the gospel.”¹²⁹

The horizontal dimension consists of the dialogue between different contemporary ways of reading Scripture. Newbigin believes that the western church should listen seriously to the voices of Latin American readers of Scripture, to other third world perspectives, and to feminist readings. A dialectic develops out of all of this; as each of the various cultures which encounter Scripture read it and are shaped by it, they are able to inform other areas of the church of levels of meaning which would otherwise be missed. Together, it is possible for the church, as it puts faith in “the promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into the fullness of the truth,” to come to a richer and deeper understanding of God’s purposes in the world.¹³⁰

The center of the Bible’s history is Jesus Christ. The story contained in the Bible is the key to the true story of human existence, and “the hinge of the story on which all its meaning turns is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹³¹ His crucifixion “was an event in history” like any other¹³² and stands in continuity with all of history. It must be regarded, Newbigin believes, as objectively true. His epistemic step backwards gives room for the story to be so regarded. As such, it is the most significant event in all of history. All of the story contained in the Bible supports the story contained in the four Gospels. The Bible, for Newbigin, contains “the written record of the total fact of Christ.” The Old Testament shows what will be fulfilled in Christ, and the New Testament records

¹²⁸Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 12.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 49.

¹³¹Lesslie Newbigin, “The Enduring Validity of Cross Cultural Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 2 (April 1958): 52.

¹³²Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach,” 237.

and interprets the fulfilment of God's purpose in Christ.¹³³ Thus, an understanding of Newbigin's view of biblical authority leads logically to the question of Newbigin's understanding of who Christ is and the significance of his work for the world.

¹³³Thomas, 134.

CHAPTER THREE
NEWBIGIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE
UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ, in his person and work, is a key element in Christian faith. No defense of Christianity would be complete without some concept of how Jesus is unique, being both God and man, and of how his role as Savior is essential for the world. Evangelicals have traditionally placed a major emphasis on Christ as unique both in his person and in his work on the cross. Evangelicals, therefore, should take an interest in Newbigin's understanding of these issues.

Newbigin's Understanding of the Person of Christ

As God Incarnate

Newbigin holds to a traditional orthodox christology concerning the person of Christ. He affirms that Jesus is God¹ and holds to the full humanity of Christ as “the presence of God in the midst of human history.”² Jesus is “the Son of God,”³ fully God, related to the Father and the Spirit as a member of the Trinity; yet he is God who “has become Man.”⁴

Newbigin affirms the preexistence of Christ, an essential part of any orthodox christology.⁵ Christ thus had a role in creation, being “the Word by whom all things came to

¹Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 29, 31; idem, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2.

²Lesslie Newbigin, “Christ and the World of Religions,” *Churchman* 97, no. 1 (1983): 22. See also idem, *Light Has Come*, 17, 103, 132.

³Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 23.

⁴Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 8, see also 102-5, and idem, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 145. Newbigin points out that Jesus' use of “Abba” to refer to his Father demonstrates “the deepest secret of his being” (idem, *The Open Secret*, 24.).

⁵Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 2; idem, “Christ and the World of Religions,” 17.

be.”⁶ This is not a major theme in Newbigin’s thought, since he seeks to focus on the relevance of Christ in the world today, but it is important to note it as an example of his orthodoxy.

Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards leads him to affirm the historicity of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.⁷ The biblical material relates these events in a generally factual manner.⁸ While Newbigin recognizes differences in the gospel accounts of the resurrection, he focuses on the similarities to support his claim. For example, “the four Gospels are unanimous in affirming . . . that women came to the tomb early on Sunday morning and found it empty.”⁹ This and other similarities override any differences in the accounts, according to Newbigin. The gospel accounts provide no basis in themselves for denying the factual nature of the event itself. The resurrection can only be denied by

⁶Lesslie Newbigin, “What is ‘a Local Church Truly United’?” in *In Each Place: Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1977), 17. See also idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 126; idem, *Light Has Come*, 2; and idem, “Christ and the World of Religions, 17.

⁷Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 87, 108, 181, 182, 252-259; idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 110, 117, 120; idem, *The Open Secret*, 39; idem, “Christ and the World of Religions,” 16; idem, “Secular-Apostolic Dilemma,” 70; idem, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 145.

⁸Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 10; idem, “Witness in a Biblical Perspective,” *Mission Studies* 3, no. 2 (1986): 82. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Newbigin states it plainly: “The resurrection of Jesus from the dead happened” (idem, *Light has Come*, 264.). Newbigin finds in the account in the Gospel of John nothing to indicate that the author was fabricating a story or attesting to some kind of “faith” on the part of the disciples apart from what actually happened. John’s Gospel is “designed to be as simple and factual as possible” (*Light has Come*, 263-64.).

⁹Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 262.

redefining historical possibilities “in such a way as to exclude it,” that is, by approaching the material with naturalistic presuppositions.¹⁰

Newbigin affirms the significance of the resurrection of Christ as more than just an event or a demonstration of God’s power. It may be seen as the “starting point” for an “explosion of hope.”¹¹ Christ overcame death and, at the same time, affirmed his love for humanity. God offered to a world that rebelled against him the opportunity to live with him in a loving relationship of service and obedience.¹² It also points to a future hope. Newbigin affirms belief in the ascension of Christ¹³ and looks ahead to a literal physical second coming.¹⁴

As Revealer of the Father

Newbigin believes that Jesus fully reveals the nature of God the Father. He describes Jesus as “the one in whom God has made himself fully known.”¹⁵ This is inevitable because

¹⁰Ibid., 264. This is related to his critique of modernity which in his view redefines history and all truth in ways that exclude the supernatural. Newbigin believes that the narratives need to be accepted generally at face value, and the fact that they point to a supernatural event in no way discredits them.

Newbigin has made clear that such an antisupernatural bias is no more “objective” or “scholarly” than one which would allow for the resurrection. It is conditioned by Enlightenment restrictions on the acceptable arena of truth.

¹¹Lesslie Newbigin, “The Future of Missions and Missionaries,” *Review and Expositor* 74, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 209.

¹²Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 39.

¹³Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 106, 117.

¹⁴Lesslie Newbigin, “Evangelism in the City,” *Reformed Review* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1987): 6.

¹⁵Lesslie Newbigin, “The Basis and Forms of Unity,” *Midstream* 23 (January 1984): 5.

Jesus, as God, cannot but reveal God.¹⁶ He has “taken our flesh in such a way that he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father.”¹⁷ In addition, Jesus reveals the Father because he is completely obedient to the Father’s will.¹⁸ What the Father does, Jesus does; what the Father wills, Jesus wills. They are one in purpose and to know one is to know the other. Jesus then is the “transparent bearer of the glory of the Father.”¹⁹ Jesus accomplishes this because his only purpose is to glorify the Father. Jesus has no agenda of his own, no plans other than those of his Father.²⁰

As Teacher of Truth

Newbigin asserts that one of Jesus’ roles was to be a teacher of truth. Jesus exceeds all other teachers since in him is revealed the truth of the nature and purposes of God.²¹ Jesus’ teaching pointed the world to a new understanding of reality. Jesus challenged Nicodemus with the new birth in John 3.²² He presented himself to the Samaritan woman as “the one who would speak truly the things of God.”²³ He always sought to challenge the worldview of his hearers. In every situation, Jesus confronted the erroneous understanding

¹⁶Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 2, 17.

¹⁷Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 17.

¹⁸Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 64.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 71, 98.

²¹Thomas Gregory Chapman, “A Phenomenological Method of Post-Dialogue within a World of Religious Pluralism” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Seminary, 1992; reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1992), 90.

²²Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 36-44.

²³*Ibid.*, 54.

of his hearers and pointed them to God's purposes for the world, which would be realized in the kingdom of heaven which was at hand.²⁴

Newbigin insists on the historical accuracy of the record of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. He rejects the view that the early church reshaped the teaching of Jesus to fit the needs of the moment.²⁵ He believes that what Jesus taught has come down in different forms in the gospels, but these differences "are not such as to leave us in the dark about their substance."²⁶ Jesus' sayings are similar enough from one gospel to another to guarantee the clarity of what he meant to teach. Their accuracy is demonstrated also in their effects. Newbigin points out that the teachings of Christ have "been sharp and clear enough to challenge, disturb, and sustain men and women" down to this day.²⁷

Newbigin disagrees with those who contend that Jesus mistakenly taught that the kingdom of God would erupt into history very soon. Jesus taught as much about being patient in waiting for the kingdom as he did about expecting it at any moment. To assume that Jesus expected the kingdom soon comes from a selective reading of what he had to say on the matter.²⁸

Newbigin emphasized the Trinity and believed that the role of each person of the Godhead should not be minimized. For example, he points out the role of the Spirit in the teaching of Jesus. The Spirit indwelling the Son reveals the will of the Father to him, and thus Jesus teaches what is true.²⁹ The Spirit also has a confirming role in leading believers to

²⁴Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 23, citing Mark 1:1-15.

²⁵Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 28-29.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 29.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 25-26.

²⁹Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 48, 53.

see the truth of what Jesus teaches.³⁰ The Spirit guaranteed that the disciples would be led into all truth and that the teaching mediated through them would be preserved. Therefore, Jesus did not write his teachings down on scrolls, but entrusted them instead to the community as they were led by the Spirit.³¹

*Newbigin's Understanding of the Uniqueness
of Christ in Salvation*

Newbigin's christological position leads him to emphasize the uniqueness of Christ in salvation. What God has done in Christ cannot be replaced. It is decisive for the world.³² Jesus is not just the example of faith for the Christian, nor does he merely point believers in the right direction. Jesus himself is the object of the Christian's faith because of his deity.³³ He is "the Word made flesh," and Newbigin asserts "there is no other basis from which we can work, except the recognition of Jesus as Lord."³⁴

The destiny of the human race is dependent on Jesus Christ, Newbigin believes.³⁵ Through him alone "the human situation is decisively changed."³⁶ As the source of hope, everyone must look to Jesus not only for making sense of life, but as the one in whom human destiny will be realized. It is imperative, therefore, that the church proclaim Christ to the

³⁰Ibid., 48.

³¹Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 27.

³²J. Paul Rajashakar, review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *The International Review of Missions* 80, no. 317 (January 1991): 131.

³³Newbigin, "Christ and the World of Religions," 22.

³⁴Newbigin, "Confessing Christ," 134.

³⁵Newbigin, "What is 'a Local Church Truly United'," 18.

³⁶Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," in *Many Other Ways*, 77.

world. Newbigin was pleading for this as early as the 1960s, when much of the world mission effort was consumed with development projects for the Third World.³⁷

The Basis of Salvation

Newbigin views Christ's death on the cross as essential to the salvation of the world. Jesus came primarily to die for the sins of the world and to demonstrate "atoning love."³⁸ One seeks in vain, however, for a clear "theory of the atonement" in Newbigin's work. He believes that the crucifixion, as an event or act of God, is a "mystery" which cannot be "translated into a theory or doctrine."³⁹ This does not mean that the cross was an event without significance. It was God's way of releasing his "life giving and cleansing power . . . into the life of the world."⁴⁰ Just how this happened involves two factors.

Judgment, together with grace, make up the first factor. In the cross, God judges the world, exposing its sin, and at the same time, manifests his love for the world to see.⁴¹ All of

³⁷Lesslie Newbigin, "Integration--Some Personal Reflections 1981," *International Review of Mission* 70, no. 280 (October 1981): 248.

³⁸Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 127.

³⁹Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 55. The nearest that can be inferred is something close to a "moral influence" theory of the atonement. Jesus' death does not change God, or his attitude toward humanity. It does not make a payment, to God or to Satan, for anything. It does demonstrate God's judgment on sin, and his mercy toward sinners. This demonstration of God's judgment and mercy leans more toward moral influence than to other theories, but Newbigin never makes this explicit preferring to leave the matter ambiguous. This is in line with his emphasis on the narrative rather than the propositional character of God's revelation.

Newbigin does believe that the cross disarmed "the powers" (see note 48 below), which goes beyond moral influence, but even here, the disarming of natural, material powers is accomplished more by Christ's demonstration of superiority over them than by any actual change in the way things work in the world.

⁴⁰Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 258.

⁴¹Newbigin, "Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," 264.

humanity is shown to be the “murderer of God,” and all “are accepted as beloved of God.”⁴² No one can claim to be “an innocent party” in light of the cross.⁴³ The religious authorities, the political system, and even the masses turned against Christ, and all are judged for their participation in the event, and, consequently, all political and religious systems and indeed all of humanity are judged. All of humanity participates in the guilt of having condemned Christ, since each of these groups is represented at the crucifixion of Christ.

Judgment, however, is not the final word. The cross was God’s message of reconciliation to the world. The cross exposed the world’s hostility to God, but also showed beyond doubt God’s active desire to reconcile the world to himself.⁴⁴ At the cross, Jesus “was made completely one with the sin of the world,” completing the process that had begun at his baptism where he first identified with sinful humanity.⁴⁵ At the cross, Jesus submitted to the sinful judgment of those who had put him there so that he might show grace and mercy to them and reveal the universal love of God.⁴⁶

The second factor of Christ’s work on the cross is that it had the effect of “disarming the principalities and powers.”⁴⁷ Newbigin accepts Hendrikus Berkhof’s understanding of Paul’s use of the term “powers” to mean “the given structures within which human life is lived.”⁴⁸ These are the “political, economic, ethical, religious, and intellectual” forces that

⁴²Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 55.

⁴³Newbigin, “Basis and Forms,” 4.

⁴⁴Beeby and Newbigin, 183-84.

⁴⁵Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 53.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁴⁷Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 111.

⁴⁸Lesslie Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” *Theology* 84 (Spring 1981): 358. Berkhof described “the Powers” as “religious and ethical rules” (Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John H. Yoder [Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1977],

shape culture and human life.⁴⁹ They are anything outside of Christ which claim to control human destiny. These “powers” seek to exercise “masterful control” over history.⁵⁰ They seek control over the destinies of nations by their own power. The truth, however, is that God is sovereign. He is in actual control. The powers “have been created in Christ and for Christ,” but when they see themselves as autonomous they become “agents of the ‘ruler of this world’.”⁵¹ Jesus disarmed them passively by submitting to them, a mystery seen through

21). Elsewhere he calls these “the ‘powers’ (of religion and state, of law and tradition)” (Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, rev. ed., trans. Sierd Woudstra [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 214). Berkhof’s study of Paul’s use of the term admits that the source was Jewish apocalyptic in which “the Powers” designated spiritual beings which control, through nature, events on earth (Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 17). Paul, Berkhof believes, took the terminology but infused it with different meaning for his own purposes, making them “structures of earthly existence (Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 23).

Newbigin also credits Walter Wink as a source of his understanding of Paul’s use of the term “powers” (Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 74.). While Wink considers Berkhof to be one of “the pioneers in this field” (Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, vol. 1, *The Powers* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 35.), Wink himself has done the most thorough work in this area, and he has strongly influenced Newbigin. Wink believes that “the powers” have an inner hidden aspect and an outer visible one. The outer includes “political systems, appointed officials . . . laws--in short all the tangible manifestations which power takes” (Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5.). The inner is the “driving spirit of the institutions” (Ibid.). The outer include “buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines” while the inner is the “corporate culture or collective personality” of the institutions (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992], 3.). Wink totally rejects any concept of the powers as “angelic beings or as demons flapping about in the sky” (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 3.).

⁴⁹Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” 358.

⁵⁰Newbigin, *Gospel and a Pluralist Society*, 118.

⁵¹Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” 358. Newbigin echoes Wink’s understanding of the powers as created by God for his purposes. Wink says that “when a particular Power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God’s purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic” (Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 5).

the eyes of faith. They have been “‘disarmed’ though not ‘destroyed’.”⁵² Destruction will come when at the end God reconciles all things to himself through Christ, ushering in his kingdom.

Salvation is founded on the eternal purposes of God, according to Newbigin. Jesus’ death was not merely for the benefit of certain individuals but points to “the sovereign work of God.”⁵³ The Bible is not so concerned with the destiny of individuals as with God’s design for all of reality.⁵⁴ God wants to bring life and light not just to a privileged few but to every part of his creation.⁵⁵ Christ’s work in salvation was not just for the benefit of the church, or to disarm the powers that would destroy it, but was universal in scope. Newbigin finds this principle at work in the Old Testament in the call given to Abraham. God purposed not just to bless Abraham but to bless, through him, all the nations of the world.⁵⁶ God’s purpose is never to bless just a portion of his creation. It is to bring all areas of his creation into conformity to his will.

⁵²Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” 358. This is similar to Berkhof’s concept of Christ’s work. Christ, “by his cross, has unmasked and disarmed the quasi-divine authority of these structures” (Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 21); the powers are “dethroned as the ultimate powers and henceforth have a kind of right to exist only as instruments of God’s love” (idem, *Christian Faith*, 513).

⁵³Lesslie Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of the Lux Mundi*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 335.

⁵⁴Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” 333.

⁵⁵Lesslie Newbigin, “The Call to Mission--A Call to Unity,” in *The Church Crossing Frontiers: Essays on the Nature of Mission in Honour of Bengt Sundkler*, ed. Peter P. J. Beyerhaus and Carl F. Hallencreutz, *Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia XI* (Upsalla, Sweden: Almquist & Wiksells, 1969), 256.

⁵⁶Beeby and Newbigin, 181.

The church, Newbigin believes, needs to see the work of Christ in broader terms. God has sent the church into the world to proclaim and to actualize in the world “the true meaning and goal of this world’s history.”⁵⁷ The church, in its life and mission, should seek “the completion of all that God has begun to do in the creation of the world and of man.”⁵⁸ At the same time, it is not the church’s program, but God’s. God is in charge and, in fact, “the content of the gospel is God’s reign.” The church cannot program it, plan it, own it, or control it. The church must embrace it by believing it, proclaiming it, and living it out.⁵⁹ God’s purposes, centered on Christ, are larger than the church, or any privileged elite.

The Nature of Salvation

The nature of salvation in Newbigin’s thought may be understood in three parts. First, Newbigin has no doctrine of regeneration. He gives little attention to such matters as passing from death to life, being renewed in the inner man, or being “born again.” This follows from his emphasis on the work of Christ relating to God’s larger purposes rather than to the individual. Even in places where one might expect Newbigin to discuss regeneration, he does not. For example, his explanation of being “born again” focuses on its being “a radical shift of perspective” and “a fresh understanding of the whole of experience.”⁶⁰ In his commentary on the Gospel of John, in the section on John 3, he does mention regeneration in terms of “new being,” but here he focuses on the ability of the believer to experience the “kingship of God as a present reality” and to see reality in a different way.⁶¹ In *Foolishness*

⁵⁷Newbigin, “Call to Mission--A Call to Unity,” 258.

⁵⁸Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 62.

⁵⁹Lesslie Newbigin, “Cross-currents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 (October 1982): 147.

⁶⁰Newbigin, “Centrality of Jesus,” 209.

⁶¹Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 38, 39.

to the Greeks, he calls conversion a “paradigm shift,”⁶² a change in the way one sees reality. Newbigin focuses on the results of salvation, not the inward dimension. He treats salvation as a phenomena of the outward life, not as a numinous inner spiritual experience.

The second element follows from this. Salvation for Newbigin is a conversion of the mind and will.⁶³ The cognitive element stands out in Newbigin’s understanding of salvation. He sees in Jesus’ call to repent in his announcement of the kingdom of God as “a call to a radical reversal of normal attitudes.”⁶⁴ Repentance is a “U-turn of the mind” which makes one able to see the kingdom of God at work in Christ.⁶⁵

This conversion may take different forms under different circumstances. For example, a Hindu will have to make one kind of shift, and a Marxist will have to make quite another.⁶⁶ Each must make a different kind of change in the way they understand reality. The Hindu must revise his whole understanding of history and of the oneness of all reality, while the Marxist will have to transfer the basis of his utopian hopes from confidence in human will and effort to confidence in God. In each case the locus of conversion is the mind. The nature of conversion is a change of mind, of how one sees reality, not a matter of receiving new life, a quickening of the spirit.

Newbigin does not, however, see salvation as merely mental assent. Human will is also involved. It is, after all, “the conversion of human mind and will.”⁶⁷ Both are always in

⁶²Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 62.

⁶³Newbigin, “Evangelism in the City,” 4. In *Truth to Tell* he calls repentance “a radical conversion of the mind” (idem, *Truth to Tell*, 9).

⁶⁴Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 23.

⁶⁵Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 117.

⁶⁶Newbigin, “Centrality of Jesus,” 209.

⁶⁷Newbigin, “Evangelism in the City,” 7.

view for Newbigin. In fact, he insists that any real conversion must be lived out if it is indeed real. For him, how one thinks and what one does are inseparable. The church lives from within its understanding of reality, and that should be shaped by the facts of the cross. Again, though, the basis is the understanding of reality, what one thinks, not a regeneration of the inner soul, the impartation of spiritual life.

A third factor in salvation involves the conversion of the culture in which the church finds itself. The larger culture is, in Newbigin's understanding, only comprehended properly from within the Christian faith. He uses an analogy from physics to illustrate this. Newtonian physics cannot comprehend Einsteinian physics. In the same way, secular culture cannot understand the Christian worldview. Einsteinian physics can comprehend Newtonian physics and absorb it. In the same way, the Christian worldview can take in the larger culture, comprehend it, and reshape it according to God's kingdom.⁶⁸

Christian faith "embraces the human community," speaking a word to the larger corporate concerns of life.⁶⁹ Newbigin believes that since Christianity is rooted in historical events, the real world, it has significance for what is happening in this world. A gospel that is good only for heaven, that only affects the destiny of souls after this life, is no gospel at all.⁷⁰ Since Christ disarmed the powers, the agents of culture, the cross confronts the culture and disarms it as well, bringing it captive to God's purposes.

⁶⁸Newbigin, "Centrality of Jesus," 209.

⁶⁹Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 110. Knitter is citing Newbigin, "Centrality of Jesus," 203, 205 and idem, *The Open Secret* 76-80.

⁷⁰Newbigin's concern that the Gospel confront western culture is part of this. For him, a gospel that results only in churches as "social clubs" where like-minded people gather, churches that in no way affect the communities they are a part of, is no gospel at all. Jesus died in history, disarming powers that work in the real world, and the gospel that tells the story of that death is one which must affect that real history (Lesslie Newbigin, "Mission in the 1980s," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4, no. 4 [October 1980], 154-55).

Newbigin defines culture as “simply human behaviour [sic] in its corporate, public aspect.”⁷¹ Culture is how people interact with one another and organize their business and social lives. It is the way families interact, the ways friendships and economic relationships are worked out. Every dimension of ethics relates to culture. The church has a responsibility in every place, in light of the gospel, to call “in question the lifestyle of that place.”⁷² Its message must impact the ethics that operate within a culture.

For Newbigin history is nearly synonymous with culture. “History” does not mean only the past, but the future as well. God in Christ made it possible for humanity to “know where history is going,” that is, where human culture is going.⁷³ History is linear and has a purpose, a destiny. Jesus died in history and for history, and a big part of a decision for Christ is to decide “for Christ as the clue to history.”⁷⁴ Salvation, for Newbigin, is a revelation of the goal and end of history. It is the breaking in of the kingdom of God, being shown forth in the church, which points the world to its proper end.⁷⁵ Newbigin takes literally the words of Paul in Colossians when he speaks of God’s desire to reconcile “all things” to himself in Christ. All things then “find their true reconciliation” in Christ. The church “in each place is to be a sign of the true end for which everything in the secular reality of that place exists.”⁷⁶

The goal of salvation is to produce a morally positive impact on the larger culture, to see God’s will accomplished there. It is part of God’s larger plan. God is involved in all of

⁷¹Newbigin, “Gospel and Culture,” 213.

⁷²Newbigin, “What is ‘a Local Church Truly United’,” 21.

⁷³Knitter, 110.

⁷⁴Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 126.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁶Newbigin, “What is ‘a Local Church Truly United’,” 18.

the positive and life-affirming activities of humanity.⁷⁷ Whatever is good is of God and has his blessing.⁷⁸ Mission work, for example, is not a failure if it does not result in personal conversions, for any activity that produces an improvement of humanity is of God. Newbigin's example of this is a Christian college which shapes the worldview of the students, giving them a moral standard for life.⁷⁹ God is more than just passively pleased in this for "whatever of good and truth and beauty they learn is of God and will somehow find its place in his new creation."⁸⁰ Clearly, for Newbigin, the role of salvation in the culture is broader than just amassing personal conversions. This leads naturally to a consideration of the scope of salvation in Newbigin's thought.

The Scope of Salvation

Newbigin's understanding of who is and is not saved arises out of his understanding of the nature of salvation and of God's purposes for the world. Newbigin does not fit into any simple category. He upholds "the uniqueness of Christ for all men and the need for evangelism,"⁸¹ but he is not exclusivist in his approach. He holds to a form of inclusivism in that he believes that "those who die without faith in Christ are not necessarily lost,"⁸² but he is not, in the traditional sense, inclusivist. He recognizes that the question of what happens

⁷⁷Newbigin, "Secular-Apostolic Dilemma," 70.

⁷⁸Ibid., 68. "God's saving purpose," Newbigin says, "includes within it all those happenings and stirrings by which human life has begun to be human." This includes all efforts to eradicate poverty, illness and conflict in the world.

⁷⁹Ibid., 70-71. This is consistent with Newbigin's emphasis on cultural change over personal conversion in salvation.

⁸⁰Ibid., 71.

⁸¹Newbigin, "Way Out West," 23.

⁸²Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 127.

to those who die without putting faith in Christ as Savior “goes to the very heart of the Christian faith.”⁸³

Newbigin’s understanding of the scope of salvation may be seen in four aspects. First, salvation is not limited to the church. Since God’s purposes extend to all parts of human life and culture, it is little wonder that “grace operates outside the church.”⁸⁴ Christ is at work, salvifically, Newbigin believes, “far beyond the visible limits of the ecclesiastical institution.”⁸⁵ God’s concerns include the church but are not limited to the church,⁸⁶ including his purpose to save.⁸⁷ One cannot properly understand the Bible to be saying that all who do not make a specific personal commitment to Christ are lost forever.⁸⁸

Newbigin believes that every person has within them “some whisper of God’s word.”⁸⁹ All truth comes from God, and to the extent that anyone functions on the basis of truth, that person is in touch with God. Newbigin makes no distinction between truth that God has given to the world in general and his salvific revelation. The church then must

⁸³Newbigin, “Call to Mission--A Call to Unity,” 255.

⁸⁴Emery Purcell, review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*,” by Lesslie Newbigin, in *The Quarterly Review*, 10, no. 4 (1990): 98.

⁸⁵Pierre Fallon, “Reaction to ‘The Secular-Apostolic Dilemma’,” in *Not without a Compass* (n.p.: Jesuit Educational Association of India, 1972), 72.

⁸⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1969; reprint, Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1969), 97.

⁸⁷Newbigin, “Call to Mission--A Call to Unity,” 258.

⁸⁸Newbigin, “Integration,” 251.

⁸⁹Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ,” in *Many Other Ways*, 74.

accept “all that is of God in the world outside the wall of the church and beyond the sound of the gospel,”⁹⁰ or it will be rejecting what God is doing there.

Newbigin justifies this perspective on the basis of Scripture. John 1:9 calls Jesus “the true light which enlightens every man.”⁹¹ Whatever “light” a person may have must come from Jesus, and be in line with God’s ultimate purposes for the world. The Old Testament also provides Newbigin a basis for his view. For Newbigin, “the covenant faithfulness of God” is the main point of Scripture.⁹² The covenant which God made with Noah covers all nations and is, Newbigin believes, the “background” for the rest of Scripture. No nation is singled out here. Every nation shares in this covenant, and at the end of the Bible “the nations” come “into the City of God.”⁹³

Newbigin rejects a “totally negative, Barthian approach to other religions,”⁹⁴ preferring to see the grace of God at work in them in some sense. Exclusivism, the idea that “all those who have not made an explicit commitment of faith in Christ are eternally lost,”⁹⁵ is not an option for Newbigin. His rejection of this is partially ethical in nature. He believes that if exclusivism were true, it would be obligatory for the church to use every means possible, “including brainwashing,” to bring people to faith in Christ.⁹⁶ He also believes that

⁹⁰Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach,” 239.

⁹¹Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” 324.

⁹²Newbigin, “Politics and the Covenant,” 359-60.

⁹³Beeby and Newbigin, 181.

⁹⁴Chapman, 89.

⁹⁵Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” 315.

⁹⁶Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173. Newbigin has always rejected evangelistic methods that are manipulative. His emphasis on the need for conversion was more explicit in his earlier work, *The Finality of Christ*, where his thinking regarding God’s work in the larger world was less developed. By the last decade of his life, that theme took

it would require Christians to attempt to discover who does and who does not have saving faith so that the latter might be warned. Scripture, he believes, forbids making such judgments.⁹⁷

In addition, Newbigin rejects exclusivism because of how religious truth is understood and integrated into an individual's consciousness. He finds a continuity between people's pre-Christian experience and their experience with Christ. For example, most cultures already have a word for God before the gospel enters. That word must be used by the missionary in translating the gospel into the new language. Inevitably, there is some continuity between previous understandings of who God is and the new one in Christ.⁹⁸

Finally, Newbigin rejects exclusivism because he finds evidence of God at work in the lives of adherents to other faiths and insists that it is "impossible to believe that the experience of God of which [these people speak] is simply illusion or fraud."⁹⁹ Newbigin in fact finds evidence of a genuine experience of God in the ethical and moral behavior and commitments of people everywhere.¹⁰⁰ This includes not only Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, but also "secularist, humanist," and "Marxist" thinkers as well.¹⁰¹ He believes that

on greater significance, and his emphasis on the need to seek the conversion of non-Christians was resultantly weaker.

⁹⁷Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 173-74.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 174

¹⁰⁰Newbigin, "Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," 261; *idem*, "Confessing Christ," 129. Newbigin says "that it is tremendously important . . . that we acknowledge, and welcome, and thank God for, and cherish, and admire, and reverence all the signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths" (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰¹Newbigin, "Confessing Christ," 129.

since Christ is at work everywhere in the world and “in all of human life,”¹⁰² to find him at work in adherents of these other faiths should not be surprising.

A second aspect of the scope of salvation for Newbigin is that while it is not limited to the church it is not automatic for every human being. Newbigin is not a universalist. He recognizes that the element of judgment found in the New Testament is real.¹⁰³ Jesus came to bring both grace and judgment.¹⁰⁴ If Jesus came to offer life to all who would receive it, this must include “the terrible possibility of refusing the gift and choosing death.”¹⁰⁵ God’s love, Newbigin believes, is really universal, not reserved for only the church. This universality, however, leads to judgment. If one refuses love that is “universal,” then there is no alternative but death.¹⁰⁶

While Newbigin believes that some are saved outside the church, he does not see this occurring as a result of their religious commitment. At this point, his form of inclusivism is really unique. He has “stoutly rejected” the concept “that all religions should be seen as in some way ‘salvific’.”¹⁰⁷ The various religions of the world are not reflections of an underlying reality, a collection of differing interpretations of a common core.¹⁰⁸ Adherents of these religions are not, in upholding and practicing their faith, responding to God as he has

¹⁰²Newbigin, “Religious Pluralism: a Missiological Approach,” 237.

¹⁰³Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” 332-33.

¹⁰⁴Newbigin, “Confessing Christ,” 129.

¹⁰⁵Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 43.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁷Ian Barns, “Christianity in a Pluralist Society: A Dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin,” *St. Mark’s Review* 158 (Winter 1994): 33.

¹⁰⁸Newbigin, “Christian Faith and World Religions,” 316-19. See the discussion of Newbigin’s rejection of John Hick’s pluralism above.

revealed himself through these faiths. God has revealed himself in Christ, and other religions do not point to Christ in some mysterious way. Newbigin offers the example of the Jewish leaders in the New Testament to support his point. These men were steeped in the Jewish faith and Scriptures. Their actions against Christ were an outgrowth of their understanding of their faith. The fact that even the Jewish faith did not lead its most zealous adherents to embrace Christ points to a lack of continuity between God's revelation in Christ and all other forms of religious understanding of the world.¹⁰⁹

Newbigin also rejects any approach to other religions that would make them salvific because this would affirm either one of two propositions which Newbigin cannot embrace. Either the world religions point to a reality that is unknowable, or the adherent of pluralism has a privileged position to know the true reality to which all religions point.¹¹⁰ Christians must affirm that ultimate reality can be knowable, for it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. To say that ultimate truth about God and reality is unknowable contradicts the basic Christian affirmation that "God was in Christ." Since reality has been revealed particularly in Christ, other religions cannot be revealing it also. Those who claim that reality is found equally in all religions are placing themselves in a special position to know ultimate reality. This usurps the place of Christ as revealer of the Father and teacher of truth. Newbigin is unwilling to affirm these consequences, and thus pluralism is impossible for him.

¹⁰⁹Newbigin, "Christ and the World of Religions," 22. This is in contradiction to his belief that there is continuity between one's understanding of God prior to conversion and afterwards as seen in the meaning and use of the indigenous word for God. See page **20** above. Newbigin does not resolve this contradiction anywhere. One arises from his understanding of the process of knowing; the other from his desire to keep Christ as pre-eminent.

¹¹⁰Newbigin, "Christian Faith and the World Religions," 318.

Newbigin, not surprisingly, rejects Karl Rahner's proposal for a viable pluralism.¹¹¹ Rahner developed the concept of "anonymous Christians" who are "given the possibility of eternal salvation" even though they have not trusted Christ.¹¹² Such persons "stand outside the social unity of the Church . . . who have not been reached by the Christian message."¹¹³ An anonymous Christian must be a "faithful adherent of a non-Christian religion." They may be saved through that religion, not because the religion itself is true, but because that person, through their faithful adherence to truth as they understand it, is in reality a "Christian" without being aware of it.¹¹⁴ Such people are "justified through the grace of Christ and through the faith, hope and love for God and mankind which are to be qualified as specifically Christian in a special sense."¹¹⁵

Newbigin dismisses this on two grounds. First, it minimizes the significance of the other person's sincere religious commitment. To tell people that they are really adherents of a religion other than the one they practice and believe is to treat their faith in a patronizing manner.¹¹⁶ It treats the most ultimate commitments of someone's life as if they were meaningless. Second, Newbigin questions Rahner's emphasis on the "fate of the individual soul" for the same reason he questions the validity of such a concern on the part of those who

¹¹¹Ibid., 324.

¹¹²Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, *Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1969), 397.

¹¹³Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV, *Ecclesiology, Questions in the Church, the Church in the World*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1976), 282.

¹¹⁴Newbigin, "Christian Faith and World Religions," 324. These people, Rahner says, "are not objectively aware that they are Christians," (Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV, 282).

¹¹⁵Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV, 282.

¹¹⁶Newbigin, "Christian Faith and the World Religions," 324.

believe in exclusivism. God's concern is for all of reality and for people in their social relationships, not individual destinies.¹¹⁷

A third aspect of the scope of salvation deals with the element of surprise in God's judgment. While some outside the church will have a place in God's kingdom, there are some in the church who will not. Newbigin believes that some will be surprised to find themselves left out who thought they would be included; just as some will be surprised to find they are not left out.¹¹⁸ Jesus' statements related to some being lost are "primarily addressed to those who think they are saved."¹¹⁹ Those who see themselves as righteous, who believe that they are God's special people, are often the ones rejected in favor of the outcasts of society. It is the "scoundrel" who is "having a party in his father's house (Luke 15)" while his righteous brother is outside. Matt. 25:31-46 indicates that people on both sides will be surprised at their position in the last judgment.¹²⁰

In a peculiar contrast to all of this, Newbigin occasionally refers to those in Christ as having a basis for assurance. Newbigin sees assurance in John 6:35-40 where Jesus pledges not to "cast out" any who come to him. Past sin is taken away and present fellowship with Jesus is established, and the believer's future in the kingdom of God cannot be circumvented.¹²¹ He never seeks to reconcile this contradiction.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 326.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 333.

¹¹⁹Newbigin, "Confessing Christ," 129-30.

¹²⁰Lesslie Newbigin, "The Gospel among the Religions," in *Faith Meets Faith: Lively Opinions from Four Continents about Christian Witness in the Encounter of People of Other Faiths*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stansky, Mission Trends No. 5 (New York: Paulist Press, 1981; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 9. This is the passage where Jesus says to those who think they are saved, "Depart from me . . . I never knew you."

¹²¹Newbigin, *Light Has Come*, 82.

The fourth aspect of the scope of salvation relates to the sovereignty of God. Newbigin wants uphold God's sovereignty in matters of individual salvation. Christians who assert that only those who put faith in Christ are saved, as well as those who assert that sincere adherents of other faiths are saved, are taking for themselves a place of judgment that belongs only to God.¹²² God's judgment on who is and is not saved is his own, and "it therefore behooves us to make no final judgment until the Judge himself comes."¹²³ This is consistent with Newbigin's insistence that the mission of the church is God's mission and cannot be engineered by the church. The church does not save, it only bears witness. Salvation is God's work, not the church's. It is the work of the Spirit who is "central."¹²⁴ Bringing people to Christ is always "the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit who is beyond our understanding or control."¹²⁵ The work of Christ is best seen in terms of God's purpose at work in every aspect of the world.¹²⁶ As God is sovereign in all matters, this must include the final decision on who is and who is not "saved."

Newbigin arrives at a christology that allows him to defend the mission of the church in a manner which includes a place for proclamation and for social ministry, for telling the story and for living out this story's ethical implications. His understanding of the person of

¹²²Newbigin, "The Gospel among the Religions," 9; idem, "Integration," 251. This is the reason Newbigin rejects assertions by those such as Rahner that sincere believers in other religions are saved. This matter "is not for Christians to decide, but God alone" (Lesslie Newbigin, "He that Sitteth in the Heavens Shall Laugh," in *Imagination and the Future: Essays on Christian Thought and Practice Presented to J. Davis McCaughey*, ed. John A. Henley [Melbourne, Australia: Hawthorne Press, 1980], 6).

¹²³Newbigin, "Evangelism in the City," 7

¹²⁴Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 65. See also idem, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 117, and idem, "Evangelism in the City," 7.

¹²⁵Newbigin, "Evangelism in the City," 5.

¹²⁶Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 198.

Christ is fully orthodox, and such as has been held by Christians historically. His understanding of the work of Christ is less orthodox. He sees it as a part of all that God does in the world, and for him that includes all that is positive and life affirming in the world. He keeps Christ at the center, however, refusing to allow any other understanding of truth to intervene with God's ultimate revelation of himself and his purposes in Christ.

CHAPTER FOUR
EVANGELICALISM AND LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Lesslie Newbigin has sought to defend the gospel as he understands it and to encourage Christians to join him in a bold and vigorous defense of the truth contained in the Bible. His arguments often seem compelling and attractive to evangelical Christians because of his defense of the resurrection of Christ, the miracles, and the general historicity of Scripture. However appealing Newbigin's apologetic seems, it cannot be embraced uncritically. Evangelicals must understand both the underlying epistemology that supports Newbigin's apologetic and its expression in his understanding of key doctrines.

On both epistemic grounds and with regard to the gospel as presented in Scripture, Newbigin's defense falls short on matters that Evangelicals consider crucial, including upholding a biblical worldview, emphasizing the authority of Scripture, and maintaining the need for faith in Jesus Christ as essential for a relationship with God. Newbigin's epistemic step backwards fails to give him a foundation which would lead to a fully orthodox defense of Christian faith.

*Evangelicalism and Newbigin's Analysis
of Western Culture and the Gospel
Common Ground*

Evangelicals agree with Newbigin that there is a cultural crisis in the west. In 1968, Francis Schaeffer described moral and epistemic relativism as "the *most* crucial problem facing Christianity today."¹ This concern parallels Newbigin's concern for the "fact/values distinction." Carl F. H. Henry, at about the same time as Schaeffer, pointed out the growing secularism which is the background for relativizing religious truth claims.²

¹Schaeffer, *God*, 13.

²Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, vol. I, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Preliminary Considerations* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976), 138-39. Henry focuses on the loss of

Recent evangelical thinkers have also focused on the problem. Millard Erickson has called for an emphasis on the differences between Evangelicals and the larger culture, fearing that if evangelical Christianity does not distinguish itself it will eventually be absorbed into that culture and lose any hope of effective witness.³

Most Evangelicals agree with Newbigin that the Enlightenment is the source of the problem, and that the church has failed because it has followed the Enlightenment's lead concerning truth and verification.⁴ Evangelicals agree that this was a mistake because of the inherent differences between Enlightenment rationalism and Christian truth claims.⁵ The

“truth” in the modern world (Ibid., 28) and agrees with Newbigin that the cultural malaise may be traced back to scientific empiricism (Ibid., 38-43). Henry sees the problem as having come into its fruition in the modern era largely due to the influence of mass media. Television, especially the news, has bombarded people with “vivid coverage” of events that seem for the moment to be world shaking. Religious appeals, Henry points out, no longer make as much impact in such an environment (Ibid., 23). Henry does recognize that the media are not the whole problem and that the foundations of secularism and relativism go much deeper (Ibid., 24).

³Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Mind and Heart: Perspectives on Theological and Practical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 40. This is precisely Newbigin's fear for the church if it does not recognize that the thought forms of the larger culture are antipathetic to the gospel.

⁴Newbigin, “Way Out West,” 22.

⁵A sampling of evangelical critiques of the relationship between Christianity and the Enlightenment may be found across the spectrum of evangelical thought. Bernard Ramm has pointed out that Christian truth claims were refuted or denounced on rational grounds by Enlightenment thinkers (Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* [New York: Harper & Row, 1983], 57-88); Francis Schaeffer recognized that the deep roots of the problem go back to Aquinas (Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* [Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1968], 9-16), but traces the real problem to “four men--Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard--and their thinking in the area of epistemology” (idem, *He is There and He Is Not Silent* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972], 46). Others who have recognized that the Enlightenment is inherently contrary to Christian faith include David Wells (*No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 143); Middleton and Walsh, 43; and Grenz and Olson, 17-23.

Enlightenment based its claim to certainty on rationalism and empiricism, not on God's revelation, staking all on "the experimentally based pronouncements of science as the one and only avenue to truth and life."⁶ The failure of modernity lies in the fact that, having failed to find truth in empiricism and rationalism, the west gave up on the possibility of discovering truth at all, rather than turning to faith in Christ.⁷

Many Evangelicals agree that the source of the Enlightenment paradigm for truth is Descartes, the originator of "modern philosophy."⁸ Cartesian methodology led to the emphasis on reason over revelation in biblical studies,⁹ which led to the destructive higher criticism of the nineteenth century. Descartes taught the west to look at every matter from a perspective of doubt and to examine every question under the cold light of reason. This method, applied to the Bible, led critics to see it as no more than the natural product of human minds describing their religious experiences. Since Enlightenment thought could admit nothing in the way of revelation or of the supernatural, it was inevitable that the Bible would come to be seen this way. Descartes' method led to a change in the way the Bible was viewed and studied that the church as not completely recovered from to this day.¹⁰

⁶Henry, *God*, vol. I, 22.

⁷Schaeffer, *God*, 18.

⁸Henry, *God*, vol. I, 36.

⁹Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber, *What Christians Believe: A Biblical and Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 47.

¹⁰Some Evangelicals focus on others than Descartes. The real crisis in values, what Newbigin calls the "fact/values distinction" begins, Francis Schaeffer believes, with the Hegelian dialectic. The first thinker to give up, though, on finding a unified field of thought in which both "facts" and "values" could be unified, was Kierkegaard (Schaeffer, *God*, 20-21). Schaeffer actually defends Descartes, as belonging to the pre-modern tradition. He says, "Descartes had an important part in preparing for what was to follow; but in my opinion the shift came in the next century, the eighteenth" (idem, *How Should We Then Live?* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976], 152). Schaeffer, while not including Descartes, is

Descartes' method inevitably led to a dead end. His method is limited to descriptions of immediate sensations or events. Descartes affirmed the reality of physical sensations¹¹ and determined that he could accept the truth of things which he could "conceive very clearly and very distinctly."¹² This, by its nature, limits the realm of truth to mathematical matters¹³ or to empirical ones. It is little wonder then that Descartes devoted so much time and space to consideration of scientific matters.¹⁴ This allows one only to develop truths based on what may be apprehended rationally or empirically, through observation and experiment. The method itself limits what may be regarded as truth, inevitably placing metaphysical, moral and religious assertions outside this realm. This is in fact what happened in the decades following Descartes' work, as Newbigin and so many others have pointed out. The wonder is that it took as long as it did for this realization to filter into the larger culture.

Evangelicals can affirm the way Newbigin clarifies the nature of the fact/values distinction. This distinction has been noted by Evangelicals, though sometimes without using Newbigin's terminology.¹⁵ Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm agree with

rightly regarded as being influential in leading Evangelicals to be critical of the culture in which they live.

¹¹Descartes, *Meditations*, 53.

¹²Descartes, *Discourse*, 21.

¹³Descartes, even before he had formulated his method began studying mathematical matters as being the source of certain laws and good reasoning (*Ibid.*, 13).

¹⁴Descartes said that he "resolved to seek no other knowledge than that which I might find within myself or perhaps in the great book of nature" (*Ibid.*, 6); he went about the matter of scientific investigation this "great book" systematically, beginning with astronomy, then to physical phenomena on earth, and finally to biological matters, including human anatomy (*Ibid.*, 27-38).

¹⁵Carl F. H. Henry recognizes that religion has become "a matter of personal preference rather than a truth-commitment universally valid for one and all" (Henry, *God*, vol. I, 13). This echoes Newbigin's analysis of western culture which makes religious truth

Newbigin that the fact/values distinction in western culture threatens the possibility that Christian truth claims can be heard.¹⁶ The terminology Newbigin uses here is helpful in understanding why western culture behaves as it does. Evangelicals struggle to counter such trends as the marginalization of religion and moral relativism. Newbigin's analysis provides a larger picture in which these things may be seen as part of an overall cultural mind set.¹⁷

Evangelicals agree with Newbigin that it is imperative that the gospel be heard in the west. Like Newbigin, Carl F. H. Henry recognizes that "either the religion of Jesus Christ is true religion or it is not worth bothering about."¹⁸ The gospel cannot be preached as merely the opinion of some, or as something that some religious groups find useful for other ends. It cannot be presented as optional and still be the gospel.

claims personal and optional. Other Evangelicals have used the same or similar terminology. Norman Geisler has spoken of the fact that Kierkegaard separated faith and destructive higher criticism of the Bible. This was a "bifurcation of fact and value" (Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 1 [March 1999], 9). See also, idem, "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 307-36.

¹⁶Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *Welcome to the Family: An Introduction to Evangelical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 34.

¹⁷Newbigin's analysis is not without its problems. One may say that Newbigin oversimplifies the western mind set in accusing westerners of a complete capitulation to scientism (Stowe, 149). Charles West has pointed out that in America, the fact/value distinction is not so clear. American culture is more open to self doubt, and to questioning its activities than a thorough-going rationalism would be (West, "Mission," 154). Newbigin also largely ignores the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. His broad outline is still useful however in disclosing the difference between facts and values and where the line is drawn for many westerners.

¹⁸Henry, *God*, vol. I, 14-15.

Francis Schaeffer encouraged Christians to present the gospel to modern people in ways that will challenge the presuppositions of those who have given up on truth.¹⁹ Many Evangelicals are aware that presenting the gospel honestly to the contemporary world is a challenge made more difficult by the way that (post-)modern people think. Newbigin's analysis of why westerners have trouble hearing the gospel and his exhortations to present it boldly as public truth are to be welcomed along with similar exhortations by others.

Evangelicals also share Newbigin's rejection of pluralism.²⁰ The idea that there are many different ways to God, or that all religions are in touch with the same spiritual reality is incompatible with Evangelicalism's emphasis on Christ as the only hope of anyone who seeks to be saved. Newbigin's criticism of John Hick, pointing out especially that Hick implicitly claims a more ultimate perspective than the religions he seeks to unify, is clear, accurate, and helpful. Newbigin's desire to keep Christ in the ultimate position with respect to all religious claims rings true in the minds of Evangelicals.²¹

While Evangelicals share much with Newbigin, he gives them some matters worth considering as well. Evangelicals need to heed Newbigin's call to live out the gospel. Evangelicals must "recognize . . . that there is a profound difference between a community which adores God as the great reality and one where it is assumed that God can be ignored."²² Newbigin challenges Evangelicals to see the west as an alien culture, something to be challenged, not something to be "regained." Here Newbigin's perspective offers a

¹⁹Schaeffer, *God*, 119-67.

²⁰Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism," 51.

²¹John W. Montgomery has described "the Evangelical community" as "duly horrified" over the christological assertions in Hick's *The Myth of God Incarnate* (John W. Montgomery, "Why has God Incarnate Suddenly Become Mythical," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 61).

²²Newbigin, "Evangelism in the City," 5.

challenge to those who have followed Francis Schaeffer's. Schaeffer believed that the cultural crisis in the west was not an inevitable result of modernity, and that Christian truth claims formed the best foundation for western values.²³

Newbigin's critique of John Knitter for seeking to move to a salvation-centered approach to world religions should serve as a warning to Evangelicals who too often center their spiritual lives on personal psychological well being rather than on God and his glory. Evangelicalism has been criticized by some within its ranks for emphasizing the subjective and personal too much. Millard Erickson has noticed "an emphasis upon feelings rather than intellect" in evangelical ranks, and a focus on psychological well being on the part of the individual.²⁴ David Wells noticed the same problems, pointing out that this is contradictory to Scripture and that Evangelicals have failed to notice this.²⁵

Wells has pointed to the fact that this focus on personal well being has shown up in contemporary Christian music. Where in the past the church sang its theology, and hymns served to teach and confirm truth, modern Christian music focuses on experience and the feeling of well being.²⁶ In light of Knitter's work, this is a troubling trend. To the extent that Evangelicalism is willing to focus on personal feelings of personal peace and emotional

²³Schaeffer sought to encourage western Christians to take back their culture in such books as *How Should We Then Live*, and *A Christian Manifesto* (rev. ed. [Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982]).

²⁴Erickson, *Mind and Heart*, 197, 203.

²⁵Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 142. Wells cites a disturbing 1983 study by James Hunter in which he examined the catalogs of the eight largest evangelical publishers. A large percentage of books in their current catalogs were designed to promote individual happiness and well-being (Ibid., 175). See James Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983) 94-99.

²⁶Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 173.

uplift as well as on “what works for me,” rather than what is true, they face the danger of trading away the essential core of the gospel.

Divergence

Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards, while it seeks to find an adequate basis for defending the gospel, fails to do so. Newbigin never really leaves the epistemic system he sought to critique. He remains broadly within the empiricism which his analysis of the Enlightenment shows to be inadequate. The Enlightenment program was an effort to found all truth on a rational description of the real physical world “out there.” This is why science became, for the west, the arena of “facts.” Newbigin demonstrated that such a commitment restricts the arena of truth too greatly.

One would have expected Newbigin at this point to abandon this method as inadequate for verifying religious truth claims. Instead he merely “steps backwards,” broadening the scope of an inductivist and empiricist epistemology to include historical matters. He still seeks to accept only what may be “empirically verified,”²⁷ only the empirical verification now includes secondary verification on the basis of the testimony of reliable witnesses. This expands the realm of what may be accepted as true but does not change the basic method which is induction applied to objective physical realities.²⁸ This allows Newbigin to accept the historical record of the gospels as true, on the basis of a number of reliable witnesses. Unfortunately, it does not allow him to accept as true the area of his real concern, which is religious truth claims.

²⁷James Emery White, *What is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, and Millard Erickson* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 10.

²⁸It is a basic principle of logic that inductive methods only achieve a high level of probability for the conclusion. Induction does not lead to certainty and conclusions arrived at in this way may only be said to be “rendered plausible” (Michael Cohen, “Induction,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 405-6).

Newbigin's epistemic step backwards also assumes a knowledge of the objective world which his critique itself says is difficult if not impossible. If the level of certainty that the Cartesian method achieves is tenuous at best, merely including a broader scope of material does not make for greater certainty. Newbigin admits this²⁹ but does not abandon the method in the end. If "Descartes' method has been found to have in itself the seeds of its own destruction," and "the demand for certainty has led directly into total scepticism,"³⁰ then the method is flawed and cannot be the foundation for whatever level of certainty one gives to the gospel.³¹ It is difficult then to see how Newbigin can call the church to proclaim the gospel boldly as "public truth" before the world, on grounds which Newbigin himself regards as discredited.³²

The key weakness in Newbigin's apologetic is that it is evidentialist. Newbigin is limited to contending for what can be verified historically and no more.³³ This is consistent

²⁹Newbigin, "Certain Faith," 339-50; idem, *Proper Confidence*, 16-44.

³⁰Newbigin, "Certain Faith," 343.

³¹Newbigin seems to be aware of this. His call for a personal faith commitment (Ibid., 347-50) as a way of knowing is on the right track as will be seen below. Newbigin himself, however, never really does this. He remains committed to empiricism and to objective reality as the foundation for truth.

³²Phillips and Okholm point out that any "attempt to prove Christianity true with absolute certainty . . . is inherently contradictory." It makes the ground of proof more ultimate than Scripture (Phillips and Okholm, 35). Newbigin would most likely agree with this, as his call to begin with the testimony given in Scripture indicates. Newbigin seems unaware that he has not really left the empirical and objective grounds of belief that he critiques.

³³As one example, in "Call to Mission: A Call to Unity" Newbigin says, "The content of the Gospel is Jesus Christ in the fulness of his life, teaching, death and resurrection" (260). This limits the gospel to the things which can be verified historically based on the documents related to his life. He can defend what Jesus said and did, but not the doctrines that give this significance. He thereby limits the gospel which the church defends to historical matters only.

with his commitment to finding an objective referent for Christian truth claims, but is inadequate for defending the whole of Christian faith. An evidentialist apologetic of this type cannot move from history to the doctrines which make the historical narrative significant, because purely doctrinal truth claims cannot be verified historically. Doctrinal matters remain on the values side of Newbigin's fact/values distinction.³⁴ People may agree, for example, that the best testimony of history indicates that Jesus rose from the dead,³⁵ but they can still disagree over the meaning of the event.

Newbigin seeks then to unite fact and value, but his method does not allow him to do this. He limits facts to the gospel story, the historical events narrated in Scripture. The meaning of the gospel--its doctrinal significance--is left to the subjective, values side of the equation. The meaning is unique for each person and is discovered by the convert "in that person's experience."³⁶ This shows up in Newbigin's understanding of the role of tradition and intrafaith dialogue in the church. Newbigin believes that the truths of the gospel are not

³⁴Like Newbigin, Carl F. H. Henry recognizes that "the fundamental issue remains the issue of truth." Henry insists, however that this is "the truth of theological assertions" (Henry, *God*, vol. I, 14). That is, doctrinal truths are primary, and no defense of Christian faith can be adequate if it does not include a defense of doctrinal claims.

³⁵Josh McDowell has compiled much evidence to show that it may be defended on good historical grounds that Jesus came out of his grave alive after his crucifixion (Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* [San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1973], 192-273). McDowell assumes that he has proven the resurrection, but as Cornelius Van Til has shown, the historical fact of the resurrection is nothing more than the fact of an unusual occurrence (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955], 24). People do not come back to life after crucifixion and burial, but clearly Christ did. The historical occurrence does not say anything about the doctrinal significance of the event. While it may be granted that without the resurrection, the doctrine of the atonement is meaningless, the resurrection does not in itself establish the doctrine of the atonement. The doctrine gives the event its significance.

³⁶Newbigin, "Call to Mission," 260.

fixed or knowable, but are subjective, at least in this present life. He asserts that “we have a bewildering variety of visions (shaped by our different cultures) of who Jesus is. We shall know truly who he is only at the end when he shall be acknowledged as Lord by every tongue. On the way, we need each other for mutual correction as we struggle . . . to embody in action our perception of his lordship.”³⁷ Tradition, for Newbigin, plays a role along side intrafaith dialogue. While tradition does not quite share equal place with Scripture for him, it is necessary as a witness to the meaning of the story contained in Scripture.³⁸ Just as the church must listen to the voices of other contemporary expressions of Christianity, it must listen to the voices of the past, including interpretations offered in Scripture itself, but none of these are final. Newbigin wants the church to proclaim as “public truth” a gospel the ultimate meaning of which is not clearly known by the church and over which the church should engage in never ending debate.

Newbigin’s method leaves him with only the gospel story itself, which calls the church to proclaim the gospel while seeking to make sense of it. This is unacceptable to Evangelicals for whom the doctrinal matters are absolutely necessary alongside the story. An evangelical understanding of the gospel involves defending both the historical reliability

³⁷Lesslie Newbigin, “Faith and Faithfulness in the Ecumenical Movement,” in *Faith and Faithfulness: Essays on Contemporary Ecumenical Themes. A Tribute to Phillip A. Potter*, ed. Pauline Webb (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1984), 5. Gabriel Fackre calls this “a ‘Corinthian model of theology’” where truth rises from “the contributions of many diverse perspectives (1 Corinthians 12) engaging one another lovingly (1 Corinthians 13) and always accountable to Jesus Christ, the head of the body” (Gabriel Fackre, *Restoring the Center: Essays Evangelical and Ecumenical* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998], 23). This places authority, not in Scripture, but in the dialectical method, and human reason.

³⁸Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 46-49. For Newbigin, the interpretation of the story which Scripture provides is a part of the tradition. It is not final, for only the story itself is final (see below), but has a higher level of authority, being included in the canon (Ibid., 47).

of the story and the revealed doctrines which attend it.³⁹ An evidentialist apologetic, while certainly valuable, is by itself inadequate for defending the full truth of Scripture.

Evangelicals recognize that historical assertions are essential but regard doctrinal ones as equally essential. Some truth claims are completely historical. These are the ones that relate to the facts recorded in the biblical narrative. That Christ was born of a virgin, that he taught in parables and did miracles, that he was crucified and rose again are all historical claims. No evangelical Christian is prepared to give these up. Other truth claims, equally important, are purely doctrinal in nature. These claims relate to the attributes and existence of God, the atonement, the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. These doctrinal truths serve to give the historical events their significance. Without the doctrines, the history becomes no more than a report of unusual occurrences.⁴⁰ Doctrinal truths share at least equal importance with historical truths, if not more so.⁴¹

³⁹It is insufficient to establish the historicity of the New Testament events alone, for “the question of the historicity of this record is of little importance for those who on other grounds deny the truth of Christianity” (F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 5th rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960], 8).

⁴⁰Carl F. H. Henry pointed out that “on the basis of the Gospels alone as trustworthy historical narratives, and without an appeal to divine revelation” [that is without the doctrinal significance of the narratives], one cannot establish that Jesus was truly risen to everlasting life, and not merely “revivified” after his crucifixion. The doctrine gives the story its meaning and significance, but history alone, even when well established, does not provide a basis for the doctrine attached to it (Henry, *God*, vol. 1, 222).

⁴¹Newbigin should have seen this from his experience with ecumenical work. Often what divides churches is not the historical questions but matters of doctrine and related practice. When Newbigin was involved in the creation of the Church of South India from three existing denominations, one major obstacle was the question of accepting the ordination of each other’s clergy from within these denominations (Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 75-77; A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The Church of South India*, The Lichfield Cathedral Divinity Lectures 1950 [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951], 41). There was no question of the historical facts of the Bible, but of the doctrine of apostolic succession, and what it meant for the legitimacy of the previously existing denominations and the new one that was created. A related element of discord was over “lay celebration” of the sacraments

There is a wide consensus on which doctrines are especially essential to evangelical identity. Alister McGrath has pointed out “biblical beliefs and practices” and the need for the individual to experience salvation in some personal way are widely accepted evangelical beliefs.⁴² McGrath also includes scriptural authority, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and “the priority of evangelism” as distinctives of Evangelicalism.⁴³ Similarly, Klaas Runia describes four “essentials” which characterize Evangelicalism. These are “unconditional acceptance of *Holy Scripture* as the authoritative Word of God,” a “personal faith in *Jesus Christ* and his work of Salvation,” and a personal relationship with him by the work of the *Holy Spirit*, and finally an “emphasis on the *missionary task* of the individual believer and of the congregation as a whole.”⁴⁴ While differences exist as to the details, most evangelical thinkers would agree with McGrath and Runia.

Among these distinctives two implications stand out. Evangelicals hold to a high view of biblical authority and see Jesus Christ as the only hope for a lost humanity.⁴⁵

(Rawlinson, 43). It was doctrine, not historical facts, that needed to be overcome for the merger to work.

⁴²McGrath, 19. McGrath points to Barry Collett as asserting that the evangelical spirit goes back to certain monastics in Italy in the late fifteenth century. See Barry Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and the Reformation*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1985. Collett describes the practices of these Benedictine monks as including an emphasis on the study of Scripture (29) and development of “a personal relationship with God” (61). It may be an exaggeration to call this Evangelicalism in the modern sense, but it does demonstrate that some evangelical concerns have a long history in the church.

⁴³McGrath, 55-56.

⁴⁴Klaas Runia, “What is Evangelical Theology?” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21, no. 4 (October 1997): 296. Emphasis his.

⁴⁵For Evangelicals, scriptural authority and a proper understanding of Christ are “inextricably linked” because “Scripture alone brings us to a true and saving knowledge of Jesus Christ” (McGrath, 65).

Scripture is often described as inerrant⁴⁶ or as infallible. Phillips and Okholm say that “evangelicals confess plenary and verbal inspiration.”⁴⁷ Efforts to defend this from an evidentialist perspective have been made,⁴⁸ demonstrating the historical accuracy of the narrative. As important as this is (and Evangelicals recognize that it is essential), it is not sufficient by itself to defend all of Christianity’s truth claims.

Tied to biblical authority is the idea of Christ as humanity’s only hope for salvation. This is essential to evangelical identity.⁴⁹ The death of Christ “is to be seen as the unique, necessary and sufficient basis of salvation.”⁵⁰ One cannot demonstrate this doctrine historically. It is a purely doctrinal claim, albeit one made in Scripture itself.⁵¹

Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards cannot give warrant for either a view of biblical authority beyond its historical veracity or for personal faith in Jesus Christ as humanity’s only hope for salvation. Evangelical Christianity cannot stand on historical

⁴⁶Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, vol IV, *God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Three* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 103-255; Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 151-93.

⁴⁷Phillips and Okholm, 48.

⁴⁸One of the best sources on this is the compilation of others’ research done by Josh McDowell in *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

⁴⁹In the surveys done by Christian Smith, 96 percent of self identified Evangelicals held that salvation is possible solely through faith in Christ. Christian Smith *et al.*, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 23.

⁵⁰McGrath, 66.

⁵¹Among many Scripture passages which explicitly assert that Christ alone is the basis of salvation are John 3:16-18, 14:6, 17:3; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:24, 5:8-10; 1 Cor. 3:11, and Gal 1:6-9. Taken together, they build a case for the doctrine that is acceptable only if one begins with faith in the authority of Scripture. Thus biblical authority and the exclusivity of Christ are linked.

grounds alone, for history by itself cannot provide a basis for making the truth claims that are essential to evangelical faith.

It is necessary then to begin from a different basis if the significant truth claims of the Christian faith are to be defended adequately. Newbigin's effort has not moved beyond classical foundationalism which holds that beliefs are justified only if they are "self evident or incorrigible." Beliefs must either be evident beyond doubt, or such that the one who believes it cannot be mistaken.⁵² Newbigin admits this is impossible, but accepts the next best thing that evidentialism can offer--a high level of probability only for those things which can be verified objectively either directly or, as in the case of historical claims, indirectly on the testimony of eyewitnesses.⁵³ Since certainty is impossible from an evidentialist perspective, one must move to another basis more suited to the types of truth claims Christians make. To attempt to found Christian truth claims on any basis foreign to those claims themselves is to make the method more ultimate than the truth one wishes to support.⁵⁴

A defense of the truth claims of Christianity must be found from within its own system of thought. Traditionally, presuppositionalist apologetics attempted to do this. Alvin Plantinga refined the presuppositionalist approach in what he calls "reformed epistemology."

⁵²Terrence Penelhum, "Do Religious Beliefs Need Ground?" in *Contemporary Classics in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Ann Loades and Loyal D. Rue (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1991), 114. Descartes' *cogito* fits both these criteria.

⁵³Newbigin has fallen into the ethical trap that obligates evidentialists to hold only beliefs that have sufficient evidential support (Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" in *Contemporary Classics in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Ann Loades and Loyal D. Rue [Peru, IL: Open Court, 1991], 95). To his credit, despite his desire to defend Christian faith, Newbigin does not go far beyond the obligation imposed by his method as will be seen below.

⁵⁴As Cornelius Van Til has put it, "no non-Christian position can be made to appear *more* than merely plausible." To attempt to establish the truth claims of Christianity on a basis outside itself inevitably leads to failure (Van Til, 115).

Here, Plantinga justifies epistemic certainty based on the concept of “properly basic beliefs.”⁵⁵ This approach offers a way for the fullness of Christian truth claims to be defended rationally.⁵⁶ This is in line with the nature of Christian truth which rests not on empiricism, or on rationalism but on the fact that God has revealed himself and his purposes to humanity.⁵⁷

A properly basic belief is one which is understood immediately, without being grounded in any other belief. Alvin Plantinga uses the example $2+1=3$ as a properly basic belief. It is believed without reference to any other belief. To see the proposition and understand it is to believe that it is true.⁵⁸ Such beliefs are not grounded in any epistemic system, but one “is entirely within his intellectual rights in believing as he does.”⁵⁹ Plantinga wants to argue that ultimate faith commitments, such as the proposition “God exists,” are properly basic also.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 93-105.

⁵⁶Reformed epistemology and presuppositionalism will be used here as for all practical purposes as synonymous terms. Under both, certain ideas may be called either a “presupposition” or a “properly basic belief” as these terms are synonymous.

⁵⁷Henry, *God*, vol. I, 223. Later he says, “human knowledge . . . has its ultimate ground in God.” There is no possibility of knowing apart from God’s revelation in Scripture and in nature and in the way the human mind has been structured by God (idem, *God Revelation and Authority*, vol. V, *God Who Stands and Stays: Part One* [Waco, TX: Word, 1982], 384).

⁵⁸Alvin Plantinga, “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson *et al.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 314. He also regards beliefs related to one’s self awareness as properly basic, such as “there is a pain in my right knee” (Ibid.). Again, the one experiencing the pain believes it apart from any epistemic foundation, and does not attempt to justify the belief on rational grounds.

⁵⁹Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 94.

⁶⁰Ibid.

One may object that presuppositions, or properly basic beliefs, can be arbitrary and that one should not base ultimate truth claims on a belief such as the one that God exists. Plantinga denies this, arguing that while properly basic beliefs are not grounded in an outside epistemology, they are not therefore groundless.⁶¹ Tradition, for Newbigin, plays a role along side intrafaith dialogue. While tradition does not quite share equal place with Scripture for him, it is necessary as a witness to the meaning of the story contained in Scripture.⁶² Just as the church must listen to the voices of other contemporary expressions of Christianity, it must listen to the voices of the past, including interpretations offered in Scripture itself. Properly basic beliefs arise “only in certain conditions; these conditions are the ground of its justification, and by extension, the ground of the belief itself.”⁶³ Plantinga believes that in all circumstances of properly basic belief, “there is some circumstance or condition that confers justification.”⁶⁴ Properly basic beliefs do not need universal

⁶¹For example, “perceptual beliefs” are properly basic but are not groundless. His example of this is “I see a tree.” The experience of seeing the tree is “the ground of the belief itself” (Plantinga, *Belief in God*, 97).

⁶²Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 46-49. For Newbigin, the interpretation of the story which Scripture provides is a part of the tradition. It is not final, for only the story itself is final (see below), but has a higher level of authority, being included in the canon (Ibid., 47).

⁶³Plantinga, “*Belief in God*,” 99.

⁶⁴Ibid., 98. “A belief is properly basic only in certain conditions; these conditions are . . . the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. In this sense, basic beliefs are not, or are not necessarily, *groundless* beliefs” (Ibid., 99) (emphasis his).

Richard Grigg has argued that there are “significant disanalogies” between properly basic beliefs and belief in God. He uses Plantinga’s proposition “(2) I had breakfast this morning” and says that the memory may later be confirmed by finding the “dirty dishes” and “one less egg in my refrigerator” (Richard Grigg, “The Crucial Disanalogies between Properly Basic Belief and Belief in God,” *Religious Studies* 26, no. 3 [September 1990]: 390). Grigg misses the point that while having had breakfast may be empirically verified, one’s holding of the belief is epistemically justified apart from verification. That belief in

justification, but rise out of personal experience and are “tested by a relevant set of examples.” The Christian believes in God and the fact that the atheist does not take away the Christian’s right to this properly basic belief.⁶⁵ Christian truth claims should not be subject to epistemic conditions imposed from the outside.⁶⁶ Phillips and Okholm concur saying that a proper worldview need not be provable to those who do not accept it. It need only pass the test of “empirical fit”--it should fit with experience and be coherent.⁶⁷ Thus, reformed epistemology is not “non-foundationalism” but is a form of “weak foundationalism” of the sort that traditional reformed thinkers have accepted.⁶⁸

Traditional reformed thinkers have argued similarly, and Plantinga sees his proposal as part of that whole mindset. Abraham Kuyper, for example, believed that faith

God cannot be empirically verified does not count against *belief* in God in any way.

Grigg’s objection fails, by the way, at one other point. The dirty dishes and missing egg can only establish the *plausibility* that he had breakfast. Others may have left the dishes in the sink and the eggs may have been miscounted. Empiricism does not establish certainty. Grigg’s memory of having breakfast is more certain than the dishes or the missing egg. These may only give grounds for the belief that he ate breakfast; they do not establish it any more than the classical arguments establish the existence of God.

⁶⁵C. Stephen Evans has pointed out that a reasonable, critically examined faith is possible even if one begins fideistically with certain commitments, and is willing to test these commitments (C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion: Thinking about Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985], 25).

⁶⁶Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 104.

⁶⁷Phillips and Okholm, 35. They state that “Scripture does not promise” that Christian truth claims are provable (Ibid.). At the same time, it may be argued that John Hick’s pluralism does not pass the test of properly basic belief. He grounds it in the universal experience of the numinous which he finds in different places of worship. Even if it does pass the experiential test (a dubious possibility itself) it does not pass the test of coherence. Contradictory truth claims cannot be reconciled, and pluralism, attractive as it may be to a certain mindset, is neither provable on hard foundationalist grounds nor does it pass the test of a “properly basic belief.”

⁶⁸Plantinga, “Reformed Objection,” 317.

commitments are bound up in the way that God has structured the mind. He argued that everyone has a faith structure which is “fundamental to every facet in our human consciousness.”⁶⁹ “Axioms,” he contended, “cannot be demonstrated” for the forming of them is a faith based activity.⁷⁰ Cornelius Van Til emphasizes the self-authenticating nature of revelation in his presuppositional approach to defending Christian truth.⁷¹ The individual believer discovers the truth in the encounter with revelation, apart from grounding in any epistemological commitments. This is similar to the concept of “properly basic belief” in that it depends on one’s experience and is grounded in itself, not in some more foundational idea.

Presuppositional apologetics holds that certain beliefs are necessary as a starting point for thought, and that these are not externally grounded. The entire presuppositionalist approach to apologetics depends on properly basic beliefs as foundational.

Presuppositionalism takes certain truth claims as basic and builds from them in the manner that Plantinga lays out. Presuppositions are not grounded in any epistemology, and yet these truth claims are not arbitrary. Christian presuppositions “must relate to the reality of what is, in a way that can be seen to be true.”⁷²

Since evidentialism cannot provide a full defense of Christian faith, it is necessary to turn to some form of presuppositionalism, a system which starts with certain properly basic beliefs, if the Christian faith is to be defended adequately. Cornelius Van Til held that it was

⁶⁹Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 125-26.

⁷⁰Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961), 182, describing Kuyper.

⁷¹White, 39.

⁷²Guinness, 335. Guinness says, “It is not enough to look into the blackness of twentieth century thinking and affirm faith as an answer; this too would be a leap of faith” (Ibid.).

impossible to defend Christianity apart from a presuppositional approach.⁷³ Francis Schaeffer believed that due to moral and religious relativism in western culture a presuppositional apologetic is imperative.⁷⁴ Presuppositionalism, what Plantinga calls “reformed epistemology,” believes that all of life must be understood from within the perspective of Christianity as it is revealed in the Scriptures. It takes the character of God seriously as one who has created humanity with the capacity to know him and to know the real world. It takes the fall seriously, believing that the noetic structures of the human mind have been compromised by that event. It supports Christian beliefs without asking them to be subject to an impossible standard of verification. When Christian truth claims are made subject to verification under any other system of thought, the ability to defend them is compromised.⁷⁵

What beliefs then may be regarded as properly basic for a defense of Christian faith? First, belief in God is properly basic.⁷⁶ Plantinga says that “a person is entirely within his epistemic rights, entirely rational, in believing in God even if he has no argument for this belief, and does not believe it on the basis of any other beliefs he holds.”⁷⁷ Believers in God have an immediate awareness of the truth of the proposition apart from any justification for it.⁷⁸ Such faith may arise from a sense of God’s presence, or from an awareness of the created universe, or from a liberating sense of being forgiven for one’s sins.⁷⁹ This faith is

⁷³White, 41.

⁷⁴Schaeffer, *God*, 15.

⁷⁵Van Til, 113-14.

⁷⁶Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 93-105.

⁷⁷Plantinga, “Reformed Objection,” 313.

⁷⁸Plantinga, “Reformed Epistemology,” 332.

⁷⁹Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 99-100. Plantinga admits that one may argue that these

entirely biblical since the Bible itself never attempts to prove or argue for the existence of God.⁸⁰

Plantinga has shown that Calvin held that Christians should include belief in God among their foundational beliefs.⁸¹ Calvin believed that some sense of realization that God exists was pretty much universal.⁸² Van Til, following Calvin, believes that knowledge of God is innate, a result of who God is, “a being who exists necessarily” and of humanity’s contingent relationship of dependence on God.⁸³

This faith is more than just the idea that some being called “God” exists. To some extent, belief in God entails, for the Christian, belief in the attributes of God revealed in Scripture. To believe in God is to believe that he has the attributes including holiness, justice and mercy that are revealed in Scripture. God, in a sense, is equal to the sum of his attributes. To believe in God, but not in the God who has revealed himself, is to believe in another god all together. Carl F. H. Henry has pointed out that God’s revelation of himself in Scripture is “the only objective intelligible basis for statements about his nature.”⁸⁴

beliefs are properly basic and that one grounds belief in God on them. In each case, though, each of these beliefs entails the belief that God exists. He stands by the existence of God, then, as properly basic.

⁸⁰Plantinga, “Reformed Objection,” 311.

⁸¹Ibid., 317. Plantinga, citing Calvin, says this: “God has created us with a tendency or disposition to see his hand in nature, and to recognize that he is both the creator of the world and the person to whom we owe ultimate allegiance” (Alvin Plantinga, “On Reformed Epistemology,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson *et al.* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 335).

⁸²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. I, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, vol. XX, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I, iii, 1; I, iii, 3.

⁸³Van Til, 57.

⁸⁴Henry, *God*, vol. V, 99.

This leads naturally to the question of Scripture. That God has revealed himself in the Bible may be seen as properly basic for Christians. Van Til has pointed out that Scripture must be a part of one's defense of Christian faith.⁸⁵ It cannot be subjected to reason or to any other foundation.⁸⁶

This has been recognized by modern defenders of the faith. Carl F. H. Henry calls "divine revelation . . . the basic epistemological axiom."⁸⁷ Henry recognizes that attempts to reason one's way to God are bound to fail and that only divine self disclosure provides a basis for certainty regarding God's nature and purposes.⁸⁸ Os Guinness agreed saying that if one believes in God and that God has revealed himself, then this self revelation may be accepted as true, even apart from outside verification.⁸⁹ Francis Schaeffer has observed that the search for an all encompassing rational system has failed. Centuries of philosophical effort did not establish successfully any such system beginning from human reason. The human mind is too limited. Without revelation, one cannot know the truth.⁹⁰

The reformers saw belief in the authority of Scripture in terms that may be described as "properly basic." Calvin affirmed that the Bible is inspired of God and saw this as a basic axiom. He said that "they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards."⁹¹ One begins with Scripture, one does not work towards it for God is capable of giving testimony to himself and needs no outside defense.⁹²

⁸⁵Van Til, 123.

⁸⁶Ibid., 125.

⁸⁷Henry, *God*, vol. I, 216, 226.

⁸⁸Ibid., 218.

⁸⁹Guinness, 336.

⁹⁰Schaeffer, *God*, 17.

⁹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, I, vii, 4. "Above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty

Many modern Evangelicals also believe Scripture should be accepted in this way. Alister McGrath has said that “the Evangelical testimony is that Scripture comes to us as the self authenticating Word of God.”⁹³ Building on this, a host of doctrines found in the Bible may be defended. One does not need to add other properly basic beliefs since belief in scriptural authority entails them. Among these are belief in the Trinity,⁹⁴ in the virgin birth of Christ, and Christ’s death on the cross as the only hope of those who would be justified before God. Of course there are certain concepts not so clearly taught in Scripture. Belief in scriptural authority does not entail only one view of church government, of eschatology, or of the nature of the Colossian heresy. Much of Christian teaching, however, and certainly everything that is essential is clearly revealed in Scripture.

While Newbigin’s effort to defend the gospel only on the basis of the objective truth of the historical record is inadequate, the presuppositionalist approach offers a greater level of certainty and is broad enough to defend the totality of Christian truth claims. It does so by showing that these claims are coherent. This is not to say that evidential approaches, such as Newbigin’s, have no value. The historical evidences for Christianity do establish that its truth claims are plausible. One cannot well defend a view of the atonement if the resurrection could be shown to have been a hoax. However, evidentialism cannot stand alone, and must always be secondary to presuppositionalism.

. . . that it (scripture) has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (Ibid., I, vii, 5).

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³McGrath, 61.

⁹⁴The term Trinity does not itself appear in Scripture, but the phrase “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” does (Matt. 28:19), and all three are spoken of as deity at various points in Scripture.

It is surprising that Newbigin does not abandon evidentialism in light of his own statements regarding the relationship of modernity to Christian faith. He recognizes that what Plantinga calls “hard foundationalism” does not lead to certainty related to the things of God.⁹⁵ Natural theology, against which Plantinga argues, is also rejected by Newbigin.⁹⁶ He understands that such doctrines as the incarnation and the Trinity cannot be justified on hard foundationalist grounds.

To his credit, Newbigin resists total subjectivism and in fact argues against it vigorously.⁹⁷ In arguing against the “modern scientific worldview,”⁹⁸ however, he never ultimately abandons it. Having established that it cannot verify religious truth claims, he never moves to an epistemic method which can.

This is also surprising in light of the way in which Newbigin uses Polanyi to undergird his critique of modernism. Polanyi’s concept of personal knowledge bears startling resemblances to certain aspects of presuppositionalism, especially as refined by Plantinga.

Both Polanyi and the presuppositionalists give the knower an essential place in the process of knowing. Polanyi emphasizes the place of “personal participation in the search for and conquest of our knowledge.”⁹⁹ He means that one perceives the world and makes elementary interpretive decisions about it, which one then believes as true, and finds confirmed in one’s experience.¹⁰⁰ This finds an obvious parallel with Plantinga’s examples

⁹⁵Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 18-19.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 44-45, 48-50.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁹Polanyi, 96.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 96-97.

of perceptual beliefs as “properly basic.”¹⁰¹ Neither Plantinga nor Polanyi would consider perceptual beliefs groundless. The knower, in both cases, is intentional in the act of knowing that one perceives a real world and that one can trust one’s perceptions.

Polanyi points out “that the logical antecedents of science are internal to science.”¹⁰² Science rests on epistemic principles which cannot be verified outside of the practice of science itself for “nobody has ever affirmed the presuppositions of science by themselves.”¹⁰³ “Science,” Polanyi points out, “is a system of beliefs to which we are committed. Such a system cannot be accounted for either from experience as seen within a different system, or by reason without any experience.”¹⁰⁴ Polanyi might as well be saying that science is a presuppositional system that cannot be justified epistemically, but which is not therefore discredited as a way to gain knowledge. He even calls it “a system of beliefs to which we are committed.” The parallel to the presuppositional apologetic method advocated by Plantinga and practiced by Calvin and modern reformed thinkers is apparent.

Newbigin comes close to seeing this. He writes that the Christian community has a “tradition which claims authority”¹⁰⁵ and which “carries forward certain ways of looking at things, certain models for interpreting experience.”¹⁰⁶ Newbigin sees this as parallel to Polanyi’s understanding of science¹⁰⁷ and advocates that Christians should “indwell the

¹⁰¹Plantinga, “Belief in God,” 97.

¹⁰²Polanyi, 171.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 49.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 43-51.

tradition” as the scientists do their own.¹⁰⁸ Newbigin even asserts that “the search for a kind of knowledge of God that is not dependent on the grace of God is doomed to fail.”¹⁰⁹ The connection between “personal knowledge” and a religious worldview was appreciated by Polanyi himself. In an illuminating passage, he asserts that

We must now go back to St. Augustine to restore the balance of our cognitive powers. In the fourth century A.D., St. Augustine brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a post-critical philosophy. He taught that all knowledge is a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief His doctrine ruled the minds of Christian scholars for a thousands years. Then faith declined and demonstrable knowledge gained superiority over it.¹¹⁰

Newbigin is fond of using the phrase “a new starting place for thought” or similar wording.¹¹¹ Polanyi’s work offered him an open door to locate that starting place in God’s revelation of himself in Scripture. By locating the starting place in the “tradition” embodied in the historical record of Scripture rather than in Scripture as revelation, Newbigin never really leaves the modernist paradigm of empirical verification. The tradition embodied in the historical record alone is insufficient to allow Newbigin to develop an apologetic which embraces *all* of the significant affirmations of historic Christianity, including the inspiration of Scripture and the exclusivity of Christ.

*Evangelicalism and Newbigin’s Understanding
of Biblical Authority*

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁹Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 15.

¹¹⁰Polanyi, 266.

¹¹¹Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 17, 23, 37; idem, *Proper Confidence*, 86.

Evangelical Christians have always regarded the Bible as the final authority in matters of doctrine and practice.¹¹² Derek Tidball has called this “the most characteristic feature of evangelicalism.”¹¹³ Many have undertaken to write the history of how Evangelicalism has emerged from the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s, which was a reaction to the erosion of faith in the Scriptures among mainline denominations, and how evangelical thought finds its basis in the Reformation concept of *sola Scriptura*.¹¹⁴ The history and general orientation of Evangelicalism have worked to keep Scripture at the center of evangelical distinctives.

Any defense of Christian faith, for Evangelicals, then must include a defense of Scripture and of the use of Scripture in defending the faith. Lesslie Newbigin has defended a high view of Scripture, often against the intellectual current of his mainline Christian milieu. He has held up Scripture as the foundation of Christian truth and identity, and has insisted that the story told in the Bible is “the true story, both of the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos.”¹¹⁵ Evangelicals must therefore consider carefully Newbigin’s understanding of Scripture and its role in Christian faith.

¹¹²John Gerstner, “The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith,” in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, and Where They Are Changing*, ed. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 32. Francis Schaeffer has said that “holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world” (Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* [Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984], 51).

¹¹³Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?: Tracing the Roots of the Modern Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 79.

¹¹⁴Excellent short histories of Evangelicalism may be found in George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); McGrath, 19-51; and Phillips and Okholm, 129-269.

¹¹⁵Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 38.

Common Ground

Newbigin has challenged the church to see the world through the Bible rather than the other way around.¹¹⁶ He wants the church to explain modern life in biblical terms rather than seeking to explain the Bible in terms drawn from the larger culture.¹¹⁷ Evangelicals generally agree with Newbigin. Evangelicals are willing to accept supernatural interpretations of reality set forth in Scripture as valid over against Enlightenment based naturalism. Enlightenment naturalism came into biblical studies in the previous century, leading to the fundamentalist-modernist conflict. Evangelicalism has maintained its insistence on the supernatural as a reality in the world and never has identified with the modernists to any great extent.

At the same time, Evangelicals should heed Newbigin's exhortation, because at times they have not been consistent with their worldview commitments. For example, Evangelicals are often quick to attempt to justify the gospel on Enlightenment terms (evidentialism), or they fail to see the extent to which they have been captured by the larger culture.¹¹⁸ For Newbigin, biblical revelation is "an interpretive key to all of experience and

¹¹⁶Newbigin, *Word in Season*, 83; idem, *Foolishness*, 22.

¹¹⁷Here, Newbigin moves toward a presuppositionalist apologetic, but in practice he never leaves evidentialism, and rarely goes beyond what can be justified on the basis of objective empiricism embodied in the historical record.

¹¹⁸David Wells has lamented the fact that for too many Evangelicals, a biblical worldview does not affect the way they live their daily lives (Wells, 95-136). Millard Erickson has pointed out the extent to which Evangelicals exhibit "willingness and even eagerness to accommodate to certain features of contemporary society" (Erickson, *Mind and Heart*, 200). Evangelicals have at times, Erickson says, accepted current social trends, for example, the self absorption of modern life which finds expression in the churches in the way small groups and even worship is conducted. The focus is too much on temporal rather than eternal values, more on self esteem than on holiness, more on getting ahead in this world than on relating to God (Ibid., 201-3). This may be only part of the picture of modern Evangelicalism, but Newbigin's challenge certainly needs to be heard.

to the meaning and purpose of history.”¹¹⁹ Evangelicalism holds to this as an ideal and needs to be challenged to follow through on it in every area of life. In this matter, Newbiggin’s insists that the church must “indwell” the text.¹²⁰

Newbiggin’s defense of the historicity of the Gospels is to be welcomed. While one wishes that he were more forceful in defending the details of the historical accounts, what he provides is certainly commendable considering that he had the ear of the wider church, not just Evangelicals.¹²¹ Evangelicals agree with Newbiggin that to divorce history of the text from its meaning and then to dismiss the history is to destroy an essential part of the biblical testimony. Newbiggin is rightly critical of Rudolf Bultmann at this point for dismissing the historicity of the accounts as of no importance.¹²² Newbiggin seeks to avoid any kind of faith that is rooted only in subjective existential experience such as Bultmann advocated or in philosophy and not in historical events. As far as this goes, Evangelicals agree, knowing that an atonement that never happened is not one that can be trusted in for eternity.

Divergence

¹¹⁹Williams, 16.

¹²⁰Newbiggin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 42.

¹²¹Others certainly have provided more detailed defenses of the historicity of Scripture, especially of the New Testament. See for example, Bruce, *New Testament Documents*; Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, and idem, *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, and Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*, 2d ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

¹²²Newbiggin, *Foolishness*, 48-50. Newbiggin’s critique is on target as far as upholding the historicity of the New Testament over against Bultmann’s demythologizing. Newbiggin signals where he is going, however, when he sees Bultmann as holding on to the subjective side, the experiential side evoked by believing in the doctrines. Newbiggin does not put the objective truth of the history along side the objective truth of the doctrines, leaving doctrine here implicitly on the subjective side of things.

For all of the effort Newbigin has spent defending the historicity of the biblical accounts, he has been unwilling “to endorse the way evangelicals handle the Bible.”¹²³ He cannot accept the idea that the text is to be taken as truth given by God since to him this is synonymous with the idea that it is dry and wooden. He believes liberal Christianity overemphasizes the subjective side of Scripture as a record of religious experience, and that Evangelicalism overemphasizes the objective side of Scripture.¹²⁴ Evangelical approaches to Scripture, he believes, see it as no more than “a collection of factually true statements.”¹²⁵ Newbigin’s concern is to unite the fact/values sides of modern culture which he sees expressed in evangelical objectivism and liberal subjectivism regarding Scripture. He ignores, however, the pietist strain in Evangelicalism¹²⁶ which emphasizes devotional reading of the Bible, and the cultivation of a dynamic relationship with God. The view of Scripture he associates with conservative Evangelicalism is really more characteristic of extreme fundamentalism, which is not the same thing at all.¹²⁷

A closer look at Newbigin’s doctrine of Scripture will show some serious flaws. For example, his epistemic step backwards does not allow him to develop a doctrine of inspiration, only a doctrine of biblical authority. Inspiration is a doctrinal matter and cannot be demonstrated empirically. Biblical authority, on the other hand, may be demonstrated by showing that the Bible is truthful. To the extent that one shows the Bible to be true, one

¹²³ Glasser, 102.

¹²⁴ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 34-39.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁶ McGrath, 25-26.

¹²⁷ McGrath points out the fact that there is a “necessary distinction between evangelicalism and fundamentalism;” one which many have failed to see (*Ibid.*, 42). McGrath gives as an example of a misunderstanding of Evangelicalism James Barr’s “deeply flawed work” (*Ibid.*, 43), *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

shows it to be authoritative. Inspiration, of course, implies truthfulness, but a document can be true without being inspired. Newbigin's epistemic step backwards allows him to admit only the historical testimony as true, since it relates to objective reality in the "real" world. Thus he defends the historical facts only. He cannot defend the truthfulness of *all* of Scripture.

This is an example of how Newbigin never really leaves the modernist paradigm for truth. While he calls for the church to "indwell" the text, and to see the world through the text of Scripture, he never really does this himself. This shows up in the way he treats Scripture's development. He freely admits that he finds contradictions in Scripture, and that the Old Testament especially is "the result of combining material which in their original form represented quite different and even contradictory beliefs."¹²⁸ Newbigin has in mind here the kinds of conclusions that arose from the destructive higher criticism of the Bible that came out of Germany in the nineteenth century. Such criticism was a result of the Enlightenment paradigm that Newbigin critiques. It sought to examine Scripture "from the outside" and to assume that its development was the result of natural processes, not divine revelation. These are the very kinds of ideas that Newbigin believes that the church should abandon. Evangelicals have generally opposed these views of the Bible, because they question the historical veracity of the text and because they arose from anti-supernatural presuppositions foreign to the nature of Christian faith and of the text itself.¹²⁹

The problem here is that he begins with epistemology. He can admit nothing as true that does not fit his epistemological paradigm which insists on truth being what may be

¹²⁸Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 44. Elsewhere, he accepts the higher critical idea of a "Second Isaiah" who authored the later chapters of Isaiah some time after the original chapters were written (Beeby and Newbigin, 185).

¹²⁹J. Barton Payne, "Higher Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 85-115; John D. Woodbridge, Mark A. Noll, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Gospel in America: Themes in the Story of America's Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 99-134.

shown to correspond to the “objective” world of reality. As science’s truth claims are controlled by what actually happens in the laboratory, so historical truth claims are controlled by what actually happened in the past, and on the quality of the testimony given by those who, like scientists, are eyewitnesses, giving empirical verification to their report.

The inspiration of the Bible is consistent with the doctrine of its inerrancy which many Evangelicals also believe. Newbigin, beginning from his epistemic step backwards, cannot affirm a doctrine of biblical inerrancy.¹³⁰ Such a doctrine goes beyond historical verifiability. One can falsify the doctrine by demonstrating conclusively that something recorded in Scripture never happened (this has never been done successfully), but one cannot prove “inerrancy” by proving historical reliability. There is much more to the Bible than history.

Inerrancy, while not held by all who identify themselves as Evangelical, is certainly a major part of evangelical thought. Donald Bloesch has said that “the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture” is a distinctive view of evangelical theologians.¹³¹ The Evangelical Theological Society makes this one of its doctrinal requirements for membership.¹³² James Emery White says that inerrancy, as an “understanding [of] the relationship between

¹³⁰In fact Newbigin calls “The doctrine of verbal inerrancy . . . a direct denial of the way God has chosen to make himself known to us as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 89). Newbigin bases this on the idea that Jesus did not teach in eternal truths (by which Newbigin probably means something like metaphysics or philosophy) and the fact that Jesus did not write a book himself, but founded a community. Newbigin assumes then that doctrinal truths are not eternal and cannot be made normative. The community Jesus founded is to be ever changing in its understanding of truth, adhering only to the story told in the historical record as absolute and final.

¹³¹Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1, *God, Authority, and Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 64.

¹³²The doctrinal statement is printed on the inside cover of every issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”

inspiration and Scripture . . . gives Evangelical theology much of its distinctiveness.”¹³³ Even those who have sought to modify the doctrine in the form of “limited inerrancy” or “infallibility” would generally agree that inerrancy is a major and legitimate aspect of evangelical thought.

Inerrancy may be arrived at presuppositionally, as a properly basic belief. It cannot be proven, on grounds outside of Scripture itself. It can only be shown to be plausible or coherent due to the historical accuracy of the record. Inerrancy can be defended on the character and nature of God, on the grounds that God’s integrity will not permit him to lead one into falsehood and his sovereignty is such that he is in control of his own self revelation. In this way, inerrancy is seen as entailed by the properly basic belief that God has revealed himself in the Bible. Either way, inerrancy is arrived at presuppositionally as a properly basic belief.

The source of the text under Newbigin’s system is human perception and interpretation, not Divine inspiration.¹³⁴ Interpretation is a human, not a divine activity. In the end, Newbigin’s approach, while attempting to make the biblical testimony normative, places him in the same position as Carl F. H. Henry’s “modernist” who retains only from Scripture that which is compatible with “scientific empiricism;”¹³⁵ only for Newbigin this is expanded to include historical empiricism. While the production of Scripture was, for Newbigin, only a human activity, he does recognize that the Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus to “lead the disciples into all the truth.” This, however, is in the context of ever changing interpretations and understandings of what the text means.¹³⁶ The story alone remains fixed, the meaning left to be tossed about in the cultural waters.

¹³³White, 35.

¹³⁴Ibid., 50; idem, *Foolishness*, 56.

¹³⁵Henry, *God*, vol. V, 399.

¹³⁶Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 45, 49. Idem, *Proper Confidence*,

Evangelicals insist on both the authority and the inspiration of Scripture. These are not the same thing. Inspiration implies authority, but a text may be authoritative without being inspired. *The Oxford Shorter Dictionary* is authoritative, but no one claims inspiration for it. Many people use the terms as if they are synonymous, but inspiration implies much more than authority. Divine activity is the source of inspiration. To call Scripture inspired is to imply that God is responsible for it.¹³⁷ Evangelicals believe that God directly inspired the text, and this “was a supernatural and thus miraculous process.”¹³⁸ The authority of Scripture lies in the fact of its inspiration.¹³⁹ Since the source of Scripture is God’s desire to reveal himself, and God is sovereign over his creation, his revelation must be authoritative. It is the authority of one who is “in charge” who has the right to establish the conditions and parameters within which those in subordinate positions must operate. As nothing in creation is superior to the Creator, what the Creator has revealed must be authoritative for the creatures.

As inspired, the Scriptures must be true. Christian Smith’s surveys indicate that “Evangelicals stand alone in completely rejecting the idea that the Bible is not inspired and are by far the least likely to believe that the Bible may contain errors.”¹⁴⁰ Evangelicals

90. Here Newbigin explicitly states that “This gift of the Spirit, however, did not make the disciples infallible any more than the same gift given to the prophetic writers of the Old Testament made them infallible” (Ibid.). Again, this points to Newbigin’s doctrine of Scripture being more a doctrine of biblical authority apart from any doctrine of inspiration.

¹³⁷Bruce Milne speaks of the Bible as “God’s word to his creatures” (Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, rev. ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998], 36).

¹³⁸Phillips and Okholm, 49.

¹³⁹Tidball, 81. Alister McGrath put it this way: “For evangelicals, the unique authority of Scripture rests on the activity of the revealing God” (McGrath, 59).

¹⁴⁰Smith *et al.*, 22. It is interesting that a larger percentage of self identified fundamentalists (7 percent) believe that the Bible is “true but with errors” as opposed to only

readily admit that Scripture uses the language and thought forms of the day in which it was written, “but they deny that divine revelation is essentially conditioned by transitory cultural conceptions and patterns.”¹⁴¹ Instead, Scripture is seen as necessarily true because of the character of God who has revealed it.

Evangelicals are sometimes “misrepresented as believing in the dictation theory of inspiration.” Derek Tidball points out that this theory is “certainly not current among today’s evangelicals.”¹⁴² Efforts to describe and explain the process of inspiration have been made,¹⁴³ the most well known being that of Hodge and Warfield at Princeton in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” produced by a committee of leading evangelical thinkers, was an attempt to lay out clearly the implications of what it means and does not mean to say that Scripture is inspired and inerrant.¹⁴⁵

3 percent of self identified Evangelicals (Ibid.).

¹⁴¹Henry, *God*, vol V, 400.

¹⁴²Tidball, 80.

¹⁴³An excellent discussion of the inspiration of Scripture and what it does and does not imply may be found in Henry, *God*, vol. IV, 129-61. Other recent attempts to describe and define an evangelical doctrine of inspiration include Geoffrey Bromiley, “The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture,” *Eternity* 21, no. 8 (August 1970): 12-20; John W. Montgomery, *God’s Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1974); Roger Nicole, “The Nature of Inerrancy” in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 71-95; Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980); and Erickson, *Theology*, 233-38.

¹⁴⁴See A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” *Presbyterian Review* 6 (April 1881): 225-60; B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948); and Warfield’s article in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, s.v. “Revelation.”

¹⁴⁵International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 289-96.

Like Newbigin, Evangelicals believe that the historicity of the account is important. Though they base the authority of Scripture on its divine inspiration, Evangelicals regard the historicity of the account as evidence for its truthfulness.¹⁴⁶ If Scripture could be shown to contain historical errors, it would undermine its claim to divine origin. Evangelicals have been adamant therefore in defending the historicity of the text. Christianity “has its roots in history,”¹⁴⁷ and cannot stand as merely a system of doctrine apart from the events which derive their significance from the doctrines.¹⁴⁸ So while the historicity of the Scriptures cannot establish its inspiration and divine origin, its inspiration and divine origin entails that it be historically accurate.

Newbigin’s epistemic step backwards makes it necessary that he focus on the narrative aspects of Scripture. He often reminds his readers that God’s revelation is “nonpropositional” in nature, and that the story told in Scripture is the important factor.¹⁴⁹ The doctrinal matter in Scripture not being verifiable objectively takes a secondary place in Newbigin’s thinking to the story, the testimony given to the events.

The doctrinal element involves interpretation of the events. Evangelicals do not argue with this, but see the interpretation contained in Scripture as inspired. Newbigin

¹⁴⁶Truth in Scripture, say Johnson and Webber, is bound up with “actual historical events” (Johnson and Webber, 53).

¹⁴⁷Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, 8.

¹⁴⁸As F. F. Bruce has pointed out, “whether our approach is theological or historical [that is presuppositionalist or evidentialist], it does matter whether the New Testament documents are reliable or not.” (Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, 9). Bruce asserts this on the grounds that they are the only witness the church has to Christ--if the documents are not historically reliable, the faith collapses.

¹⁴⁹Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 38, 40-43; idem, *Foolishness*, 59. In *The Other Side of 1984* (47-54), Newbigin emphasises the historical center of the narrative and describes the essence of Scripture as “testimony”; in *Proper Confidence* (4-8), Newbigin contends that the story of God acting in the world is at the center of biblical faith.

accepts the interpreted nature of the narrative, but does not see the interpretation as final. The biblical material begins as someone's interpretation of the events, and before it reaches its final form it is "reinterpreted over and over again in terms of another generation and another culture."¹⁵⁰ He sees the teachings given in the Gospels as having "come to us in varied versions filtered through the varied rememberings and interpretations of different groups of believers."¹⁵¹ Newbigin recognizes that the interpretation given in Scripture is primary, having come from eyewitnesses and those near them, he still sees the interpretive process as secondary to the narrative given through it. The narrative is primary, since it can be verified if one accepts Newbigin's epistemic step backwards.

Evangelicals cannot follow Newbigin this way. No one denies that Scripture contains an interpretation of the events it records and that is itself subject to varying interpretations. A minimal doctrine of inspiration should require, however, that the interpretation given in Scripture should have more than just a primary place in the interpretive process--it should be the determinative. Newbigin makes the interpretive process involved in the production of Scripture continuous with the on-going interpretive process carried on in the church. Neither is final supernatural in nature, leaving only the story as normative.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰Newbigin, *Other Side*, 49. Newbigin sees this as on-going in the life of the church but also as a process which took place in the process of producing the Scriptures (Ibid.). In *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Newbigin says that the Bible is "a selection of a minute fraction of the available records and memories, on the basis of a particular belief about the meaning of the story" (Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 38). Here the focus is on human activity, not divine inspiration. While Evangelicals do not deny that there was a human element in the production of Scripture, it is inaccurate to see it as solely a human enterprise.

¹⁵¹Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 57.

¹⁵²Scripture is part of the process for Newbigin when it needs to be the objective measuring stick for theological study. Spanner has pointed out that here Newbigin's effort to bring science and theology under the same epistemic umbrella fails, for science looks to an objective outside reality that is not itself part of the scientific process. (Spanner, Review of *Truth to Tell*, 363). Spanner's analogy fails because Newbigin makes historical fact the

This does not work, because the story alone is insufficient. The interpretation, the doctrinal significance of the story is essential if the story is to be understood and is to communicate truth. The Bible contains a story, one which is of eternal significance, and no one denies that. This story “properly used . . . can serve as a metanarrative that shapes our grasp of the entire Christian faith.”¹⁵³ When only the story is authoritative, however, “a tremendous amount of material will be left out.”¹⁵⁴ It is the doctrines which give the story significance.¹⁵⁵ Newbigin’s view excludes doctrinal, propositional truth from being authoritative. It is replaced by culturally conditioned speculation as to the significance of the text.¹⁵⁶ The story is absolute, the interpretations and significance of the story changes. Such an approach “undermines evangelical confidence in the comprehensive unity and universal validity of Bible doctrine.”¹⁵⁷

object of study, but Spanner is correct in insisting that all of Scripture needs to be normative for discovering theological truth much the same as all of the created universe is the locus for scientific investigation.

¹⁵³D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 194.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

¹⁵⁵Newbigin refutes his own case on this point when he discusses the proclamation of the word in the Gospels. Jesus’ teaching, he says, explains the importance of his works. When he sends out the apostles to cast out unclean spirits and to heal, he tells them to preach as they go. “[T]he preaching is the explanation of the healings . . . the healings--marvelous as they are--do not explain themselves. The works by themselves did not communicate the new fact. That has to be stated in plain words: ‘The Kingdom of God has drawn near.’” (Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 132). By extension, the story told in the Bible has no meaning apart from the underlying doctrinal teaching.

¹⁵⁶Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 55-56; idem, *Other Side*, 49-50.

¹⁵⁷Henry, *God*, vol. V, 402.

Evangelicals insist that the doctrinal and propositional portions of Scripture are as important as the narrative portions.¹⁵⁸ As important as the narrative is, large portions of the text of the Bible are not narrative at all. The Law given in Exodus 20 to the end of Leviticus, and again in Deuteronomy, much of the Psalms, Proverbs, the Prophets and the Epistles as well as the discourse material in the Gospels are not narrative but communicate propositional truth. It does damage to the Bible as it really is to insist that the essence of the biblical revelation is narrative. It is a mistake to minimize the propositional nature of revelation when so much of the Bible is propositional in nature.

The end result of Newbigin's insistence that revelation is narrative and not propositional is to leave doctrine on the values side of his fact/values distinction. Since the church must be about the business of re-interpreting the story again and again, a process that began before the text reached its final form, no doctrine can be final. Christians are left to insist on the story, the historically verifiable portion of Scripture, while the spiritual significance of it is left to speculation. He does not overcome the problem. His view of Scripture does not unite the "fact" and "values" sides of perception but rather becomes an occasion of the distinction itself.

Newbigin focuses on how the Bible functions, an important question, but his method does not allow him to develop an adequate understanding of its essence. He insists that the Bible should function as the clue to history, and the starting place for thought,¹⁵⁹ and he is right. It cannot do this unless its essence is understood. The Bible functions in these ways because in essence it is the Word given by God, designed to reveal both propositional and

¹⁵⁸Francis Schaeffer made the necessity of the propositional nature of revelation a cornerstone of his thought (Schaeffer, *God*, 134).

¹⁵⁹Newbigin uses the phrase "the Bible functions" or its equivalent many times (Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 58-59; idem, *Other Side*, 49; idem, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 37, 42, 43; and idem, *Word in Season*, 84, 85, 86).

historical truths to his creatures, who cannot understand the world they live in or their spiritual need adequately apart from it.

Newbigin rejects the view that Scripture records a special salvation history, that revelation lies in the acts of God which are interpreted by the writers. He denies this on the grounds that such a view replaces a normal understanding of history with an understanding of divine acts that may be too specific to have universal application.¹⁶⁰ His problem really is with a particular understanding of the significance of God's actions in history, *Heilsgeschichte*, in which the events are "sometimes portrayed as something quite distinct from the ordinary history depicted by secular historians."¹⁶¹ Newbigin's case depends on the history contained in Scripture being "secular" in nature, that is, corresponding with objective facts.

Nevertheless, Newbigin's approach to Scripture may be understood as one where revelation consists in how God has acted in history. The Bible offers no more than a witness to revelation wherein God's deeds have been recorded by those who were impressed by them. The events are recorded as "different human perceptions of things that really happened."¹⁶² The deed is the primary revelation, and the interpretation recorded in Scripture is secondary to it. This becomes clear in his use of "testimony" to describe the nature of Scripture and in his emphasis on the interpretive nature of the biblical witness. Such a view is unacceptable to most Evangelicals who see Scripture as the actual words of God.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 48.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*

¹⁶²Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 41.

¹⁶³"The Chicago Statement" ends with the affirmation "that what Scripture says, God says" ("Chicago Statement," 296). Evangelicals often point out that for Jesus, the "words of Scripture," (for him, the Old Testament), are "the words of God" (Johnson and Webber, 23). See also Ronald Nash, *Evangelicals in America: Who They Are, What They Believe*

*Evangelicals and Newbigin's Understanding
of the Uniqueness of Christ*

Newbigin has contended for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's ultimate revelation of himself and the one in whom all things will be consummated.¹⁶⁴ He has been criticized for this by colleagues in mainline denominations with which he most often worked through the auspices of the World Council of Churches.¹⁶⁵ His insistence on the ultimacy and universal relevance of Christ makes his defense attractive to evangelical Christians. There are, however, weaknesses in his approach. His epistemic step backward allows him to affirm for the most part only those doctrines which arise out of the historical facts related to Christ.¹⁶⁶ He also affirms those doctrines which arise logically out of the incarnation. The doctrinal realities of Christ's work in salvation, however, are left to the subjective, values side of his fact/values distinction. There his theology moves him away from a historic and evangelical understanding of the gospel.

Common Ground

Newbigin's doctrine of the person of Christ is wholly orthodox and easily embraced by those in the evangelical tradition. Like Newbigin, Evangelicals embrace the doctrine of the incarnation, that God became a man in Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁷ Newbigin affirms this inductively

(Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 26.

¹⁶⁴Newbigin, "What Is a 'Local Church Truly United'?", 17-18.

¹⁶⁵For example Maurice Wiles criticized the "extreme and exclusive insistence on Jesus as the source of any true knowledge of God." This he believes is "a narrowing and distorting perspective . . ." (Maurice Wiles, "Comment on Lesslie Newbigin's Essay," in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed. Michael Goulder [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 211).

¹⁶⁶Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 127.

¹⁶⁷Alister McGrath put it this way: It is impossible to "remain faithful to the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ" without believing in the incarnation, that Christ is "no

on the basis of the historical record which records the miracles and the resurrection of Christ.¹⁶⁸ Since Christ did these miracles, and since he rose from the dead, logically, he must be God, and thus his pre-existence and present glory present glory may be affirmed.

ordinary historical figure,” but “God himself” (McGrath, 65).

¹⁶⁸Newbigin believes that Jesus’ miracles were “signs of the presence of the kingdom of God in power” (Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 108). On the resurrection, he says, “The resurrection was as much a fact of history as the crucifixion” (Ibid.).

Divergence

The central concern of Evangelicalism is expressed in its view of salvation.¹⁶⁹ Evangelicals hold their high view of Scripture and of the person of Christ as the incarnate virgin-born Lord of creation because these doctrines undergird the faith that Christ alone offers the only hope to a lost humanity.¹⁷⁰ Faith in these truths is, in a sense, faith in the God who has revealed himself and offered salvation in Christ. Much of evangelical opposition to false doctrine, to questions about the veracity of Scripture, arises from an awareness that such things weaken evangelism due to the loss of an effective and vital soteriology. For Evangelicals a proper understanding of salvation is essential if one is to proclaim a gospel that is worth defending.

Newbigin's epistemic step backwards does not allow him to affirm certain doctrines related to the work of Christ that Evangelicals consider essential. Since most of these doctrines cannot be historically verified, Newbigin sees them as subjective, matters of opinion which the church can discuss in light of Scripture, but which will only be known at the end when Christ returns.

Evangelical concerns regarding Newbigin's understanding of the work of Christ fall under three basic headings. First, Newbigin's epistemic step backwards does not allow for an adequate understanding of the nature of salvation. Salvation, as Evangelicals understand it, involves regeneration, a quickening of the human spirit or soul which is otherwise dead.¹⁷¹ Regeneration is to be "born again," which Evangelicals see as the receiving of new life through union with the Spirit of God.¹⁷² Newbigin focuses on conversion as a change of

¹⁶⁹Erickson, *Mind and Heart*, 86.

¹⁷⁰An exclusivist approach to the gospel "brings with it certain view of who Jesus is, what the Bible is, and how salvation is achieved" (Carson, 27).

¹⁷¹Eph. 2:1-6.

¹⁷²Schrotenboer has pointed out that the importance of redemption, of being born

mind or direction.¹⁷³ He overlooks the supernatural aspect of salvation. This is consistent with his desire to defend a gospel that is objectively verifiable, but biblical teaching goes beyond this.

Evangelicals insist that something supernatural happens at conversion, “the creation of a new heart within man which entails new goals, new aspiration, new power for service.”¹⁷⁴ This new birth is a key doctrine in evangelical thought.¹⁷⁵ When one becomes a Christian, it “brings into being an entirely new creature.”¹⁷⁶ Biblical teaching confirms this in such passages as John 3:3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be “born again.” Jesus explains that this is a spiritual birth, not a physical birth, implying that it is a supernatural event. Evangelicals often point to II Cor. 5:17 also as biblical justification for seeing the new birth as supernatural: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”¹⁷⁷ This is implied also in Eph. 2:1, 5 where those who were “dead in . . . transgressions and sins” are made alive in Christ.

again seems to be missing in Newbigin’s thought (Paul G. Schrotenboer, “Response to the Article by Lesslie Newbigin,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 [October 1982]: 152).

¹⁷³George Hunsberger says that “conversion has mental, ethical, and communal dimensions for Newbigin” (George Hunsberger, “Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” *Missiology: An International Review* XIX, no. 4 [October 1991]: 397). The spiritual dimension is missing. Newbigin’s doctrine focuses on the visible, verifiable aspects. In contrast, Donald Bloesch points out that “regeneration does not consist in the alteration of the old nature, but in the impartation of a new nature” (Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 2, *Life, Ministry, and Hope: Essentials for Evangelical Theology*. [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978], 8).

¹⁷⁴Bloesch, *Essentials*, vol. 2, 6.

¹⁷⁵Tidball, 116.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷⁷Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

In a related matter, Newbigin's understanding of moral repentance is weaker than it could be. Newbigin focuses instead on intellectual repentance, changing the mind to see things from a biblical perspective.¹⁷⁸ This, he believes, leads to good works and the transformation of society. Newbigin describes salvation as "a real consummation of universal history"¹⁷⁹ Much of his focus is on how a biblical understanding of life and reality will transform the culture.

Evangelicals do not in any way deny that the Bible has significance for the social order. Evangelicals expect the gospel to effect changes in the culture as it spreads and gains influence. Their understanding of Scripture implies that the moral truths presented there are universal. This often translates into actions to improve society.¹⁸⁰ Neither do Evangelicals minimize the importance of cognitive change in one who has come to Christ. That the concepts of conversion and of faith imply that one changes what one has believed and believes something different is implicit in the concepts themselves.

At the same time, Evangelicals believe that societal transformation and intellectual change are not the whole story. The moral relationship of human beings to God is central to evangelical understandings of salvation.¹⁸¹ Salvation is necessary because of the moral failure of humanity; it is salvation from sin. Francis Schaeffer has pointed out that man's

¹⁷⁸In *Foolishness to the Greeks* Newbigin points to "a conversion of the will and of the feelings," and of the mind (Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 64).

¹⁷⁹Newbigin, "Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue," 262.

¹⁸⁰Christian Smith's surveys indicate that 91 percent of self identified Evangelicals have "given money to help the poor and needy;" 51 percent have "given money or time to a Christian political organization or candidate;" 26 percent had given money to a non-Christian political organization or candidate; 79 percent had "volunteered for a church program that serves the local community;" 58 percent had "volunteered for a local community organization not related to church" (Smith *et al.*, 40-42).

¹⁸¹McGrath, 67; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 562.

problem is not philosophical or ontological--it is moral. He insists that one major difference between biblical and non-biblical understandings of humanity is that the biblical view sees humanity as in an abnormal state, due to the fall, while non-biblical views see humanity as normal in its present condition.¹⁸² Logically, recognition of one's moral corruption precedes the reception of the moral cure found in God's gracious regeneration of the sinner.

The Bible also focuses on the reality of sin and the need for repentance. The Bible rarely focuses on purely speculative philosophical matters but on humanity's moral failure and need for a right relationship with God. In Psalm 14, when "the Lord looks down from heaven" to see if there is anyone who seeks God, he finds moral, not philosophical problems, keeping people from God: "There is no one who does good, not even one."¹⁸³ Much of the prophets' writings are given to denouncing sin and calling the people to repentance.¹⁸⁴

A second area of concern relates to the atonement. Evangelism is essentially the proclamation of the good news of the atonement. Newbigin's understanding of the atonement, however, falls short of a biblical perspective. His need for an objective reference

¹⁸²Schaeffer, *God*, 100. Schaeffer reasons that if what mankind is today is a result of evolutionary and historical forces that have been continuous, then humanity is "normal" as it is. If, instead, there was a moral fall, at a time in the past, then humanity began as something different and is in a dilemma that must be rectified. It is not "growth" that humanity needs, or a different philosophical or cultural paradigm, but a change of heart and nature (*Ibid.*).

¹⁸³Ps. 14:2, 5b.

¹⁸⁴Selected passages include Isa. 1:16-31; Jer. 8:4-9:25; Hos. 6:1-7:16; Amos 5:1-17. In fact, a continuous theme in the Old Testament prophets is sin and repentance. The sins condemned are mostly moral sins along with the sin of idolatry, which might be seen as the "intellectual" sin of having the wrong worldview. In light of the amount of space given to moral righteousness in the prophets one would only with difficulty use the prophets to defend the idea that the thrust of Scripture is cognitive rather than moral reform. Newbigin, of course, would agree very much with this. He actually opposes any form of Christianity that expresses itself only in terms of "a mere cognitive exercise" (Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 39). At the same time, his soteriological emphasis is on transformation of the way people think, leading to moral transformation, rather than moral transformation itself.

point leads him away from a “spiritual” understanding of the atonement. Newbigin instead focuses on the atonement as an overcoming of the evil structures of society. This is consistent with his focus on cultural change as the purpose of the gospel; but it is not the biblical focus. While Evangelicals can affirm with Newbigin that “the gospel offers . . . not just hope for individuals, but hope for the world,”¹⁸⁵ they believe this hope is realized as people come to faith in Christ who accomplished their salvation on the cross.

Newbigin believes that when Christ died on the cross, somehow this “overcame the dark power” at work in society.¹⁸⁶ Newbigin understands this to mean primarily the powers of government, culture, and economics that seek to dominate life independent of God.¹⁸⁷ Newbigin’s approach here offers another example of the inconsistency between his stated desire to see reality from within the perspective of Scripture and his actual practice.¹⁸⁸ His emphasis regarding the powers is based on a naturalistic paradigm that excludes the activity of demonic forces as an explanation of reality.¹⁸⁹ Newbigin elsewhere has no trouble

¹⁸⁵Newbigin, “Evangelism in the City,” 5.

¹⁸⁶Lesslie Newbigin, “Christian Faith and the World Religions,” in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of the Lux Mundi*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 332.

¹⁸⁷Whether Newbigin believes that a supernatural power is at work here is a little ambiguous. He states that “the ministry of Jesus from beginning to end was a might spiritual battle with powers which are not simply human frailties, errors, diseases or sins” (Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 210). The thrust of Newbigin’s treatment, however, focuses on the powers as the structures of social life, and the supernatural does not really figure into his understanding of this in any significant way. It is his treatment of the biblical term powers, and the source of it, that is being critiqued here.

¹⁸⁸Newbigin’s dependence on Berkhof and Wink for his understanding of “the powers” has been discussed above.

¹⁸⁹This is in line with one of his sources, Walter Wink, who believes that it is impossible in this modern day to see the powers as supernatural beings (Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 4). His tone turns negative when he describes it as “unfortunate” that the Powers

accepting the supernatural at face value, where it relates to what Jesus did historically, such as performing miracles.¹⁹⁰ His view regarding the powers is consistent with his desire to have a gospel that is verifiable and objective and which relates to the realities of the visible world. At the same time, it fails to bring the biblical perspective to bear on that world, collapsing instead into that world's "plausibility structure" which readily accepts political and social evils, but not supernatural ones.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, treat the powers as supernatural in nature.¹⁹¹ Carl F. H. Henry has pointed out that "the biblical writers . . . speak of superhuman powers as rebellious personal agents hostile to God's good governance of the world . . ." ¹⁹² He asserts, however, that they are "under the rule of God."¹⁹³ The powers have always been under God's rule. Richard Melick, commenting on Paul's use of the term "powers" in Col. 1:16, says, "there is a general consensus among scholars that the terms used here [thrones, powers, rulers, authorities] refer to spiritual beings."¹⁹⁴ This may be slight overstatement,

have been seen as "angelic beings. . . or as demons flapping about in the sky" (Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 3). The apostle Paul, however, never described the powers as "flapping about." Wink is setting up a straw man. No one who understands the references to "the powers" in Paul's writings to be supernatural imagines them "flapping about in the sky." By holding this view up to mild ridicule in this way, Wink makes it easier for his readers to accept his own naturalistic explanation.

¹⁹⁰Newbigin sees the miracles of Jesus as presented in a way that makes them "concrete." There is an "insistence on the factuality of the story" (Newbigin, *Light had Come*, 25). He defends the raising of Lazarus as a historical event (Ibid., 139).

¹⁹¹Berkhof himself admits that "powers" in Jewish apocalyptic thought were spiritual beings (Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 7), but believes that Paul gave the term a different meaning, applying it to earthly structures (Ibid., 23).

¹⁹²Henry, *God*, vol. V, 73, 79.

¹⁹³Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, vol. VI, *God Who Stands and Stays: Part Two* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 21.

¹⁹⁴Richard Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32 in *The New American*

but such an understanding is probably the best one. There is no warrant in Scripture to reinterpret Paul's language to make these powers something other than supernatural.¹⁹⁵ Evangelicals agree that Christ disarmed these powers, and that this was part of his work of atonement. Evangelicals seem at this point more willing to look at the world through the lenses of Scripture than Newbigin himself.

The real problem for Newbigin's approach to the atonement is that it minimizes what Christ accomplished for individuals at the cross.¹⁹⁶ Whatever Christ may have accomplished on a societal or on a cosmic level, the fact remains that his atonement made it possible for individuals to put their faith in him and be added to the church.¹⁹⁷ Individual salvation is not verifiable objectively. This may be why Newbigin minimizes it. Certainly his epistemic step backwards would lead him to look for those effects of the gospel which influence the course of history, a matter which can be verified and offered as evidence that God is at work.

Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 219. He sees these as most likely "fallen beings" (Ibid.).

¹⁹⁵Millard Erickson believes that Paul may have reinterpreted Jewish apocalyptic language in a way to make the powers somewhat less personal in nature than angelic beings. At the same time he describes them as evil forces at work in the structures of society. While he does not abandon a supernatural understanding, his position may be seen as somewhat of a mediating position between that of Henry and Melick and that of Newbigin (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 648-52). He still recognizes a supernatural source of these powers, more strongly it appears than Newbigin or Berkhof, though Erickson cites Berkhof's work. Elsewhere Erickson specifically attests to the reality of supernatural evil powers at work in the world (Ibid., 445-51).

¹⁹⁶It has become popular to point out the corporate dimension of the Bible. Evangelicals, like others, have been guilty of reading the Bible through the perspective of Enlightenment individualism. Seeing the corporate, communitarian aspect of Scripture is important, but one must not go from one extreme to the other. The individual dimension of salvation is very real.

¹⁹⁷McGrath, 67.

Evangelicals, while recognizing the social dimensions of the gospel, emphasize more fully the individual dimension. Salvation must be accepted on faith based on the presupposition of the truth of what Scripture teaches. The atonement was a “propitiation,” a “substitution” by which individual believers may be justified before God.¹⁹⁸ What happened at the cross was “the unique and perfect sacrifice that covers and shields us from the righteous anger of God against sin, reconciles us to God” and makes it possible for individual believers to become God’s children.¹⁹⁹ The call to salvation, to appropriate the benefits of the cross, is ultimately a call to individual decision.

This view is in accord with the preponderance of scriptural teaching. A survey of key passages in the epistle to the Romans will make this clear. In Rom. 1:16, Paul calls the gospel the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; righteousness, in Rom. 3:22, comes “to all who believe; in Rom. 5:6, “Christ died for the ungodly.” In Rom. 8:1, there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In each case, the focus is on the fact that Christ’s death on the cross opens a way for believing individuals to be right with God.²⁰⁰

A third area of concern for Evangelicals relates to Newbigin’s understanding of the scope of salvation. He is inconsistent in his understanding of assurance for the believer. He must affirm with Scripture that believers are saved, but his desire to leave salvation strictly in the sovereignty of God leads him to emphasize at times that no one can be sure of their final destiny, and that those who think they are “in” will be surprised at the last judgment.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸Tidball, 105.

¹⁹⁹McGrath, 66.

²⁰⁰Of course, many other passages from the New Testament could be cited, showing that Christ came to save sinners, to give his life for “whosoever believes” and so forth. These passages from Romans give the general thrust of the New Testament teaching.

²⁰¹Newbigin, “Cross-currents,” 151.

Assurance for the believer is a major evangelical doctrine. Those who have put their faith in Christ “can rest secure in the assurance that their salvation is permanent.”²⁰² Those in the Arminian tradition do recognize the possibility of apostasy, but Newbigin’s focus is on those who think they are saved and are not, rather than on those who have rejected the faith.

Several Scripture passages are often cited in reference to the security of the believer. In John 10:27-30, Jesus promises that believers are given “eternal life.” Jesus asserts here that “they shall never perish.” In this passage, “Jesus is categorically excluding the slightest chance of an apostasy by his sheep.”²⁰³ The other passage often used is Phil. 1:6 which asserts that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

A more serious problem is that he opens up the scope of salvation to include some who are outside the church. To limit salvation to only those in the church “places the church rather than God at the center of the universe.”²⁰⁴ Newbigin may be arguing against the assumption made in some church traditions that to be a member of the visible church is to be saved. If that were so, then membership in the church really would be a more vital issue than relationship with God. Scripture teaches, however, that one’s salvation is based on faith in Jesus Christ. One becomes a member of the body of Christ, by virtue of the Spirit “baptizing” the believer into the body. This is understood by many Evangelicals to happen at the moment one is regenerated on the basis of faith in Christ. The center of concern is still Christ, the head of the body, and the church exists as God’s creation. One does not join the church to be saved; one is saved, and thus is placed into the church. Membership in a local congregation is but an outward sign of the inward spiritual reality.

²⁰²Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 996.

²⁰³*Ibid.*, 992.

²⁰⁴Newbigin, “Integration,” 251.

Newbigin desires also to avoid putting Christians in the position of “judging” who is and who is not saved.²⁰⁵ That judgment belongs to God and not to men. As far as this goes, it shows a genuine desire on Newbigin’s part to cultivate an attitude of humility toward the outside world. When a Christian approaches a non-believer with an attitude that seems to say, “I have it, and you don’t,” it will be perceived as arrogant.²⁰⁶ In addition, one really cannot ultimately verify empirically who is and who is not saved. There really will be surprises at the judgment. Nowhere, however, does the Bible indicate that people of genuine faith will be left out, nor is there any hope offered for those who do not trust in the Lord. The Bible gives every reason to assume that those who profess faith are saved, and that those who profess no faith in Christ are not. As Schrotentboer has pointed out, “to affirm that people who don’t know Christ are lost . . . is simply a witness to the exclusive saving power of Jesus Christ.”²⁰⁷

Newbigin bases his view of the scope of salvation on the unity of all of humanity. He believes that there is a continuous aspect to one’s religious beliefs prior to faith in Christ and afterwards, and that this indicates that faith is not decisive for one’s relationship with God.²⁰⁸ In addition, he cites the Noahic covenant as implying a universal desire to save all of

²⁰⁵Newbigin, “Cross-currents,” 151.

²⁰⁶The real and proper attitude of many Christian evangelists is best summed up in the popular saying, “I’m just one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.” The arrogance of a few overly zealous believers is not a sound basis for saying, contrary to Scripture, that there is no criterion for distinguishing the saved. The application of the criteria may be necessarily ambiguous, and one’s judgments tentative, but this is no reason to imply that no criteria exists at all.

²⁰⁷Schrotenboer, 153.

²⁰⁸Shrotenboer has contended that this “basic unity of humankind” concept is more stoic than Christian (Ibid., 153), though Newbigin denies this. Neither offers evidence.

humanity because it embraces the whole human family and all of creation.²⁰⁹ This covenant is found in Gen. 9: 8-17. God promises never to destroy all life on the earth with a flood again. It is difficult to see how this applies to eternal destiny. It certainly points to God's desire to preserve life, but it cannot be said to supercede the warnings of judgment found throughout Scripture.

Newbigin also find an "inclusive" note in Romans 9-11, "which begins with the unbelief of the Jews" and ends with the affirmation that "the fulness of the Gentiles will be gathered in and all Israel will be saved."²¹⁰ He assumes that fulness means "all" rather than considering other possibilities such as "the full number of those who will believe," or "the full number of the elect." His interpretation of this passage does not take into account the context of the passage, nor the context of all of Scripture. It is a selective reading of a selected passage. On so important a matter as the eternal destiny of human beings, one must do more careful work.

Newbigin also supports his position by referring to the Pauline concept of Christ as the "second Adam" in Rom. 5:17-19. He believes that Paul is suggesting that "the new relation to God inaugurated by Jesus is as universal in its scope as the old relation of sin and death inaugurated by Adam."²¹¹ Again, he reads more into the passage than is warranted. At best one might argue that it opens up the possibility that everyone might potentially be incorporated into the new humanity, but in no way does the passage imply that it is automatic. The passage must be put along side those which regard the old, fallen creation as condemned, and which see the church as a sign or forerunner of the new creation, the kingdom which is coming. Newbigin's reading of this passage is not nearly so clear as he would like.

²⁰⁹Beeby and Newbigin, 181.

²¹⁰Newbigin, "Confessing Christ," 130.

²¹¹Newbigin, "Christ and the World of Religions," 27.

Newbigin also points to the fact that God is at work every where in the world. This, he believes, provides warrant to see God's hand at work in every situation where ethical behaviour is being encouraged or promoted, or where justice is being advocated or carried out. God's purposes, Newbigin believes, relate to the "whole creation, a context wider than his purpose for the Church."²¹² While it certainly is God's will for justice to be done everywhere, one cannot assume that in every case where it happens that it is a part of God's eternal purposes. To some extent, the image of God in humanity leaves open the possibility that people will do things God's way sometimes without God necessarily being involved directly in it. Newbigin wants to assert that all that is good in the world will have its consummation in the purposes of God.²¹³ This does not take into account the indications in Scripture that human righteousness is inadequate for God, and that even the best that humanity can offer is not sufficient to give them a right standing before God. Ultimately, Newbigin's understanding of how God works in the world does not take into account the extent of the effects of the fall,²¹⁴ and the biblical promise that God will completely replace the current creation with a new one.

Newbigin's emphasis on cultural rather than individual conversion is also a factor here. Since Newbigin believes that cultural transformation through the church's witness is

²¹²Newbigin, "Call to Missions--A Call to Unity," 256.

²¹³Newbigin says, "There are liberations and humanisation going on in the world . . . quite outside the boundaries of the Church, of which we do right to say that they are signs of the presence of Christ in the world" (Newbigin, "Call to Mission--A Call to Unity," 261). See also idem, "Christian Faith and the World Religions," 331.

²¹⁴Milne points out that even though people can do things that are "relatively 'good' the thrust of Scripture indicates that such goodness 'can never approach that entire, lifelong righteousness by which alone we can stand before God" (Milne, *Know the Truth*, 131). McGrath points out that Evangelicals "fully acknowledge the devastating and destructive impact of sin" (McGrath, 67). Scriptures that focus on this include Isa. 59:1-2 which points out that sin separates God from humanity and Rom. 3:9-23 which makes it clear that no one will be declared righteous by the keeping of the law.

primary, it follows logically that whatever of morality and justice is happening in the world must be part of God's plan. Again, this assumes that the culture is redeemable rather than condemned.²¹⁵

A danger that many Evangelicals find alarming in the idea that faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation is that it may undermine the need for evangelism.²¹⁶ Evangelicals place evangelism at the forefront at least in theory if not always in practice. Evangelism is "an integral element of the evangelical recognition of the identity and significance of Jesus Christ."²¹⁷ One cannot recognize that Jesus is Lord without wanting to proclaim him as such.²¹⁸ Newbigin, however, contrasts bringing people to Christ with being "an effective witness and agent of God's purpose for society."²¹⁹ This implies that God's purpose is primarily cultural transformation, not the regeneration of lost people who come in faith at the proclamation of the word. Paul G. Schrottenboer has responded to Newbigin on this,

²¹⁵It is true that many Evangelicals hold out hope for a Christianized culture either through political action or through social action. This may be built on a false hope of converting the culture, but sometimes it is what Phillips and Okholm call the dualist position which assumes that Christians are to be salt and light in the culture, not so much "to advance the kingdom but to prevent degeneration and thereby allow Christians a place in which to evangelize the world." The other position Evangelicals take is a Reformed approach which is "conversionist" and is the stance that really expects cultural transformation. Phillips and Okholm cite H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951) as the source for these categories (Phillips and Okholm, 277). Newbigin's approach is actually closer to the conversionist paradigm, but is too optimistic about the culture itself.

²¹⁶Newbigin in fact at a 1978 consultation on missions strategy advocated that "no specific, collective effort to reach Muslims" be made (Glasser, 112).

²¹⁷McGrath, 68.

²¹⁸Ibid., 67-68.

²¹⁹Newbigin, "The Future of Missions and Missionaries," 217.

insisting that “evangelism is primary, because it is foundational to all that the church does in the world.”²²⁰

Scripture teaches also that evangelism is of primary importance. One need cite only the Great Commission in Matt. 18:19-20 and the parallel injunction in Acts 1:8. Paul often expressed his desire to present the gospel as in Rom. 1:15 and saw his ministry in terms of evangelism. Newbigin speaks of genuine New Testament witness as usually happening without “conscious intention to bring about a conversion.”²²¹ Newbigin cites no examples of this. One wonders, though, how to account for the missionary journeys of Paul if evangelism is not intentional.

²²⁰Schrotenboer, 152. Newbigin fails to understand here the motivation for evangelism that drives evangelical witnessing and missions. He sees church growth as nothing more than efforts to grow the church for the church’s own benefit, as mere proselytism, an illegitimate activity (Newbigin, “Evangelism in the City,” 3-4; idem, “Common Witness and Unity,” *International Review of Mission* 69, no. 274 [April 1980]: 160. (He does admit that this may be a caricature.) He believes that the church’s mission should not be primarily “the aggrandizement of the church” (idem, “The Future of Mission and Missionaries,” 217).

This is a mistake on Newbigin’s part. It rises out of his lack of a doctrine of regeneration and his belief that salvation is available apart from explicit faith in Christ. Since he sees conversion in terms of intellectual and ethical change, not regeneration, he sees efforts to promote conversion as nothing more than persuasion. This becomes clear when he says that “if all non-Christians are in fact destined for eternal fire, then any method, however violent, that has the possibility of converting them is not only permitted, but required” (idem, “Christian faith and the World Religions,” 315). At this point, Newbigin parallels Lindbeck who says nearly the same thing in *The Nature of Doctrine* (Lindbeck, 55).

Obviously no responsible Evangelical believes that human persuasion can bring about regeneration, or that a conversion that is in any way coerced could be genuine. Regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit and cannot be engineered. Christians are responsible for proclaiming Christ in the best way possible, but no Christian can convert another person. The impetus to evangelism arises out of seeing who Christ is and what he has done for sinful humanity at the cross. A burden for a lost world is a natural outgrowth of the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer. Newbigin has failed to understand the nature of evangelism.

²²¹Newbigin, “Common Witness and Unity,” 159.

Newbigin's understanding of the scope of salvation leads him to see God's grace at work in some places that are surprising. He wants to affirm, for example, that God is at work in the struggle for political liberation, which he sees as an expression of Christ's redemptive work.²²² This is consistent with his understanding of the Christian mission as primarily cultural transformation. It also corresponds with his desire to have a Christianity that is empirically verifiable. These types of actions and their effects may be seen while spiritual transformation may not.

He has also said that he finds evidence of God's work among adherents of other faiths. He affirms that "many non-Christians . . . have a deep and often radiant sense of the presence of God,"²²³ and speaks positively of the "signs of the grace of God which we see so movingly among people of other faiths."²²⁴ Similarly he affirms that "there is no human being in whose consciousness there is not some trace of God's presence and goodness."²²⁵ The problem here, besides a weak view of the fall, is one of objective criteria. How does Newbigin know that there are "signs of God's grace" at work in a person?²²⁶ Possibly, he means that he has met people of other faiths whose lives are well-grounded, and who, as a result, have warm, pleasant personalities and high ethical values. One is often tempted in such cases to identify as "signs of God's grace" or "the presence of God. These things are better seen, however, as manifestations of the image of God within and do not count as evidence of the grace of God at work, especially in any salvific sense, outside the church.

²²²Newbigin, "Call to Mission--A Call to Unity," 257.

²²³Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus Christ," in *Many Other Ways?*, 74.

²²⁴Newbigin, "Confessing Christ," 129.

²²⁵Newbigin, "Christian faith and the World Religions," 331.

²²⁶This is especially puzzling in light of his insistence that one must not judge who is saved and who is not.

Newbigin's epistemic step backwards makes it possible for him to affirm many essential teachings of Scripture. Since it is only a step backwards, however, merely a broadening of what may be verified, it does not allow him to affirm those doctrines most essential to the gospel. For that, Newbigin would have to abandon the field of empirical verification and genuinely embrace the "new starting place for thought" offered in the Scriptures. Evangelicalism, beginning from Scripture, affirms those doctrines, and the historical events that form the point of contact between doctrine and the physical world.

CONCLUSION

Evangelical Christianity has shown itself capable of maintaining its doctrinal distinctions and core commitments through decades of change both in the larger culture and within the churches. It has shown an increasing willingness to listen to the various voices within its own tradition as well as to those outside, and to engage the larger culture critically on matters of ultimate concern.

In addition, evangelical writers have displayed a genuine passion for helping the churches proclaim Christ in a world that desperately needs to hear the message. The desire of evangelical leaders to be intentional about effectively communicating the gospel is commendable. These pages have shown that if Evangelicals are to continue to share the gospel effectively, they must recognize the nature and coherence of their core commitments and be ready to defend these boldly before a world increasingly open to a supernatural understanding of reality.

Newbigin's apologetic, while it strives to leave the modernist paradigm and ground itself in God's revelation of himself, never really succeeds. Newbigin's commitment to empiricism shows up in the way he limits his defense to only what may be historically verified, or inferred directly from the story given in Scripture. Many of the great doctrines of the faith are not defended in Newbigin's apologetic.

Evangelicals seek to defend both the historical truths of the Christian faith and the great doctrines to which they point. While many have argued that one may begin with the evidences and infer the doctrines from them,¹ at some point one must commit oneself to seeing the world from within the Bible's perspective and to defending the doctrines presented there. Presuppositional apologetics seeks to do exactly this.

¹John W. Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).

One must not suppose, however, that presuppositionalism can stand alone. As Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, a properly basic belief is not therefore groundless.² Evidential apologetics plays an essential role in showing how Christian faith corresponds to the facts of history and to human experience. Presuppositionalism demonstrates the coherence of the doctrines and worldview that are essential to give meaning to those evidences. A presuppositionalism that is coherent, but completely unrelated to reality, would be as far removed from defending historic Christianity as Newbigin's strictly evidentially based defense. An evidentialism that does not take the historic doctrines of the faith as a reference point offers the church a gospel that is empirically true, but which is hardly worth defending.

The latter is what Newbigin offers the church. If he had heeded his own injunction, to see the Bible as "a new starting place for thought," and had, with Michael Polanyi, recognized "the power for the deliberate holding of unproven beliefs"³ inherent in the way the human mind is structured for knowing, he might have developed his defense of the faith along more comprehensive lines.

What then are Evangelicals to do as they face the task of defending the gospel in the new century ahead? First, they must recognize that "Evangelicalism is historic Christianity." It has "every right to claim to be a modern standard bearer of historic orthodox Christianity."⁴ As such, it stands in the tradition rooted in God's revelation, the Bible, and upheld by Augustine, the reformers, the pietists, and traditional Protestants down to the present day. As such, their faith has stood the test of time. It has weathered myriad cultural changes. Evangelicals can be confident that whatever changes the next century brings, historic orthodox Christianity will survive, and perhaps even thrive.

Second, Evangelicals must recognize that to defend the gospel, they must remain rooted in the Bible as God's revelation of himself. As revelation, Scripture is to be approached with an attitude of believing acceptance. Only then can it truly function as a

²Plantinga, "Belief in God," 97.

³Polanyi, 268.

⁴McGrath, 94.

“starting point for thought.” Newbigin’s call for the church to “indwell” the text of Scripture and to see the world from within its perspective must be heeded if the church is to defend adequately the claims of the gospel. This means that Christians must believe what Scripture says, live lives that demonstrate that the Bible’s doctrinal and moral propositions really make a difference, and boldly proclaim the great truths of the faith regardless of the cost.

Third, Evangelicals must heed Newbigin’s insistence that Christianity is rooted in the historical facts. In an age when temptations abound to seek forms of spirituality that are merely experientially satisfying, Newbigin reminds Christians that without the objective facts of the gospel, the faith is meaningless. The gospel makes assertions about what really happened in real history. These facts cannot be divorced from the doctrines to which they point. What Christians defend is a set of assertions about objective reality--assertions which are true, not just for one group, but true for the whole world. How the world and people individually respond these truths will have real and genuine consequences both now and for eternity. The question is not whether evidentialism or presuppositionalism is superior, but of defending “the whole counsel of God.”

The century ahead will bring challenges and situations the church today cannot imagine. Evangelical Christians, rooted in God’s inspired word, and empowered by the Spirit at work within them, will meet these challenges and continue boldly to “contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.”

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