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Review: Lesslie Newbigin: a Theological Life

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and is therefore able to place Owen's thought into a wider context. For anyone interested in the development of post-Reformation Reformed thought, this book should be required reading.

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Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life. By Geoffrey Wainwright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, xiii + 459 pp., $60.00.

Lesslie Newbigin is well known among a broad spectrum of Christians due to his contributions in the areas of missiology, apologetics, and ecumenical activities. He was influential in the World Council of Churches, as a missionary and bishop in India, and as a critic of Western secular thought and culture. Most of his admirers know of one or two areas in which he made contributions but are only vaguely familiar with the broader scope of Newbigin's life and thought. It is to address the need for a comprehensive understanding of Newbigin that Geoffrey Wainwright offers his biography. He subtitles the book *A Theological Life* because Newbigin lived a life of "faith, hope, and love . . . the three theological virtues" (p. vi). His goal is to show how Newbigin lived out his theology through his ministry. The book is, however, more a summary of Newbigin's thought than a treatment of the events of his life. Wainwright is an admirer of Newbigin and regards him as a fully orthodox Christian who embodied all that is best, genuine, and biblical in Christianity. His treatment is often laudatory rather than critical. Wainwright even compares Newbigin to the Church fathers in "stature and range" (p. v) because he successfully integrated thought and practice in his work as bishop.

Wainwright summarizes Newbigin's life in the first chapter, then treats his thought under ten topics that characterized Newbigin throughout his life (though some were more important at some stages than others). Wainwright looks at Newbigin as a believer, an evangelist, an advocate of ecumenism, a bishop, a missionary strategist, an interlocutor of other religions, a visionary, a preacher, a teacher, and an apologist. These are treated in the order in which each theme was most prominent for Newbigin. Wainwright ends with an assessment of Newbigin's place in history.

This review will concentrate on just three of the more significant chapters. Many know Newbigin primarily as a missiologist due to his articles in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* and elsewhere. Wainwright points out how Newbigin, as a young missionary in India, quickly recognized flaws in traditional missions strategy, according to which missionaries live in a compound, remote from the people, and where the churches remain dependent on the missionaries. Newbigin advocated missionaries being partners with local church leaders, even serving under them in carrying out the mission of the church.

Wainwright lays out accurately the Trinitarian dimension of Newbigin's missional thinking. Newbigin emphasized that missions begins with the Father sending the Son, and later their sending the Spirit. Following this formula, the church identifies with those to whom it bears witness. Wainwright emphasizes that for Newbigin missions was essential for the church even to be the church.

Wainwright surveys the development of Newbigin's thought regarding the encounter between Christianity and the claims of other religions in the chapter entitled "The Religious Interlocutor." Newbigin "remained constant in his attachment to the comprehensiveness, centrality, and finality of Jesus Christ" (p. 204). Christ, for Newbigin,

was the "clue" to all of history and to God's purposes in the world. However, Newbigin asserted that dialogue with those of other faiths might result in "converting both partners in the dialogue" (p. 229). Newbigin believed that our knowledge of God's purposes is partial and that one source of additional information, beyond the Scriptures, may come in the encounter with those who call into question our beliefs. Wainwright recognizes that there is tension here between Newbigin's desire for dialogue and his insistence that the cross is in some a non-negotiable, but Wainwright does not develop the matter. Nor does he seem to recognize that in later years Newbigin moved towards an inclusive understanding of salvation—the belief that God may save some who do not have faith in Jesus Christ. This change in Newbigin's later thought is recorded, but Wainwright does not discuss the significance of the change.

It was as an apologist that Newbigin made his mark in the last years of his life, though it had been a part of what he was doing from the beginning. Wainwright finds apologetic concerns expressed in Newbigin's writings even from his student days. Newbigin's basic approach—to challenge the world to see reality in light of Scripture and the cross—existed at that early time, as Wainwright makes clear.

Wainwright recognizes the importance of Newbigin's major apologetic work *Foolishness to the Greeks* as the best summary of his critique of Western thought and of his call to the church to bring the gospel boldly into the marketplace of ideas. He also is aware of differences of purpose and scope in various apologetic writings by Newbigin. He recognizes that Newbigin's "narrative and judgments may appear unnuanced," but contrastingly affirms that they are possessed of "that clarity and sharpness which characterizes the insights and vision of pioneers and prophets" (p. 355).

It is in this apologetic section that Wainwright's lack of a critical eye once again becomes a problem. Some note that Newbigin's critique of the West focused too much on science as the foundation of all truth, as if nineteenth-century romanticism had never happened. Wainwright could have expanded upon this. In addition, evangelicals reading Newbigin are often disturbed that, amid his ringing call for "the conversion of the West" and for the gospel to be proclaimed in the marketplace, there were some odd lapses. His move toward inclusivism in salvation, for example, is strange given his insistence on the cross as central to history. Also, Newbigin treated the Bible as a human book, the best interpretation of God's actions and purposes written by those who were witnesses to them, rather than as God's own Word to humanity. This understanding of salvation and the Bible is consistent with mainline theology, Newbigin's milieu, but it is odd when juxtaposed with his understanding of the universal significance of Christ and the biblical worldview. Wainwright might have noted this tension even if he himself might be inclined to agree theologically with Newbigin.

Wainwright's book has value in that it brings together and summarizes a lifetime of Newbigin's thought in many areas. Those who have known him mainly as a missiologist or apologist will find new areas of Newbigin's thought to explore, and all will gain a deep appreciation of his total significance. In addition, for the first time there is available to the next generation of scholars a comprehensive survey of Newbigin's thought in one volume. Wainwright's book will be the starting place for Newbigin studies for some time to come.

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