**The Gospel in a Post-Foundational Society**

**The continuing relevance of Lesslie Newbigin’s Christological epistemology**

***Abstract***

Lesslie Newbigin’s book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* was published 30 years ago this year. I want to offer an outline of his thesis, and in particular draw out the way he brought together Michael Polanyi’s epistemology with his understanding of the Gospel and the saving work of God, in and through Jesus Christ. I hope to show, with the help of Paul LaMontagne’s work on epistemology, that Newbigin’s approach is neither positivistic or irrational. Further, I hope to show with the help of Bruce McCormack’s theological work that the primary role that Newbigin gives to the doctrine of election and refusal of metaphysical foundations makes his work of ongoing importance in the sharing of the Gospel in a ‘Post-Foundational’ society.

***Introduction***

In 2019, it will be thirty years since the publication of Lesslie Newbigin’s classic work *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. In this book, Newbigin produced an epistemological critique of what he called the ‘myth of the secular society’ and offered a theological treatise for a renewed confidence in the Gospel. At the heart of this confidence is his conviction that the doctrine of Christ and the logic of election and mission are indivisible. This creates a relationship between the Gospel and other religions and cultures that is liberating for both the church and society as a whole. Mission is intrinsic to the Gospel rather than a subsequent movement, and therefore the church is called to be neither reticent about proclaiming the uniqueness of Jesus as Saviour and Lord, nor make an arrogant claim to be in ‘possession’of the truth. For Newbigin, if the church embraces (as it should) the reality of a pluralist society but, further, assumes that this necessitates demurring on the ‘universal intent’ of the Gospel in the name of humility and for the sake unity, it has accepted an account of autonomous reason that is as illusory for non-Christians as for Christians. This erroneous rationality leads instead to confusion and hopelessness, and ultimately anything but the peace that is the goal of those who argue for a ‘secular society’ in which the public realm of universally accepted facts and personal beliefs are somehow separable. Newbigin calls the Gospel is “Public Truth” and the Bible “universal history” not as a culturally imperialist move but the necessary implication of the ontological primacy of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church’s witness to that reality should bear the marks of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God (costly self-giving) and any sort of institutional or political coercion to accept this truth is incongruent with its reality. In outlining this thesis, Newbigin drew upon significant epistemological and theological work contemporary to him (Michael Polanyi and Karl Barth in particular) as well as, of course, his wealth of experience as a British missionary and a local bishop in India for decades. In doing so, he also employed terms that he drew from ‘narrative’ and ‘postliberal’ theology, but I hope to argue that his work does not ultimately depend upon these theological moves. [My purpose in the opening section is to give an outline of his thesis in *The Gospel in a Pluralist society*, drawing particular attention to his epistemology, Christology and doctrine of election. Then, ]

***The centrality of Jesus Christ in mission and theology***

Newbigin argued that the communication of the Gospel was not possible without being embodied within the culture of a particular people, place and time.[[1]](#footnote-1) The church is a missionary community that looks both to the culture around it and to Lord whose mission it is:

“True contextualisation happens when there is a community that lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same costly identification with people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus. When these conditions are met, the sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, he held as equally axiomatic that the Gospel was not (could not be) constrained or contained by this cultural embodiment. For Newbigin, there is a proper tension here, but not a contradiction.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is because mission is not a separate movement to the Gospel but rather integral to it.[[4]](#footnote-4) I shall argue that this is crucial point because Newbigin is articulating a missiology/theology in which Christology and the doctrine of election are coinherent.

In the first five chapters of the book, Newbigin questions the epistemological assumptions of late modernity and its impact upon theology and mission. This could be portrayed as a ‘prolegomena’, clearing ground and laying foundations upon which to build theology, but Newbigin’s intention is to show that the gospel – the actual historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus – establishes a rationality that cannot be judged by the perceived independent critical framework provided by philosophy and the natural sciences. The Christian cannot and should not ever naïvely claim that the truth claims of the gospel are not open to critical thought. Rather, the argument Newbigin is making is that *all* critical reason, rationality, is only possible within fiduciary frameworks that we must commit ourselves to personally in order to understand and find meaning in the created order and the events of history.[[5]](#footnote-5) The central myth of modernity is that rationality is somehow self-evidencing within the natural order and accessible without our personal commitment to beliefs that create the framework for critical thought; the dictum ‘I believe in order to know/understand’ is reversed creating an illusion of autonomous reason that determines faith and the meaning of the events of history. For Newbigin, the unquestioned assumption “that historical events are not a source of ultimate truth”[[6]](#footnote-6) (with origins well before modern theology) was the initial divergence point that disastrously separates the rationality of the gospel from the autonomous rationality perceived to be discoverable in the universe.[[7]](#footnote-7) Newbigin charts the steps in this divergence and its effects.

Newbigin’s starting-point appears that it might imply an underlying ‘positivistic’ epistemology (I hope to show that this is not the case):

“Christianity began with the proclamation of something authoritatively given. Paul presents himself not as the teacher of a new theology but as the messenger commissioned by the authority of the Lord himself to announce a new fact — namely that in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus God has acted decisively to reveal and effect his purpose of redemption for the whole world. … [This] cannot be derived from rational reflection on the experiences available to all people. It is a new fact, to be received in faith as a gift of grace. And what is thus given claims to be the truth, not just a possible opinion. It is the rock which must either become the foundation of all knowing and doing, or else the stone on which one stumbles and falls to disaster.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The first epistemological point to make is that, whilst the gospel is authoritatively ‘*given*’, this does not mean that the Christian community is in *possession* of the truth vis-à-vis other communities in the world: “it is essential to the integrity of our witness to this new reality that we recognize that to be its witnesses does not mean to be the possessors of all truth. It means to be placed on the path by following which we are led toward the truth.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Truth is not our possession, but is to be understood in personalist terms – the person and work of Jesus Christ, in whom is all truth. This leads to the second epistemological point, which is that all knowledge of truth and reality is personal knowledge *unless* we set aside the question of purpose.

“The spectacular success of the natural sciences in the past three hundred years has been due to their concentrating on tracing the cause-and-effect relation between happenings, and setting aside the question of purpose. There was a good practical reason for this. Purpose is a personal word. … If I come across a piece of machinery or equipment and have no idea of its purpose, I can of course take it to pieces and discover exactly how it works. But that will not explain what it is for. Either the designer, or someone who knows how to use it successfully for the purpose for which it was designed, will have to tell me. There will have to be personal communication. … If I do not know the purpose for which human life was designed, I have no basis for saying that any kind of human life-style is good or bad. It is simply an example of human life as it is. Judgments about what is good or bad can only be personal hunches. Each person will be entitled to her own. They will be, as we say, personal beliefs; and since there is no objective fact by which to test them, pluralism operates. If, on the other hand, it were a fact that the one who designed the whole cosmic and human story has told us what the purpose is, then the situation would be different. That would be a fact — a fact of supreme and decisive importance.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

[Insert section on Nancey Murphy’s comments on teleology and purpose in her response essay to Early et al.]

If all knowledge of reality and truth is personal knowledge, we cannot create dichotomy between ‘objective facts’ and ‘personal beliefs’.

The initial judgement of whether to personally commit to this rationality is ‘a-critical’. All acts of knowing require a personal commitment to a ‘fiduciary framBut that does not mean I shall sketch his argument in order to show is important to

1. “Human beings only exist as members of communities which share a common language, customs, ways of ordering economic and social life, ways of understanding and coping with their world. If the gospel is to be understood, if it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the real human situation, if it is, as we say, to “make sense,” it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.” (141) “The simplest verbal statement of the gospel, “Jesus is Lord,” depends for its meaning on the content which that culture gives to the word “Lord.”…The missionary does not come with the pure gospel and then adapt it to the culture where she serves: she comes with a gospel which is already embodied in the culture by which the missionary was formed.” (144) [? Include Bible, election in p144-145 plus Allen p147 as a bridge to next point.] [mention that I will argue that LN would agree with Lindbeck’s classic formulation of the issue, vis crusader, but his theology should not be characterised as ‘postliberal’ and entirely subject to the critiques levelled at this ‘school’ of theology. [PB note a-criticality; doctrine of election coinherent with Christology] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 154. “It seems to me to be of great importance to insist that mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the triune God — of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings whether they acknowledge him or not, graciously guiding history toward its true end; of God the Son who has become part of this created history in the incarnation; and of God the Holy Spirit who is given as a foretaste of the end to empower and teach the Church and to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. Before we speak about our role, the role of our words and deeds in mission, we need to have firmly in the center of our thinking this action of God”(134-135) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ?better quotes?…

   “I am…stressing the priority of the gospel message, embodied in an actual story, of what God has in fact done, is doing, and will do.” (152) Newbigin describes two dangers the church faces: “It can fail by failing to understand and take seriously the world in which it is set, so that the gospel is not heard but remains incomprehensible because the Church has sought security in its own past instead of risking its life in a deep involvement with the world. It can fail, on the other hand, by allowing the world to dictate the issues and the terms of the meeting. The result then is that the world is not challenged at its depth but rather absorbs and domesticates the gospel and uses it to sacralize its own purposes. … True contextualization accords to the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and to speak with each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgement and grace.”(152) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Newbigin, “the mission of the church is rooted in the gospel itself” (116 and passim chapter 10)

   “The starting point is God’s revelation of himself as it is witnessed to us in Scripture. The dynamic of mission is the presence of God the Holy Spirit with the power to convict the world and to bring home the truth of the gospel to each human heart.”(154) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I shall argue that the recent work in ‘post-foundational’ epistemology and the theology of Karl Barth by (**REF)** resonates with Newbigin’s position, and extends/elucidates how the interplay between personal commitment (judgment) and criticality functions epistemologically and ultimately theologically. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is significant to the parallel I wish to draw between the stunning exegesis of Karl Barth’s theology by Bruce McCormack, which entails a profound questioning of the place of metaphysics in theology. Newbigin writes: “Here, I think, is the point at which we may well feel that the eighteenth-century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man. The Bible was a source of information about such of these eternal truths as could not be discovered by direct observation of nature or by reflection on innate human ideas. Any valid defense of the Christian faith, I believe, must take a quite different route. The Christian faith, rooted in the Bible, is — I am convinced — primarily to be understood as an interpretation of the story — the human story set within the story of nature. Our dialogue as Christians, therefore, with the modern world, will be as much a dialogue with the historians as with the natural scientists. Every understanding of the human story, even more obviously than every understanding of the natural world, must rest heavily on a faith commitment — for we do not yet see the end of the story. But no human life is possible without some idea, explicit or implicit, about what the story means. The Christian faith is — as often said — a historical faith not just in the sense that it depends on a historical record, but also in the sense that it is essentially an interpretation of universal history. Its defense, therefore, will be as much concerned with how we act as with what we can say.” (12-13) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (5-6). Apart from the epistemological points that I wish to draw out, it should be noted that Newbigin is well aware of the offense such a way of stating the gospel elicits. “The Church is not generally perceived as concerned with facts, with the realities which finally govern the world and which we shall in the end have to acknowledge whether we like them or not. In this cultural milieu, the confident announcement of the Christian faith sounds like an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others. As long as the Church is content to offer its beliefs modestly as simply one of the many brands available in the ideological supermarket, no offense is taken. But the affirmation that the truth revealed in the gospel ought to govern public life is offensive.”(7) Newbigin says that this has always been the case, and at all points in western civilization (not just recent centuries in the west): “It is no secret, indeed it has been affirmed from the beginning, that the gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel. The Church, therefore, as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures without exception.”(9) But this has never entitled the church to impose the gospel, which would actually be a contradiction in terms: “We must affirm the gospel as truth, universal truth, truth for all peoples and for all times, the truth which creates the possibility of freedom; but we negate the gospel if we deny the freedom in which alone it can be truly believed.”(10) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 16. He notes, with Max Weber, that Nietzsche “was the first to realize that the operation of the modern critical principle would make it impossible any more to speak of right and wrong. The factual, ontological basis for using such language had been removed. There could only be personal choice. And what could guide that choice except the will? We choose what we want. So we are left with the will to power. This, it seems to me, perfectly explains the dichotomy of our usage between what we call “values” and what we call “facts.” Facts are what we have to reckon with whether we like them or not. Values are what we choose because we want them — either for ourselves or for someone else.”(17) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)