

Leslie Newbigin

Who was Leslie Newbigin? Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, he entered the university as an agnostic. He became a Christian through the reading of Scripture. He was a devout student of the Word ever since. He wrote: "I do most deeply believe (and I have tried to act on that belief in many different situations) that when we are looking for guidance and renewal, fundamentally we have to go the Scriptures." Newbigin spent 35 years in India as a missionary, took a major part in the negotiations which led to the establishment of the Church of South India (CSI). At the inauguration of the CSI, he was appointed bishop. He was a member of the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. In 1959 he was called to become the secretary of the International Missionary Council, based in London. He served as associate general secretary of the WCC and director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism till 1965. He was invited back to India. He served the CSI as bishop in Madras until his retirement in 1974.

Although he served most of his careers within the circles of the WCC, his greatest following was among evangelicals. He was greatly concerned about the developments within the WCC. He protested that the WCC 's vision was too much shaped by the ideology of the 1960s with its faith in the secular and in human power to solve problems. He remarked that the evangelicals are the ones growing and showing increasing breadth of vision in their approach to the whole range of contemporary human problems, while the WCC is in decline.

Newbigin was a brilliant thinker, a humble servant of the Lord, who did a great deal of street preaching before skeptical crowds, traveled to remote, illiterate villages, spending the night in local homes, conducting services in the open air in his passion to reach the lost. He was never a church bureaucrat. Newbigin's greatest impact came after his retirement. He and his wife settled in Birmingham, UK, where he taught at the Selly Oak missionary training college, and from 1980 to 1988 he served as pastor of a small inner city church. He was shocked by the desperate state of British Christianity. He noted that contemporary Western culture is in the power of false gods, of idols; and that people are seeking salvation through the invocation of all the old gods of power and sex and money. He commented that a ministry in England " is much harder than anything I met in India. There is cold contempt for the Gospel, which is harder to face than opposition. England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church." How can the Church reach paganized Western culture? To answer this question Newbigin wrote a series of books and gave many lectures. His books made him famous in England and throughout the world. He showed the need for a vigorous Christian mind. He became instrumental in founding the " Gospel and Culture" program. A newsletter was launched, which helped pastors, academics and thoughtful laity to discuss whether the Western world can still be converted. Newbigin's faith did not accommodate itself to modern thought; his Christianity never fit into the category called " personal faith." He believed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In his works *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *the Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Newbigin examined the foundations of secularism, the causes which led to the privatization of the Christian faith, and the concept of the Gospel as public truth. For him there was no greater task, or any deeper joy than to

tell the world the glorious Gospel, and to enable others to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

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