

## **Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader.**

Compiled and Introduced by Paul Westen. Pb. 277 pp. April 2006.

How can a missionary be both relevant and faithful to the Gospel? Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) argued that the gospel stands in contradiction to human wisdom twisted by sin. His understanding of the relation of gospel to culture was shaped by his experience of cross-cultural communication of the gospel. He was a brilliant thinker, a humble servant of the Lord, an internationally esteemed British missionary, pastor, missiologist and theologian. His long career included service as a village evangelist in India, who did a great deal of street preaching before skeptical crowds, travelled to remote villages, spending the night in local homes and conducted open-air services in his passion to reach the lost. He was also bishop of the Church of South India, and an associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches. But he was never a church bureaucrat. Although he served many years within the circles of the World Council of Churches (WCC), his greatest following was among evangelicals. He was greatly concerned about the developments within the WCC. He protested that its vision was too much shaped by the ideology of the 1960s with its faith in secular and human power to solve problems. While the WCC was in decline and becoming irrelevant, 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.

Newbigin's greatest impact came after his retirement. He and his wife settled in Birmingham, UK, where he taught at Selly Oak missionary training college, and from 1980 to 1988 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 beholden to idolatry. People are seeking salvation through the invocation of all the old gods of power, sex, and money. He commented that a ministry in England "is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a 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 he wrote a series of books and gave many lectures. Among his many best-selling books are Foolishness to the Greeks, The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, The Open Secret, and the Unfinished Agenda. 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 still can be converted. He showed the need for a vigorous Christian mind. He believed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every area of life. In his works he examined the foundations of secularism, the privatization of the Christian faith, and the concept of the Gospel as public truth. For him there was no greater task, or 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.

In Lesslie Newbigin: *Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, Paul Weston, a tutor at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, opens with a short biography of Newbigin and a discussion of his major theological and missiological themes. He puts selected readings in context with brief introductions and offers suggestions for further readings from Newbigin's works. His "reader" is a thorough introduction to the remarkable career of a man of God whose legacy should not be forgotten.

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