



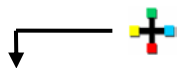
## Lesslie Newbigin Replies

1982

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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I appreciate the critical comments of Paul G. Schrotenboer and C. Peter Wagner. We have very much in common. I have been asked to respond briefly. This requires a very staccato style, with no space for many points of agreement. With this understanding, I hope that any appearance of rudeness and crudeness will be excused.

To Dr. Schrotenboer I would say: (1) There is a semantic confusion. I have avoided the phrase "holistic evangelism" because it confuses two distinct things and allows the distinctive business of evangelism (*telling* good news) to be side-stepped in favor of "social systemic reform." I hold that the latter is equally an obligation for Christians but can never be a substitute for the former. Therefore I am willing to "buy" "holistic mission," but not "holistic evangelism." (2) I maintained on exegetical grounds that the New Testament gives no authorization to assign primacy to words over deeds. The texts quoted by Dr. Schrotenboer in no way touch my argument. They refer to the facts of the gospel on which we agree, but they do not invalidate Paul's statement (for example) that he has been a minister of the gospel to the gentiles "by word and deed" (Rom. 15:18f.). The attempt to assign priority to words over deeds arises (I am convinced) not from Scripture but from the pervasive dualism of our "modern" culture. (3) On universalism, I was struggling to express the same tension that Dr. Schrotenboer expresses. I do not think we are basically in conflict. Scripture requires us to hold *both* the universality and totality of God's saving purpose for the whole of humankind (*not a* Stoic idea), *and* the fact that there is no way to the Father except by the faithful following of Jesus on the way of the cross. I do not believe that our minds are capable of formulating statements that completely do justice to both. In that sense we cannot be judges, but only witnesses. And I cannot escape from the argument of Paul in Romans 9-11 taken as a whole. The central pastoral thrust of that passage is a warning to believers not to think "We are saved: they are lost" (11:17-36).

To Dr. Wagner I would say: (1) Is he not confusing "evangelism" with "conversion"? The former is an activity of believers; the latter is a work of the Holy Spirit. When Wagner says, "When people turn from darkness to light ... evangelism has occurred," he is talking about

conversion. (2) I agree that there is no conversion without evangelism. But the (verbal) telling of good news may not in fact be the decisive happening that the Spirit uses for his decisive work of conversion. The "mighty works" are an equally essential element in the total witness. (3) I agree that when Paul talks about "mighty works" he is not talking about picketing for free labor unions, and I am happy that the long failure of Christendom to take seriously all that the New Testament so plainly teaches about miracles is now being ended. I am sure this was a surrender of the gospel to culture and that we are indebted to Third World Christians who (in my experience) expect and experience as a normal part of discipleship the kind of deeds of power that nineteenth-century positivists have dismissed as mythical miracle stories. (But we would both agree that picketing for free labor unions can be a proper form of obedience.) (4) However, I do not agree that the goal of evangelism is to make Christians and that the goal of social action is to make people comfortable in this world. It is this dichotomy that I absolutely reject. I think the social action of Christians is significant only if it is a *sign* of the kingdom. Otherwise most of it is piffling amateurism. I think that both *telling* the good news and *acting* in the power that the reality of the life in Christ gives us are acts of obedient testimony offered to our Lord with the faith that the Holy Spirit will use (or not use) them in his own freedom to do His work (only His) of bringing men and women to conversion and faith in Christ. (5) Therefore I agree with Dr. Wagner that it is perfectly right and proper to have groups of Christians banded together for the specific purpose of *telling* the good news, but *only* on the condition that they do not separate themselves from those whose special gift and calling is in



the field of social action. When this happens the words are robbed of their credibility and the deeds are robbed of their meaning. (6) I agree that, as the Scriptures teach, the death of Jesus was a necessary sacrifice for sin. But according to both Mark and John the occasion of the decision by the authorities to destroy Jesus was precisely his mighty works of healing interpreted in the context that he gave them (e.g., Mk. 3:1-6; Jn. 5:1-18). It was this witness to the presence of the reign of God that precipitated the cross. But Dr. Wagner, I fear, is profoundly altering the whole meaning of these events by transferring them from their scriptural context into the typical thought forms of "modern" Western individualism.

The more I reflect on this debate, the more I am sure that it is about the way in which our modern post-Enlightenment culture distorts our reading of Scripture. We need more input from Third World theologians-people who are spending their time as evangelists among and in the languages of non-European peoples.

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