



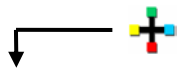
The Bible: God's Story And Ours

1990

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

Reform (January): 7.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



To explain who a person is, you need to tell their story. But a person's story cannot be told apart from the wider story of family, nation, world. No story is isolated from the whole human story. But how do you tell the whole story, or any story? Only by having a belief about what is the point of the story and picking out the events which are significant for that.

When I learned world history at school I learned that the point of the story was that it led up to our kind of civilisation. That dictated what events were discussed. We were the point of the story!

The Bible is an alternative world history. It sets the human story in a cosmic frame, between creation and consummation. It tells of the procreation of the nations at the beginning and of the gathering of all the nations at the end in one glorious city.

These accounts of the beginning and the end are symbolic because nobody has been there to report. But they are not random symbols: they are developed out of events which could be and were reported and which gave the clue to the meaning of the whole story.

These events concern one nation among all the nations, and finally one man of that nation – Jesus. Since the 18th century people have asked. 'How can this particular story be the clue to the universal story?' Behind this objection lies the very natural feeling that I ought to be able to know God's purpose through my own reason and conscience, and that all people ought to have this possibility. But this kind of rationalism tries to escape from the togetherness which God seems to have intended for us. We are to learn to know him and live in his love only through other people.

Bearer of the secret

So God chooses one people among all the people to be the bearer of the secret. This doctrine of election has a bad name because the 'elect' have so often thought that they were God's favourites and had a special claim on him. They have had to learn by hard experience that they are trustees, not sole beneficiaries, and that they fulfil their trusteeship by suffering for the sin of us all.

At the turning point of the story the Elect One is nailed to a cross. It is from this centre that we begin to understand the story as a whole. It is not the story of the success of the strong in eliminating the weak, not 'the survival of the fittest'.

It is the story of the infinite patience and the awesome holiness of the creator and lord of all, who will never give up his purpose to bring the world he has made and the human family to whom he has entrusted its care to the glory he has planned for us. That is the point of the story and it makes it possible for us to make sense of the story of which our lives are a part.

There are things in the Bible which shock us – the Book of Joshua, for example. But part of the divine patience is a divine pedagogy which cannot teach all the lessons at one time. We have to read on to Ruth and Jeremiah and Hosea and to Jesus himself. We understand the whole story in the light of the events concerning Jesus, but we do not understand Jesus except in the context of the whole story.

This is the true world history, not in the trivial sense that we affirm the factual accuracy of every statement in the Bible, but in the serious sense that it tells us what the real point of the human story is. As Christians we do not look at the Bible from outside. We live in it. It is our story. Living in it, we learn to cope with the history in which we share, because we have seen the point.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.