



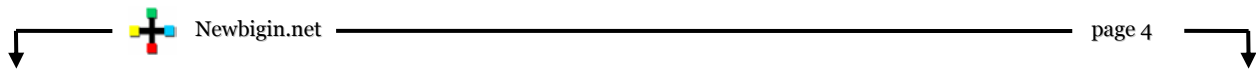
A Letter And A Response: Graeme Jackson and Lesslie Newbigin

1991

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

The Gospel and Our Culture (U.K.), 8 (Winter): 4.

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.



We publish a response from the Rev Graeme Jackson to Newsletter 7, because it represents the views and questions of many, both readers and non-readers. It is followed by excerpts from Newbigin's reply and from Mr Jackson's letter after receiving the reply.

From Rev Graeme Jackson

The article 'The Threat and the Promise' by Lesslie Newbigin makes out a strong and clear case that revelation has to be the starting point of any discussion of the subject 'The Gospel and our Culture'. Ultimately, however, that case is unconvincing – or maybe I should say that it does not convince me. Perhaps that is because I have not properly understood the argument, so let me outline the two difficulties I have with it.

1. The statement that revelation must be the starting point must itself be a basic axiom. It is, in other words, no more capable of demonstration than any other basic axiom. In the final analysis, therefore, I either do or do not accept it as the start of a discussion of the Gospel and our Culture. If I do, well and good. If I do not, then I suppose Dr Newbigin and I are left with nothing to say to each other about the subject of the Gospel and Our Culture, and all our discussion has to be concerned with the truth or otherwise of the basic axiom. This is hardly a good basis for the dialogue about the gospel and culture which Dr Newbigin ends up by pleading for.

2. When Dr Newbigin says that 'revelation' must be the starting point of the discussion on The Gospel and Our Culture he presumably means the revelation that is associated in some way with Jesus Christ and the Holy Scripture. If such a statement is to be accepted as the basic axiom which if the starting point for the discussion, then the content of that revelation has, presumably, to be defined. This is where I find my second difficulty.

There are those who would say (whether they really mean it or not: that the content of that revelation is given by the words of Holy Scripture then one goes on to ask whether that means the original world in which Holy Scriptures were written, or the Greek and Hebrew in

which the modern theological student learn; to read them, or even the language of one of the many modern English translations. I cannot believe that that is what Dr Newbiggin would say.

Perhaps he would say something like the following: "Revelation consists of a truth that I come to perceive as I use all my gifts of intellect and imagination and compassion and insight to bear on my understanding of the meaning of the life of Jesus Christ in the context of the story of God's dealings with humankind as borne witness to by Holy Scripture." (Clearly the statement could be modified or made more precise). But what, then, if I, when I use my gifts of intellect etc come to a different understanding of Jesus Christ and so of the content of revelation? Indeed, it is highly likely that I do. Where then does that leave the basic axiom' from which we have to begin the discussion of The Gospel and Our Culture?"

Response from Bishop Newbiggin

"It seems to me that all the paragraphs of your letter rest on the assumption that there is, or ought to be, available to us a kind of 'proof' which would dispense with the need for faith and offer total certitude. This, of course, is what Descartes undertook to provide at the behest of Cardinal Berulle. I do not believe that such certitude is available. I follow Polanyi (paraphrasing Einstein) when he says that only propositions which can be doubted make contact with reality. So I agree, of course, that I cannot demonstrate from some supposedly indubitable facts that it is proper to take revelation as a starting point.

The 'proof' of any fundamental belief (and this is certainly true in science) is not that it can be demonstrated from some other basis, but that when it is published and tested in all relevant situations it stands up and leads on to further truth. The starting point is only a starting point, not a cut-off point.

And this is why dialogue is not only possible but necessary between those who take different starting points. We meet, so to speak, in our exploration of the world of human experience. None of us meets the other as possessors of a supposedly indubitable set of certainties. It is then a question of which expedition proves more able to cope with the realities of the world we share. This is a genuinely pluralist society, not a society which says (like John Hick) that all the different paths are really going to the same place. This is monism, not pluralism. This is a genuinely pluralist society which, like the scientific community, acknowledges the need for free enquiry and research, but constantly tests out all lines of research in respect of their adequacy to account for all the facts. In other words it is a pluralism which recognizes that absolute possession of the truth is not available to us now, but that we are called to press forward to the day when 'we shall know as we have been known'.

And the Church is called to be such a pluralist society avoiding both the false objectivism of the fundamentalists who try to ignore all the elements of human subjectivity (cultural and personal) in every stage of the creation of the Bible through to the translation on my table; and the false subjectivism of the liberals who treat the Bible as a collection of 'the varieties of religious experience' without facing the question 'experience of what?' Both of these are evasions of our responsibility to press towards the truth."

Response from Rev Graeme Jackson

As I read your letter I come to an understanding of your basic position that is almost in total opposition to what I thought you were saying in the article. I had thought that you wanted the church to be a society that stood out against pluralism. My puzzle was to understand how you could take that attitude when the only alternative position seems to me to be one which, equally dearly you did not take, namely a kind of fundamentalism.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbiggin family, the Newbiggin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbiggin.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.