

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), preface and chapters 1-2,
Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), chapter 1, and
Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), chapters 1-3.

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Newbigin's first few chapters analyze the environment in which westerners have grown used to interpreting the Christian faith.

His selective tour through recent historical and contemporary intellectual history describes a cultural context, often called *modernity*, in which claims are sorted into two separate and hard-to-relate categories. The first is absolute, objective, public fact, which exists regardless of whether one (or *anyone*) recognizes it ("2+2=4"). The second is relative, subjective, private value, which lies entirely of the minds of specific people ("God is love").

For our purposes it is important to note several features about this *paradigm* or way of ordering, gaining, using, and teaching knowledge:

1. It is not the only such way. In fact, historically it is not even a very popular one.
2. While it is 'dogmatic' in claiming to be a universal arrangement (10, 18), in fact it arises through peculiar historical circumstances in the Europe of the last three centuries (1-3).
3. It has arisen out of, challenged, and begun to eclipse the Christian way. Its prevalence means that today it provides the 'plausibility structures' even of Christians (8-9).
4. While it claims to offer freedom of conscience, in fact it coerces the acceptance of the things it calls 'facts' (through mandatory education, for instance) and discourages universal claims about the things it calls 'values' or 'opinions' (by making it 'oppressive' or 'judgmental' to commend one's values on others) (14-16).
5. According to its paradigm, only values communicate purpose. Because values lie in individual consciences, separating facts from values makes the universe amoral and human beings sovereign moral agents whose will is all the purpose there is (16-18).
6. Whether a claim counts as a fact or a value becomes a major social battle. For instance: does the Christian doctrine of creation belong in the public or private domain? Should French Muslim girls be allowed to wear headscarves in school? Is evangelism intolerably rude? Is sincerity what really matters in religious belief? (25-26).
7. Neither category fits the character of claims such as "Jesus is Lord," which are public in being universal yet personal in not being coercive (10-11). These kinds of claims are basic to the Christian mindset (5-6, 11-12). *Q: Is modern Christian faith even possible?*
8. Modernity is responsible for the existence and destructive divide between 'fundamentalist' and 'liberal' Christianity. These two movements take sides roughly for Christianity-as-objective-fact versus Christianity-as-subjective-interpretation (24).
9. Modernity relativizes the claims of Christian faith, domesticating it and turning it into something other than the apostolic traditions we call biblical Christianity – 'a religion' (9-10). Christian apologists who have tried to show that Christianity is 'reasonable' by its standards have generally retreated and hastened Christianity's demise (2-3).
10. Not coincidentally, modernity seems well suited to explaining religious diversity in multicultural contexts and keeping the peace among different religious groups (25).
11. While modernity is proud of scientific culture, in fact science predates it and (as Michael Polanyi shows) cannot work according to its structures. (We shall see that the same is true of history.) Traditions such as science have direction and require commitments, faith, doubt, intuition, and engagement (19-22). *So does Christian faith.*

Lee Camp has a different but related diagnosis for Christianity's mutation from good news for the whole world to socially conventional religion. Camp's account centers on the alliance the early Church forged with the state in the fourth century that has characterized "Constantinian" Christianity ever since, and which despite appearances characterizes the faith in America. The "Constantinian cataract" is a distortion of the gospel's paradigm. According to Camp, Constantinianism shifts the Christian message in far-reaching but often little-noticed ways that his next few chapters will describe. As a Southerner, Camp knows that Constantinian Christianity seems biblical in Constantinian and post-Constantinian societies. It probably seems biblical to many of you. The cataract, he says, has blinded us to all the contrary evidence. The rest of his book is an exercise in recovering a "radical" Christian vision that resolutely centers on Jesus Christ rather than what already makes sense to American cultural sensibilities.

Vincent J. Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered* begins with a description of the failure of one hundred years of Catholic mission to East Africa. The character of Christian evangelism there (Protestant as well as Catholic) was in substance imperialistic and colonialistic – western-style schooling, western-style relief and economic development (chapter 1) – and after a century of it, it has had scarcely any impact of the proud, conservative Masai tribes of Tanzania (described in chapter 2). Reading a seminal book by Roland Allen called *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (you will see it cited in Newbigin too) convinces Donovan to try something radically different: abandon conventional western missionary strategies for the cross-cultural evangelism of the New Testament (chapter 3). *Protestants reading Catholics who read Protestants? Welcome to a Christian faith that is bigger than you may have thought.*

Q: How are these three diagnoses from Newbigin, Camp, and Donovan related?

All three of these projects (as well as the book-in-progress that some of you will read, "a prayerful exercise in theology") invite us to begin anew: not by abandoning the Christian past or the faith or any of these stubborn cultures, but by returning to them for lessons, criticisms, and new life we had learned to overlook. "I wonder if you ever reach that point in your life or in your work where you are certain you will never have to start all over again," Donovan says (21). I haven't, and I hope you haven't either.

Telford Work read the material, wrote the presentation, edited it, and fact-checked. (You will credit each person in your small group here for *only* the roles he or she actually played in producing the presentation.)