Witness to the Signs
More reminders from Lesslie Newbigin.


Leading my class through the third or fourth primary text in an undergraduate seminar on St. Augustine, it hit me what kind of visionary a true theologian is. Confessions had shown us an autobiographical account of salvation, On Christian Doctrine a scriptural one, and On the Trinity provided a theological, Christological, philosophical, and anthropological one. In City of God we saw the same thing historically, sociologically, and eschatologically. Our class did not have time to catch its creedal form in the Enchiridion or the anti-Pelagian writings’ metanarrative, but the point had already been made. St. Augustine ranges wide, but he never loses his focus. He shows readers one thing, blindingly brilliant in itself, through manageable narrow crevices and from every imaginable angle, until we finally that it is the uncontainable source of everything we are as Christians.

What that course trained me to see in St. Augustine, I have come to see in Lesslie Newbigin. While Newbigin is sometimes pigeonholed as a missiologist – missiology being thus misunderstood as a mere appendage to Christian life – in fact he is a true theologian. Everything he saw in his long career, he was gifted to see as they truly are: in the uncreated light and eternal reign of the Pantocrator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I first caught a glimpse of Newbigin’s vision in a series of addresses he delivered at Duke University. In introducing Newbigin, my doctoral advisor Geoffrey Wainwright commended Newbigin’s The Household of God as one of the century’s ten best works in ecclesiology. I wrote down the reference, read it the next summer, and was hooked. When I assigned it some time later

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1 Thanks to Daniel Moorhead for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this review.
for a class on contemporary Christian thought, Newbigin’s claims immediately injected a vitality into the class discussion that carried on through the entire semester. I have assigned *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* for a seminar on the doctrine of the world, *Proper Confidence* for a course on revelation, and *The Light Has Come* (his theological commentary on the Gospel of John) for my introductory classes on Christian doctrine, to remarkable effect every time.

Now comes one last surprise: *Signs amid the Rubble*, edited, introduced, and insightfully annotated by Wainwright, Newbigin’s theological biographer (Wainwright 2000). The collection of three previously unpublished works loosely centers on “the purposes of God in human history.” Naturally I added it to the reading list for my school’s capstone course on contemporary world theologies. Like every other volume of Newbigin’s, this one too mystified my students at first, then captivated them, awed them, and left them transformed.

The three lectures are “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” delivered in Bangalore in 1941; the Henry Marten Lectures on missions, delivered in Cambridge in 1986, and “Gospel and Culture,” an address to the WCC’s World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil in 1996. One of this volume’s gifts is the power of juxtaposing all three lectures to show us both what has changed for Newbigin and for us over the last six decades, and what has not.

Newbigin’s Bangalore lectures come in the historical context of World War II, in which the west’s secular eschatologies struggled murderously for dominance. National Socialism, dialectical materialism, and democratic/imperialistic capitalism all had their own visions of the end: a thousand year Reich, a workers’ paradise, a manifest destiny. Against all their proposals
for a new order for the ages, Newbigin reminded his audience of the Kingdom of God that comes not according to on human timing or by human devices, but only in the will of the Father.

The Bangalore lectures re-emerged in 2003 as these eschatologies’ descendants continue their ancestors’ war to decide the world’s future. Militant Islamism openly fuses Fascism, Islamic-Arabist nostalgia, oil money, and asymmetrical warfare to return to Islam’s glory days. Transnational progressivism merges the remnants of Marxism with postcolonial remorse and reconceives a world where bureaucracy and multiculturalism end war, hunger, and oppression. Global democratic capitalism offers a soft Darwinism backed by financial and military hyperpower where market forces and technological growth yield material prosperity, then political freedom, then peaceful cooperation at “the end of history.”

Not every detail is the same, but the big pictures are uncomfortably similar. The capitalists are still torn between grim realism and sunny optimism, while the socialists are now the cynics and the Fascists the dreamers. This time the outcome is not in doubt, but the strategic question is once again whether the socialists will side with the Fascists or the capitalists, and whether the capitalists will resort to what it took to win last time.

Newbigin would be as concerned about these developments as he always was; this is, after all, his Father’s world. Yet they are not the issues that most concern him. They are but wars and rumors of wars that must come and go before the real end of history (Mark 13:7-8). The most astonishing quality of the Bangalore lectures is not that their eschatological vision is newly relevant today, but that its relevance will not and could never end. For these lectures present an apocalyptic history for which the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are determinative for the death and life of the cosmos as well as the Church and the individual disciple. There is nothing new under the sun, the schools of Hegelian historicism, spiritualistic Pietism, realized (i.e.,
Platonized) eschatology, and historical-critical naturalism notwithstanding. Real “progress” is found only here.

Newbigin’s detractors tend to sniff at all this as so much rehashed biblicism. A new world needs a new gospel! “Surely it is time for us to reformulate such a gospel according to Newbigin,” one unsympathetic reviewer of Wainwright’s book pleaded. “From the particularist Jesus of fundamentalism, we must move to the universal Jesus who belongs to the whole of humanity, while avoiding a christocentric universalism” (Aleaz 2002, 510). (*Jesus belongs to humanity? Hadn’t it once been the other way around?*)

However, like everything from Newbigin, the Bangalore lectures *are* a new telling – a new telling of the old apostolic story, in dialogue with its current rivals, misinterpreters, and antagonists. With the increasingly rare training of a scholastic theologian, Newbigin systematically takes up and demolishes the major objections to his position.

Newbigin argues here that while the linearity of Hebrew-Persian history provided the framework in which progressivism was born (8-10), the vast colonial world that conceived of secular progress had resorted to an orgy of self-destruction in its own heartland. There is no evidence that modernity’s accumulating knowledge and mastery over nature is truly progressive. What does seem to progress as human history meanders towards the present can be named *both* good and evil (14-15). Trains can bring people together or deliver Jews to death camps, as today jet planes can convene fellowships or fell skyscrapers and the Internet can unite missionaries or empower pornographers. This moral ambiguity is intrinsic to progressivism, since no immanent account of existence can answer the underlying question of whether modernity’s human moral agents are intrinsically good. “At some point the vital question is begged; the thing which needs to be proved is quietly assumed” (12-14). Technology is not teleology.
In his second lecture, Newbigin defeats progressives’ common fallback position that future might still become an age of progress. In the Church itself, liberal “social gospellers” sacrifice this generation for some future generation in which the ideal state of affairs will be realized, while conservative “individual gospellers” make this world a training ground for personal afterlives (19-20). Neither makes sense of the Christian life or fits the data of the New Testament, above all because both reduce salvation to less than the summation of all things in Christ (24) and deny either the fact or the sphere of Christ’s rule (27). History does not reduce to either global or personal self-realization. “We have to find a view which does justice to both aspects of the problem – individual and social – and which resolves the apparent contradictions between them” (26).

Newbigin’s arguments apply both to the current Christian scene and to the alternative futurisms the sixties spawned for both individual souls and whole societies. Cultural successes have moved postmillennial liberals on from heralding the Great Society to the Age of Aquarius to the Global Village, while political and economic successes have moved my fellow premillennial evangelicals on from fingering humanists to New Agers to postmodernists as the pawns of the Beast. They are all deserving targets of the young Newbigin’s polite and withering critiques.

An eschatology that does make sense of Christian life and biblical faith is a literal judgment day. But is it still credible? Newbigin’s third disputation addresses those who dissipate the reality of final judgment with language of “symbolism” or “realization” in the present (C.H. Dodd). These betray the very story they seek to conserve, either by atemporalizing God along Greek or Hindu transcendentalist lines (and making practices such as prayer and repentance nonsensical), or by relegating the work of Christ to the past along supersessionist lines (and
distorting beyond recognition virtues such as faith and hope) (36-39). In both cases our theological elites theorize a supposedly more spiritual world than the one Jesus and the apostles actually inhabited. It is one where suffering is heroic, recompense tragic, absurdity comedic, and the cross foolish (42-43). “Take away the literal fact,” Newbigin warns, “and the symbol vanishes” (34). No symbol will truly intimidate the powers and comfort the persecuted but the arrabon guaranteeing God’s promise to overcome the distance between what is and what ought to be – the Spirit of divine love that alone can fully contain the divine wrath (45).

If we pause between the third and fourth Bangalore lectures, we can see in the Marten lectures forty-five years later an address whose character is as similar as it is fresh. There, in honor of a noted nineteenth century missionary to Muslims, Newbigin examines the dramatic turn from European confidence in the goodness of mission to embarrassment, guilt, repentance, and even apostasy (59-61) – progressivism on the rebound.

Juxtaposing the Bangalore and Marten lectures dramatizes the profound shift in both mission and the wider world between the 1940’s and the 1980’s. Newbigin, like Wainwright, sees the 1960’s as the tipping point of the west’s collapse of confidence in both the good news and itself. Even so, a dynamic of insecurity and aloofness already haunted the world of his Bangalore lectures, and the specter of modern progressivism still haunts the world of his Marten lectures in the form of a liberation theology that subordinates and sidelines the Church (95-107). In 1941 England was still reeling from the legacy of Neville Chamberlain, and mainstream America had not yet been shaken from its isolationism. In the sixties isolationism migrated from the political right to the hard left. Twenty years after the Marten lectures, the cynics seem to outnumber the utopians in trendy NGOs, public sector unions, and so-called anti-war movements.
that sometimes serve as little more than apologists for totalitarians. The new left, like the old
right, is vested in the powers it won, defensive of the status quo, wary and dismissive of
outsiders, long on slogans and short on ideas, shrill when criticized, and reluctant to reform. It
promotes its agenda with the same arrogance and bitterness it projects on its antagonists. It is
now the standard bearer for western anti-eschatology.

The substance of the Marten lectures is familiar to readers of Newbigin’s work after he
“retired” to an England whose pluralists had come to accuse Christian evangelists and
missionaries of the arrogance of absolutism. Newbigin replies here as elsewhere that authentic
Christian evangelism refuses the deeper arrogance of late modern relativism, which questions
every dogma but the self-contradiction on which it naively rests. True Christian mission shares
the Church’s knowledge as a gift of grace – entrusted rather than owned, freely offered to all,
and powerful in its own right (62-65).

While pluralists take the Christian faith as an instance of something generic called
“religion,” which would situate Christ in some lower place than the Father’s right hand,
Newbigin insists that the Christian tradition is sui generis. It obeys a unique divine election to
mission where “one is chosen in order to bring the good news of salvation to others, one people
for all the peoples … an action of God which binds together those who share in it” (73).
Christians encounter others as others as well as counterparts, as learners as well as teachers, as
vulnerable to change as well as agents of change.

True conversation is not relativistic, and true conversion is not imperialistic. True cross-
cultural contact is bound to change both missionaries and mission fields. If the gospel’s
audiences offer something to learn, then the Church must find in non-Christian cultures
something to affirm. Conversely, if mission reconciles all peoples to a common Lord, then their
fellowship must transcend the homogeneous cultural units reified by anthropologists and church-
growth advocates who forbid cultural “contamination,” repress individuality, and fear cultural 
change. Newbigin insists that this is true even when, in the new freedom of the Holy Spirit, some 
in these mission fields commit the politically incorrect acts of responding before neighbors and 
families approve, rejecting elements of their own cultural inheritance, and even embracing 
elements of the missionaries’ culture (84-91).

If progressivism faltered within the new left after the sixties, it grew stronger than ever on 
the new right, where confidence in the market replaced confidence in ancestry and state. The 
ideology of Thatcherite England bothered Newbigin tremendously (Wainwright 261-262), not 
just because of his background in radical politics and his Keynesian economics training but 
because its rhetoric appealed to the market as surest provider and final authority – in other 
words, as Lord. The third set of lectures in Signs amid the Rubble follows up on that conviction 
ten years after the Marten lectures. At the WCC’s World Conference on Mission and 
Evangelism, Newbigin prophesies against a new idolatry that simultaneously enthrones and 
enslaves the individual. Consumerism reduces society to the market, the creation to 
commodities, work to labor, and unborn children to dispensable inconveniences (114-121). 
Global democratic capitalism imagines it is bringing ultimate freedom; but “we are dealing here 
with an idol, the idol of the free market,” he says, “and idols do not respond to moral persuasion. 
They are cast out only by the living God, and it is only the power of the gospel in the last 
analysis which can dethrone idols and which can create the possibility of a free society” (119). 
Only the living God – not the United States or the European Union, not the IMF or the UN, not 
the Constitution or the proletariat, not Fox News or The New York Times, not even the National
Association of Evangelicals or the World Council of Churches. Many inside and outside the Church will find Newbigin’s nonpartisan iconoclasm embarrassing, even intolerable. No disciple should find it surprising.

What Newbigin does in all three of these lecture series is what he did throughout his life: He explicates the good news of Jesus Christ, distinguishing it carefully from this or that “other gospel” by which his contemporaries (and occasionally he too) are becoming seduced. This is his gift to us. Newbigin’s prophetic vision expects and finds a place for everything in the framework of God’s story. His world is almost always biblical, but never biblicistic. It features missionaries whose trials never dampen their joy, righteous Hindus and Muslims who become latter-day Pauls, a colonial west that struts out proudly to battle like King Saul, is stricken accordingly, and finally falls on its sword, and a modernity that rises and falls like Babel. It draws on thinkers whom Newbigin chooses with eclectic judiciousness and uses with casual brilliance. And it always addresses the *Zeitgeist* in ways deeply attentive both to the apostolic story and to the cultures in which the story must always be told. Only that faith anchors hope in the future; only that faith identifies goodness and meets need among all peoples; “only that faith in the long run can sustain a truly free society” (120).

In each lecture series Newbigin patiently holds up the Word to show us who we are, in the hope that we will not turn away and forget how we look. What we see is not likely to make us comfortable, since in one way or another we have bought into the scenarios of the ruler of this age. Newbigin fingers my own conservative American idolatry just as skillfully as the idolatries of the left. But what we see can set us free. That is why I keep reading and assigning Newbigin,
and why my students love his stringent critiques of their lives as much as I do. They love the freedom of receiving the truth.

When the critiques are this incisive, readers also need to identify a way forward. When the point comes in every class that the students finally understand what Newbigin is saying, they panic. When they realize that even the most faithful circles they know have been seduced by sectarianism, solipsism, Gnosticism, and nihilism, they worry that apostasy is unavoidable. They wonder whether the darkness has overcome the light.

That temptation returns us to Newbigin’s final lectures – in Bangalore as the Second World War rages, in Cambridge as the Cold War begins to wind down, and in Brazil in the false peace between the Soviet collapse and September 11. A striving for perfection seems planted in the human spirit, yet our dreams for perfect lives and perfect societies this side of eternity inevitably fail and fade (49). Progressivism’s heroic sacrifices for a continually deferred future are as vain as nihilism’s craven efforts to delay mortality. There is no path going straight to the good life; all lead downward to the grave. Over and over, modern history’s sad denouements teach the same lesson: the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable.

Yet Christ the firstfruits is risen and death will be swallowed up in victory, so our labor is not in vain (50). The cross is the reason that all is not vanity. Christian faith does not pretend that death is no more – as the world’s progressives imagine it might be – but it knows the power of death to be broken forever. “In His lowly subjection to the powers, Christ is Lord over them” (108). His victory frees not just the inhabitants of some future age, but frees us (50). The good news came as a surprise to a captive and weary world, and because we are constantly asserting our historical and personal eternity in spite of it, the news surprises still (109). Yet the workers who live in remembrance of Christ’s victorious passion will find themselves and their efforts
blessed of the Father. Despite the surrounding darkness, Newbigin never loses hope, because he stays focused on the light that has come. “Even though [the Christian’s] actions may all seem to be failures as far as visible effectiveness is concerned, he commits them to God as his thank offering, in the sure hope that they will not be lost. And by faith, the substance of things hoped for, he now possesses in his heart a foretaste of the joy of that perfected Kingdom in which God’s purpose shall be complete” (52-53).

This beatific vision overcomes both the messianism that drives progressivism’s powerful and the despair that idles its powerless (55). Newbigin always worked, and sometimes strained, to develop its implications in every age. In the forties, it implied to him that Christians need neither control nor surrender to the forces of central planning that drove his world’s industries, nations, and war machines. (I wish in the Bangalore lectures he had developed the Wesleyan and Holiness trajectories he sensed rather than the Niebuhrian direction with which he actually concluded (54-55). Rather than accommodating to “realism” – where is that in New Testament eschatology? – Wesleyan hope calls with divine impatience upon the Spirit to come and sanctify. But it was the 1940’s, and Newbigin was an English Presbyterian. Nobody’s perfect!) In the eighties the beatific vision offers the same assurances that God does not finally abandon the cultures he rebukes (109). In the nineties, it leads him to prophesy against both conservative and liberal forms of libertarianism in an explosion of joy. In every context it confirms to him “the very center of our calling as Christians – to recover confidence in the gospel as the power of God for salvation” (120), and drives him with the whole Church on to “the continuing communication of that joy – joy in the Lord” (121).

To see everything and live in all circumstances through the cross and resurrection is the task to which Newbigin inspires me. My original comparison between Newbigin and Augustine
could suggest that gifts such as theirs belong only to a few heroes across the centuries. Perhaps Newbigin is, as an Orthodox bishop called him, “like a Father of the Church.” However, this language tempts us to overlook all the others who share their gift: pastors, parishioners, my own students, family, friends, and colleagues in academia. They are rare in proportion to the rest of us, but critical to the health of the faith of the whole. Like mentors rather than heroes, they train us to see as they do. They compile and catalog our testimonies, then present them back to us with a power we had not noticed. They are not merely witnesses; like the writer to the Hebrews, they are the spiritual meteorologists who show us that we really are a cloud of witnesses.

For all his considerable influence, the point of Newbigin’s career is not the effect it has had or could have on the Church. It is not the promise his vision holds for reviving the moribund west or its dying liberal Christianity, or quickening and chastening its growing evangelicalism. To seize upon Newbigin’s lifelong thesis as motivational fodder for revivalism or as a program for cultural renaissance is to miss the ultimate significance of witness. The WCC he worked so hard to guide may have lost its way; the Britain that raised him may have descended into paganism; his measured postliberal voice may be lost in today’s theological cacophony; his prophecies against capitalism may fall on deaf conservative ears. Defeat is inevitable. Yet victory is more than inevitable; it is a fact. Christians do not force it; we proclaim and celebrate it. The Spirit is the one who draws all things toward their appointed end. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can neither comprehend nor overthrow it, though it tries to do so” (108).

Bibliography
