

PREPARING FOR A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

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OUTLINE

1. Who was Lesslie Newbigin?
2. What is a theology of missionary encounter?
3. What would be involved in having a missionary encounter today?
4. Relevant reading and resources

Discuss: *Have you ever returned to a familiar place only to find it different from when you left? What allowed you to see the difference? Describe what that felt like.*

WHO WAS LESSLIE NEWBIGIN?

1909-1928 / Childhood and Boarding School

1928-1939 / University and Seminary Years

1936-1974 / Years of Ministry in India

1936-1974 / Intermittent Appointments in the Ecumenical Movement

1974-1998 / Life as a Public Theologian

I knew, of course, that he was right. Among all the cultures which have power in the contemporary world, the culture which originated in Western Europe is the most powerful and pervasive. It dominates the cities of most of the world. What is called 'modernisation' in Asia and Africa is usually co-opted into this way of thinking and behaving. And it

is precisely this powerful culture which is most resistant to the Gospel. Christianity is a growing movement in large parts of the Third World, rapidly growing in some places. In the West it is on the defensive, if not actually shrinking. Plainly, if one is looking at the global situation of the Christian world mission, the crucial question is:
“Can the West be converted?”

“What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter with modern Western culture?”

Discuss: What are some of the formative moments that shaped your own understanding of ‘the mission of the church’? Briefly explain.

WHAT IS A THEOLOGY OF MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER?

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN’S THEOLOGY OF MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

Newbigin’s theology of missionary encounter is Newbigin’s recipe for how the Church ought to mediate the gospel in a culture. Newbigin’s recipe centred on four ingredients:

1. Gospel recovery
2. Story indwelling
3. Theological challenge
4. Faithful witness

His approach is far more than a set of ideas. It is also a way that a local congregation can live faithfully in a cultural context.

GOSPEL RECOVERY

The Cultural Captivity of the Gospel

The Recovery of the Gospel

STORY INDWELLING

The Local Church Indwells the Biblical Story

The Importance of “Story”

The Local Congregation Must Indwell The Story

Indwelling The Biblical Story Enables Critique of the Cultural Story

Three Implications of Indwelling

First, as the local congregation indwells the biblical story, the story will inform their understanding of mission.

Second, as the local congregation indwells the biblical story there will be an encounter of stories that takes place in the very lives of God's people.

Third, the local congregation must indwell the biblical story because the Scriptures are the only guide for life and doctrine.

THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

Understanding Culture

Challenging the Entire Framework of Thought

We have allowed the Bible to be inserted into this history as a very minor strand in the whole human story, one element in the history of religions, which is itself only one element in the whole fabric of human history. We have not had the boldness which—for example—our black-led churches in Birmingham show, to recognise the story which the Bible tells as the real story, the true story, the story which explains who we really are, where we come from and where we are going.

But secular societies which have developed in Europe since the 17th Century share the common belief that reliable knowledge about human nature, and therefore about how human life is to be managed, is not to be found by reliance upon divine revelation and grace, but by reliance upon the methods of empirical science.

An Epistemological Confrontation

FAITHFUL WITNESS

A Faithful Witness Patterned After the Biblical Narrative

A Positive and Negative Relation to Culture

MICHAEL GOHEEN'S THEOLOGY OF MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

Goheen recognises 'an interactive combination of four factors' in Newbigins:

1. The gospel
2. The biblical story
3. The mission of the church
4. A missionary encounter with culture

TIM KELLER'S THEOLOGY OF MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

Keller observes eight ingredients for a missionary encounter in Newbigins:

1. A new apologetic (that takes on the so-called neutrality of secular reason)
2. The teaching of the kingdom of God (that God wants not only to save souls but heal the whole creation)
3. Earning the right to be heard through willingness to serve others sacrificially
4. Equipping the laity to bring the implications of their faith into their public calling and so transform culture
5. A countercultural church community
6. A unified church that shows the world an overcoming of denominational divisions
7. A global church in which the older Western churches listen to the non-Western churches
8. Courage

Keller's 'six basic elements to having a missionary encounter with Western culture:

1. **CHRISTIAN HIGH THEORY** - before we can explain the gospel to a culture, we must analyse that culture with the gospel
2. **A TRULY POST-CHRISTENDOM EVANGELISTIC DYNAMIC** - For 1,000 years the Western church's basic ministry model was premised on the social reality that people would be *coming, prepared, and positive*, and we could simply preach sound sermons. We need a new dynamic that includes the following:
 - a. Attention - how do we get people to pay attention to the gospel when they find it irrelevant?

- b. Attraction - helping non-Christians recognise they have a problem that requires salvation will mean *questioning people's answers* even before we *answer people's questions*
 - c. Demonstration - there's a definite need to address the traditional objections
 - d. Conviction - we have to explain the gospel in a way that is compelling and attracts late modern people
- 3. **A CATEGORY-DEFYING SOCIAL VISION** - we need to recover a way of church that is winsomely against the world's way of community. The early church's social vision was
 - a. Multi-racial and multi-ethnic
 - b. Highly committed to caring for the poor and marginalised
 - c. Non-retaliatory, marked by a commitment to forgiveness
 - d. Strongly and practically against abortion and infanticide
 - e. Revolutionising the sex ethic
 - f. Building a multi-ethnic church
 - g. Creating a church committed to the poor and to justice
 - h. Being a pioneer in civility, peace-making, and bridge-building
 - i. Having a church that is strongly pro-life
 - j. Becoming a sexual counter-culture
- 4. **COUNTER-CATECHESIS FOR A DIGITAL AGE** - finding new ways of teaching to mimic Jesus' "you have heard it said..."
 - a. "We need a counter-catechesis that explains, refutes, and re-narrates the world's catechisms to Christians."
- 5. **FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN PUBLIC SPHERES** - we need to equip Christians to be Christians in their jobs.
 - a. Keller quotes Newbigin,
 - i. We need to create, above all, possibilities in every congregation for laypeople to seek illumination from the gospel for their daily secular duty... The work of scientists, economists, political philosophers, artists and others [must be] illuminated by insights derived from rigorous theological thinking. For such a declericalized theology, the role of the church will be that of servant, not mistress."
- 6. **GRACE TO THE POINT** - we must never lose grasp of the difference between gospel grace and religious moralism

Reflect: In your own words, ‘What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and your specific neighbourhood/culture’?

WHAT WOULD BE INVOLVED IN HAVING A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER?

How should we minister in an increasingly urbanised world that embraces much of Western culture?

- 1. Identify as missionaries.**
- 2. Learn the culture.**
- 3. Speak the gospel to the culture.**
- 4. Equip church members as missionaries.**

“Do you try to understand the gospel through the spectacles provided by your culture, or do you try to understand your culture through the spectacles provided by the gospel?”

Relevant Reading + Resources:

Thomas West, [Who Will Be The Missionaries To Western Culture?](#)

Tim Keller, [How To Reach The West \(Again\)](#)

Lesslie Newbigin, [Can The West Be Converted?](#)

Lesslie Newbigin, [Foolishness to the Greeks](#)

Lesslie Newbigin, [The Open Secret](#)

Michael Goheen, [A Light To The Nations](#) (mostly missionary ecclesiology)

Michael Goheen, [The Church and Its Vocation](#) (mostly missionary encounter)

Michael Goheen, [The Symphony of Mission](#) (mostly Christians at their jobs)

Tim Chester & Steve Timmis, [Everyday Church](#)