

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans / Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989).

Foreword (Christopher Duraisingh)

It especially becomes incumbent upon the Church to understand its role in a pluralistic world when this moves from being a pluralistic milieu to being a pluralistic ideology. The church needs not to be timid or anxious, an attitude attributable to accepting an illegitimate dichotomy between the 'world of facts' and the 'world of values', but instead to confidently affirm our faith in this intellectual climate.

Preface

Newbigin acknowledges the influences of Michael Polanyi, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hendrikus Berkhof (*Christ the Meaning of History*) and Walter Wink.

Chapter 1. Dogma and Doubt in a Pluralist Culture

There are a number of conceptions concerning pluralism that need to be tested:

1. In the Western world it used to be the case that an accepted public doctrine, shaped by Christianity, provided the norm by which all belief and conduct was to be judged.
2. Secular pluralism is characteristic of a society in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct.
3. A secular pluralistic society is characterised by a critical spirit which is ready to subject all dogmas to critical (and even sceptical) examination.

A "critical spirit" actually presupposes contrary beliefs that justify dislodging long-established dogma.

What are those contrary beliefs? What has led to the modern critical attack of the Christian worldview in western European society? Newbigin draws on Graf Reventlow's work, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, in addressing this question:

1. It is an oversimplification to attribute this to the rise of modern science.
2. The origins of this critical attack go back to the strong humanist tradition inherited by the West:
 - a. The rationalist tradition drawn especially from Greek and Stoic sources. This "affirms human reason as the organ through which alone truth may be known."
 - b. The spiritualist tradition which believes the human spirit is capable of making direct contact through mystical experience with the ultimate source of being and truth (something Europe shares with India).
3. The humanist tradition involves an "unquestioned assumption", with the force of an axiom, namely "that historical events are not a source of ultimate truth."
 - a. The humanist tradition *severs truth from history*: "Truth can only be that which is accessible equally to all rational human beings apart from the accidents of history, through the exercise of reason and the experience of direct contact with the divine."
 - b. So Lessing: the accidental truths of history can never establish universal truths of reason.

4. In the latter part of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries, defences of the Christian faith constituted a retreat because instead of confronting the fundamental humanist assumption they effectively sought to accommodate it:
 - a. So developed the view that God has provided two ways of making himself known to us: the book we call the Bible and the book of nature.
 - i. The Bible is reduced down to be a supplementary source, providing truths that we cannot discover by the exercise of reason read from the book of nature.
 - ii. We live in an a-historical, timeless world, in which “timeless truths, valid for all times and all peoples, are being communicated in two different ways.”
 - iii. We no longer see ourselves as living in a world governed by a God-directed historical process, as “part of a story, a drama of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.”
 - iv. Truths discoverable from the Bible are of minor importance.
 - b. The logical consequence of making this concession to humanism is that “inexorably we move on to the point where the Bible is subjected to the scrutiny of reason and conscience and is found to be full of inconsistencies, absurdities, tall stories, and plain immorality.”
 - c. Our commitment to defending “a reasonable Christianity” on the terms of our modern Western intellectual formation constitutes a domestication of the gospel no different in essence to the co-option of Jesus into the Hindu worldview as yet one of many manifestations of deity.
 - d. In a religiously pluralistic Western society, which once was uniformly ‘Christian’, evangelism no longer can operate, as it once did, as a ‘recall to religion.’ Indeed, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims are often much more ‘spiritual’ than average native Christians. Having accepted the humanistic assumption divorcing truth from history the gospel, amid such religious pluralism, becomes a message for whites only. Hence the reluctance to use the language of evangelism and a preference for the language of dialogue when talking about communication with other faiths.
 - e. “Only what can stand up under the critical examination of the modern scientific method can be taught as fact, as public truth: the rest is dogma. One is free to promote it as personal belief, but to affirm it as fact is simply arrogance.”
5. So the big question becomes: “How, in this situation, does one preach the gospel as truth, truth which is not to be domesticated within the assumptions of modern thought but which challenges these assumptions and calls for their revision?”

Throughout church history ‘dogma’ denoted “that which has been authoritatively given and is to be received in faith.” “In our contemporary world, the readiness to question dogma is regarded as one of the marks of intellectual maturity and competence.”

Christianity begins with such ‘dogma’, something authoritatively given and to be received by faith, the proclamation of “a new fact – namely that in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus God has acted decisively to reveal and effect his purpose of redemption for the whole world.” What follows from this?

1. This proclamation invites belief because its truth cannot “be demonstrated by reference to human experience in general.”
2. It is that by which all human experience is rightly understood, without which reality is not truly seen.

3. It rests on an authority beyond itself.
4. It is proclaimed boldly as the truth, not one possible opinion among others.
5. It can be rejected and is rejected.
6. Those entrusted with the gospel message “can in no way demonstrate its truth on the basis of some other alleged certainties.” It is dogma.
7. One protest: “Only an open mind can hope to reach the truth, and dogma is the enemy of the open mind.”
 - a. But if a teacher asks whether Paris is the capital of France or Belgium it will not do to say one has an open mind on the matter.
8. One protest: the confident announcement of Christian faith is “an arrogant attempt of some people to impose their values on others.”
 - a. In Western culture a sharp distinction is made between ‘values’ and ‘facts.’ We are pluralists with respect to values: They are a matter of personal choice. We are not pluralists with respect to facts: ‘facts are facts.’
 - b. The Church and its preaching is said to belong to the world of ‘values.’
 - c. No offence is taken as long as the Church offers “its beliefs modestly as simply one of the many brands available in the ideological supermarket.”
 - d. Offence is taken when Christians affirm that gospel truth should govern public life.

Newbigin introduces three preliminary points which he will develop later in the book:

1. Dogma is not the unique peculiarity of the Church
2. We need to take seriously the social conditioning of belief.
3. The idea that truth is transcendent may be used to oppose truth by neutralizing it.

Dogma is not the unique peculiarity of the Church

1. No coherent thought is possible without taking some things as given; without presuppositions.
2. Honest thought involves being as explicit as possible about these presuppositions.
3. Most of the time we take for granted the assumptions which our society takes for granted.
4. Every society depends for its coherence upon a set of ‘plausibility structures’, patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society.
5. It is a confusion of categories to treat ‘reason’ as if it were an independent source of information to be set alongside tradition or revelation.
6. The definition of what is reasonable and what is not will be conditioned by the tradition within which the matter is being discussed.
7. The gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure.
8. The Church as bearer of the gospel inhabits a plausibility structure at variance with and calling in question the plausibility structures that govern all human cultures.
9. The parable of the blind men and the elephant is misused when it is used to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions and suggest that in humility they must see themselves as having no more than one aspect of the truth. But if the king observing this was also blind there would be no story. He sees the full truth which all the world’s religions are only groping after.
10. Dogma is partly rejected because for so long it has been entangled with coercion, with political power and so with the denial of freedom of thought and conscience. But dogma rightly understood – the free gift of God’s grace in Christ – alone establishes and sustains freedom of thought and of conscience.

11. The Christian message is not defended by domesticating it within the reigning plausibility structure. This was the great error of the 18th century when it was proposed that reason and revelation are two parallel paths to truth and that alleged revelation must be tested at the bar of reason. Of course, reason is necessarily involved in knowing of any kind. But reason is but one aspect of the human activity by which we seek to understand the world and ourselves. Reason and revelation must not be viewed as two sources of information but as two ways of interpreting data which are (potentially) available to all. The interpretation of the biblical accounts of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus are a case in point. Domestication of the gospel into the reigning plausibility structure occurs when the resurrection is understood in purely psychological terms. "It is obvious that the story of the empty tomb cannot be fitted into our contemporary worldview, or indeed into any worldview except one of which it is the starting point." This boundary event, the beginning of a new creation analogous to creation itself, "is as mysterious to human reason as the creation itself." When this is accepted in faith it becomes the starting point for a wholly new way of understanding our human experience which ultimately makes more sense of human experience as a whole than does our reigning plausibility structure.
12. As witnesses we don't possess all truth but are being led toward the truth. But our learning of truth is guided by the tradition which stems from God's decisive acts in Christ.
13. The dogma which we accept in faith is not a set of timeless propositions, but an unfinished story awaiting the end when all will be made clear. 18th century apologists erroneously defended a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature and man, with the Bible treated as a source of information about these truths which, it was assumed, could not be discovered by a direct observation of nature or by reflection upon innate human ideas. Rather apologetics should stress that biblical faith is primarily an interpretation of the human story set within the story of nature. This means that a faith commitment is foundational to every understanding of the human story and is essentially an interpretation of universal history.

Chapter 2. The Roots of Pluralism

1. The fact of plurality must be distinguished from an ideology of pluralism and within pluralism we must discriminate between cultural pluralism and religious pluralism.
2. Religion is an aspect of culture, though much more than this. Religions can be multicultural, like Christianity, and people of different religions can share much of a common culture.
3. Cultural pluralism may be seen as enriching society with the proviso that cultures are not morally neutral, with there being good and bad elements in culture.
4. Religious pluralism "is the belief that the differences between religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible. Religious belief is a private matter. Each of us is entitled to have – as we say - a faith of our own."
5. Religious pluralism assumes a social context that discriminates between 'facts', with which everyone is expected to agree, and 'beliefs', where it is valid to agree to differ.
6. The societal definition of 'facts' is changeable. It used to be a fact that "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But today it is not taught as such but only as a belief to be placed in the same category as the beliefs held by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. With respect to religious belief what matters is sincerity, but, inconsistently, what matters about beliefs about physics is not sincerity but correctness. Today, it is taught as a 'fact' that human life is the

accidental result of a struggle for existence in which the successful succeed, and we are the successful. This is taught as what 'we know', not as what we or some people believe.

7. In the last 300 years the spectacular success of the natural sciences is due to a focus on cause-and-effect, setting aside the question of purpose for practical reasons. But if we don't know the purpose for which human life was designed we have no basis for saying that any kind of human life-style is good or bad. It just is the way it is. Judgments about what is good or bad are personal beliefs and in this realm pluralism reigns.
8. Society does not accept as a fact that the Designer has revealed to us the purpose for which he designed the whole cosmic and human story. It is not part of the 'plausibility structure.'
9. In a world where relativism and subjectivism reign, the language of 'values' has replaced the traditional language of 'right' and 'wrong'. All that is left is the will to power, for we must personally choose what we regard as right and wrong. 'Facts' are what we have to reckon with whether we like them or not. People choose the values they want either for themselves or for someone else, but they have no factual basis. Consequently, they can only be the expression of what some people choose, and – inevitably – it will be the strong who prevail.
10. Following Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" starting point, a dualism developed thinking reality (*res cogitans*) and reality extended in space (*res extensa*). Ever since there has been scepticism about whether our senses give us access to reality. So Kant distinguished between the noumenal world, ever impenetrable by our senses, and the phenomenal world, that which appears to our senses and alone can be known. Science seeks to understand the rational structure of the created world, but underlying philosophical dualism means that science sees this as supplied by the necessities of human thought and not given to it by its Creator.
11. Because it is assumed that ultimate reality is unknowable, it follows that human nature, like everything else in our experience, must be understood in terms of efficient causes (studying the 'facts' to understand how human nature functions) and not in terms of final causes (how human nature *ought* to function). The latter becomes irrelevant on the assumption that all views about final causes are but expressions of person opinion, it being unacceptable dogmatism to assert that the God who created human beings for a purpose has revealed what that purpose is.
12. But dogma undergirds this rejection of dogma, the dogma that doubt is more intellectually responsible than to assert to a creed. This is rooted in the assumption that ultimate reality is unknowable.

Five points to consider in critiquing the assumptions underlying religious and ethical pluralism:

1. "When we undertake to doubt any statement, we do so on the basis of beliefs which – in the act of doubting – we do not doubt." This applies whether one doubts a statement because one believes something else is true or because it doesn't square with the rest of one's beliefs. It also applies to agnostic doubt that claims a statement has not been proved or is of a kind that can never be proved, since this assumes the doubter believes there are criteria of proof or there are no such criteria.
2. Knowing always begins with an act of faith, either trusting the evidence provided by sense experience or by trusting those who undertake to teach us. Since these are fallible doubt is necessary as we proceed. But believing is primary and doubting secondary. "The contemporary opinion – very widely held – that doubt is somehow more honest than faith, is an entirely rational prejudice. It is a form of dogmatism which is entirely destructive."
3. The whole work of modern science rests on faith-commitments which cannot themselves be demonstrated by the methods of science. The development of science as we know it required two beliefs: that the universe is rational and contingent. However, the rationality and contingency of the universe are not things that science can prove. They are faith-commitments.

This means that the popular dichotomy between ‘facts’ (what we know) and ‘beliefs’ (what is true for me) rests on an illusion. In reality, all so-called facts are interpreted facts: What we see depends on the way our minds have been trained. What we see as facts depends on the theory we bring to the observation.

4. The preference for doubt as against faith conceals the very arrogance it proposes to condemn. How does the doubter know so much about the unknowable? “The unknown god is a convenient object of belief, since its character is a matter for me to decide. It cannot challenge me or pose radical questions to me.” It is, of course, arrogant, in affirming the truth, to suggest I *possess* the truth in such a way that I have nothing more to learn. “The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about ‘what is true for me’ is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.”
5. It is logically absurd to devalue belief-statements as merely subjective. When I say ‘I believe’, I am not merely describing an inward feeling or experience; I am affirming what I believe to be true, and therefore what is true for everyone.” Bertrand Russell’s definition of truth as the correspondence between a person’s beliefs and the actual facts is of no use to me because in order to apply it I would need to be able to stand outside my own perception of the facts, a sheer impossibility. Knowing has both a subjective and an objective pole, but in our culture there has developed a disconnection between these poles. At one end stands the ideal, a kind of objectivity, a knowledge of ‘facts’ which we have merely to accept without question. At the other end stands a range of beliefs which are purely subjective. This dichotomy between knowing and believing is embodied in the curriculum of our public schools and universities. So science is taught as public truth and religion is not. The Darwinian theory that human beings exist as the result of the successful elimination of weaker species by those which have accidentally inherited superior strength or skill is obviously incapable of proof, yet it is viewed as objective ‘fact’, whereas the belief that human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever is not. Newbigin sees this same “falling apart of the two poles of the business of knowing” in “the deep and tragic split which divides Christian believers” into liberals and fundamentalists. “...most people for most of history have lived in societies where one religion was dominant and others were marginal. What the sociologists call the ‘plausibility structure’ was provided by the dominant religion.” The inter-religious issue is usually compounded by the interracial issue, so that “there are the strongest emotional reasons for regarding religious pluralism as something to be accepted and welcomed.” Now what matters in our society is not the factual content of faith claims but the sincerity with which they are held.

Chapter 3. Knowing and Believing

We are pluralist with respect to beliefs but not with respect to facts.

For most of human history “it has been thought that all knowledge was one and that theology was as much part of human knowledge as astronomy or history.”

Descartes’ quest for a firm foundation for knowledge, involving total certainty, already involved a great act of faith, the highly dubious assumption, that it is possible to have total certainty. There is no proof that this assumption is other than illusion. Descartes saw his statement ‘I think, therefore I am’ as proof against doubt, but against this in modern science we see that only statements which can be doubted make any contact with reality. Further, ideas have to be expressed in words and as

Polyani states, “Only words of indeterminate meaning can have a bearing on reality”, because if the meaning of words were determinate, all verbal statements would be tautologies.

Bertrand Russell did not do justice to the way science actually works when he identified three stages in establishing scientific truth, that which “we know” as distinct from “some people believe”:

1. *Observing the significant facts.* In reality, the only context in which the scientist can begin to guess which facts are significant is one of faith, since a “good scientist is one who has a sound intuition about where something lies, and on that basis is able to identify facts which may be significant for searching in that direction.”
2. *Arriving at a hypothesis, which, if it is true, would account for the facts.* This is never a step-by-step logical argument, but is “much more a matter of intuition and imagination.”
3. *Deducing from the hypothesis consequences which can be tested by observation.* Scientists do not abandon a theory simply because some experiments have yielded results which do not confirm it; they abandon it only when a better theory is available.

“There are not two separate avenues to understanding, one marked ‘knowledge’ and the other marked ‘faith.’ There is no knowing without believing, and believing is the way to knowing. The quest for certainty through universal doubt is a blind alley.”

“Knowing things as they are is not something that happens automatically or that can be guaranteed against failure... At every stage there has to be a personal commitment to probe and explore, and at every stage we have to rely on tools, instruments, which we have to trust while we use them.”

The world of what are called ‘facts’ is a closed world of cause and effect, a world from which purpose has been excluded as a category of explanation, and in which – therefore – there can be no judgment of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, a mythological world of valueless facts in a mechanical universe.

The “Christian story provides us with... a set of lenses, not something to look at, but for us to look through. Using Polyani’s terminology... the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story, tacitly aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it”

Chapter 4. Authority, Autonomy, and Tradition

The challenge to the authority of tradition set in motion by the Enlightenment is irreversible. In his book *The Heretical Imperative*, Peter Berger points out that in pre-Enlightenment society there were only a few heretics, only a few who made their own decision about what to believe, as opposed to the majority’s acceptance of what everybody believed because it was obviously the case. But in post-Enlightenment society everybody is required to be a heretic, to make a personal choice.

But since, in our culture, no one is called to have a physics or biology of his own, there *are* elements where tradition remains operative.

The teacher of mathematics wants a child to understand for himself why the three angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees and not simply accept this on the teacher’s authority. But the child must first accept the authority of the teacher to reach such a point of understanding. Yet in our modern society such a process is widely condemned with respect to the development of religious understanding. In reality, as Polyani recognises, in contrast to Bertrand Russell’s rejection of authority in intellectual matters, “The authority of science is essentially traditional.” The progress of

science depends on the authority of scientific tradition maintained by the community of scientists as a whole who freely accept the authority of this tradition. But this tradition does not rest on anything outside itself.

“...must we not say that it is part of the deep sickness of our culture that, ever since Descartes, we have been seduced by the idea of a kind of knowledge which could not be doubted, in which we would be absolutely secure from personal risk?”

“...there is a close parallel between the ways in which the authority of tradition works within the scientific community and within the Christian community.” But “the Christian understanding of the world is not only a matter of ‘dwelling in’ a tradition of understanding; it is a matter of dwelling in a story of God’s activity, activity which is still continuing.”

Chapter 5. Reason, Revelation, and Experience

“The study of Scripture takes place within the continuing tradition of interpretation”, with tradition not constituting a separate source of revelation from Scripture. “When ‘reason’ is adduced as a third source of truth, or a third element in a threefold criterion of truth, it is obvious that what is happening is simply that the reigning plausibility structure is being allowed to operate.”

“...all use of reasoning depends on and is embodied in a tradition”:

1. *We cannot reason except by the use of language.* “In learning a language we are being inducted into a tradition, and we have no way of developing our powers of reasoning except through the use of this language.”
2. *We learn to use our reasoning powers by entering into the experiences, the discoveries, the debates, and the disagreements of those who have gone before us.*
3. *The development of a tradition of rationality is never unrelated to the social, political, economic, military, and cultural changes which the society in question is going through.*
4. *Does this way of understanding the use of our rational powers lead to complete relativism?*
 - a. *All traditions of rational discourse are continually changing in the effort to make sense of experience.* “Truth is grasped, can only be grasped, within a tradition, but traditions can be and are judged adequate or inadequate in respect of their perceived capacity to lead their adherents into truth.
 - b. *Traditions of rationality are embodied in languages.* Language-based traditions of rationality can be compared with each other in respect of their adequacy to the realities with which all human beings have to deal.
 - c. *The relativist who contends that all truth is relative because all truth is embodied in a particular social context must be asked for the basis on which this claim is made.* In effect this amounts to a claim that reality is unknowable, but this claim itself is formulated within a particular social context.

“What we call ‘self-evident truths’ are not the starting point for rational argument, but the product of a long history of rational argument.

A proper use of reason requires that we recognise there are two ways of understanding the world, one in which the self is sovereign (Buber’s world of I-it) and the other in which I understand myself only in a relation of mutuality with other selves (Buber’s I-You world). The traditional dichotomy between reason and revelation rests on a serious misunderstanding. “The sort of analytical, psychological, sociological, or neurological knowledge of the working of another person’s mind is not

in any way a step toward the knowing of another person which we experience in love and friendship. By itself, it could only lead us away from such knowledge. That truly personal knowledge only becomes a possibility when I abandon the sovereign claim of autonomous reason... Natural theology... is in no way a step on the way toward the theology which takes God's self-revelation as its starting point. It is more likely, in fact, to lead in the opposite direction."

"The true opposition is not between reason and revelation as sources of and criteria for truth. It is between two uses to which reason is put."

Chapter 6. Revelation in History

To speak of God acting in history meets with certain intellectual difficulties:

1. Those arising from the dominance of the modern scientific worldview which shuts the door against any intervention from outside this closed system, e.g. natural law seen as inviolable.
2. If God is not under compulsion by outside forces then doesn't this mean that everything that happens in the world is an expression of God's mind? "God reveals himself in history... but not all history reveals God." "...no history could be written at all without some presuppositions about what is significant and therefore about the meaning of the story."
 - a. From Augustine to the 18th century history in Europe was written in the belief that divine providence was the key to understanding events, e.g. Bede's *History of the Anglo-Saxons*.
 - b. From the Enlightenment onwards history in Europe was mainly the history of nation states. Variations include attempts to write a universal history (e.g. Hegel) or a history of civilisations (Toynbee).
 - c. Christian history: "God has made his mind and purpose known to some (not to all) people through events in history – not all events, but some...." This causes 'the scandal of particularity', which rebels at the notion that the knowledge of God be restricted to particular segments of the whole human race.
3. "...wherever human beings are found there are always evidences of some kind of awareness of God, however faint and confused. It seems impossible to doubt that this is the case. But, from the point of view of a Christian believer, it would be necessary to say that his awareness, valid as it is and much to be respected as it ought to be, does not of itself communicate the full understanding of God's purpose for human beings. It is necessary also to attend to the particular events and words which communicate that purpose."
 - a. Since **"human wills have an autonomy which enables them to act in rebellion against the purpose of their Creator... no overview of the total human situation can provide authentic knowledge of the purpose of the Creator"** (my stress).
 - b. Since the communication of divine purpose cannot be discerned from general revelation and since every tradition of rationality has a socially embodied character it follows that **the communication of divine purpose presupposes that such communication develop as a tradition of rationality within a specific community** (my stress).

Newbigin goes on to observe James Barr's attacks on this 'revelation in history' model – that the Bible itself shows God is not unknown apart from the biblical story; that much of what we call revelation in the OT is in the forms of words, not events. He notes also the attempt to cast the Bible not as revelation but as a record of revelation, as if revelation is located in 'what really happened' behind whatever interpretations of those events we might find recorded in Scripture. But Newbigin

insists, "The question 'What really happened?' can only be answered within a tradition of rational discussion about what is 'real.'... all understanding of history involves interpretation of the available 'facts,'..." "We have access to the knowledge of these events only through the words which embodied the understanding of those who witnessed them or participated in them, and which have been treasured and handed on by those who shared this understanding. As Christians we are part of that community and have the responsibility to seek to interpret contemporary history, the history which is now in the making, in terms of the same belief."

All of this is "not just a matter of personal decision" even though this is involved and I am responsible for my beliefs. For "this decision is a response to a prior decision, to the decision of God who has chosen me to be part of that community which bears the secret of the meaning of history through history."

Chapter 7. The Logic of Election

Following Alasdair MacIntyre Newbigin notes, "it is an illusion to suppose that there is available to us some kind of pure rationality existing in a disembodied state and therefore capable of passing judgment on all the various ways of grasping truth developed in particular socially embodied traditions of rational discourse."

The Bible does not speak about 'humanity' but about 'all the families of the earth' or 'all the nations.' "...there can be, no private salvation, no salvation which does not involve us with one another... In order to receive God's saving revelation we have to open the door to the neighbour whom he sends as his appointed messenger..."

Election does not mean that there is an elite and the covenant of grace must not be turned into a contract.

"To be chosen, to be elect,...does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost. To be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God's saving purpose for his whole world, to be the sign and the agent and the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all."

"The rationality which can lead to a true understanding of reality as a whole will necessarily be a rationality embodied in a particular society. The Christian community, the universal Church, embracing more and more fully all the cultural traditions of humankind, is called to be that community in which a tradition of rational discourse is developed which leads to a true understanding of reality, because it takes as its starting point and as its permanent criterion of truth the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ."

Chapter 8. The Bible as Universal History

I have not seen anything in this chapter that to my mind significantly adds to what has already been said.

Chapter 9. Christ, the Clue to History

Newbigin critiques notions of progress as the meaning of history and purely privatized eschatology.

Chapter 10. The Logic of Mission

To speak of 'the missionary mandate' and to follow the long tradition of seeing the mission of the Church as obedience to a command is not without justification, but misses the point. "It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel."

"The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving."

"It is a striking fact... that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church... In every case there is something present, a new reality, which calls for explanation and so prompts the question to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer."

"One of the dangers of emphasizing the concept of mission as a mandate given to the Church is that it tempts us to do what we are always tempted to do, namely to see the work of mission as a good work and to seek to justify ourselves by our works."

Newbigin emphasises that mission involves the Church in following her Lord in the way of suffering witness to the real meaning and goal of history and that the mission of the Church can only be rightly understood in terms of the Trinitarian model.

"The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission."

"In discussions about the contemporary mission of the Church it is often said that the Church ought to address itself to the real questions which people are asking. That is to misunderstand the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. The world's questions are not the questions that lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer. And that, I suppose, is why the letters of St. Paul contain so many exhortations to faithfulness but no exhortations to be active in mission."

Newbigin distinguishes between 'mission' – "the entire task for which the Church is sent into the world – and 'missions', "those specific activities which are undertaken by human decision to bring the gospel to places or situations where it is not heard, to create a Christian presence in a place or situation where there is no presence or no effective presence."

"In this sketch of the logic of mission, it is obvious that the center of the picture is not occupied by the question of saving, or the failure to save, individual souls from perdition. That question has dominated Protestant missionary thinking at many times and places.... The center of the picture is the eschatological event in which the fathomless depths of God's wisdom and grace will be revealed."

Missions test our faith. "We believe that the truth about the human story has been disclosed in the events which form the substance of the gospel. We believe, therefore, that these events are the real clue to the story of every person, for every human life is part of the whole human story and cannot be understood apart from that story. It follows that the test of our real belief is our readiness to share it with all peoples."

Chapter 11. Mission: Word, Deed, and New Being

“...the gospel is the clue to history, to universal history and therefore to the history of each person, and therefore the answer that every person must give to the question, Who am I?”

“...this new reality, this new presence creates a moment of crisis wherever it appears. It provokes questions which call for an answer and which, if the true answer is not accepted, lead to false answers. This happens where there is a community whose members are deeply rooted in Christ as their absolute Lord and Savior. Where there is such a community, there will be a challenge by word and behaviour to the ruling powers. As a result there will be conflict and suffering for the Church. Out of that conflict and suffering will arise the questioning which the world puts to the Church.”

1. “...it is clear that to set word and deed, preaching and action, against each other is absurd. The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection. Both the words and acts of that community may at any time provide the occasion through which the living Christ challenges the ruling powers. Sometimes it is a word that pierces through layers of custom and opens up a new vision. Sometimes it is a deed which shakes a whole traditional plausibility structure. They mutually reinforce and interpret one another. The words explain the deeds, and the deeds validate the words.”
2. “...action for justice and peace in the world is not something which is secondary, marginal to the central task of evangelism. It belongs to the heart of the matter.”
3. “...action for justice and peace can never mean total commitment to a particular project identified unambiguously as God’s will.”
4. “The vision of the ultimate goal of the human story must not be used to withdraw attention from the immediate possibilities which the Lord of history offers... The fact that we are mistaken must not be supposed to excuse us from action, for inaction is itself a fateful choice.”
5. “...the major role of the Church in relation to the great issues of justice and peace will not be in its formal pronouncements but in its continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens.”
6. “...there will always be the need to point explicitly to the central reality by which the Church exists, to the central verities of the gospel, to Christ incarnate, crucified, risen, regnant at God’s right hand and to the promise of his coming to judge the living and the dead.”

Chapter 12. Contextualization: True and False

“The actual word ‘contextualization’ is of recent coinage. Older discussions used such terms as indigenization, adaptation, and accommodation.”

“How far should the gospel be ‘at home’ in a culture, and how far should it resist domestication. What is true contextualization?”

“True contextualization... happens when the word is not a disembodied word, but comes from a community which embodies the true story... it must be both truly local and truly ecumenical.”

“True contextualization happens when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same costly identification with people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus. When these conditions are met, the sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work.”