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Theme: Theologies of Mission in a Pluralistic Age

Presenter: Steven B. Sherman, PhD

**Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
& Christian Ethics**

Winebrenner Theological Seminary

**Title: A Paragon for Relational Theological Apologetics in a Pluralist Society:
Newbiggin's Approach as a Way Forward for Evangelical Theological Epistemology**

Introduction

The overall purpose of my paper is to show how Lesslie Newbiggin's theological and missional approach to the knowledge of God – along with his method respecting ecumenical and interreligious dialogue – ought to first, inform (as well as be embraced by) evangelical scholarship, especially among those seeking to engage in civil and constructive dialogue both within and beyond Christian academia; and second, perhaps be used as a way forward for relational evangelical theological apologetics in our pluralist society.

The very theme of this Consultation – Theologies of Mission in a Pluralistic Age – betrays an underlying *tension* (at least apparently): perhaps tension not only between Christian mission and one or more types of pluralism, but also tension between specifically Christian *claims* as to the knowledge of God (saving or otherwise) and *alternative* epistemic claims. If we were to place the Consultation theme (at least the apparently substrata version) into query form, we might find ourselves asking one or more of the following questions: How are we to best understand the tension between the call to mission and the reality of pluralism? What difference does it make for mission whether this culture is pluralistic or otherwise? How can the gospel best be presented in the midst of such religious and cultural diversity? Can (or how can) there be both respect

for different religious faiths while also faithfulness to mission (and therefore, evangelism)? Are there model(s) we might want to follow? Whose or what are they? Ancient or traditional or contemporary? How does contextual theology enter into the discussion? Ought we to speak in terms of universality, or should we be focusing on a particular culture or community-based emphasis? Finally, what is (or at least appears to be) at stake in all of this?

Newbigin's Missional Theology and Theological Knowledge

It appears to me that Lesslie Newbigin's approach might serve well as a paragon for responding to these and related questions regarding missional theology and our pluralistic age. Let us look, then, at Newbigin's theological and missional approach to the knowledge of God (with one eye fixed on his interreligious and ecumenical thought) to see whether his way may perhaps epitomize a flourishing relational theological apologetics in a pluralist society.

The "theological life" of Lesslie Newbigin's reveals a thinker *for the church*, someone less concerned about a particular academic title or label than *being* evangelical, *doing* theology well, and *knowing* God: someone not confined by standard notions of what it means to be a theologian, evangelical, or epistemologist, but rather someone immersed in holding together the larger holistic mosaic of life. No wonder Newbigin flowed so freely in and out of diverse positions and contexts. His model reflects commitment to a holistic approach vis-à-vis evangelical theological epistemology – consistently employing relational language flowing outward from a trinitarian and christological center.

Respecting “mission,” for instance, Newbigin holds that it does not begin from an human program perspective, beginning with an exclusivist, individualistic, salvific orientation – for instance, How can Alfredo be saved, or Will Rowina go to hell if she doesn’t explicitly acknowledge God through Jesus Christ? (That is not to say Newbigin eschewed faith-commitments to Messiah Jesus nor that Christ is less than crucial for salvation – on the contrary, he strongly affirms that “we have been reconciled to God through the atoning love of Christ, and therefore we have an obligation to share that love with all for whom he died. We have a ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us because God has reconciled us to himself.”¹

Yet Newbigin is adamant in saying that mission properly understood is “not first of all an act of ours” but rather “an action of God, the triune God.”² Having this *missio Dei* (i.e., mission of God) at the center of our theology of mission entails seeing the triune God as already (and always) active in all creation – graciously sovereign, incarnationally participatory, and empoweringly present. Moreover, Newbigin’s theology of mission emphasizes the eschatological purposes of God – especially the future events picture of the ingathering of all who will into the fullness to share in God’s perfection – and the church’s call *not* to anxiety about failure or boasting about success: instead “only for faithful witness” to Christ “in whom the whole purpose of God for cosmic history has been revealed and effected.”³

Knowledge of God is presented missionally from the standpoint of the God-revealed (and revealing) universal true story. Theological knowledge gives meaning to

¹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 127.

²Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 134-35.

³Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 125.

the human story (which cannot be understood apart from that story), and invitation to every human story to find its significance in relationship to the one true story and the whole human story, along with a persuasive call for doxological response – that God may be glorified.⁴

How does this missional approach to theological knowledge inform ecumenical – even interreligious – thought and experience? Via its understanding of God’s broad mission to and through the entire human story, as well as by way of Newbigin’s double commitment: first, to living and telling the universal true story, while second, refraining from assessing the ultimate destiny of not explicitly-Christian individuals. This method encourages finding “Signs amid the Rubble” (i.e., *The Purposes of God in Human History* [the title of a recently edited work by Geoffrey Wainwright that considers three sets of Newbigin’s previously unpublished materials]). On the ecumenical level, this entails a great deal of sharing: sharing of histories and ideas, sharing between denominations and communities, sharing the blame and confession (for our failures), and sharing in the joy and truth of the Lord’s grace (for God’s successes). On the interreligious level, this entails significant caring: caring for others as creatures and objects of God’s affection, caring to listen and learn (for the signs from the rubble), caring to confide and confess (concerning our mistakes), and caring to proclaim and perform (for God’s glory).

But to digress a moment, we ought to ask what it was that contributed to this more “story-oriented” apologetical approach. Perhaps most formatively, his multiplied missionary years in southern India; Newbigin awakened to competing systems of thought

⁴ See Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 125, 127.

that directly challenged the prevailing Eurocentric perspective. He came to see that alternative worldviews, rather than being “barbaric,” were highly systematic, and pragmatically viable for particular cultures. His own Enlightenment heritage had not prepared him adequately for effectively engaging with these alternative philosophies and theologies, thus leaving him to seek an apologetical methodology that would seriously consider the worldviews found within particular cultural contexts, while maintaining an irenic yet also vigorously evangelical Christian faith.

The way forward for Newbiggin was both old and new: both a return to the ancient Anselmian *credo ut intellegam*, and an appropriation of the thought of contemporary philosopher Michael Polanyi.⁵ He found that together these methods provided a legitimate and material response to both the deeply empirical scientific method, and the reason-driven fundamentalism reflecting Gnostic-like tendencies. Thus, Newbiggin’s later writings repeatedly focus on Christian apologetics in an increasingly hostile-to-Christianity culture, as he attempts to answer the question asked at a conference more than a decade earlier, “Can the West be converted?”⁶

Eventually, Newbiggin would apparently coin the term “out-narrate” to describe the task awaiting the church in the midst of a pluralist society: a society interested more in story than propositional statements; a society interested more in praxis than theory; a society interested more in Christ than Christianity; a society inclined more toward holistic than atomistic thinking; and a society involved more in pluralisms than monisms. For

⁵ Polanyi, an epistemologist, actually began his career in the scientific arena, but became a scientist-turned-philosopher whose writings in the areas of knowledge have had an enduring impact across disciplines. See his most well-known book, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). I am indebted to Wainwright for his many insights into Polanyi’s methodology and influence.

⁶ This question arose from a Bangkok missionary conference in 1973 in which Newbiggin heard Indonesian general and theologian T.B. Simatupang muttering the query under his breath (see Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbiggin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 192).

Newbigin, Augustine and Polanyi could be effectively utilized to counter Enlightenment assumptions in a post-Christendom, post-modern world.⁷

The Turn from Modernity to Postmodernity

Perhaps one of Newbigin's most formative moments came as he stepped back onto British soil—having been away for nearly 40 years—to experience repercussions of the cultural shift underway in the West. The Enlightenment project had utterly failed to provide the backbone, the values, or the “utopia” expected of it by so many who had placed their faith in its supposedly objective and “foolproof” system. Doves of thinkers, especially younger ones, escaped into despair or deconstruction, embracing both tolerance and multiculturalism—partly because of disillusionment with an exclusive exaltation of the Eurocentric vision of truth and values.

Forms of Enlightenment-entangled Christianity met with similar intolerance. Questioning all claims to truth and authority came to characterize the last several decades of twentieth-century Britain (and for that matter, most if not all of Western Europe). This was a new era with a new philosophy. How would—or even *could*—the gospel be heard again in the new context? This question occupied much of Newbigin's mature years.

Newbigin's engagement with the culture from such diverse positions and ministries made his already incisive observations that much more compelling, even prophetic at times. He spoke and wrote ahead of his time, perceptively grasping cultural

⁷ Augustine and Polanyi will also have shaping roles regarding Newbigin's theological epistemology, as will be shown later in this chapter.

changes and their effects, sometimes years before his contemporaries.⁸ Because of the compass and quality of his reading, Newbigin kept pace with significant developments in multiple disciplines, once again authenticating his personal devotion to a holistic focus.

Newbigin's openness and willingness to draw from a wide spectrum of thought, provided by his Reformed philosophical commitment to "all truth is God's truth," helped to alleviate potential fundamentalist-like fears of finding other "truths" contradicting the Bible. Hence, Newbigin steadfastly retained a strong confessional stance in line with historic Christian doctrine, while holding that God has not limited truth to merely biblical or theological realms.⁹

Theological Tradition, Method, and Doctrine

Newbigin's theology was not defined by a single theological system, although on most issues, as a Presbyterian, he clearly favored Reformed over Arminian or Anabaptist themes. Nonetheless, Newbigin's ecumenical experiences made him much more open to—and at times accepting of—views not espoused, and sometimes rejected, by his denominational tradition.¹⁰ Newbigin's breadth of experience and depth of reading and reflection, including from outside his own denominational and confessional boundaries, allowed him to develop alternative ways of viewing God's character and works than those generally reflective of his own theological tradition. For example, with reference to

⁸ The bishop's detection—descriptively and prognostically—of the changing situation was, as some have said, simply uncanny.

⁹ Perhaps, too, the methodology of Christian philosopher Arthur Holmes may have influenced Newbigin's own thinking with respect to considering and articulating God's work amidst the world, e.g., within the Arts. See Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

¹⁰ One such example involved Newbigin's affirmation of the theological validity of certain charismatic movements. Even as early as 1952 in *Household of God*, Newbigin showed remarkable openness to Pentecostalism, dedicating one chapter to Pentecostals. Moreover, his involvement with Holy Trinity Brompton in the 1990s helped to put Newbigin in greater touch with charismatics.

one's normative spiritual journey and salvation, Newbigin attributed primacy to the Christian *community* rather than to the individual.

Newbigin's willingness to hold his own and other Christian traditions to the standards of the gospel—and to principled criticism—provides a refreshing as well as exemplary model for evangelicalism: remembering to consistently judge one's own religious tradition in light of the gospel that Christian traditions are called to proclaim and practice. Apologetically, Newbigin (in his later works) would conclude that only the God-honoring praxis of the proclaiming faith community would serve as the ultimate witness to the truth of its given message to the world; Christianity stands or falls not on whether it stands the “acid test of modernity,” but whether the local Christian community is properly and attractively a living witness in its particular context. Is it any wonder, then, that Newbigin is deeply concerned with unity of the whole body of Christ, since division therein destroys its compelling beauty and witness?¹¹

Evangelicals can find much to appreciate in Newbigin's outspoken and well-documented commitment to essential, historic Christian doctrines. For example, his approach encompasses a systematic trinitarianism—one that is strongly christocentric while also possessing an exceptionally high level of openness (among Reformed-minded theologians) to the work of the Holy Spirit.¹² Newbigin's display of tolerance for views not naturally associated with his own liturgical tradition is perhaps due to several crucial factors: an ecumenical heritage and spirit focused on a mission of unity and agreement on the core essentials of a shared faith in Jesus Christ, rather than a centering upon

¹¹ Cf., John 17.

¹² For instance, Newbigin was even willing to grant the so-called “Toronto Blessing” as a work of God's Spirit.

soteriological or sanctification issues; the shaping influences of the missionary field, increasing his personal tolerance level and widened his ministry perspective concerning the triune God; an “all truth is God’s truth” philosophy, providing him with a willingness to learn and to be corrected, as opposed to accepting a potentially stifling separatism; interpersonal relations and shared ministry experiences with Christians originating from a multiplicity of traditions and being used by God for the sake of the Kingdom; and the testing of theological and philosophical thought and practice by authoritative Christian sources.¹³

The *contextual* emphasis of Newbigin’s thought is obvious, showing an awareness of the necessary interplay between theological reflection and praxis within concrete situations. He demonstrates an ability to comprehend—even prophetically—the cultural and historical shifts in philosophy, behavior, technology, ethical and moral standards, and trends in religion. At times he seems to be simultaneously standing in numerous places in the past, present, and future, seeing complexities and connections between a great number of relationships on a mega scale, both within the church and larger cultural contexts.¹⁴ No doubt, this ability calls evangelical thinkers to respect, learn from, and to at least some extent, follow Newbigin’s own thought and praxis.

¹³ See Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 25-63.

¹⁴ Recently, at a local café in Santa Ana, CA, my brief conversation with a lay friend who had just recently been introduced to one of Newbigin’s books (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*) yielded his comment that Newbigin sounds like a futurist. I noted that the inimitable Alvin Toffler “had nothing on him,” at least as to feeling the pulse of national and world level culture. More to the point, Newbigin’s perceptibilities reminds me of what a different friend told me years ago about another elder statesman in the faith: “he seems to be able to see how everything connects, and then to be able to actually articulate it with great success!” While much of this depth of perception was arrived at later in Newbigin’s life, the seeds and gifts were evident even early on: as far back as his years at Cambridge as evidenced by several of his papers.

Theological Knowledge Sources and Norms

Before moving to specify particular steps evangelical and other Christian thinkers might take toward implementing some of Newbigin's insights and practices, we need to very briefly sketch the major theological knowledge sources and norms to which he appealed and how these influenced his work.

Newbigin focuses on faith as being the reception of revelation, and on God's self-revelation as necessary for human knowledge of God. Sensitivity and trustfulness in responding to God's revelation is the way to know God in his self-disclosure. However, as to our knowledge being true, Newbigin is concerned with both "inward understanding and valuing" and "a reality external to our minds." Moreover, because revelation is passed down through historic community, the church is *the location of*, and the Bible is *an instrument for*, reception of the divine self-disclosure.¹⁵

Newbigin's belief in the preeminence of divine initiative in the process of human knowledge of God is ontologically based: "If the reality that we seek to explore, and of which we are a part, is the work of a personal Creator, then authority resides in this One who is the Author." This is due to knowledge of a *person* being necessarily connected with that person's willingness to self-disclose—something that the Enlightenment has seen fit to reject as it concerns God's own authority."¹⁶

This divine authority, according to Newbigin, was powerfully evident in the teaching and healing work of Jesus, as he "embodied final authority," not binding himself to the authority of the Torah, as had the scribes. Thus, ultimate authority rests directly

¹⁵ Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 34.

¹⁶ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 1-2.

with the revelation-based authority of the personally disclosed Creator—most clearly and finally seen in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ Here, Newbigin has opted for a Barthian move: rejecting all allegedly authoritative “arbitrators” of truth set to judge the confessed authority of God’s self-revelation.

Noting the fallacy and failure of the scientific method to provide an unassailable objectivity respecting knowledge and truth, Newbigin keys in on the *postfoundationalist* approach that views all knowing as intertwined with believing and *a priori* commitments. Thus, one must begin not with Aquinas, but instead with Anselm: not with a strict division between what can be known by faith and revelation on the one hand, and by reason on the other, but rather with *credo ut intelligam*—I believe in order that I may understand.¹⁸

Hence, for theological knowledge, the way out of this conundrum is the way back: back to a starting point of *faith*—committed belief in the divine self-revelation of God. This does not entail, however, a precritical naïveté, but instead a christocentric interpretive model, grounded in a larger trinitarian framework.¹⁹

Newbigin declares as the *ultimate* standard of faith, “the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.” Scripture, rather than tradition, is where through the testimony of his first followers, Christ is encountered in his person, words, and works: they bear witness to “God’s redeeming act once for all at a point in history . . .” Thus, rather than going to the

¹⁷ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 2-3.

¹⁸ See Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 3-4.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 17.

Bible to discover for the church its earliest forms of the traditions and rules, we instead seek in the scriptures the “object” of faith: Christ and his work, in trinitarian terms.²⁰

Newbigin rejects a bifurcated fundamentalist-modernist divide in seeking to understand scripture, preferring to center on the *narrative preeminence* of the biblical writings—narrative that “structures human experience and understanding . . . [I]t is essentially a story that claims to be *the* story. The true story both of the cosmos and of human life within the cosmos.”

Newbigin emphasizes the *instrumental* use of scripture—a looking *through* rather than *at* it—that calls us “to *indwell* the story, as we indwell the language we use and the culture of which we are a part.”²¹ Living *in the story* of the Bible, as well as within our own contextual story, necessitates (as foreign missionaries experience) the setting up of “an internal dialogue as the precondition for true interpersonal dialogue.”²²

Perhaps the single most important contemporary thinker to influence Newbigin’s theological epistemology is Michael Polanyi. Among his most profound insights is that *all* knowledge has a fiduciary character—*trust is inherent to the process of knowing*.²³

Hence, “indubitable certainty” (*pace* Descartes) does not enter into the equation, since knowledge does not rest in the mind of the knower, but rather in the Incarnation, which “shows ultimate reality to be personal in nature, which means that it can only be known by self-revelation on the part of the Creator and by an answering response on the

²⁰ From Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, 2nd rev. ed. (London:SCM Press, 1960), pages not cited, as quoted in Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 89.

²¹ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 42.

²² Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 42-43.

²³ See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 266-67, 280-86.

part of the human knower. Such knowledge comes by way of an inseparable trust and obedience toward the call of Christ.”²⁴

As a result, the centrality of one’s confidence rests squarely in the One who is known and upon his faithfulness and reliability, rather than in the competence of one’s own knowing; in fact, the knower does not *possess* absolute knowledge of final truth, but is merely on the *path* that is leading toward the eschatological clarity of reality that awaits humanity.

Thus, while the Enlightenment model envisions individuals as autonomous centers of knowing and judging, essentially making interdependence incompatible with human dignity, the biblical model possesses a “relatedness” orientation, humans created to “mirror divine faithfulness by faithful relatedness to one another;” while the Enlightenment focuses on “equal rights” and “atomic equality,” the scriptures emphasize God as the center and human “personal mutuality,” serving one another.²⁵ These two paradigms are in obvious conflict. Choosing between them will determine the centrality of one’s theological epistemology: knowledge as *personal* or *impersonal*.

Newbigin relentlessly attacks the false dichotomy between “knowing” and “believing,” which he saw often characterized in the statements, “We all know” and “Some people believe.” This false distinction between “facts” and “values” claims existence of a world of facts without values and a world of values that have no grounding in facts. However, in ways similar to Christianity, Enlightenment science has been shown to create and depend upon *faith in the authority of its own tradition*—i.e., trust in a

²⁴ Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 50. In effect, *the* gospel must become *my* gospel, personal commitment to the call to “trust and obey” the gospel.

²⁵ From Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984*, page not cited, as quoted in Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 257.

community that claims to have knowledge.²⁶ Hence, all human knowledge is of a fiduciary character.

Wainwright notes that Newbigin, drawing from Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, "shows that all knowledge is a 'skill' that has to be learned; that all knowledge is 'an activity of persons in community,' involving mutual trust and accountability to certain standards; that all knowledge entails at least a provisional commitment to an existing framework of thought and knowledge, but that advances in knowledge occur only when the risk is taken that one may be proved wrong . . ."²⁷

Newbigin never downplays the importance of *personal responsibility* as it relates to knowledge. Yet, being responsible with knowledge also means recognizing one's knowledge as limited: "my judgment is not the last word."²⁸ Hence, an individual's vocation as defined by God's revelation is that of *learner* or *apprentice*—learning how to learn and know.²⁹ Here, Newbigin assigns to the faith community (or tradition) a principal as well as reciprocal role pertaining to shaping the knowledge and worldview of its members.

Learning in community, therefore, means becoming immersed in the expressions of *worship* within the tradition: an ongoing effort of the worshiping community to "grow in the grace and knowledge of God"—part of the "activity of persons in community"

²⁶ From Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, page not cited, as quoted in Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 371.

²⁷ Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 348-49. Internal Newbigin quotations are from Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966), page not cited.

²⁸ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, 12.

²⁹ During a brief flirtation with the "secularization" of theology in the early to mid 1960s, Newbigin posited "all knowledge is of a piece," encouraging correlation of the knowledge of God and knowledge of the world. He retains some important elements appreciated within "the secular," reorganizing them into the genre of the "public" nature of the gospel and Christian faith; this is the arena in which he engaged as an apologist the remainder of his years (see Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*, 354).

committed to the tradition's worldview. One central aspect of these activities includes theologizing in worshipful contexts. In fact, Newbigin claims that theology is rightly done in the context of worship and discipleship.³⁰

In a mission-focused context involving critique of liberation theology (and later, capitalism), Newbigin declares that “to know the Lord” involves carrying out justice and mercy in tangible situations.³¹ Determining what justice and mercy are, however, must be based on the biblical story and the authority of Jesus Christ, rather than on an unquestioned “proletariat praxis.” Thus, even while liberation theology may be viewed as being much closer to the biblical models of salvation and liberation than is Enlightenment-driven theology that separates theory from praxis,³² for those who seem to imply that action itself is the truth, the text of scripture functions “as a source of judgment upon the praxis of those who have the Scriptures in their hands.”³³

Newbigin notes that the gospel has always encouraged acts of justice and mercy, e.g., feeding the hungry, helping the poor and helpless, and healing the sick. Therefore, the believing community fulfills God's purposes by means of these deeds, and as a result, reflects the knowledge of God in seeking to make manifest the prayer, “Thy will be done.”³⁴

³⁰ Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 151, 153. Unfortunately, the source of the quotation for Newbigin is not cited, but is apparently the Constitution of the Church of South India (CSI). See also Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 85-87.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 109. Newbigin also states, “Those who claim to know the Lord and do evil are deceived. They are far from God. . . . There is no knowledge of God apart from the love of God, and there is no love of God apart from love of the neighbor.” See, for instance, Jeremiah 22:16.

³² Among liberation theologians, the exodus from Egypt is frequently presented as *the* biblical model of God's supreme saving action.

³³ From Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 127-34, as quoted in Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 188.

³⁴ From Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 102-03, as quoted in Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 186.

For Newbigin, embracing the gospel presupposes a bold proclamation concerning Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, while necessarily avoiding both pessimistic “exclusivism” and fanciful “pluralism.”³⁵ The approach known as “biblical realism”³⁶ is properly viewed as one of several methodologies within the “inclusivist” category,³⁷ and is found in various works by Newbigin.³⁸ As to theological knowledge, this “wideness” perspective necessitates that knowledge of God extends beyond the bounds of Christianity (as a religion), and ought to be anticipated elsewhere since Christ is Lord of all.

Newbigin asserts that while complete mutual understanding between humans is not attainable this side of the eschaton, perfect knowledge of persons does exist *within the Trinity*. Hence, knowledge of the Triune God involves *participation* in the shared love between the persons of the Trinity, demonstrating that the ultimate purpose for human knowledge of God is *partaking in the life and love of God*.

³⁵ Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen defines exclusivism as viewing salvation as “available only in Jesus Christ to the extent that those who have never heard the gospel are eternally lost. Exclusivists claim that salvation can be found only in the Christian church.” Pluralism, he states, “involves both a positive and a negative element: Negatively, pluralism categorically rejects exclusivism (and often also inclusivism); positively, it affirms that people can find salvation in various religions and in many ways” (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives* [Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], 24).

³⁶ This designation is widely attributed to Hendrik Kraemer.

³⁷ Kärkkäinen maintains that inclusivists “hold that while salvation is ontologically founded on the person of Christ, its benefits have been made universally available by the revelation of God” (Kärkkäinen, *Theology of Religions*, 25).

³⁸ See, for instance, two chapters, *No Other Name* and *The Gospel and Other Religions*, in *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

Conclusion: Selected Practical Steps for Employing Newbigin's Approach as a Way Forward for Evangelical Theological Epistemology

Based on what has been said to this point, Newbigin's holistic, theological and missional method ought to be embraced as it pertains to evangelical academic *intercommunity* dialogue and ecumenical orientations. Such a move envisions evangelical scholars committing to civil and constructive discussions on questions of the shaping role and effects of modernity and postmodernity upon evangelical thought, e.g., in regard to the knowledge of God. Furthermore, it imagines a willingness to submit theological systems to the scrutiny and authority of the biblical record, intertwined with fidelity to the gospel metanarrative in present historical and cultural contexts, as well as embracing a scholarly *believing criticism* or *critical anti-criticism* stance.³⁹ As with Newbigin, such dedication necessitates painstaking effort, time, sacrifice, patience, and an attitude of genuine openness.⁴⁰ Conducting such dialogue seems most feasible via major entities like the World Evangelical Alliance, the National Association of Evangelical, evangelical seminaries, and other professional evangelical societies. At the very least, commitment to ongoing dialogue respecting theological knowledge and other key topics ought to

³⁹ Details of these two broad evangelical scholarship orientations, focused mainly on biblical criticism, are found in Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 156-73. In short, both critical anti-criticism and believing criticism scholars affirm the inspiration and revelatory truthfulness of the scriptures, yet approach the question of criticism from different angles, based on, for instance, differing degrees of commitment to the infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible (strongest among critical anti-criticism scholars) and dependence upon the practices and results of critical research (highest among believing criticism academics). Naturally, strict fundamentalists and others absolutely opposed to biblical, theological, or epistemological critique would be quite likely to refrain from engagement with either of these two orientations.

⁴⁰ Ideally, this type of dialoging would involve a balanced representation of evangelical communities. Conferences may best suffice as the communication environment. More realistically, however, likelihood of engaging in such discussions would be among those open to new light breaking forth from God's word, as well as new methods of expressing the faith. Consequently, it seems probable that reformists would comprise the vast majority of participants, while attending traditionalists and fundamentalists would be highly underrepresented though deeply respected for their commitment to interact with divergent perspectives.

stimulate and further critical reflection and praxis advantageous to the evangelical cause. More hopefully, it may generate a broad consensus among evangelical and other Christian thinkers as to authoritative sources of theological knowledge, especially by scholars open to considering a wide variety of views both within and beyond evangelicalism.⁴¹

Next, evangelical intellectuals need to hear the clarion call to return theological reflection to the proper place of immersed participation in the church community. Partaking in the sacraments and worshiping together ought to be the focal point of growing in the grace *and knowledge* of the Lord (*pace* Newbigin). Perhaps, combined with strategic development of a Christian worldview among the congregation, a unifying vision among God's people may be ignited.

Therefore, a reconnection between evangelical scholars and the *ecclesia*, both locally and globally, will be indispensable. One reasonable way to accomplish this bridge building involves moving advanced theological education "classrooms" into local churches, rather than keeping such opportunities for learning at arms-length from the many parishioners unable to attend evangelical seminary, university, or college. Of course, this would not entail any less progression of evangelical institutions of learning.

Evangelical academics ought also to consider adopting a Newbigin-like *centrality of Jesus Christ* and *Trinitarian framework* approach. This would mean embracing a relationally or personally oriented standard for theological knowledge. It is past time to

⁴¹ This could include attention to typically non-evangelical Christian traditions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox), as well as to, say, newer charismatic or Pentecostal faith communities.

reject, as controlling for theology, the modern scientific method and its hard evidentialism saturated with fact/value and other faulty dualisms.⁴²

Properly attending to the *personal* expression of theological knowledge will not only guard against future developments of aberrant Christian groups⁴³ seeking to connect with the biblical God—the One who is at once transcendent and immanent—but will likely ensure that the theological center of attention does not move “off camera” to focus on peripheral matters, instead remaining centered on the person of Jesus Christ, God-with-us. Two additional benefits attending this are alignment with the personal nature of the biblical drama and connectivity with postmodern sensibilities to relationality over rationalism.

Possibly one of the most important contributions Newbiggin makes to evangelical scholarship is his commitment to learn from—and critically analyze—so many different fields of knowledge and interest. His example bodes well for evangelicals who will heed the call to go beyond specialization and preference, and to enter into consequential conversation with various related or impactful disciplines. Although Newbiggin is by no means the first to move in arenas wider than his trained expertise, in modern times his résumé demonstrates the kind of breadth of subject and cultural mastery that rarely arises in this era of ever-narrowing concentration.

⁴² As mentioned before, this does not imply a rejection of utilizing evidences as it regards the Christian faith, both to compel the yet unconverted, and as edification for followers of Christ. It would imply, however, returning evidence to its rightful place, alongside experience and reason, as *part of* a holistic interpretive framework.

⁴³ Both Mormonism and Christian Science arose in the nineteenth century partly in reaction to a lopsided, mainly strict Puritan, presentation of God as extraordinarily transcendent, at the expense of God also being truly immanent.

Following Newbigin's epistemological lead, including his approach to theological knowledge, will likely entail a much wider consideration of the subject than often emerges within evangelical thinking. Willingness to listen to *other voices* beyond the evangelical community who may have something valuable to contribute to the current discussion will represent a crucial step forward. This could conceivably take the form of revisiting the long history of virtue epistemology, as at least one evangelical academic has done recently.⁴⁴ It will also likely suggest careful reading and critiquing of French and other postmodern philosophers, whose epistemological views have radically altered both intellectual and popular scenes on the Continent.⁴⁵ Research and developments in sociology, linguistics, philosophy, hermeneutics, and other disciplines related to theology must be understood and evaluated. And this task ought to be a concerted effort among groups of evangelical intellectuals, most feasibly by way of both mutual study and conference opportunities, as well as through shared tasks as part of sponsored endowments and grants.

While never being rightly accused of anything short of total commitment to the gospel and its claims to truth and knowledge of God in Christ, Newbigin was one to lead the way in willingness to learn and to change, and in his attitude of true appreciation and patient understanding of others and their perspectives, no matter how wrong he felt they

⁴⁴ See W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁴⁵ Happily, some evangelicals have engaged (or are beginning to analyze) these intellectuals. See, for example, D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); David S. Dockery, ed. *The Challenge of Postmodernity: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997); Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*; Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Roger Lundin, Clarence Walhout, and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

were. Deep recognition of God's grace provided the impetus for his own beneficence toward others. Evangelical scholars will not only increase their sensitivity level as to multifarious theological and epistemological views by following the *irenic yet full confession of faith* approach Newbigin epitomized, but will undoubtedly augment their own God-honoring constructive and creative thinking as they take seriously the dictum, "All truth is God's truth."

Contemporary evangelical thought presently enjoys, or at least has access to, critically-engaged scholarship revealing the fiduciary character of *all* knowledge. Such valid insights should encourage apologists to take initiative to defend the *functional/relational emphasis* of God's revelation to humanity,⁴⁶ and moreover, to graciously commend a more biblically-derived theological epistemology.

This effort ought to be carried out within a broad evangelical context in order to judiciously test knowledge of God claims made by members of the body of Christ, and as a means for understanding and evaluating these claims in light of scripture, tradition, virtue, and Christian maturity. Intercommunity dialogue among academics of various evangelical traditions on particular theological knowledge topics is bound to meet with difficulty and disagreement. Nevertheless, evangelical interlocutors will need to press toward constructive engagement on these issues and their biblical criterion, in a spirit of peace and tolerance, as exemplified by Newbigin. Once again, incorporating an ecumenical and dialogical spirit will be a determinative ingredient in the potential for respectful interaction among evangelical intellectuals, as well as toward fruitful advancement of Christian apologetics in the twenty-first century.

⁴⁶ A central thesis in John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).