

Authentic Evangelism

Author: Krish Kandiah

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Here is a paper I am going to give at the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians gathering in a 10 days time. Any comments to make it a more useful paper would be gratefully received.

?Word, Words and Worship: Revelation, Truth, Authority and Worship in late-modern and pluralistic Europe?

This paper on evangelism in a European context will explore the relationship between the revelation of God in Christ the word of God, our words about him as we seek to express the gospel and the corporate worship of the local congregation. This paper will draw heavily from the world of Lesslie Newbigin whose missiological project directly interacted with these three aspects of the doctrine of revelation.

Postmodern Europe?

I was asked to engage with the concept of Europe as a pluralistic and postmodern context. I am happy to concur that Europe is a pluralistic continent ? as the raw data on demographic and migratory shifts do seem to support an increasing diversity of religious beliefs in Europe . I would like to make a small caveat about the description of Europe as a postmodern context.

Ernest Gellner, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, states that: ?Post-modernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is.? The term postmodernity is notoriously difficult to define but it does seem to intimate a definite break or leaving behind of modernity. Vinoth Ramachandra agrees that postmodernity ?is best understood as a continuation of the process of modernisation but with increasing intensity and scope? the result of that intensification has been to erode the stability of modernity and throw it into some confusion.? Rather than moving beyond modernity Ulrich Beck describes the phenomenon of ?modernity turning upon itself? resulting in ?reflexive-modernity.? Zygmunt Bauman argues that this is the modernization of modernity. Jean Franois Lyotard?s oft-quoted definition of postmodernity as ?incredulity regarding metanarratives? fits within this description of reflexive modernity as the critical tools of modernity have been applied to the very assumptions of modernity itself, resulting in scepticism towards all overarching descriptions including that of modernity itself. This thesis assumes a reflexive understanding of modernity and thus, following Anthony Giddens , the term late-modernity will be adopted in preference to postmodernity. There will therefore be no further references to postmodernity and where authors have interacted with this reflexive model of modernity, their work will be labelled late-modern.

The doctrine of revelation

The starting point for this paper is that the doctrine of revelation can provide a useful framework for the nature of evangelism in the current european context. The doctrine of revelation might seem like a strangenovel place to explore the nature of evangelism, as evangelism if it receives any theological analysis at all, is usually placed within the confines of practical or pastoral theology. There are a number of problems in locating evangelism under the rubric of practical theology. Firstly there is an implied bifurcation of theology into practical and non-practical or even worse ?impractical? theology! The existence of a discipline known as practical theology calls into question the nature and purpose

of theology in general, a subject too vast to be explored here, but suffice to say that all Christian theology should serve God's purposes, which is intrinsically tied to the *Missio Dei* of which evangelism is a central facet. Secondly by separating evangelism from the mainstream of theological reflection it is often left bereft of the resources of the centuries of systematic theological reflection and instead becomes allied to pragmatism.

At first sight locating evangelistic theology as a subset of the doctrine of revelation seems to be unorthodox but there is a worthy precedent provided by the magisterial figure of Karl Barth. In his seminal work *Church Dogmatics*, Barth expounds the theme of the word of God by characteristically starting with God's revelation in Christ, then exploring the revelation of God through Scripture and finally exploring God's revelation through the preaching of the church. Although Barth does not embark on a full-scale theology of evangelism, his location of the preaching of the gospel by the church within the remit of the doctrine of revelation provides sufficient historical precedent to locate evangelism here.

Evangelism in Europe: Is there a European mindset?

The title I was asked to respond to assumed that Europe is a 'postmodern' context. There is an implicit assumption that there is such a thing as a European mindset. This echoes an assumption made by Lesslie Newbigin's programmatic essay 'Can the West be converted?' published in 1985:

'If one looks at the world scene from a missionary point of view, surely the most striking fact is that, while in great areas of Asia and Africa the Church is growing, often growing rapidly, in the lands which were once called Christendom it is in decline. Surely there can be no more crucial question for the world mission of the Church... Can there be an effective missionary encounter with this culture - this so powerful, persuasive, and confident culture which (at least until very recently) simply regarded itself as "the coming world civilization."'

Newbigin asks both a prophetic and a culturally naive question. Newbigin offered a clarion call to missiologists that had been so busy engaging with the cultures of the non-western world that they had neglected an adequate missiological engagement with European cultures. But Newbigin seems to assume there is such a thing as a monolithic western culture. Newbigin argues this point specifically when he writes:

'...our culture - not our culture in the multi-cultural sense but in its more mono-cultural sense... I mean that whatever may be the varieties of culture that are represented in our society we share what sociologists call 'a plausibility structure'.'

Despite, Newbigin's misappropriation of Peter Berger's plausibility structure concept this quotation demonstrates Newbigin's conviction that there is an overarching homogeneity to western societies despite apparent multi-cultural diversity. Newbigin assumes that all the inhabitants of a society no matter what their individual cultures believe share a common 'plausibility structure.' Newbigin goes on to argue that 'this plausibility structure' determines whether in any society any particular belief is plausible or not. Thus for Newbigin it is the common plausibility structure that ultimately homogenises society and that acts as the arbiter of what is held to be true by all the members of the society. These are not isolated quotations. In another paper addressing the issue of mission in a pluralistic society Newbigin's opening statement is that 'No society is totally pluralist. In every society there is what Peter Berger calls a 'plausibility structure.' Note the reference to a singular plausibility structure which diminishes the importance of subcultural particularities.

Newbigin's failure to grasp the degree of diversity present within western society is hard to explain. The idea of homogenised western multi-cultural societies may be attributed due to an assimilation model of cultural diversity. For example despite the British government's commitment to multicultural policies that 'advocated integration rather than assimilation', where assimilation was seen as a 'flattening process' and integration promoted 'equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance', there is a homogenising tendency in British society. Being

British does have an impact on all immigrants but to argue that it becomes the defining characteristic of the intellectual life of those immigrants I believe is naïve.

It is also true that globalisation often means westernisation but this globalisation thesis is too simplistic an approach. It fails to take into consideration the way that 'non-western ideas also travel' back? and the way that the perceived westernisation effect of globalisation has produced a culturally conservative backlash in some parts of the world. . The same process can be seen in microcosm within western societies as Konrad Raiser writes:

'While there is the fear that globalisation will lead to the imposition of a unified culture based on the Western clause of consumerism, there is also growing evidence of the resistance of local communities defending their own culture or of migrants and indigenous communities trying to recover their cultural values and mark their difference from the dominant environment.'

But by focussing virtually exclusively on a presumed shared Enlightenment bifurcation between fact and value Newbigin underplays the significance of the cultural diversity within western societies. At first sight it might seem that Newbigin has fallen prey to what Graham Huggan describes as 'virtual multi-culturalism?': that is Newbigin has adopted the unintentionally optimistic, and often politically motivated, skewed depiction of cultural integration that has been propagated. But Newbigin's own experience of life in Winson Green, Birmingham where he describes the relative openness to the gospel of migrants when compared to those of English heritage, and his writings on Islam in Britain demonstrate his awareness of the depth of cultural diversity. He also writes in a very different tone in a book that was published in the year of his death. In a chapter entitled 'Multiculturalism and Neutrality?' Newbigin writes:

'...we are a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. The histories our children learn in school? are not coherent but vastly diverse. Whether at school or in the mosque, temple or gudwara, children learn many different histories and are shaped thereby into different identities. There are agonising tensions.'

Newbigin was also well aware of the extent to which cultures shape concepts of identity and rationality due to the influence of both Berger and Alasdair MacIntyre on his epistemology and his approach to cultures. Newbigin was thus well aware of the tensions in western societies between cultural groups so why then in his writings does he constantly deal with generalities, the supposed commonalities and not the specifics of the individual cultures? The Gospel and Our Culture Network seems to assume a homogenised western culture. It may well be that Newbigin is simply seeking a short-cut to engaging western cultures with the gospel and so chooses to ignore diversity. Thus Newbigin's continual exposition of his own interpretation of the history-of-ideas leading to the current epistemological crisis in late-modern cultures is seen as the extent to which the (re)contextualisation of the gospel needs to go. But if the church does not take into consideration the cultural distinctives of the various ethnic groups in western societies it aligns itself with a new form of hegemonic imperialism. The gospel demands to be contextualised into the subcultures of Europe. There is not a single articulation of the gospel that is going to connect with the pluralism of the continent. Indeed the European Values survey of 2008 showed an enormous variance in degrees of secularity. For example in answer to the question of Belief in God responses ranged from Turkey with 95% affirmative answers to Czech Republic and Estonia which returned 16%. The mean response was 52% exhibited in Austria and Lithuania. To argue that there is a single European mindset is not backed up by the figures. On the other hand there is a definite secularising effect in European politics. There is a public discourse that takes place in the corridors of power in Brussels that does exhibit strongly secularist tendencies ? to say that this is representative of the population of Europe is unjustified and it is worth engaging with this public discourse.

Late modernity and mission

Without wishing to either endorse Newbigin's commitment to a single Western 'plausibility

structure? nor to discount his vast missiological wisdom and insight we can further explore Newbigin's programmatic essay, "Can the West be Converted?." will be explored for its implications on contemporary European evangelisation. Newbigin sets out the contours for a missional engagement between the gospel and western culture. Newbigin points out that the key area of contention in this engagement is over the nature of religious belief and specifically the bifurcation between the public world of facts and the private world of values. This observation plays such a significant part in Newbigin's missiological project that it is worth exploring some of the implications for Newbigin's his doctrine of revelation and in particular his theology of evangelism. Newbigin argues that the Enlightenment was the decisive moment in the dichotomy of western thought into the public and private. Thus a central element in Newbigin's apologetic approach is to tackle head-on this public/private dichotomy. Newbigin asks: "what in our culture is the meaning of the word 'fact'?" In its earliest use in the English language it is simply the Latin factum, the past participle of the verb 'to do,' something which has been done. But plainly it has acquired a much richer meaning. In ordinary use 'fact' is contrasted with belief, opinion, value. Value-free facts are the most highly prized commodities in our culture.?"

The public/private division in knowledge continues in many European public discourses to this day : there is a distinction between, for example, religious truth and scientific truth, as Newbigin argues: "Our values, our views of what is good and bad, are a matter of personal opinion, and everyone is free to have his own opinions. But on the facts we must all agree. Here is the core of our culture.?"

This distinction between scientific truth and religious values continues despite contemporary philosophical deconstructions of the myth of scientific objectivity by philosophers of science such as Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. Newbigin argues that this dualistic approach has "at least from the eighteenth century" been the public culture of Europe, and has "under the name of 'modernisation' " extended its power into every part of the world.?" Objective facts are for the public realm, taught at school and presented without the need for the preface "I believe?," while subjective values belong to the private world of religion and ethics.

"With respect to what are called "facts" a statement is either right or wrong, true or false. But with respect to values, and supremely with respect to the religious beliefs on which these values ultimately rest, one does not use this kind of language?. They are matters of personal choice."

Due to the empiricist movement science was effectively elevated to become the arbiter of truth and along with this came the "corresponding downgrading of non-scientific systems of belief." This scepticism of non-scientific truth claims can be clearly seen in the dismissive writings of David Hume:

"If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

Hume limits real knowledge and hard facts to mathematics and empirical science whilst relegating ethics and theology to the irrational and subjective world of personal values. This same approach is described by Newbigin in his analysis of contemporary Western cultures. This fact-value dichotomy between science and religion became and was to remain a prevailing characteristic of modernity. The reaction to the elevation of science at the expense of values was that every other discipline tried to justify their existence by claiming to be a science. Paul Hiebert shows how many of the systematic theologies produced in the first half of the twentieth century reformulated theology in scientific terms. Being dismissed into the realm of the subjective, Christians reacted by defending the truth of Christianity through appealing to the objective facts of the resurrection or through arguing for the concrete existence of God through rational, self-evident proofs. This is still evident in popular apologetics literature. It can also be seen in the way that much preaching (including evangelistic preaching) is undertaken "we seek to boil a passage down to its basic components so that we can turn a biblical narrative into a series of bullet points. The very popular "four spiritual laws" presentation of the gospel is a case in point. The introduction to this four point gospel presentation is "just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws which

govern your relationship with God.?

In contrast late-modernity has a pessimistic view of the ability of the mind to grasp reality leading to the view that truth is a mind-dependent projection based on the context of the beholder in time and space. James Sire explains that under late-modernity, truth cannot be objective because the "ontological substructure" of the universe is not available, since an individual's mind looks at the world through a skewed perception of reality. Betty Craige illustrates this when she writes, "Things and events do not have an intrinsic meaning. There is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world." Newbigin and others provide this picture of the latemodern Enlightenment influenced west. But this is not a homogenous picture. Generationally, ethnically, geographically there is a huge diversity of worldviews across Europe . Perhaps Newbigin's description best describes the predominant worldview accepted in some of the corridors of power across the continent whether it's in the European Parliament building in Brussels or the headquarters of MTV in Warsaw or the BBC Worldservice in London.

It is into this broad context that church in Europe seeks to carry it out mission.

It is into this broad ? ?public European culture?? that the church in Europe seeks to carry out its mission. The rest of this paper will explore two key missiological relationships that are vital to negotiate. Firstly how does Christ the Word of God and the words of the gospel relate together and secondly what is the relationship between the words of the gospel and the worship of the church.

The word of God and the words of the gospel

An Albanian church leader was asked to go on a fundraising trip to the United States for a campus based ministry whose two main evangelistic tools are a video presentation of the life of christ and a four point gospel outline. Standing in front of a crowded room of prospective supporters he said: "for god loved the world so much that he sent, not a video, not a tract but his son." To be sure things did not go as well as expected on the fund raising side. But this Albanian theologian raises an important question: What is the relationship between Christ's incarnation as the "central revelatory act of God" and the preaching of the gospel.

On one level in this current phase of salvation history how can one know the revelation of God in Christ? It does seem that according to the New Testament the normative post-ascension means of coming to know Christ is through the preaching of the gospel. Jensen argues that the:

"...earliest Christians regarded [the gospel] as the power of God for salvation, the indispensable way to the knowledge of God. For them it was primary revelation, the initial and fundamental way into the presence of God?.

Jensen's argument is convincing; Paul in his epistles uses the terms gospel and Christ interchangeably. This is possible as the New Testament conception of the gospel, as will be demonstrated, is preaching the person of Christ but also the significance of his words, deeds and life.

But the Albanian dissatisfaction with the modus operandi of the proclamation of the gospel as merely a video to be broadcast or a set of bullet points to be transmitted from one person to another is still worth exploring especially as we sense a shift in the public discourse of Europe. Not every articulation of the gospel is an accurate, appropriate or accesible presentation of the gospel. The dissatisfaction with prepackaged, impersonal regurgitations is worth exploring. In this short paper I would like to suggest three sign posts provided by Lesslie Newbigin's missiological project that have assisted my own evangelistic practice in European university missions and churches.

1. The Gospel and story

The recent emphasis on narrative in a lot of contemporary theology and preaching owes its rediscovery to the post-liberal writings of people like Hans Frei and I believe also to Newbigin. Newbigin was ahead of his time in engaging with the narrative nature of the gospel message. This was not always present in Newbigin's theology however. In 'What is the Gospel?' (Newbigin 1942) Newbigin in a similar vein to C.H. Dodd sought a lowest common denominator approach to the gospel where the key elements of the gospel were distilled out of Peter's Pentecost sermon in an apparent bid to work out the minimal noetic elements of the gospel. But Newbigin's evangelistic requisition of the post-liberal approach to narrative theology led him to later assert:

'The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story? here I think the eighteenth century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man? Any defence of the Christian faith? must take a quite different route. The Christian faith, rooted in the Bible, is? primarily to be understood as an interpretation of the story- the human story set within the story of nature.?'

Newbigin identified for me the inadequacy of a lot of the apologetic literature that I had been devouring. I had tried to use the classical arguments for the existence of God with little fruit. My two-step process meant that I had to convince the listener that a first cause, moral law giver or designer existed using pure reason and then also convince them through the use of historical and biblical evidence that this God was the Triune God of the Bible. Whereas this approach may have engaged some from a monotheistic religious background such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Moslems, it completely failed to engage anyone influenced by the late-modern critique of the objectivity of rationality. Newbigin undercut this approach recognising along with Alasdair MacIntyre the need to ask the question, 'Which Justice and Whose Rationality??' (MacIntyre 1988). If a supra-cultural rationality is not available to us then the idea that there would be a watertight apologetic argument that will work in every context is a myth.

Newbigin's challenge to evangelists was to tell the Biblical story, allowing it to provide a window (or a tacit connection) to God's character, purpose and explanatory power of the universe. It is a very relevant approach for our age despite the alleged suspicion of meta-narratives, and it has transformed my own preaching, apologetics and evangelism. My utilisation of the Campus Crusade four-point gospel outline was rendered virtually redundant, replaced by a desire to present something of the grand sweep of the biblical story as a way of understanding who we are, why we are here and what we are supposed to be doing. I suggest that in my experience Christianity is the best explanatory framework that makes sense of who we are and what we do and is the story in which our own stories make sense. I find myself spending most of my time telling stories about Jesus, or retelling stories he told to win people's allegiance to himself ? recognising both who he is as the glory of God revealed and what he has done for us, as our Saviour and Lord.

2. The Gospel as Public Truth

Sometimes those that emphasise the narrative approach to theology underplay the historicity of the Jesus story. Newbigin shows how the two elements need not contradict each other clearly asserting in some of his last books

'It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story.'
(Newbigin 1996,40)

The gospels are 'human perceptions of the things that really happened.??'
(Newbigin 1999,4)

Newbigin's thinking in this area was altered after a specific encounter of interreligious dialogue where a Hindu commented to him that:

'I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion? I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of human history??' (Newbigin 1999,

4)

As a result Newbigin was forced to reconsider the pietism, ghettoisation and reductionism that was involved in much evangelism. He was also provoked to think beyond the bifurcationschism between of the subjective world of private values and the objective public world of facts that he attributed to the Enlightenment. Once again influenced by Polanyi's philosophy of science Newbigin debunks the myth of scientific objectivity.

Newbigin commandeers the philosophy of science of Michael Polanyi to argue against the alleged pure objectivity of the scientific process but he also wants to argue for the historicity of the Christian story. This not only refutes the Enlightenment's privileging of scientific knowledge but also refuses to allow Christians to reduce the gospel into the realm of personal piety. Newbigin carefully avoids the excesses of rationalism without falling into absolute subjectivism. This approach revolutionised my own understanding of the gospel ? I find that I am less comfortable with approaches that focus solely on helping people know they are going to heaven when they die (NT Wright has further helped my thinking in this more recently). I also find it imperative to talk about the implications of the gospel not just for personal piety, but also for politics, community, relationships, economics and justice. Our public as well as our private life is radicalised by the gospel of grace. The words we speak in evangelism must accurately portray Christ the word of God who is not just personal saviour but the cosmic Christ, lord over all creation.

3. The Gospel in four dimensions

In 'Sin and Salvation' Newbigin explained how sin amounts to four dimensions of alienation. In a chapter entitled 'What is Salvation?' he outlines this four-dimensional schema as follows:

- ? Man is in a state of contradiction against the natural world
- ? Man is in a state of contradiction against his fellow man
- ? Man is in a state of inner self-contradiction
- ? Man is in a state of contradiction against God

Far from reducing the gospel to four bite-size chunks, this schema points us to recapturing the immensity of the gospel in four grand-scale dimensions. Newbigin goes on to show that salvation can be then understood as the repairing of these four fractured relationships leading to 'the restoration of creation to its original purpose.' (Newbigin 1956, 124). Using this outline the gospel story can be expanded through following through how each of these four dimensions of salvation are worked out through creation, fall, redemption and consummation ? a theme that I developed in my own evangelistic book. (Kandiah 2007). This approach resonates well with younger adults, as there is recognition of the sense of connectedness there is between all things, and naturally calls people to receive from God his gracious gift of reconciliation. It presents the need for integrity rather than a dualistic soul insurance and it also calls people to join the adventure of participation in the *missio dei*.

The gospel according to Newbigin challenged my own pietistic and simplistic presentations of the gospel as simply a message that needed to be intellectually assented as a means to avoid eternal damnation. It is rare to find evangelistic presentations that offer more than a personal one-dimensional approach to salvation. The gospel of course is of inestimable importance to the individual, with the need for personal faith and an individual response to God's call. But when salvation looks like the personal rescue of an individual soul for an ethereal eternity rather than the radical restoration of all things we can fall into a number of traps. Sometimes we minimise repentance and the importance of the atonement, sometimes we underplay the resurrection and the social implications of the gospel, sometimes we fail to pass on the importance of church, community and evangelism and ecology.

Newbigin opened my eyes to the fact that the gospel is bigger than we think and needs to include all four aspects of salvation. But in my experience instead of putting people off the faith, the scale of the thing actually draws people in. Instead of being a lifestyle choice, Christianity returns to being a cause to live and die for which transforms relationships and the environment as well as our personal

eternal destiny.

The words of the gospel and the worship of the church

?...evangelism is the activity of the redeemed community seeking to share with all men the joy of redemption, and to welcome all men into the fellowship of those that share that joy. Much harm has been done by the wrong kind of individualism. The human element in evangelism must be the fellowship.?

Pre-Newbigin my apologetics usually included an apology for the state of the church. I argued that it was personal relationship with God that was central, not experience or impressions of the church. I would liken the church to a school orchestra generating a cacophonous noise playing a Mozart concerto and challenge people to either conclude that Mozart was a terrible composer or that the performance of Mozart was flawed. But Newbigin rightly argues that the church is the chosen means of God's revelation of the gospel ? the hermeneutic of the gospel? (Newbigin 1989).

A communal approach to apologetics and evangelism could have a profound impact on the church in Europe. The various commonly accepted modes of evangelism include: the platform apologist who convinces a large crowd of skeptics of the intellectual respectability of the faith, the individual Christian gossiping the gospel at a coffee break at work.

Focussing on evangelism without the respect for church and an understanding of the need for renewal and reformation of the church is counterproductive. Newbigin the evangelist invested much of his life into ecumenism arguing consistently and passionately that the gospel is best served by a unified church. In my own experience it is sadly often those who are most concerned about evangelism that are the least concerned about unity which may well be an outworking of the minimalist, personalised gospel that is preached.

In 'The Reunion of the Church' (Newbigin 1948), Newbigin gave a theological defence of the 1947 Church of South India (CSI) unification scheme in which he played a strategic role. The CSI was the joining of the South India United Church (made up of reformed Presbyterian and Congregational Churches), the South Indian Methodist Church and Anglicans from the Church Missionary Society to form one visible institutional church. Newbigin saw that disunity undercut the gospel in three key ways: firstly division contradicts Christ's sufficiency, secondly division contradicts the reconciliatory purpose of God and thirdly division contradicts the eschatological destiny of redeemed humanity . (Newbigin 1960, 12). Newbigin's powerful arguments challenged me to cross the tribal boundaries of evangelicalism as I worked with churches as diverse as the Baptists, Brethrens and Anglicans, the conservatives, charismatics and café-style church-planters. Ultimately it led me into my current position seeking unity for mission through the Evangelical Alliance.

Newbigin was not an armchair theologian, or a missiological number-cruncher working in an office block. Newbigin was a reflective practitioner ? an idealistic prophet calling for the reformation of the church with his feet firmly planted on the ground either as bishop who equipped his diocese in Madras to be at the cutting edge of poverty relief, evangelism and apologetic engagement or as an aging missionary church leader in Winson Green, Birmingham . (Wainwright 2000).

Understanding the significance of a local congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel has two important implications by way of conclusion:

1 Reconciliation

If Newbigin's articulation of the four dimensional gospel is accurate then a reconciled community is the best medium for the message of reconciliation. Newbigin argues this in his defence of his evangelistically motivated ecumenism:

?A gospel of reconciliation can only be communicated by a reconciled fellowship? it will be communicated by the way of election, beginning from one visible centre and spreading always according to the law that each one is chosen in order to be the means of bringing the message of salvation to the next.?

If the gospel is the offer of individualised salvation for a disembodied eternal state then it is fitting for an individual with a privatised gospel to be the basic unit of communication. But if the gospel is the mystery hid before the ages, the multifaceted wisdom of God, if it is the secret of how now Jews and Gentiles can be reconciled with God and with each other as Ephesians declares it to be - then the local church living out the gospel as living proof is a more fitting basic unit.

2 Epistemologically

NT Wright's approach to worldview construction function and maintenance highlights four interrelated axes. Firstly, worldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Secondly, from these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic questions that determine human existence. Thirdly, the answers that the stories provide to basic questions are expressed in cultural symbols. Fourthly, worldviews include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world. The local congregation is the place where the gospel can be experienced in all four of these dimensions and thus function as a hermeneutic of the gospel.

Figure 1: NT Wright's Four Dimension of Worldview

It is in the communal life of the church that people experience for themselves the praxis of the gospel - in compassionate acts, in pastoral care one for the other, in the ethos of the common culture of the church's life together - in conversation, prayer for one another, in the models provided for raising children, in political engagement, in the church's unwritten curriculum, in the simple and unintentional "way things are done around here". This praxis of the communal life is shaped and informed by the congregation's grasp of the story of God's dealings with his people and his planet as revealed in the bible. Firstly the proclamation, study and meditation on God's word is vital for both establishing and maturing faith. It is how the church knows its story. There is an urgent need for the church to recapture clarity and confidence in the retelling of the biblical story. Not just as a set of atomised proof texts but as a true telling of the true story of which every human being and indeed all of creation is a part. Secondly it is in the faithful retelling of the story that people's questions about their existence will be answered. There is a dynamic interplay between these two axes of story and questions. If the questions of a culture dominate the teaching of the congregation there is a danger of compromising the integrity of the telling of the story of God - as the culture may centre around a set of questions that God's word subverts. Allowing the culture to always set the agenda for the story can lead to a distortion and corrupting of the story. However to ignore the cultural questions can mean the communication of the gospel is compromised, the listener can end up dismissing the gospel as irrelevant or insufficient as it seems to offer no answers to the questions that drive them. There is a need to practice faithful relevance making sure the doublelistening that preachers like John Stott have constantly called for. In the answering of questions there is room for straight apologetics of course but the answers provided must be embodied in the life of a believing community - in other words apologetics and systematic theology must be grounded in the third aspect - the praxis of the church.

The third aspect of worldview creation and sustenance is crucially connected with the life of the congregation, the translation of the word of God into the praxis of the church life is vital for the credibility and intelligibility of the gospel. It is in the communal life of the church that people experience for themselves the praxis of the gospel - in compassionate acts, in pastoral care one for the other, in the ethos of the common culture of the church's life together - in conversation, prayer for one another, in the models provided for raising children, in political engagement, in the church's unwritten curriculum, in the simple and unintentional "way things are done around here". This praxis of the communal life is shaped and informed by the congregation's grasp of the story of God's

dealings with his people and his planet as revealed in scripture.

The fourth and final axis is that of symbol. The sacraments are a key aspect of how the communal life of the congregation embodies the story of the gospel and provides tangible multi sensory experiences that underline the answers that the gospel story provides to the questions of the culture. Baptism and communion are deliberately corporate sacraments so provide another mechanism for the congregation to act as Newbigin describes it as the hermeneutic of the gospel.

These four aspects of worldview construction and maintenance work synergistically, and so in the life of the local church there is a need to reform all four of these areas to maximize the ways in which the corporate life of the church can communicate the gospel. As a communal apologetic is emphasised the enlightenment bifurcation of fact and value, personal and public. The storied nature of the gospel of Jesus is underlined and the opportunity for the multi-dimensional gospel that presents spiritual, personal, social, environmental implications of the death, resurrection and return of Christ to be fully embodied in a people can be realised.

If the gospel is simply the transfer of information from one person to another then the basic unit of gospel communication can be a tract, a video or a sermon. But if the gospel is the announcement of the good news that universe transforming events have taken place and the working through of the implications of that news in repentance and faith at both an individual and corporate level that includes: the renewing of minds, the transformation of affections away from idols to the true and living God, the rethinking of how resources are used and distributed to name but a few. Then we are talking about worldview transformation which is best achieved not just in oral, written or cinematic form, but through the embodied life of a congregation. A congregation provides the concrete set of relationships that not only allow for the speaking of gospel truth but also the practices that make the gospel plausible and the experience of participating in sacraments that were instituted to both proclaim and experientialise the gospel. This makes sense of the heavy emphasis on ecclesiology in the New Testament, the early church's strategy of church planting and insistence on communion and baptism as some of the constituting practices of the church and also the clarity and boldness by which the gospel story was proclaimed.

Conclusion

In the complex missional context of pluralistic Europe with its overlapping mix of premodern, modern and late modern worldviews competing with each other for ascendancy, Newbigin's missiology helps to call the church back to biblical evangelism which clearly proclaims the biblical story as the true story of the whole of creation that is grounded in the public life of the whole church as an embodiment of the gospel message. It is as the church faithfully communicates Christ the Word of God through preaching and enacting the biblical story that we effectively communicate the gospel. In short Newbigin calls the church back to the practice of the early church who dared to share the gospel of Christ with great confidence despite being an apparently powerless minority in a pluralistic context.

Downloadable Attachments:

Authentic_Evangelism.rtf

http://conversation.lausanne.org/uploads/resources/files//Authentic_Evangelism.rtf