

SOUTHEASTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
WAKE FOREST, NORTH CAROLINA

A BOOK REVIEW OF  
LESSLIE NEWBIGIN,  
*SIGNS AMID THE RUBBLE: THE PURPOSES OF GOD IN HUMAN HISTORY*

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Newbigin, Lesslie, *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 121 pages. Reviewed by Jeremy P. Roberts.

Lesslie Newbigin “. . . was an internationally esteemed British theologian, missionary, pastor, apologist, and ecumenical statesman” (back cover). Among the most influential ecumenists of the twentieth century, *Signs amid the Rubble* allows the author to communicate to his readers years after his death in 1998.

Newbigin’s text is a composition of three previously unpublished addresses given over a fifty-four year span between 1941 and 1996. The purpose of the text is not clarified amongst the three addresses, but a common underlying theme is seen that the church is called to express God’s purposes to the world. Amid the rubble of evil in the history of mankind, an ecclesiastical calling of expressing the purposes of God is expressed throughout. “Every faithful act of service, every honest labor to make the world a better place, which seemed to have been forever lost and forgotten in the rubble of history, will be seen on that day to have contributed to the perfect fellowship of God’s Kingdom” (47). This is a sign of corporate eschatological hope in the days to come.

### **The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress**

The first of three addresses is from 1941 at United Theological College in Bangalore, India. Newbigin was just thirty-two years of age as he delivered four lectures centering on the theme, “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress” (3). Considering Newbigin’s age, he shows keen insight and maturity beyond his years as he explains the crushing perspective of progress in Western culture. He explains “progress” as becoming

accustomed to “. . . the idea that human society has become better and will go on becoming better . . . that ignorance and sin can be and will be gradually eliminated from human life” (5). The desideratum of this theory results in man living in perfection. It is a combination of perfection in love and Gnosticism.

Newbigin teaches of the process by which this theory transitioned from the secular into Christianity. Christianity’s goal is neither to exist in an earthly eutopian society, nor to individually seek salvation solely for the betterment of oneself. Christianity’s goal, as communicated by Newbigin, is to understand hope for the Church; “. . . this is essentially a corporate hope” (27). Newbigin’s argument is for an eschatological hope culminating in the day of judgment with God. As a conclusion, Newbigin inserts his opinion for how Christians should handle various political situations relevant to the mid-twentieth century.

### **The Henry Martyn Lectures**

The second of three addresses is from 1986 at the University of Cambridge where he delivered the Henry Martyn Lectures. In a similar manner to his lectures in India forty-five years prior, Newbigin attentively addresses hope for the future through a relationship with Christ and political situations facing the church. Newbigin’s emphasis upon preaching is a key aspect of this lecture to those assembled at Cambridge.

In his first lecture, “Authority, Dogma, and Dialogue”, the importance of one’s soteriological stance is extrapolated. Newbigin is perplexed that one could even consider a Sandy Creek perspective of soteriology (72). He expresses that “The crucial issue in this debate centers, I think, in the doctrine of election” (73). Newbigin’s Reformed

theological stance shades his theology so strongly that it perplexes him if one were to disagree. He transitions the lecture from God's authority, to theological issues, and finally to preaching and other forms of communicating the eschatological hope he so strongly purports. Newbigin states that “. . . whether we like it or not, preaching . . . is and has been from the beginning part of the Christian style” (75). Beyond preaching, other forms of dialoguing about Christ—both talking and listening—are encouraged by Newbigin (75–77).

The second lecture, “Conversion, Colonies, and Culture,” begins with Newbigin's emphasis upon the diametric opposition between the world and the church. Conversion “. . . will not be believed except as the result of a radical reorientation of mind and will” (78). Newbigin follows the line of thought that true conversion to Christ must be seen in a radical form by expressing frustration. To his chagrin, sometimes followers of Christ seek to draw new believers into an already existing Christian subculture. He states, “. . . it is as wrong to absolutize culture as to ignore it” (84). Newbigin explains that a fine line exists between severing “. . . the link between conversion and cultural change” and making new converts like all the other existing Christians (84). As a process to communicate this concern, he uses the Church Growth Movement as an illustration to express concern of the measurement of success by numbers on paper instead of radically obvious changed lives (91).

In the third and final lecture Newbigin gives at Cambridge, “Church, World, Kingdom”, he deals with critical topics. While reiterating the importance of preaching, he also addresses social action. He concludes the address by explaining how the end result

of mission is neither mere preaching, nor mercy ministry, but it is an interweaving of the two expressing both speaking and living the truth (100).

### **Gospel and Culture**

The final address in Newbigin's text is from a lecture he delivered to the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil in 1996—just two years prior to his death. The address is simply entitled, "Gospel and Culture" (111). This address is the most brief of the three within *Signs amid Rubble*, and is divided into two separate lectures.

In his lecture, "Gospel," Newbigin explicitly states the nature of the Gospel as not being synonymous with Christianity, but it is a "factual statement" (113). This factual statement needs to be supported by Christians with courageous communicators of Christ. In Newbigin's "Culture" lecture, he explains how Gospel and culture must relate to one another while determining which defines the other. Does Gospel define culture or vice versa?

### **Strengths and Weakness**

The strength of Newbigin's work is his ability to pack a mass amount of information into a small amount of space. In just 121 pages he provides a wealth of information. Even from his earliest days as a scholar, he shows his skills as a succinct yet powerful communicator.

Key missiological issues are addressed with lucidity and a clear line of reasoning. His combination of historical references with modern missiological lines of thought are

edifying. As one of the lead missiologists of the twentieth century, the previously unpublished lectures within this text only further Newbigin's stellar reputation beyond his time on earth.

The clearest weakness of Newbigin's text is his lack of biblical support throughout the three addresses given. An example of this is in the "Gospel" lecture given in Brazil; he only made one reference to a specific reference in the Bible (Matt 28:18–20) within the entire lecture about "Gospel" (113–15). Newbigin uses rationale in his beliefs, but fails to use ample biblical support for his arguments.

### **Conclusion**

Newbigin has a skill of taking the intricate and making it intelligible. This collection of lectures is useful for laypersons, pastors, and professors alike. Newbigin, being one of the great missiologists of the twentieth century, has provided a fine book beyond the grave; so, "he, being dead, yet speaketh" (xiv). All students of missiology would be encouraged from this work.