CHRIST AND THE CLUE OF HISTORY:
LESSLIE NEWBIGIN’S CHRISTOCENTRIC PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY
AS THE CENTRAL THREAD OF HIS THOUGHT

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To my deeply compassionate and exceptionally practical wife, Stephanie, who prepared my overly abstract mind to receive Newbigin’s emphasis on the concreteness of the good news about Jesus.
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Of course, every error in this work is attributable to me alone and not to those named above. I risk publishing this piece, knowing flaws are likely to be found, out of obedience to Christ, who has sent me, as part of his church, on a mission to make his kingdom more evident in this world. Moreover, I do so in the confidence of the Spirit, knowing that the God of history can use even this meager offering, which will one day be buried beneath the rubble of history, to bring men and women to him and to bring glory to himself.
ABSTRACT

As early as his 1941 Bangalore Lectures, “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” Newbigin took a hard look directly at history itself and its various interpreters. In those four lectures at the age of 32, Newbigin laid the foundation for all of his critical theological thinking for the next half century. While Newbigin scholarship is still relatively fresh, it appears that expositors of his work have neglected a, if not the, central motif in his immense corpus: his philosophy of history. I will attempt provide a systematic account of Newbigin’s incredibly consistent thoughts on the topic of history over the span of more than fifty years, and to show how his epistemology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and missiology find their coherence in this singular vision.

Chapter 1 introduces the importance of the topic of history in Newbigin’s life and work as well as clarifies the way in which I am arguing for his philosophy of history. I proceed to address the four main aspects of Newbigin’s view of history: its reality (chapter 2), its linear quality (chapter 3), its u-shaped structure (chapter 4), and its relational nature (chapter 5). In each chapter, I show that Newbigin’s philosophy of history is thoroughly grounded in Jesus Christ.

Newbigin believed that a critical and basic component of the missionary theologian’s task in contemporary Western culture is a deep and intentional reflection on history itself, understood against various counterproposals for the nature and shape or history. Newbigin intentionally performed this task, and thereby was able to provide the Church with a basis for fruitful and faithful ministry at this time in history (chapter 6).
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO NEWBIGIN’S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

I. Philosophy of History in the Life of Newbigin

In the academic year of 1935-1936, James Edward Lesslie Newbigin led a study at Westminster College on “The Kingdom of God and History” which became “the focus of [his] most passionate theological interest towards the end of the course.”¹ This theme was to prominently direct his thought in nearly every theological topic on which he spoke and wrote for the next six decades.

Early on in his career as a missionary in Kanchipuram, Newbigin recalls being taught a version of Hinduism called Visishtadvaita, a version of theism very similar to Rudolf Otto’s “evangelica Christianity.” His objection to this religious system was that it had its grounding in “the human need for salvation, not in a divine act of redemption within the real history of which this human life is a part.”² Possibly as early as 1939,³ he articulated some of the convictions that form the basis of what I call his philosophy of history, which he implicitly claims must form the roots of a desirable religious viewpoint.

God acts in our history, which is subject to death, making history u-shaped and its end contingent on God’s actions (chapter 4). This action happens within a history that is real (chapter 2). Redemption within a real history implies a linear history which Newbigin defines as ‘a road,’ since there is sequential action and a final distinction between states (unredeemed —> redeemed) which requires non-cyclical time (chapter 3). Finally,

² Unfinished Agenda, 57-8.
³ Neither the date nor the chronology is clear, but Newbigin was in Kanchipuram from 1939-1946.
human life is a part of this real, u-shaped road, woven into it with relational significance (chapter 5).

In 1941, Newbigin gave a series of lectures in Bangalore entitled “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress” wherein he critiques various other views about history and the Kingdom of God. Goheen comments on the longevity of his positions here, saying, “Many of the conclusions he came to at that time continued to shape his views of the kingdom for the rest of his life.” Hunsberger agrees when he writes, “A survey of Newbigin’s thought makes it obvious that at the most basic levels the major concerns to which he has tended to give theological attention and the major insights which lie at the heart of his reflections were to a remarkable degree formed during his early years…. But those seeds germinated in the soil of his missionary engagements….” Indeed, I believe that these early conclusions also shaped his views on history for the rest of his life.

For this reason, I will draw from Newbigin’s writing across the span of his literary career. This approach is systematic rather than chronological. The systematic approach is taken to utilize his consistency for the sake of drawing out nuances and implications of similar items in his thought, rather than to prove his consistency. Certainly, a chronological approach on this topic would be helpful, but for reasons of space I will not undertake that task here.

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As Goheen and Hunsberger have both pointed out, this kind of analysis is fraught with difficulty. First, Newbigin’s theologizing was almost always ad hoc in the sense that he wrote for a particular lecture series, ecumenical event, or need in the church. While some lecture invitations provided him the opportunity to think more clearly and comprehensively on a subject, he never sat down to write a comprehensive account of his whole system of thought. This ad hoc approach means that he asked different questions than a systematic theologian might ask, questions that had less to do with difficulties in the tradition of theology and more to do with how to relate the Christian faith to the missionary context in which he was engaged.

Second, a sixty-year career is difficult to distill into a few pages without elements of interpretation, thus this paper runs the risk of being more reflective of my thought than Newbigin’s. For this reason, I have chosen to 1) exposit only a very few basic categories, 2) use Newbigin’s own terminology rather than imposing categories from the philosophy of history more generally conceived, and 3) quote Newbigin extensively so that the reader has the opportunity to check the objectivity of my conclusions.

Finally, Newbigin was not an expert scholar in philosophy of history. He was a missionary, a bishop, a teacher, and an ecumenist among other things, but he did not achieve a philosophical pedigree through study or publication. Nevertheless, Newbigin did reflect deeply and read widely on philosophical issues, including philosophy of

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7 Hunsberger says, “Newbigin freely acknowledges that in regard to many of the issues he addresses he is not an accomplished specialist. Whether in the area of theology, of the history of religions..., or of the philosophy of history, his contributions do not claim a basis in a mastery of the field. He recognizes that he has always been more of a generalist” (Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 43).
history, and, as I will show, he grounded much of his thinking on his own very consistent philosophy of history.

It is frequently noted by scholars that his thought is remarkably congruent throughout his life. Hunsberger puts it this way, “In all of his ad hoc biblical theology, Newbigin shows the capacity to maintain cogency and coherence. He works to establish a unified view of things, informed by the questions and clues that arise from all the particular places embraced by such a vision.”\(^8\) Goheen notes a fundamental unity to Newbigin’s ecclesiological thinking, which I believe extends to his historical thinking as well.\(^9\) It is worthwhile to explicate this unity for the sake of clarifying the proximate basis on which Newbigin approaches a wide variety of topics.

In so doing, I will show that the widely varying cultural, ecclesiastical, theological and philosophical areas of Newbigin’s thought are held together by his philosophy of history: a u-shaped road that is both real and radically relational, which is itself epistemically grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

II. State of the Question

As early as his 1941 Bangalore Lectures, “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” Newbigin took a hard look directly at history itself and its various interpreters. In those four lectures at the age of 32, Newbigin explicated much of the coherent basis for his critical theological thinking for the next half century. Arguably his two most important and comprehensive works, *The Open Secret*\(^10\) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 42.

\(^8\) *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 42.

\(^9\) Cf. “As the Father Has Sent Me,” 7.

Society,\textsuperscript{11} both feature his philosophy of history in the climactic middle his arguments, grounding what comes both before and after. While there are a number of other books and essays that present his views on this topic almost exclusively,\textsuperscript{12} nearly all of his work in epistemology, anthropology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and missiology is grounded in his fundamental and explicit presuppositions about the historical nature of God’s activity, especially in the person of Jesus Christ, as will become clear throughout this treatment.

However, despite the central importance of this topic for the rest of Newbigin’s thought, it is relatively untouched in recent expositions of his work.

Michael Goheen’s central work, “\textit{As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You}”: \textit{J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology}, addresses some of Newbigin’s thoughts on history through the lens of eschatology and the Kingdom of God in order to helpfully illuminate Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology. Goheen skillfully accomplishes the task he sets for himself. However, he only addresses the topic of history very briefly and with reference to other matters. It is my contention that a more direct examination of Newbigin’s view of history yields additional insights into Newbigin’s view of the church and its mission and raises additional questions about Newbigin’s ecclesiological consistency.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Cf. the excursus in chapter 4.
A sympathetic reading of Donald Le Roy Stults recent book, *Grasping Truth and Reality*, yields only eight pages explicitly engaged on the subject of history. Nicholas Wood’s monograph, *Faiths and Faithfulness*, is more explicit about the importance of the subject in Newbigin’s thought. He writes, “It is virtually impossible to read anything ever written by Lesslie Newbigin without gaining a sense of his feel for history, his awareness of being part of a story, indeed of being caught up in the story of the unfolding drama of the purposes of God.” Yet, he only allots six pages to the subject and ends the discussion with the assertion that “questions about culture and epistemology…are even more fundamental…. In contrast, I intend to show that issues of culture and epistemology, among others, grow out of Newbigin’s thoughts on history, which itself is grounded on Christ.

One work that has more specific import for the topics taken up in this paper is *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* by George Hunsberger. In his book, Hunsberger dedicates an entire chapter to expositing Newbigin’s thoughts on history. He accurately and eruditely illuminates many points in Newbigin’s thought, including the relation of history to meaning, the relation of history to Christian social ethics, and the active interpretation of contemporary history. However, Hunsberger views the doctrine of

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17 *Faiths and Faithfulness*, 147.

18 *Faiths and Faithfulness*, 153.

19 *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 66.
election as even more fundamental to Newbigin’s thought than his view of history. Election is the “essential integrating notion” connecting Newbigin’s theology, and it is its roots in election that pushes Newbigin’s theology of cultural plurality to engage questions of history. On the contrary, I will contend that it is his notion of history and its importance that drives his distinctive theology of election, as well as a plethora of other elements in his thought.

Finally, the most direct and extensive exposition of Newbigin’s view of history is in the recent work done by Jürgen Schuster, *Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective: Lesslie Newbigin’s Contribution.* In this piece, Schuster very ably explains many of the sub-themes that will be taken up in this present work. There is obviously significant overlap in the doctrine of eschatology and philosophy of history. However, here again Newbigin’s view of history is subsumed under a category thought to be more potently bearing on his philosophical and theological reflection: in this case, his eschatology. Schuster claims, “The ‘fully real character of biblical eschatology’ which Newbigin reflected upon and defended at the beginning of his public ministry…shaped his understanding of human history and the role of the church in relationship to the world.” There is truth in the statement that his eschatology shaped his ecclesiology. Newbigin says this explicitly in his most prominent work on the church, *The Household*

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20 *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 66.

21 *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 278.


of God. However, I will argue that history is a more basic category of thought for Newbigin, out of which his eschatology blooms.

A more focused and intentional, rather than an indirect and piecemeal, study of Newbigin’s philosophy of history should yield a few important results. First, this study will illuminate the reason behind the coherence of Newbigin’s thought on many disparate but connected theological topics. Secondly, it will explore Newbigin’s philosophical depth and validate his position as a thinker worthy of critical philosophical engagement. Thirdly, following in Newbigin’s own rigorous practice of engaging the fundamentals of his interlocutors thoughts, it will provide a basis for dealing critically with the fundamentals of Newbigin’s own thought, probing them for their coherence, development, and consistency of implications.

III. Christ as the Epistemic Ground of History

A. Two Life-Changing Events

As related in the first section of this introduction, part of the thesis of this paper is that Newbigin’s philosophy of history is epistemically rooted in Christ. I will address this in every chapter by dedicating a section to Christ as the foundation for each specific element of Newbigin’s philosophy of history. However, it will be useful to first defend this portion of the thesis in a more general way.

When Newbigin was a young man between the years of 1928-1931, he had a vision that affected his faith and his thinking for the rest of his life. He was working with the Quakers in a service center in South Wales on behalf of miners who were plagued

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with despairing unemployment. After a particularly discouraging night, Newbigin had a vision while awake in his tent:

It was a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost. I would know where to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage.  

This vision had its effect on his theological study in the coming years. Back in Cambridge in 1933, Newbigin was studying the book of Romans at Westminster College. This was a theological watershed period for Newbigin. He relates the experience, “I began the study as a typical liberal. I ended it with a strong conviction about ‘the finished work of Christ’, about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary.”  

After these two particular experiences, the centrality of Christ (the person, not the theological construct) in all things became a major and consistent theological theme in Newbigin’s writing.  

**B. Christ, the Central Clue to History**

Throughout Newbigin’s long writing career, he regularly refers to Christ as the ground and center of his thought. He does not try to prove that Christ is the only starting point from which to understand the world because he does not think such a proof can be given for a starting point. He explains, “Every kind of systematic thought has to begin

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25 *Unfinished Agenda*, 11-12.

26 *Unfinished Agenda*, 30.

27 Hunsberger puts it clearly when he says, “The ‘total fact of Christ’ is central to his eschatology, his ecclesiology, and his missiology” (*Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 33). Obviously my project seeks to add to that list his view of history.
from some starting point. It has to begin by taking some things for granted…. No coherent thought is possible without taking some things as given…. No coherent thought is possible without presuppositions.”

He frequently uses Augustine’s phrase *credo ut intelligam* to refer to his own perspective that belief always precedes and provides the material for reason. If a starting point is really the starting point, it cannot be doubted on the basis of some prior starting point. All people either implicitly or explicitly choose a starting point in which to believe.

Newbigin not only uses Augustine’s famous phrase to denote this general epistemological truth, but also to draw attention to Augustine’s conclusion about which starting point to select. He writes, “In his famous slogan *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to know), [Augustine] defined a way of knowing that begins with the faithful acceptance of the given fact that God revealed himself in Christ.” This is indeed the way of knowing that Newbigin spent his life pursuing. For Newbigin, Christ is the epistemic ground for any true knowledge about the world. He says, “It is only in the presence of Christ, the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord, that we can speak truly about the world or be truly involved in it.”

Christ is so central to our understanding of reality, that even one of the most basic realities about God himself, his Triune character, can only be known because it was revealed to us in Christ.

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31 *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 147.

32 Cf. Chapter 5, History is Relational.
More to the point, Christ is the central clue to history: its reality, its shape, its nature, and its meaning. Newbigin puts it very concisely, “The Christian faith is a particular way of understanding history as a whole which finds in the story about Jesus its decisive clue.” This is the meaning behind the title of Newbigin’s 1969 piece, *The Finality of Christ*. In that document, he explains, “To claim finality for Christ is to claim that this is the true clue to history, the standpoint from which one truly interprets history and therefore has the possibility of being relevantly committed to the service of God in history now.” Christ is the reason we can know anything about history ontologically, he is the central turning point of the plot line of history itself, he is the way by which we can know how to interact with our own past and present history, as well as the ultimate goal of cosmic (including human) history.

C. The Historical Christ is the Central Clue

It is exceedingly important, however, that in saying “Christ is the central clue of history” we do not sneak in a Christological doctrine in the place of the man Jesus. For Newbigin, the *historical* Christ, as interpretively presented to us in the Scriptures, is the center of and clue to history, not the doctrines of Christology. This is emphatically not to say that we should look to the Christ of history and not the Christ of religion. It is to say that there is no difference between the two. Ultimate truth, that truth which can alone unite humankind, Newbigin says, “…is not a doctrine or a worldview or even a religious experience; it is certainly not to be found by repeating abstract nouns like justice and

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35 Cf. also *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 164. Schuster agrees with this assessment, “Christ is the centre of world history, its turning point, because in him the reign of God has been established and revealed on earth” (“The Clue to History,” 40).
love; it is the man Jesus Christ in whom God was reconciling the world. The truth is personal, concrete, historical.”

As I will further elaborate in chapter two, the Christ who is the central clue to history is a real historical person who has a real body, which is not whatever height, weight, or color we want to make it simply so that we can identify with him.

Newbigin puts it clearly and emphatically, “Nothing can displace the concrete historic figure of Jesus Christ from the centre of the Christian religion.” As Christians we have, says Newbigin, a confessional stance that requires commitment. And this commitment is not to a principle or an idea, but to a person. Newbigin says, “The basic commitment is to a historic persona and to historic deeds. It rests upon a life lived, upon deeds done, upon events in history.”

We believe the clue to history is a part of history. This is the only way he could be a clue for us historical persons.

In this statement we see both the primacy of Christ and the close relationship of our understanding of Christ with our understanding of history. If Christ is the concrete foundation of our thought, history must be the ground floor. To fully understand what we mean when we believe in a Christ who is a part of history, we need to know what kind of thing history is. Christ is not a part of a history that is an illusion or mere illustration of higher ahistorical principles or ideas (chapter 2). He is not a mere instance of divinity in a cyclical history that repeatedly brings divinity and humanity into contact (chapter 3). He does not take the reins of history, but obediently submits to the will of the Father, in his


37 The Finality of Christ, 68.

38 The Open Secret, 165.
life, death, and his future return (chapter 4). He is not an isolated individual whose words and deeds have no impact on us except in how we autonomously appropriate them (chapter 5). Christians believe, says Newbigin, in a Christ who is part of a real, non-repeatable, contingent, and relational history. This Christ teaches us about the history he inhabits with the goal that ultimately we may know him who inhabits history better.

Therefore, I view my task as very similar to Newbigin’s. He makes a statement in *The Finality of Christ* that holds true for almost all of his works, “The ensuing discussion will be on the basis of this commitment [to Jesus Christ]. There will be no attempt to demonstrate the finality of Jesus. What will be attempted will be the much more modest task of exploring what it means to claim finality for him.”39 This will be my task as well, to describe Newbigin’s view of history as it rests on the foundation of Christ, and to show how the world looks differently when standing on so firm a foundation.

**IV. Does Newbigin Have a Philosophy of History?**

In Goheen’s review of Hunsberger’s *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, he reminisces about Newbigin’s response to hearing a paper entitled “Newbigin’s Philosophy of Culture.” Newbigin commented, “I became rather alarmed because I didn’t know I had a philosophy of culture.”40 I suppose Newbigin may be alarmed at the aim of this paper in a similar way. As far as I can tell, he never uses the term “philosophy of history” to denote his own thoughts. And while due to time restraints I have not been able to read the entirety of Newbigin’s immense corpus (which Wainwright notes “runs to

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several hundred titles”) I have only been able to locate two occasions in which he uses the phrase. Both times, Newbigin puts the words in the mouths of other scholars.

The first occasion is in 1963 in his piece *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine of Today’s Mission*, wherein Newbigin says:

Charles Cochrane (Christianity and Classical Culture, p. 474) has shown how the classical attempt to formulate a philosophy of history came to an end with the concept of ‘fortune’. When Rome, fortune’s favourite, fell, nothing was left of the philosophy…. Such high-sounding phrases as ‘the logic of history’ may easily cover the same banal paganism as Rome’s ‘fortune’. But a Christian cannot possibly identify the purpose of God with whatever is currently the successful political line…. 

What is instructive about Newbigin’s use of the term “philosophy of history” in this instance is that Cochrane does *not* use the phrase here. It seems to be Newbigin’s paraphrase of Cochrane’s statement, “…the quest for a principle of historical intelligibility…. “ This principle of historical intelligibility (or, as Newbigin puts it, philosophy of history) failed, but according to Christians at the time it is because they did not have the right principle. Cochrane maintains that Christians substituted Christ the *logos* for the fortune of classical thought, thus defining their own principle of historical intelligibility. While Newbigin would vehemently reject the notion that Christ is a principle rather than a person, and while he retains the freedom of God to act as he chooses in history rather than to conform to a static principle (cf. chapter four), I will show that Newbigin does believe Christ is that which reveals the nature and shape of history to the world. Christ provides us, in Newbigin’s view, with history’s shape, nature,

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direction, and meaning, as well as with some understanding of how we can know and write about historical events (historiography). It seems that his use of the term ‘philosophy of history’ in this case validates my decision to use it with respect to Newbigin’s thought insofar as it denotes congruent thoughts about history predicated on some firm basis of secondary reflection.

The second instance of Newbigin’s usage of this term comes only three years later in a quote from Rudolph Bultmann’s book Kerugma and Myth. Bultmann says,

Eschatology tells us the meaning and goal of the time process, but that answer does not consist in a philosophy of history, like pantheism, where the meaning and goal of history are to be seen in each successive moment, or like the belief in progress, where the goal is realized in a future Utopia…. Indeed eschatology is not at all concerned with the meaning and goal of secular history, for secular history belongs to the old aeon, and therefore can have neither meaning nor goal.44

This instance is more difficult to use as a guide for my project; however, there are yet a couple of items to note. First, Bultmann uses the term philosophy of history to denote pantheism and the belief in progress. In contrast to a philosophy of history, he proposes a personal existential meaning that rejects meaning for secular history altogether. This response to the idea of progress is what Newbigin calls “The Escape from History.”45

Second, while Newbigin carefully distinguishes his view from that of pantheism and the idea of progress (as I will show), he rejects Bultmann’s rejection of meaning in history as a whole. He writes, “Only an interpretation of the Gospel which puts in the centre God’s total purpose for human history is true to the Bible, and I am persuaded that only such an

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44 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 45, quoted from Rudolph Bultmann, Kerygma and Myth, 116.

45 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 47.
interpretation can meet the realities of a world in process of secularization…"46 This usage of ‘philosophy of history’ then also militates toward using it as a description of Newbigin’s thoughts on the subject.

I have addressed the issue of using the term “philosophy of history” of Newbigin’s thought over against Newbigin’s own explicit silence on the matter. However, another possible objection to the using this phrase for Newbigin’s thought may come from some forms of the academic discipline of philosophy of history. The genesis and frequent usage of ‘philosophy of history’ either in disregard of or direct and intentional contradiction to Christian theology seems to pose a problem for a philosophy so self-consciously grounded on the person of Jesus Christ. Voltaire coined ‘philosophy of history’ in the 1760s in order to free historical thinking from the prison of Christian historiography. 47 Karl Löwith also opposes Christian thought to philosophy of history when he says of Augustine’s work, “It is not a philosophy of history but a dogmatic-historical interpretation of Christianity.”48 To restate this same objection in different terms, one might say that Newbigin is doing theology of history rather than philosophy of history, conceived as radically distinct, if not entirely separable, enterprises. He relies on Christian special revelation for his constructive views, from which he can intelligently critique the philosophical views of others. In order to be doing philosophy he would have to base his insights purely on reason, and in so doing interact with the philosophical guild on its own terms.

46 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 46.


48 Karl Löwith, Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949), 166.
However, Newbigin himself does not share this understanding of philosophy because he does not believe that it is possible to ground one’s belief on reason rather than revelation. He rejects the false choice set up by modernism which says that either reason or revelation can be chosen as one’s epistemological authority, and theology makes use of the latter while philosophy is grounded in the former. Going yet further, Newbigin explicitly rejects reason as a basis/foundation for knowledge at all. Reason is not the type of thing that can be a source of information. He writes,

Tradition is not a separate source of revelation from Scripture; it is the continuing activity of the Church through the ages in seeking to grasp and express under new conditions that which is given in Scripture…. It would be equally inappropriate to speak of reason as though it were a third source of true knowledge to be put alongside Scripture and tradition as the third in a triad. No one can grasp and make sense of what is given in Scripture except by the use of reason, and—similarly—reason does not operate except within a continuing tradition of speech which is the speech of a community whose language embodies a shared way of understanding. Reason is a faculty with which we seek to grasp the different elements in our experience in an ordered way so that, as we say, they make sense. It is not a separate source of information about what is the case.\textsuperscript{49}

Reason, in his view, is the mill not the grist. It processes rather than generates. Reason, shaped and molded as it is in every person by one’s culture, language, and plausibility structures, takes what is revealed and ascertains the ‘fit’ of that revelation/experience with one’s previously interpreted revelation.

According to Newbigin, any sort of philosophy that is purportedly done on the basis of reason misunderstands itself. This is why Newbigin is emphatically and self-consciously not doing philosophy of history in the modern sense as developed by scholars such as Lessing and Hegel. In fact, Newbigin writes,

Every exercise of reason depends on a social and linguistic tradition which is, therefore, something which has the contingent, accidental character of all

\textsuperscript{49} The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 53.
historical happenings. Lessing’s great gulf which he confessed himself unable to jump, the gulf between accidental events of history and universal truths of reason, disappears upon closer inspection. There are no “truths of reason” except those that have been developed in a historical tradition.50

His claim is that rationality is used in every tradition, but traditions of rationality differ. He argues, “Reason operates in this [Mosaic] tradition no less rigorously than in the tradition of though which has developed from the discoveries of Kepler. The difference between these two traditions is not that one relies on reason and the other on revelation. Both are inconceivable apart from their rationality.”51 The difference is the choosing a different revelation as primarily authoritative and/or a different tradition of rationality by which to make sense of the various revelations in our experience. According to Newbigin, the Christian revelation and tradition of rationality has as much de jure right to make universal claims and to be debated by philosophers as does Platonic ontology or modern materialism. There is no neutral tradition from which we can do philosophy, while the rest are doing various forms of theology.

Therefore, calling Newbigin’s view a philosophy of history rather than a theology of history is emphatically not to make a fine distinction between the two. It is to reject the distinction as a product of the modern dualism between reason and revelation as discrete sources of knowledge. In this sense, I am using the term in a more Augustinian tradition, which is the sense in which I believe Newbigin used it as well. It would be just as accurate to call it a theology of history, if you like, provided that does not reconstruct the old dualism.

50 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 57.

51 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 60.
So, we have avoided two misunderstandings about Newbigin’s ‘philosophy of history’, one from the direction of Newbigin scholarship and one from the direction of modern philosophers of history. The latter uses the term history primarily with regard to events in the past (and sometimes in the present and future as well). Lastly, we must deal with an objection from those in the technical analytic camp of philosophy of history (e.g. Collingwood), who use the word ‘history’ to denote the practice of writing about past events. In this view, the phrase ‘philosophy of history’ is restricted to the painstaking explication and critique in philosophical terms of exactly what is going on in the process of researching and writing about past events. Now, although Newbigin does intentionally address the modern discipline of historiography at its epistemological roots (as I will later show), he does not do so in the technical language of the discipline nor does he do so for its own sake. Rather Newbigin’s project is consistently to make use of this undergirding philosophical structure in order to answer pressing ecclesiological or cultural questions.

At this point, if I have adequately done my work, it should be clear in what sense I am claiming a philosophy of history for Newbigin. Granted that he never formally systematized his interpretation of universal history, his views can nevertheless be expressed somewhat systematically. Furthermore, while his interpretation of universal history was an interpretation in accordance with a person rather than a principle, he certainly had such a self-consciously grounded interpretation, and it is the task of the forthcoming chapters to begin to illuminate some of its implicit systematic character. For that reason, I will describe various categories in Newbigin’s philosophy of history, rather than telling the story of past, present, and future through those categories. The cosmic story method is the strategy employed by many famous philosophers of history from
Augustine to Schelling. Indeed, Newbigin himself preferred to tell the story rather than to detail analytical arguments. However, in an effort to deal clearly with various elements of Newbigin’s philosophy and theology which do not fall neatly into a historical time period such as past, present and future, I will attempt to draw out four prominent elements in Newbigin’s philosophy of history, moving from more basic to more complex features.

I will briefly remind the reader of those elements here. In chapter two, I will show the seemingly prosaic but incredibly important fact that history for Newbigin is indeed real, rather than illusion or relatively unimportant compared with ideas or eternity. In chapter three, I will show that Newbigin’s view of history follows the image of a road, over against the Hindu and Greco-Roman view of history as a wheel with which Newbigin dealt frequently during his ministry. Chapter four explains Newbigin’s view of history’s contingency, in contradiction to the idea of progress which was the subject of one of his earliest theological critiques. In this sense, history can be conceived of as u-shaped rather than a smooth line of ascendancy. In chapter five, I describe Newbigin’s relational view of history, which opposes what he calls the atomic and oceanic views. In the course of each of these chapters, my aim will be to show how each element of history is epistemically rooted in Christ and has significant implications for the life and thought of the church and culture. Finally, in chapter six I will offer some of my own evaluations of the ongoing value of Newbigin’s philosophy of history as well as some areas of critique.

Without further elaboration, then, we will enter Newbigin’s philosophy of history. Throughout these pages, I hope the reader sees that Newbigin’s view of history is the
central thread holding the fabric of his thought together and that Christ is the one who reveals to us the pattern of that fabric while it is yet on the loom.
CHAPTER TWO
HISTORY IS REAL

I. Introduction

Is the realm of history an illusion from which we need to awake? Does salvation lie in escaping from history? The claim that history is illusory and escapable is, says Newbigin, made in a wide variety of ways. Perhaps it is the Greek conception of God as a timeless Being for whom time is not a reality.\(^1\) Perhaps it is the Vedantic Hinduism that describes all multiplicity and change as meaningless *maya* from which we must attempt escape.\(^2\) Perhaps it is the epistemological skepticism of postmodern thinkers that jettisons any hope for accessing a world outside of our radically solipsistic selves. The belief that history is an illusion or at best a shadow of reality has been a powerful culture-shaping belief in societies throughout time and all across the world.

Indeed, in Newbigin’s view, it has shaped beliefs and behaviors in various other areas of life and thought. If history is a mere shadow of the reality that lies in the realm of ideas, then the ‘accidents’ of history need not fundamentally affect how we live or believe. It is this view that allows, from Newbigin’s perspective, for an existentialist approach to the gospels such as Bultmann’s. He paraphrases Bultmann’s view of faith in this way, “The belief is equally authentic, even if it was belief in something which did not happen, in fact even if it was false. Faith concerns the individual in his self-

\(^1\) *The Open Secret*, 24.

\(^2\) “The Quest for Unity through Religion,” 20. NB that the doctrine of *maya* does not mean that all appearances are, strictly speaking, illusions. What it does entail is that all perceived change and multiplicity is an illusion, which by extension means that history, conceived of as various events, people and things that change over time is illusory.
understanding; it does not stand or fall with what happens in the history of the world. I submit that this is precisely the wrong way to re-state the Christian message for modern secular man.”3 The events of history are, for Bultmann, completely separate from the notion of faith. He writes, “Faith…must not aspire to an objective basis in dogma or history on pain of losing its character as faith.”4 Such a view of religious beliefs as ultimately private values that cannot be affected by the public facts of history not only defends those values from attack by historians (should they draw conclusions that contradict one’s beliefs), but it also strips faith of its public effect.

If faith is radically private, separate from all other people and events in the world, then it is very difficult to see how one could, on the basis of faith, make public judgments about economic systems, political events, or even the behavior of one’s neighbor. If there is a fundamental divide between historical fact and religious value, then one cannot cross it in either direction. Indeed, this is the belief of many people in the West, including many Christians. Religion should be kept out of the public square, and therefore people must put aside their religious convictions when dealing with the concrete events and people around them. If ideas and ethical principles are the fundamental reality in the realm of ontology and ethics, then the flesh of history is accidental and only marginally related to reality.

These are just some of the implications of a very general and somewhat vague disbelief in the reality of history. However that disbelief, as previously mentioned, takes a handful of specific forms, and Newbigin defends the reality of history from a variety of forms.

3 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 49.

4 Rudolf Bultmann, Faith and Understanding, 41, quoted in Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 49.
different directions. First, I will describe Newbigin’s defense against those who say that
time (and therefore change) is not a reality for God, a belief which he thinks negatively
conditions our disposition toward history. Second, Newbigin defends the reality of the
historical past and our ability to know about that past over against those who are skeptical
of our ability to know anything that is not radically conditioned by our subjectivity. The
availability of the past is an important corollary of its reality because in a very important
sense it would not matter if the past is real if we could not possibly know it. Third, even
the ontological reality of the historical present is mitigated in the Vedantic doctrine of
\textit{maya}, which Newbigin challenges in part based on his doctrine of the Holy Spirit.
Finally, Newbigin argues for the reality of the biblical end of history over against those
who read that biblical description as a merely illustrative vision for the present reality.

\textbf{II. Description: Real God in Real Time}

\textit{A. The Reality of Time for God}

Newbigin sees a challenge to the fundamental reality of history in some versions
of the doctrine of immutability. He believes that Christian theologians have often been
led astray in this regard by the Greek philosophical tradition.\textsuperscript{5} In the lectures entitled
“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress”, Newbigin clarifies that the reality of
events means that they must be significant for that which nearly all theists take to be the
ultimate reality, God. He writes, “[The Bible] interprets history as a real process in which
real events happen, events that is to say which have significance for God Himself.”\textsuperscript{6} In
other words, part of what is entailed by the belief that history is a “real process” with

\textsuperscript{5} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 35.

“real events” is that they are real for God. He immediately goes on to describe the God for whom such a real history is possible, “The biblical picture of God is not a changeless and impersonal absolute, but an active will, seeking, calling, leading, punishing, and forgiving.”\(^7\) What does this mean? Is Newbigin describing a God that is \textit{subject} to time and change? Are we stuck with a choice between a God who is ‘a changeless and impersonal absolute’ and a God who is a fickle and disturbingly powerless victim of change?\(^8\)

God, Newbigin says, is neither completely alien to temporality, but neither is he subject to time. Here, he invokes the Christian doctrine of creation to describe how one should understand the relationship of God and time. He writes, “Time is the creation of God, but it is a real creation of which He takes account as He does the rest of creation.”\(^9\) Time is in its essence the working of God. The activity of God is what we human beings call “time,” so God is radically active in all of history.\(^10\) As such, time is no doubt very real for God, but it is also radically subject to him just like any of his creations.\(^11\) Time is also, therefore, “real for us”; however, it is “not subject to us.”\(^12\) God’s activity, while completely subject to his will, is a given for us.\(^13\)

\(^7\) “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 8.

\(^8\) One can see in these questions the immediate and obvious question of Open Theism. Newbigin does makes some similar critiques of the traditional doctrine of immutability as contemporary Open Theists, but, as I show in the forthcoming paragraphs, Newbigin does not go so far as Open Theists in subjecting God to time.


\(^10\) This is what many theologians, especially in the Reformed tradition, refer to as God’s providence. This corresponds to the radical contingency of history that I will explore in chapter 4.

B. The Reality of the Past

The past has happened, and it cannot be changed—not even by God. The reality of past events grounds the reality of the present. Many things that are true of the world (not just things that are incidentally true but rather critically true) would not be so if it were not for particular past events in history. This statement may seem to many Western readers to be so obvious as to be almost tautological. However, the importance of the past’s reality is disbelieved by many people around the world. Newbigin singles out Buddhism as a prime example. In his summary explanation he says:

The truths which Buddhism teaches would (as Buddhists understand them) be true whether or not Gautama had discovered and promulgated them. But the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings.

Events in the history of the world have very real and very significant implications. In fact, the very importance of historical events is defined by their contribution to history as a whole. Newbigin writes, “An event is important historically not when it illustrates

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13 One area of critique for Newbigin here is his simplicity in his understanding of language for God. He breaks down speech of God into two categories: literal and symbolic. He then goes on to say that we must posit temporality of God literally, since we posit his loving actions in time literally and not symbolically (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 35-36). However, I believe he would both benefit from and agree with the language of analogical speech about God’s temporality. In describing the “literality” of God’s love, he means that God really loves in a way that corresponds to what we understand as a father’s love. However, he concedes that this “of course immeasurably more pure and good than the best parental love we know” (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 35). Indeed, in the manuscript for this address, he had a note to insert a description of Thomas Aquinas on analogical language here, but we do not know what he said on the subject since he did not expand on the note and there is no recording of the lecture.

14 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 36. This is a view for which Newbigin credits Aquinas.

15 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 66. Note the similarity of his description of Buddhism to his aforementioned description of Bultmann.
certain general or timeless laws, but when, by its actual happening, it contributes in such and such a way to the development of a whole historical process.”\(^{16}\) This statement reveals Newbigin’s belief in the ontological priority of history over ideas or principles that are abstracted from real historical circumstances. That is why significance is derived from the event’s effect on history rather than its illustration of an abstract truth. In this way, we see that meaning and reality are integrally connected for Newbigin. He claims, “I here confess my belief that there are happenings which are significant in the sense that they change the course of history and not just the way men think.”\(^{17}\)

Newbigin derives his desire to retain the ontological priority of history primarily from his desire to know God. The Christian faith, contrary to Buddhism, understands God to be a person, and as such he can only be known in and through personal revelation, that is, through his words and deeds.\(^{18}\) But these must be actions that take place in history. Newbigin puts the necessity of God’s action in history this way, “If God does not act in history, what meaning can there be in saying that God acts at all? And if there is no category in which we can speak of God acting, what meaning can we attach to the word ‘God’?”\(^{19}\) To claim the reality of the past is, for Newbigin, necessary for claiming that God can be known, particularly through his words that have been spoken and deeds that have been done.

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\(^{17}\) “The Centrality of Jesus for History,” 204.

\(^{18}\) Cf. chapter 5.

\(^{19}\) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 69.
C. The Availability of the Past

But what good is the reality of the past if it is fundamentally unavailable? How does the reality of the past help us to know God if the past is unknowable? This is the question that many postmodern epistemologists would put to Newbigin. Every statement about the past necessarily does violence to the past, interpreting it not as it was, but as a particular person can fit it into their pre-existing mental schemas. In other words, the past cannot be recounted without some kind of interpretation, and the interpretation is not the thing itself.

As a matter of fact, Newbigin would heartily agree that there is no communicating the past without interpretation. He defends this view against those who naively suppose one can reach value free descriptions of history. As an example of just one clear statement on the matter, he writes, “We can no longer accept a positivist conception of history which supposes that ‘facts’ are the given data which can and should be isolated and identified apart from any judgment of the historian about their meaning.”20 One must use language to communicate history, and therefore one is using an existing plausibility structure (i.e. a way of understanding and valuing the world) that shapes the use of language, the definitions and connotations of words, the grammatical structure, etc.21 Therefore, the writing of history is unavoidably a value-laden enterprise.

The values of the writer permeate beyond the language she uses. She also must make selections from among the copious amounts of material available to her, which in turn have been preserved because of a value that the original writers and preservers

20 The Finality of Christ, 53.

placed on these particular events over and above others, namely those events which have since lapsed into obscurity. Newbigin puts it plainly, “All historical writing involves the selection of the most significant from among the almost infinite mass of records. The selection is necessarily based upon the provisional judgment of the historian, which again depends upon his own understanding of and commitment to the course of events in his own time.” Recounting facts about any event would be an endless enterprise if one did not select the relevant facts to recount. That process of selection requires that the selector have an interpretation of the event’s meaning (though it is often implicit and unstated) that determines the criteria for ‘relevance.’

This culturally conditioned history, however, is not therefore inherently unreliable. Rather, it is only by use of these concepts and structures that a useful interpretation can be given. Newbigin says, “On the contrary, they help us to understand the periods about which they write precisely because they themselves were trying to understand them in the only way in which anything can be understood— namely by seeking to grasp the data in the power of those concepts which they themselves had come to acknowledge as valid.”22 In other words, why except an a priori standard for knowledge (namely interpretation-free data) which is entirely foreign to the way we come to know things and which is impossible to carry out? The sheer fact that all of our knowledge is conditioned by our plausibility structures should lead us not to believe that we cannot know anything, but rather to believe that having a plausibility structure does not rule out the reliability of our beliefs. With that in mind, the proper concern becomes

whether or not the structure in question helps one to know the true significance of things, including the past.

If Newbigin’s vision of the past is right, that it is both real and epistemologically available (even if not in objective, disinterested purity as some historians have hoped), one still has to agree that, since we do not have direct access to past events, we cannot prove beyond all doubt that they happened or that they have the particular significance with which we invest them. Therefore, the natural question is one raised by one of Newbigin’s Hindu friends, “Why…should I be so foolish as to risk the salvation of my soul on questionable events in history? What is at stake?” His answer to this question is existential without being solipsistic, “The present which I now live and experience will become the past for future believers. My way of understanding the past must be valid also for their way of understanding my present.” That is to say, if their past is not real, neither is my present. This leads us into the consideration of our next topic: Newbigin’s understanding of the real present.

D. The Reality of the Present

As in the past, so in the present. The reality and the meaningfulness of my present are integrally connected. My present cannot be very real if it is not meaningful, and if it is real than it will have some kind of meaning. For my present existence to be significant it must have some effect on the future and some meaning in terms of its contribution to the ongoing whole of history. Like the past, the reality and significance of my present life,

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23 cf. Truth to Tell, 33-37


actions, and words does not lie in some participation in the realm of ideas or principles (like a lived fable), but rather in its participation in the ongoing whole of the story of human history.

This does not mean, however, that I secure the significance of my own actions. Indeed, I cannot, because I will die, and likely will be forgotten in due course. One of Newbigin’s favorite ways of describing this phenomenon is to say that all our work will be buried beneath the rubble of history. Nevertheless, Newbigin, says, there is one that can make sure nothing is forgotten:

We commit everything now into His hands who is Himself the End. We can do this with complete confidence, knowing that death and destruction have been robbed of their power, that even if our works fail and are buried in the rubble of human history, and if our bodies fall into the ground and die, nothing is lost, because He is able to keep that which we commit to Him against that Day.

The one who trusts in Christ trusts him not only for their justification, but also to secure the significance of their present words and works as he, by his Spirit, weaves their story into the one story of the whole world.

Indeed, it is the activity of God that makes the present fundamentally real. If, as we saw earlier, time is essentially the activity of God, then the very existence of the present time is dependent upon whether or not God is active in it. God is not less active now, in Newbigin’s perspective, then he was in the past. He still sovereignly rules over all events in history by his Spirit, and therefore time and history are presently real for him.

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26 “The Kingdom of God and Our Hopes for the Future,” 10;

27 “The Present and Coming Christ,” 123, emphasis original.
Newbigin also speaks of the Spirit as the present pledge of a future fullness. He argues, “The Holy Spirit is such an *arrabon* of the Kingdom. It is, on the one hand, a real foretaste of the love and joy and peace which are the very substance of God’s rule. But—on the other hand—it is not yet the fulness of these things. It is the solid pledge which gives assurance that the fulness is coming.”28 What does Newbigin mean when he refers to the future Kingdom as ‘the fulness’? Does he mean that the future is somehow *more real* than the past or the present?29

**E. The Reality of the Future**30

Past and present history is not the shadowy image of some invisible idea, but Newbigin does talk about them as the shadow of some ultimate future. He writes, “The eschatological in Christian experience [i.e. the present] is the shadow of the eschaton cast backwards across time, but if the eschaton is itself non-existent, then the shadow must disappear.”31 The reality of the present and the past of Christian experience somehow depend on the reality of the eschatological future. This is not history lapping back onto itself, to put it metaphorically. As I will show in the next chapter, Newbigin’s view of history is distinctly linear, in the sense of non-repetitive. Rather, we see here once again the connection for Newbigin of reality and meaning. The end will reveal once and for all the meaning of the whole story, which it can only do if it is a real end. Thus, if there is no

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28 *Sign of the Kingdom*, 37.

29 To put imaginary teeth to this question, one may consider the image C.S. Lewis gives in his *The Great Divorce* of a heaven that is more tangible or concrete than earthly matter.

30 This section will only deal sparingly with the reality of the future, the end of history, since the topic will be covered in greater length in chapter 3.

end there is no meaning generated by that end for the present. The shadow of the eschaton to which Newbigin refers is the self-revelation by God of the end (and thus purpose and meaning) he intends for history. Newbigin writes, “…the prolepsis is not a metaphysical marvel like some recent so-called experiments with time. It is the self-communication of God’s will, grasped by faith here and now, which enables us already to live in the light of its final goal.”32 Indeed, all of our hope is directed to the sure, real future.

Does the future have to be present to God for it to be real? And if it is always present to God, how can it end? As previously noted, God interacts differently with future time and past time, according to Newbigin. Part of what it means that time is real for God is that he takes the distinctions in time seriously. For example, he can alter the future, but not the past.33 That does not, however, mean that the future will not be a real end. It is simply not a real present.34 Newbigin is clear on this point, “[Christ] will visibly terminate and consummate the world history in which He is now at work hiddenly. There will be a real end.”35 What assures that end is not its presence to God now, but rather (as I will show in chapter four) the promises and activity of a faithful and sovereign God.


34 While I find no evidence that Newbigin was significantly influenced by Schelling, this concept of time finds some similarities with Schelling’s view, wherein the future could have being in the present as future, even though it does not have being as present until it becomes present. (Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, The Ages of the World, Third Version (c. 1815), trans. Jason Wirth (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2000), 315-16.

This is why our hope is contingent on the realization of that promised end. To those like C.H. Dodd who view Christian eschatology as completely realized, as merely a symbol to inspire present behavior, Newbigin says, “Yet surely this is to make the Christian hope into something like the proverbial carrot dangled before the nose of the donkey — something which is always just ahead, but never reached. If Christians really believed that that was the truth, there would be an end of hope.”

If the future of God’s Kingdom in its fullness is not an unrealized future reality, then the significance, the meaning, the importance of our current work is lost beneath the rubble of history.

Does this mitigate the reality of the past and present ontologically? Not at all. Newbigin says, “When we speak of the Christian Hope we must first of all make it clear that the hope of which we speak is something quite certain, more certain than tomorrow’s dawn.” However, it is only certain because of its grounding in God’s actions in the past and in the present. He writes, “The Christian hope is thus no mere wishful thinking about the future. It is based upon solid ground in the past and in the present.” The resurrection of Christ in the past and the Spirit’s present application of his resurrection power to our lives is the ground out of which the future grows. Without the past and present actions of God, the promised future reality would not even be possible. These events, as we saw earlier, are real in the sense that their happening means a different future than if they had

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36 “The Present and Coming Christ,” 122. Newbigin also wonders aloud why people might not believe in an actual end of history. This he credits to the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thought, in that the full presence of God could certainly not be applied to an end within time, since God is above time. As I have shown earlier, he believes God to be able to interact meaningful with his creation, Time, as something real and under his governance. (cf. “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 35).

37 “The Present and Coming Christ,” 118.

38 “The Present and Coming Christ,” 118.
not happened. However, since they have happened and are happening, the future is secure and very real, even though it has yet to be realized.

III. Foundation: The Fact of Christ

Why think all this? How does one know that time is real for God, that past, present, and future have a solid ontological reality, that the past is available, and that events can fundamentally change the course of history? I have already shown one answer to this question by way of implication. As I have argued in the introduction, Newbigin believes that Christ, as he is revealed in the Christian Scriptures, is the primary epistemic ground for all his claims. Therefore, in order to ground the reality of history over against his various interlocutors, Newbigin turns to the person and work of Jesus, what he calls, “the fact of Christ.”

The Kingdom of God is not an idea. It was and is a present reality in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God entered the stream of public history, activating his plan in an actual human being named Jesus who lived in the Middle East in the first century. In The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Newbigin clarifies that historical events are not just illustrations or fables because there have been decisive historical events in the life of Jesus.

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39 A careful reader might note that something more specific needs to be true for this statement to be accurate. For the events in the past or present to make a difference on the shape of the future, we must believe history to be more like a line than a circle. In other words, there must be able to be significant distinctions between historical happenings and epochs, not just reiterations of the same cosmic principles with different clothing. I will address this topic in the next chapter, “History is a Road.”

40 “Faith to receive and hold and trust in God's mighty deeds of redemption wrought out once for all in the past; love shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us; and hope that waits with eager longing and patient endurance for the completion of His glorious purpose: these three belong together, and we can only understand the Christian hope rightly in this indissoluble relation with faith and love” (“The Present and Coming Christ,” 119).

41 The Finality of Christ, 75. This is a phrase he borrowed from his teacher, Dr. Carnegie Simpson.
of Jesus that have changed the whole of the world’s story. He writes, “The gospel is not just the illustration (even the best illustration) of an idea. It is the story of actions by which the human situation is irreversibly changed. The concreteness, the specificity, the ‘happenedness’ of this can in no way be replaced by a series of abstract nouns [such as love, justice, and peace].” He draws out the concreteness of Christ by describing his historical particularities:

Because it is a happening, it is part of history. It is located at a particular point of place and time in the whole vast fabric of human affairs…. It happened outside Jerusalem and not outside Tokyo or Madras, in the first century and not the tenth or the twentieth. The necessary particularity of the happening is a cause of offense to millions of devout people. To millions of people…it seems self-evident that God’s presence must be equally available to all people of all time in all places. Jesus Christ cannot be conceived as a placeholder for a great spiritual man. At stake is the very substance of the Christian message, “…if it be not historically true that in actual fact a person named Jesus lived, taught, died, and rose again in substantially the manner portrayed by the New Testament, then the whole claim of Christianity to be a revelation falls to the ground.” The name refers to a real person with a home, one biological mother, and a particular amount of body hair. God became a particular man, not “man” in the sense of humankind, and therefore validated the particular in history as both real and effective.

Moreover, Newbigin expressly states that the ‘fact of Christ’ itself is not value-free. He explains:

42 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 166.

43 *The Open Secret*, 50-1.

A ‘fact of history’ is an interpretation of evidence. The ‘fact of Christ’…is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus interpreted by the apostles. Apart from their faith, the very name of Jesus would be unknown to us; there would be no ‘fact of Christ’ for us to believe in. Like other facts of history, the fact of Christ is available to us now because of the judgment of contemporaries about its significance.  

Jesus did not leave us with a book of his own writings in a language which could not be translated. He left us with his Spirit-filled apostles who themselves translated the accurately interpreted story of Jesus into the language and cultures of their people. This, Newbigin, believes must be instructive for how we access real history. It is not only ‘real’ if it is devoid of subjective appropriation.

IV. Conclusion: Implications of History’s Reality

By now it should be sufficiently obvious that Newbigin believes in the reality of history and on what foundations he grounds that belief. But why does it matter? What do we lose if we see history as illusory, ontologically secondary to ideas, or completely epistemologically unavailable? Newbigin, as a bishop for twenty seven years, was not oblivious to the impact of these deep metaphysical questions on the everyday life and thought of individuals and communities. He asks, “What is at stake in the Christian insistence on the 'happenedness' of the story told in the New Testament? Does it matter whether or not these things actually happened? Is it not much more important that we grasp for ourselves the meaning of the story?”  

Why is it important that history, and particularly this history, is real?

If the past is real, that means it can affect the future. Things may very well be different because of past and present happenings, whereas they certainly would not be

45 The Finality of Christ, 75.

different because of some unreal event.⁴⁷ That means that my life, and the life of my community, would not be the way it is without very particular events in the past. If this is true, and the story of Jesus is said to be part of this very real continuum of past and present and future events, then one has to grapple with the potential impact of the historical event of Jesus’ resurrection. One cannot believe it to be ‘true’ in some non-historical sense and remain unchanged. We cannot ignore the historical question. One must ask if it has happened or not. If the answer is that it has happened, if Jesus really has risen from the dead and history is real, then his resurrection may very well have an ongoing effect in and significance for the world in which we live.⁴⁸

This significance impacts both how our relationship with God is affected by the world around us, by our relationships, systems, and cultures, and how our relationship with God affects how we interact with the world. It is helpful here to quote Newbigin at length:

> The issue is this: Is this relationship with God something separate from your involvement in the ongoing life of the world, your family, your neighborhood, your nation in the family of nations? Do you have, or do you seek a relationship with God in which you can really turn your back on these other involvements? Or is your relationship with God necessarily bound up with your acceptance of the part God assigns for you in his purpose for his world? If the latter is the case, then your relationship with God cannot be separated from those acts in which God has revealed and effected his purpose for the world. Your life of devotion to God will be expressed in and through your involvement with history as you are now part of it. You will understand your own life as part of a story which is not a story made up by you, not just the story of your decisions and actions, but the story which is being enacted under God’s creative and providential control in the events of

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⁴⁷ It is hard to know what that phrase might even mean. If it did not happen, it is not an event (a happening). It therefore would very naturally have no ongoing effect. Newbigin shares his frustration with this kind of language when he says, “It is sometimes said that the resurrection is an event outside history. This seems to me simply a sentence without any meaning. If it happened it is not outside history” (Honest Religion for Secular Man, 54).

⁴⁸ For a fuller explanation of why a real event two thousand years ago should have an impact on people today, cf. chapter 5.
contemporary history. It will be of the very essence of the matter that the events and places which you read in your Bible are part of the real world and the real history—the same world in which you live…49

If faith has an object about which we can make ontological claims, if the name of Jesus is not just a placeholder or an illustration of the idea of perfect humanity, then our faith is affected by the real events of history, including those recorded in the Bible.50

Therefore, faith is no longer relegated to the tiny world of private values. Rather, it has public effect. It bears on the way we live in the world. If historical events are ontologically primary to ideas and do not get their significance from their participation in some other worldly form or principle, then the way we live in the world must reflect this. That is to say, history must have an impact on ethics.51 The impact on ethics is twofold: 1) our communication and ethical decisions will be more contextual, and 2) we will not shy away from proclamations on public ethical issues such as politics, economics, or education.

First, our ethical decisions will be more contextual in that they will take the real historical circumstances of the present situation as critically important to the decision that must be made. Given an ethical question, we cannot make decisions upon disembodied principles, because such principles are not the primary reality.52 They are subject to the


50 As I will note in chapter 5, history can *theoretically* be both real and atomic, in the sense that all real beings are fundamentally isolated. On that picture, however, the foregoing statement would still be accurate because the only object of faith about which it would be possible to make ontological claims would be oneself in that radically solipsistic system. In that case, one’s faith would still be affected by one’s real self.

51 *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 141.
concrete historical realities that have spawned them, and, for the Christian, our ethical principles are grounded in the historical reality of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, we take our present ethical decisions and actions to be significant in light of their place in the history of God’s redemption of the world. To take this past historical reality and the future historical impact seriously means we must take the present historical reality seriously as well. Newbigin puts it this way:

The Christian’s conduct is not simply deduced from timeless truths. It takes seriously the accepted patterns of each time and place. This means that there will be different patterns of conduct for Christians in different times and places. This is in turn rooted to the fact that the Christian’s life is understood in a historical perspective—understood, that is to say, form the point of view of its place in the carrying to completion of God’s purpose for the whole life of mankind…. If a ‘religious’ ethic means an ethic of sheer blind submission to external standards of behaviour supposed to belong to a supra-natural order of being, then the Christian must be against it.53

Newbigin believes that the fact of Christ’s incarnation also conditions how the gospel can be communicated. If Christ is the good news, and Christ came as a man with a particular body and culture and language, then the most important historical events of history (those that surround his life, death, and resurrection) cannot be communicated without culture and language. His language to this effect is adamant:

Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh…. There can never be a culture-free gospel.54

52 "It is this actual body, this community…which is the prior reality, having ontological primacy over the particular styles of life and ethical codes and political principles which it may develop as it seeks to be faithful in its situation" (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 147-8).

53 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 141-2.

54 Foolishness to the Greeks, 4.
These are strong words. A culture-free gospel is not only an illusion, not only an impossibility, but (if it were possible) an abandonment of the gospel. To attempt to express the reign of God in Jesus Christ in a culture-free format is to attempt to express it in the exact opposite way God chose to reveal himself to us in Jesus Christ. This also entails, if one has faith in Christ as God’s most clear and reliable revelation of himself, that cultural accretions and plausibility structures do not invalidate knowledge.

Secondly, if Christians view their lives and actions in historical perspective (that is, as continuous with the real, significant historical events of past, present and future) then we will not shy away from applying our faith to public ethical questions. If public historical events actually have bearing on our faith, then our faith is not unrelated to public historical events. It is not private. Our faith is based on, and consequently has something to say about, public fact.55

In Newbigin’s view, the ontological reality and primacy of history has enormous implications on our life and thought. It also has enormous impact for other concerns in the philosophy of history. In the reality of history, we begin to see the echoes of history’s other characteristics. If the reality of history means that a historical event finds its significance in its significance for the story as a whole, then history must be fundamentally relational. If the reality of history (‘history’ in the sense of the succession of events) and the reality of history’s end is radically contingent on the activity of a non-pantheistic or panentheistic God, then history must not be a smooth ascent into utopia. Finally, if the reality of history means a real past, present, and future with a real end, then

55 The reality of history is closely related to its relational nature. Therefore, this theme of public ethics will be expanded in the conclusion of chapter 5.
history is likely to be conceived in the shape of a road rather than a wheel. This last implication of history’s reality will be the subject of the next chapter.
I. Introduction

To take history as real, to believe that the events in the past, present and future have significant ontological status insofar as they contribute to the whole story, to believe that the temporal succession of moments is real to God, is to imply that history can be conceived of as a relatively linear road.¹ This is not to say that history is a smooth progression of ascendancy into utopia.² Rather, moment succeeds moment and does not relapse or repeat. There is continuity without repetition.

Not everyone believes that history is a linear road. According to Newbigin, both Indian and Greco-Roman philosophical traditions view the events of history as basically circular in shape, repeating themselves over and over in different times and places with different people but having the same essential components.³ He writes,
The main intellectual tradition of the Greco-Roman civilization, and of Indian civilization, has been of this opinion. It has sought for the real in the changeless and has regarded the changeful world of history as relatively unreal. Consequently, it has regarded history not as a line of development leading to a goal, but as a wheel (chakra, in Sanskrit) ceaselessly arching round the center, which alone is at rest. This cyclical view of history — so widespread and influential in all ages — is of very great significance.⁴

Newbigin vigorously and repeatedly rejects this view as not only anti-biblical but harmful to our thought and work. While, again, to many readers the linear road of history seems too basic a point to be worth belaboring, the shape of history has enormous consequences for issues we face in our everyday lives.

Is there a hope for humankind as a whole? Will there be a day when human beings will live in community with one another and yet shed only tears of joy, cry out only shouts of praise, and work only toward the good? In other words, can there be a corporate salvation? This question depends in part on this particular element in one’s philosophy of history.

If history is essentially circular and there can be no radically new event, no event that fundamentally changes history, then our only hope of salvation lies not in the redemption of the items and people in history but in escape from history. Salvation can only be radically individual and anti-historical. It can only be individual because part of what needs escaping are the repeatedly and inevitably divisive relations between persons. More importantly, if it were not individual, it would be hard to know how people would interact with each other without inherently doing so in events that occur in succession and thus entering that temporal stream of cyclical history once again.⁵ Salvation can, under

this scheme, only be anti-historical because one absolutely cannot find ultimate meaning in the cycle since it keeps going round and round to no effect. One can only find meaning in the ideas, principles, forms, or other such abstract concepts/realities. That means that how parents raise their children, what career a young person chooses, how a country votes in a presidential election, or whether or not a people rebels against a dictator have no inherent meaning. These events and decisions are ultimately insignificant by their very nature. Certainly, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are equally meaningless. They participate in the meaningless cycle from which we all must seek escape. The value of the ‘fact of Christ’ lies solely in its ability to help the individual escape the flesh, succession, and space in which the event itself took place.

Another question that is greatly impacted by this discussion of the shape of history is the contemporary question of meta-narratives. Is there one story line that encompasses the deepest truths about the world and includes coherently within it all other individual stories? Or, as Foucault would have it, do only individual stories have integrity? If history is circular, there can be no meaningful plot line. Newbigin writes, “There is no point in a circle, and so there is no story to tell. There are only stories.”

More than that, these stories are merely significant as multiple examples or illustrations of cosmic principles. They are not significant in terms of their participation in the whole story. If this is true, the circular view of history puts the testimony of Christians, which is

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5 The point here is not to say that Hindu or Buddhist soteriology claims some kind of isolated individual salvation where each of us get our own little plot of heaven. Rather, the claim is that there will be no multiplicity, thus no interaction between multiple persons. This could indeed be (and often is) considered the end of individuality as well as community, which is to say that it is a salvation to complete uniformity. In any case, the destruction of individual personhood by the destruction of relatedness would actually seem to square with Newbigin’s view that humans are not humans if they are not in relationship (cf. chapter 5 and The Open Secret, 70).

6 The Open Secret, 86.
testimony to the true story of the whole world,\textsuperscript{7} into direct conflict with the fundamental nature of reality. The Bible is not, and cannot be, what the Christian faith says it is: the story of one God who acts in history with a purpose. It must be reduced to a conglomeration of individual stories without any inherent connection or fables to teach ethical principles for everyday living.

Finally, if history is cyclical, how are we to live? From where does our sense of direction in life come? Does the word “progress” mean anything at all outside of a very narrow and relative field of experience? As Newbigin says, “…if we lose our sense of history we lose our sense of direction.”\textsuperscript{8} One can claim that she gets her sense of direction from the abstract truths of love and justice that are illustrated by various historical events. However, by what rubric does she choose which historical events illustrate the ultimate truths or principles that lie outside of history? What constitutes justice? Furthermore, are not hate and injustice principles illustrated by history as well? Why not choose these principles? It is difficult to know how one can have a rubric for these decisions without a purpose or telos, without knowing what one is working toward.

Therefore, if one wants to even entertain the beliefs in corporate salvation, a historical meta-narrative in which one’s own narrative has significance, or ultimately purposeful ethical action, then one needs a different vision for the shape of history. This is a vision that Newbigin provides.

\textsuperscript{7} To use the title of Goheen and Bartholomew’s book of the same name. (Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, \textit{The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama} (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2009).

\textsuperscript{8} “\textit{The Good Shepherd},” 129.
II. Description: A Linear Road

A. The Biblical Plot Line

The Bible, says Newbigin, is in the shape of a story with a beginning and end. It is no mere book of fables to illustrate eternal principles. He writes,

Although, of course, it contains a great variety of material—legal codes, prayers, wise sayings, and moral instruction—it is, in its overall plan and in a great part of its content, history. It sets before us a vision of cosmic history from the creation of the world to its consummation, of the nations which make up the one human family, and—of course—of one nation chosen to be the bearer of the meaning of history for the sake of all, and of one man called to be the bearer of that meaning for that nation. The Bible is universal history.\(^9\)

The Bible is a story. Stories have a plot line. They have a beginning, middle, and end. The end is not at the beginning, and vice versa.\(^10\) The Bible begins with the beginning of time, and ends with the end of time, and the intervening text is the description of how the cosmos gets from one to the other.

Newbigin points out that the New Testament writers are consistently interested in placing events in history: both in fact (i.e. there were many witnesses to Christ’s resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15:5-8) and in the temporal, successive chain of events (“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—...“, Luke 3:1).\(^11\) These details do not just add flowery trivialities to the story. Rather, they are part of its very substance. They are inextricable

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\(^9\) The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 89.

\(^10\) In the aforementioned film, Cloud Atlas, the end of the film is meant to be, in some sense, the (or a?) beginning. This is the exception, however, that proves the rule. One point of the film is to ironically use the linear plot of story to illustrate a cyclical history. Indeed, the viewer is left with questions, “Was that the beginning or the end?” What it ends up illustrating is that using the form of story to illustrate a cyclical history produces confusion because it is itself a confusion of conflicting philosophy and method.

\(^11\) The Finality of Christ, 51.
from the story of the Bible without stripping it of its essential content. Newbigin puts it this way, “The announcement occurred at a particular point in history. It cannot be detached and looked at as a piece of timeless wisdom about the human situation or about the nature of God. 'Under Pontius Pilate' is part of its substance. This placing of the announcement as an event in secular history is part of its essential character.”¹² The writers of the Bible think in terms of a real beginning, a real end, and a real succession of moments in between.¹³ That is why Newbigin, toward the beginning of his career, wrote, “The biblical interpretation of history, on the other hand, is not circular but linear. It interprets history as a real process in which real events happen, events that is to say which have significance for God Himself.”¹⁴ The Bible views history, at least in this sense, as linear.

B. Linear or U-Shaped?

However, it is important to distinguish between two ways of talking about ‘linear history’ so as not to misconstrue Newbigin’s view. This need is precipitated by Newbigin’s own words in 1992, which at first glance seem to directly negate the words just quoted. Newbigin writes:

The most powerful and pervasive of all the narratives has been the cyclical one…. The ‘meta-narrative’ of modernity has been linear, the onward march of human mastery over nature…. The Christian narrative has a shape which is neither cyclical nor linear. It is U-shaped. The creed is U-shaped, from the source of all being, down into the depths of hell, and back to the glory of the new creation.¹⁵

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Here Newbigin distinguishes between the linear view of modernity and the U-shape view of Christianity. Is this a contradiction? Is it perhaps a development of his core philosophy of history?

Schuster’s perspective on this question is too simplistic. Based on the short paper from which the above quotation is derived, he exclusively uses the term ‘linear’ to refer to the “onward march of human mastery over nature,” or, as Newbigin elsewhere refers to it, the idea of progress. However, as I have shown, Newbigin himself uses the term linear to refer to his own thinking about history earlier in his career. Rather than simplistically preferring the latter language over the former, if we ask what Newbigin meant by linear in these two different cases, we will get a more nuanced window into his philosophy of history.

This juxtaposition does not represent a contradiction or even a development of his philosophy of history, but rather a development in his articulation of the same essential philosophy. Newbigin gives various metaphors for history in order to arrive at conclusions about different elements of history. In this case, he uses the metaphor of the U-shape in order to point out that history is not some smooth ascent into glory. History, personal and societal, is interrupted by death and requires the activity of the God of the resurrection to bring it to fruition. This has been Newbigin’s view from the beginning of his career (including the lecture from which the above ‘linear’ quotation is drawn), and this U-shape of history will be the subject of the next chapter. History is still linear for Newbigin in the sense that it involves succession of moments, does not repeat itself, and

therefore allows for genuinely new events. It is on this particular piece of history’s nature that I will focus for the rest of this chapter.

C. The Road

This use of a plot line or a road to describe the history of the world is, says Newbigin, one of two ways of bringing ultimate coherence to the many disparate events of world history. He claims, “One way is to seek unity as an existent reality behind the multiplicity of phenomena; the other is to seek unity as an end yet to be obtained. The typical picture of the first is the wheel; of the second, the road.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, we see an incredible diversity in the world. Not only is this diversity in types, shapes, and sizes of items, but also in variety of experiences. It is our challenge to, as we often put it, ‘make sense’ of these experiences.

Many of these experiences, when set in the succession of a single life, do not seem to make sense together. A mother’s life is spared in a car crash, and then an aneurism takes her life a week later. A poor man is embittered against the wealthy class that has constantly oppressed him, until one such wealthy man takes him into his home and gives him meaningful work to do. A senior in high school gets accepted with scholarships to Harvard, and dies of cancer the summer after graduation. These types of experiences, set up next to each other, demand explanation. The explanation must come from outside of these experiences, because on their own they lack for coherence.

In searching for an explanation, one may conclude that meaning and coherence must lie outside of the realm of historical events altogether. There is no coherence of which the events themselves can be a part. In this case, as described above, one will seek

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Finality of Christ}, 65.
escape from history, a kind of contact with that which is not in the succession moments and interactions of diverse items and people. History, Newbigin says, is in this case conceived of as a wheel: a meaningless cycling of disparate events that lack coherence on their own ontological plane. Therefore, unity is found necessarily in escape, which is conceived of as an attainment to that stable center, the eye of the storm. The movement we seek is a movement to the middle where there is no movement. Any other movement is meaningless.

Newbigin says that the Bible gives us a different vision for finding coherence in our disparate and challenging experiences:

The other symbol is the road. History is a journey, a pilgrimage. We do not yet see the goal, but we believe in it and seek it. The movement in which we are involved is not a meaningless movement; it is movement towards a goal. The goal, the ultimate resting-place, the experience of coherence and harmony, is not to be had save at the end of the road. The perfect goal is not a timeless reality hidden now behind the multiplicity and change which we experience; it is yet to be achieved; it lies at the end of the road.18

This vision of the road is, of course, a metaphorical image for linear history. Moreover, as we will see, this is not a line in the proper geometrical sense of the term. It is not interminable, nor is it necessarily straight. This line, this road, has an end. Indeed, it is that destination that gives the journey on the road meaning.19 Before we discuss the end of the road, however, we need to clarify the relationship between history and its end in the thought of Newbigin.

18 The Finality of Christ, 66.

19 This is contrary to the very common sentiment today that “It is not the destination, but rather the journey that matters.” Newbigin would respond to this sentiment by saying that indeed the journey does matter. However, it only matters because there is an end that matters supremely, and it is in participation in moving toward that end that the journey is a meaningful journey at all.
D. History Comes before Its End

The road ends. Schuster, in his major work *Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective*, is right to see in eschatology a critically important piece of Newbigin’s thought. He says, “…the eschatological orientation of the biblical story and the eschatological tension between the present fulfillment and the future revelation of Christ’s reign are of fundamental importance for Newbigin’s theology of mission.”

Indeed, as we will see below, Newbigin’s eschatology governs a huge swathe of his theology.

However, Schuster says that Newbigin’s eschatology is prior to his view of history. He says, “The ‘fully real character of biblical eschatology’ which Newbigin reflected upon and defended at the beginning of his public ministry…shaped his understanding of human history and the role of the church in relationship to the world.”

This is true in a certain very limited sense. Read charitably, Schuster may mean that Newbigin’s eschatology governs his view of the meaning of history. This is indisputably true and straightforward in Newbigin’s own thinking. Still, this is to use the word ‘history’ in a way that is far too narrow for Newbigin’s deep reflections on the subject.

History means much more than the significance of individual events, although it does include that. As I argue throughout this paper, Newbigin has a consistent philosophy of history that addresses deep ontological questions without which his eschatology would be impossible and unthinkable. In Newbigin’s view, history is without question prior, ontologically, logically and epistemologically, to his eschatology.

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20 *Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective*, 236.

Ontologically speaking, if history is cyclical, then it has no end. That means that if one is to enthrone the idea that history ends, then history must be the type of thing that can end. A linear shape to history is required for an ending of history to exist. There is no destination without a journey, no end of the road without a road, but (theoretically) there could be a road without end. Therefore, Newbigin’s view of history as a road is ontologically prior to his eschatology.

Moreover, his view of history is logically prior to his eschatology. We cannot conceive of an end to a circle. That means that the simple belief that history has an end entails the prior belief in the linear shape of history.

Indeed, this must be since, as Newbigin says repeatedly, we have not yet come to the end. This is why his philosophy of history is epistemologically prior to his eschatology. We do not yet know the end fully. In his third Bangalore lecture, Newbigin rejects the fully realized eschatology of C. H. Dodd by saying, “In all this it is quite clear that the eschaton has ceased to be, literally, the end of history—that is to say, an unrealized future event….” For the end to be ‘the end’ it must be as yet unrealized and future, since we have not yet come to that finale of history that brings coherence to the whole story. Therefore, we do not know the true end as something in our experience because we have not yet experienced it.

In order to know the end, therefore, we take our clue from events in the past and present. If we have not yet come to the end of the story, Newbigin asks, “How then can we, who are still in the middle of the cosmic story, know what the point of the story is, or

22 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 34. A little later Newbigin argues, “Take away the literal fact, and the symbol vanishes. Mortality is a present fact because death is a future certainty in the same way, it seems to me, that all talk about eschatology as an element in Christian thinking is a mere beating of the air, unless it be really the case that some day there is really going to be an eschaton” (34).
whether it has any point at all? Only if the author of the story has let us into the secret while we are still in the middle. There can be no other possibility." The author of the cosmic story is, of course, God, and the secret is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Notice that in order to know the end, one must know something about the past (and the present in light of the past). But why believe that one can know something about the end while yet in the middle of the story? One absolutely necessary assumption for this conclusion is that there is someone who can reveal that end, who already knows it: God, the Author of history who stands both outside and inside history, providentially

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23 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 91. Cf. also Foolishness to the Greeks, 14, wherein Newbigin argues that we cannot inductively prove the author and purpose of this world and its history because the full set of data for induction is lacking.

This seems to imply that when history does reach its end, and all the data is before us, we will be able to invariably understand the purpose and purpose giver of the world. Indeed, he says in Proper Confidence that because we have not reached the end of history, therefore we cannot have indubitable certainty (54-5).

How does this comport with Newbigin’s view of personal knowledge that requires the correct plausibility structure for correct interpretation of the data? His need for personal knowledge rather than induction is occasioned not only by the lack of data, but also the human inability to read or collect data without interpretation. Furthermore, the basis for personal knowledge is not based on a lack of data at all. Newbigin repeatedly calls to the reader’s attention the fact that multiple people can have the same data and draw different conclusions based upon the plausibility structure they have as a consequence of their personal history in community. Multiple people can even experience the same event, or the same person, and draw different conclusions because of the framework of interpretation that they bring to the occasion. How is it possible, then, that our personal histories and their attendant plausibility structures can be taken seriously, while at the same believing that all of us will interpret the data of the eschaton in the same way? Furthermore, does this not seem to mitigate the possibility that people may reject God in the end, which Newbigin maintains is a distinct possibility?

Read charitably, he is only noting that a full data set is necessary (but not sufficient) for certainty. However, it seems that Newbigin would do better to make more cautious statements about the eschaton and epistemology, without implying that we will all know the purpose of the world with the kind of certainty he says is impossible for us based on our inherent human ways of knowing. Perhaps a more cautious approach is to say that, at the end, those who have believed Christ as the clue to history will be vindicated in their belief in the sense that the data will easily and naturally be able to be interpreted as confirming their belief. On the other hand, while some will be radically and undeniably disproved in their incorrect interpretation of the creator and purpose of history, there will be others who may go to perdition convinced (wrongly) that God is a maniacal dictator who has a vendetta against them, interpreting the same set of eschatological ‘data.’ This leaves room for persons to reject Christ with their whole person while remaining a person in their way of knowing.

24 Recall Newbigin’s amended definition of history from E. H. Carr after reading Moltmann’s Theology of Hope, “History is a conversation between the present and the past about the future” (The Good Shepherd, 129).
controlling it and entering into it. This is a matter of philosophy of history, a belief about
history not shared by the likes of pantheists or panentheists, for example. In this respect,
Newbigin’s philosophy of history is epistemologically prior to his eschatology.

Therefore, at least certain fundamental aspects of a philosophy of history are
ontologically, logically, and epistemologically prior to Newbigin’s eschatology, such as a
linear trajectory and an omniscient author of history. To say that his eschatology is prior
to his view of history is to overlook the rich philosophical reflection Newbigin has done
on history itself. This is not to say that belief in a linear history or a belief in God entail a
belief in an end to history. However, the belief in an end to history (especially in the way
Newbigin conceives of it) rationally entails prior belief in the linear nature of history and
an ontologically distinct author of history. Now that we have seen the priority of
Newbigin’s view of history over above his eschatology, we can proceed to a discussion
of the latter as a component of his view of history.

E. The End of the Road and the Beginning of Meaning

Just because one believes in a linear trajectory of history, does not mean that one
believes history ends. One could conceive of it as a line without end. Indeed, there have
been many theologians and Christian philosophers that object to a literal end of history,
accepting much of the Christian story but insisting that we are now living in the eschaton
in the fullest sense of the word. To illuminate this viewpoint, I will describe two more of
the objections that Newbigin takes up in his third Bangalore Lecture of 1941.

The first of these two objections I will call the ethical objection. It goes
something like this: Our job is to take up our cross here and now and suffer for the

25 Cf. Hegel, for example, who conceives of a God who is coming to know himself in the process
of history, and who is therefore incapable of revealing the end before the end.
Kingdom vision that God has given us. We do not need a reward in a final cosmic victory. Our morality should be disinterested in personal participation in such a reward. We should, and have to be, satisfied to do the revealed will of God even though there will be no final justification for us or our community. Our dutiful commitment to this path while knowing it will only ever mean suffering for us is the measure of our virtue.\(^{26}\)

In response to this objection, Newbigin says we would lose three things if it were true that there is no end: hope, purpose, and justice/morality. Without these things the idea of being virtuous sufferers for the moral kingdom is completely impossible.

If there is no end when evil will be destroyed and all things will be put right, then “we should have to write off hope not as a virtue but as a misunderstanding.”\(^{27}\) Indeed, if there is no such future, surely it is foolish to hope for that future. “But,” says the interlocutor, “hope is unnecessary! It is faithfulness that is required of us!” Newbigin responds to this by saying, that faithfulness is indeed required of us, but faithfulness toward what end? If we have no goal, we have no purpose. He says, “…we seem to have a similar error when it is said that faithfulness is itself the absolute good apart from the consideration as to the object of that faithfulness.”\(^{28}\) The object of faithfulness, the fully realized Kingdom of God in this context, must be a reality for faithfulness to be a meaningful word. An earlier statement he made in response to Dodd’s eschatology is needed to fully understand his belief in the loss of purpose:

Now it is of course plain that the only significance of eschatology, as of any other doctrine, is its bearing upon the actual life and thought now. The eschaton, the


end, enters into our present experience by qualifying all present action; that is its significance. But the point is whether it does not lose that significance unless it be also a fact which is really going to happen.29

We are only mortal, and live in light of our mortality, because we will someday die. We are only citizens of the Kingdom, and live in the light of that citizenship, if that citizenship will one day be fully realized in God’s Kingdom fully come. That is the basis of our hope and purpose.

Finally, Newbigin argues that we lose any sense of morality and justice if there is not a real end to this history in which we live. We live in a world wherein goodness is often not rewarded and evil often goes unpunished. Newbigin remarks, “I do not think the conflict between what is and what ought to be is spiritually bearable unless we believe that somehow, sometime, it is going to be resolved.”30 We cannot bear it, and, ultimately, we will not bear it unless we believe that rewards and punishments will be handed out justly in the end. He writes, “I believe…it is not possible to doubt that the moral life requires the assurance that what ‘ought’ to be, ultimately shall be. And ‘shall be’ is a verb in the future tense which is meant literally and not symbolically.”31 It is important to note here that Newbigin is not saying that moral actions are not possible without a belief in a real end of history. He is claiming that a sustained moral life is not possible. It is also worth noting that while it is unclear in this case whether Newbigin is referring to an

29 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 33-4. When Newbigin says that this is “the only significance of eschatology” it is consistent to read him implicitly saying, “the only present significance of eschatology.” As we have seen the present has significance as it contributes to the the whole. Therefore, when the eschaton is “present” it will have significance in this way as well. However, now it is only “present” as future, and thus can only contribute to the whole, ontologically speaking, through the present which it proleptically affects.


individual life, communal life, or both, his primary reference point throughout his writing ministry is the life of communities, not individuals. For example, one way in which he bears this claim out is in the economy of a society, “A society which believes in a worthwhile future saves in the present so as to invest in the future. Contemporary Western society spends in the present and piles up debts for the future, ravages the environment, and leaves its grandchildren to cope with the results as best they can.”

Why do anything differently? How can something that will never be the case ‘ought’ to be? Why ought it be so? Newbigin believes this normative value can only exist in relation to a description of an ultimate future state. Hope and purpose are tied to morality and justice.

The subject of the predicate “shall be” in the above quotation is God’s just judgment. “But,” the skeptic interjects, “we have God’s judgment of evil here and now. He already says evil is condemnable.” When Newbigin says that God’s judgment is necessary, he does not mean that God’s opinion is necessary. He means a declaration and sentence must be made. His position on God’s judgment in the last days is clear, “A judge's own mental notes are not a judgment. A judgment occurs when the judge’s conclusion about the case in question is given public effect, so that as far as possible ‘is’ is made to correspond to ‘ought.’” A family is not satisfied that justice is done because the judge believes their father’s murderer to be guilty. He must be declared guilty and

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32 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 91. Reading these words at this point in history, Newbigin’s insight seems positively prophetic.

33 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 41. The cross, contrary to those who think it negates the need for a final punishment since God has foregone the option to punish evil by going to the cross in Jesus, actually requires that God punishes evil because in the cross Jesus bears the punishment himself in order to give sinners a chance to avoid the final punishment they deserve (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 42).
sentenced. In order to have a moral purpose to our faithfulness, we must hope for a real, morally just day at the end of time.

Newbigin attacks the question of purpose from a different direction in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Rather than arguing philosophically that a lack of end to history entails a lack of morality and purpose, he argues historically from the story of post-Enlightenment Western culture. Modern Western culture, Newbigin says, has in fact lost a broad sense of purpose which led to its loss of unrealized eschatology. The question of purpose is subordinated and even suppressed by the question of cause. In the thought of our culture, “To have discovered the cause of something is to have explained it. There is no need to invoke purpose or design as an explanation.”\(^{34}\) The question “Why?” when asked by broader Western culture and applied to a natural disaster, or to the result of a job application, or to the size and shape of a tiger, is answered by giving a natural cause rather than a providential purpose directed toward the *telos*.\(^ {35}\)

This results in the replacement of a Christian eschatology of final judgment and the fully revealed Kingdom of God with the doctrine of vague, inevitable, intrinsic progress.\(^ {36}\) Such replacement was made possible by the popularity and success of modern science extrapolated into metaphysics and morality. The explanatory power of the new science of the Enlightenment perpetuated by Isaac Newton was more concrete to the mind of Western humanity. Therefore, the question of purpose was eliminated from the natural sciences, which in the Western world became the ‘gold standard’ for knowledge.

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\(^{34}\) *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 24.


\(^{36}\) The ‘Idea of Progress’, as Newbigin calls it, will be more fully discussed in chapter 4.
We no longer needed to invoke purpose to understand the phenomena in front of us, and if we did not need purpose then we did not need a true end to the story of history. Therefore, Newbigin would contend, not only does the loss of an unrealized future end philosophically entail the loss of purpose for the world and therefore for people and events within the world, but historically the loss of a sense of purpose for the world and the people in it led to a loss of an eschatology of an as yet unrealized future Kingdom of God.37

37 Newbigin is not entirely clear or consistent with regard to the relationship between time and the end of history. Recall from chapter 2 that he argues for the reality of history, in part, by arguing for the reality of time for God. Time is real to God, although God is not subject to time. Time is real for God in the sense that different points in time are different for God. Newbigin uses the two insights of Edwyn Bevan to make this point. First, Christians believe that God can alter the future, which is why we pray prayers of supplication. However, we do not believe God can alter the past. As Newbigin puts it, “It involves self-contradiction” (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 36). Past and future are therefore different for God. Second, Bevan (and thus Newbigin) argues that time is fundamental to spiritual life and space is not. Repentance does not necessarily require a spatial reality, but it does require a particular temporal succession: sin → turning away. If the action is reversed, the spiritual reality is much different.

Time is real, in the above sense, and the end of time is also real. Newbigin says that history is “directed to and bounded by a real end, a real consummation, a real fulfilling of all and more than all our longings, a brimming over of the cup, a real journey’s end” (“The Christian Hope,” 114). This end is not, properly speaking, part of history itself. Newbigin says that the Biblical narrative is unique “in that it places the end of history beyond history” (“The End of History,” 1). In fact, time is defined early on by Newbigin as God’s activity itself, and, consequently, God’s rest is the ceasing of time, “God is not only activity, as some have argued. When His work is done, He rests. His working is time—real for Him, but subject to Him; real for us and not subject to us. His rest is eternity” (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 37). When God stops working, and is at rest, time ceases. Importantly, Newbigin says that we also enter this eternal rest of timeless bliss. He calls it, “…a condition of perfect enjoyment of the beauty of God in which all successiveness ceases because both God and also His creatures are at rest” (“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 37). The end of history, the end of time, is God’s rest shared with his creatures.

However, if spiritual life requires time and yet our hope is placed in a timeless bliss shared with God, then in what sense could we possibly share this rest with God? We would have no spiritual life! Succession of moments is the vital medium of our relationship with God. Furthermore, as Newbigin indicates in later pieces, personal knowing requires experiencing the activity of the other, which can only happen in successive moments. If our knowledge ceases to grow in eternity, this brings up a host of other very challenging questions. Would our knowledge of God be complete at this time, or permanently lacking? If complete, how could we completely know an infinite God in the finite period of history before eternity (even if we were present with him in an intermediate state)? If permanently lacking, how could we be in a state of bliss while there is so much we will never get the chance to learn about our Beloved? It seems that Newbigin’s view of time and the end of time do not comport well with one another. He would do better to talk about the end of history as permanently ushering in a new quality of history related to his notion of perfect fellowship. As it stands, the end of time would likely mean the end of fellowship as well.
III. Foundation

A. Christ Changes Things

But how do we know that history ends in this way? How do we know that history ends at all? How do we know that history is a linear road and not a circular wheel? I will deal with the last of these three questions in this section and the other two questions in the following section.

How do we know that history is linear in the sense described above? Well, if history is linear, that has some bearing on our epistemology. We cannot get outside of history and objectively look at it to determine its shape and structure. We are inextricably a part of it. We are characters in the middle of the story, so to speak, and not its readers or authors. That disables us from skipping to the end or seeing the full storyboard. Newbigin puts it this way:

Within this tradition we remember, retell, and celebrate a story in which we believe that God was acting in a unique way to communicate and effect his purpose for the human race and the created world. Clearly we cannot justify this move by appealing to some tradition of rationality drawn from elsewhere. It must be justified, can only be justified at the end. Its acceptance is an act of faith which looks toward the end of history.\(^{38}\)

We, therefore, necessarily ground all of our knowledge on objects of faith, which are for us the deepest reality knowable to human beings within the past and present.\(^{39}\) As noted

\(^{38}\) The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 74.

\(^{39}\) The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 79-80. This is not completely unlike Alvin Plantinga’s basic beliefs, which he puts forward as a warranted epistemological ground for knowledge in his book Warranted Christian Belief (New York: Oxford University, 2000). There are, indeed, many similarities between Newbigin’s epistemological stance and that of Plantinga, although they are using different terms and arguments to answer different sets of questions. Both of them reject the classical foundationalist approach (although not foundationalism altogether, as some have done. Cf. Nancey Murphy, Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda, [New York: Trinity Press International, 2007.]}, and both of them arrive at the conclusion that we are historically situated human beings still capable of knowing truth.
in chapter 1, this seems to be the way all people come to know anything at all. We cannot prove that history is a particular shape in an inductive, scientific sense because we simply do not have all the data.\textsuperscript{40} We believe it is linear on the basis of God’s most clear revelation of himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The particular aspect of the incarnation, death, and resurrection that teaches us of history’s linear shape is \textit{its newness}. The work of Jesus was not merely new for the time, as in another dollar bill that is new when freshly minted. It was new in quality.\textsuperscript{41} It was a new form of currency.\textsuperscript{42} Quoting J.H. Oldham, Newbigin explains, “‘The Christian faith…implies that events took place which changed fundamentally the relations between God and man and instituted a new era in human life. History now possesses a centre. From this centre it derives its ultimate meaning.’”\textsuperscript{43} God had never before become man. The Son of God had never before died on the cross. No person who had suffered the full wrath of God, who had died in body and soul, had ever come back from the dead. It is to the newness of the resurrection that Newbigin gives particular attention. He says, “The Christian tradition has recognised only one event comparable to what happened on the first Easter morning, namely the event of creation itself.”\textsuperscript{44} The person and work of Jesus was something radically new to the world.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Foolishness to the Greeks}, 14.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Truth to Tell}, 64; \textit{Foolishness to the Greeks}, 62.

\textsuperscript{42} One might relate the distinction to the difference between the Greek words \textit{neos} (new in time) and \textit{kainos} (new in kind or quality). Cf. \textit{A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature}, third edition, ed. Frederick William Danker.

\textsuperscript{43} J.H. Oldham, \textit{The Church and Its Function in Society}, 103ff, quoted in “The Centrality of Jesus for History,” 201.

\textsuperscript{44} “The Kingdom of God and Our Hopes for the Future,” 5.
Something that is new in time can happen in a cyclical or linear history. But something that is fundamentally new in kind, as I have argued above, cannot happen in a meaningless, repetitive cycle. Newbigin says, “Within this [cyclical] view it is therefore inconceivable that the life of one man at a particular point in history could permanently alter the state of things. Jesus can illustrate the truth about the human condition, but he cannot change it.”\(^{45}\) Newness and change can only happen in the plot line of a story. It can only happen in the bend of a road. It can only happen when the newness can be said to affect the trajectory of history itself.

Newbigin says it is on this basis that Christians believe in the linear nature of history. It is on this basis that Christians believe God has done, is doing, and will do something genuinely new in the tangible world of history and in our very lives. Newbigin writes, “The community of faith celebrates the resurrection of Jesus as the ground of assurance that the present and the future are not under the control of blind forces but are open to unlimited possibilities of new life.”\(^{46}\) We do not live in a closed system. Therefore, Christians can look forward to genuine change in themselves and the world, remaining open to new ways of life. In Christ, it has been revealed that God does new things. He says, “To know God, the living, God means to live in the constant expectancy of what is new, yet in the constant certainty that nothing which happens can contradict the reality of what has been revealed…. It is the personal knowledge of one whom we know to be utterly consistent and yet endlessly original.”\(^{47}\) Newbigin makes the ground

\(^{45}\) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 96.

\(^{46}\) *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 63.

\(^{47}\) *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 97-8.
of this disposition toward newness explicit, “The more we stress the need that the Church should develop a new openness to the world, a new flexibility in its structures and new styles of ministerial leadership to meet the changing patterns of secular life, the more necessary it is to stress the centrality and finality of Jesus Christ for everything in the life of the Church….”

We can believe in the possibility of positive change only because Christ, the ultimate object of our faith, has changed the human relationship with God. Christ has changed history for the better.

B. The Finality of Christ: The Alpha and Omega in the Middle

How do we know that history ends and ends in the way the Bible tells us it ends—

with the judgment of all people by Jesus, with the unquestioned rule of Christ over all, the destruction of evil, and the renewal of the world? Again, not yet being at the end, we cannot prove that it ends or that it ends in this way. We have to take our clue from somewhere in the middle of the story. For the Christian that is Jesus Christ. Newbigin explains:

Within the Christian tradition the Bible is received as the testimony to those events in which God has disclosed (‘revealed’) the shape of the story as a whole, because in Jesus the beginning and the end of the story, the alpha and the omega, are revealed, made known disclosed. On the basis of this disclosure, therefore, it is possible to have a universal history, a way of understanding the whole story that is not determined by a starting point in the particular culture, time, and place where each of us stands.

48 Sign of the Kingdom, 68.

49 Newbigin himself asks this question in The Open Secret, 101.

50 The Open Secret, 85.

51 The Open Secret, 85.
Just as the resurrection of Christ is the preeminent ground of our hope for newness in history, it is also the ground of our hope for a new world wherein we personally participate in a renewed corporate reality. Newbigin states clearly, “[The resurrection of Jesus] has been treated as the ground of our hope for a personal future. It is this, but it is much more than this: it is the ground of our hope for a new world.” We cannot understand this comment, however, without understanding the fundamental problem to which the resurrection is the solution: death.

Death, Newbigin says, is that which cuts off our history and therefore cuts off our hope. There seems to be an end to our personal histories (at least) that looks nothing like the end of justice and peace described in the Bible. Death means that my personal life is no longer a part of the corporate life of humanity, that there is a radical split between me and others. Even if I die with people by my bedside, I will die alone. In the face of death, I can only find significance in either the goal of a utopian humanity (to which I may contribute a small piece, but of which I almost certainly will not be a part) or in a personal salvation apart from the world. Newbigin calls this the dilemma of choosing either, “…meaning for the human person at the cost of denying meaning for history, or meaning for history at the cost of denying meaning for the human person.” The latter is the choice of Marxism. The former is the choice of many Western individualistic Christians.

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52 The Open Secret, 106.

53 This discontinuity in history brought about by death is the subject of the following chapter. Here, it is my goal to show on what basis Newbigin says there is some continuity between the road and its end.

54 The Open Secret, 104.
Newbigin says that the resurrection of Jesus Christ teaches us that we do not have to despair of a corporate salvation of which we as individuals will be a part. In other words, we do not have to despair of any sense of continuity of our history and the history of the world in the face of the death of both. Confronted with a death that is utterly final, we would have to choose. Confronted with a Christ who is final, who has conquered death once and for all, who has risen to new and glorious life, we are freed from the dilemma of public versus private salvation. When we put our faith in Christ and his work, we can know the end of the story is a public salvation in which we have a personal part.

He writes:

The gospel is good news because in Jesus Christ God has dealt with sin and death, has opened a way that goes down into that chasm and leads out into the uplands beyond it, and has thereby released me from the dilemma in which I was trapped. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have opened up a way on which I can travel toward the city, knowing that the end of the journey will be a real consummation both of my personal history and of the public history in which I have shared.  

If this is true, if Jesus is indeed the center of history, the clue to history’s meaning, the revelation of history’s end, then we can no longer believe that we are caught up in a cycle in which our decisions ultimately do not matter. A corollary of the claim of Christ’s finality is that it is his judgments that are ultimately significant. There is a standard, his standard, whereby actions will be judged meaningful or useless. In either case, they will be judged. Therefore, we are freed from the terrible ignominy of forced meaninglessness perpetuated in the cyclical view of history. However, we must decide to either commit ourselves to Christ’s rule or not. “The coming of him who is the true End

55 The Open Secret, 105.

56 The Finality of Christ, 85-6.
of history—the Omega as he is the Alpha—precipitates the necessity for decision,” says Newbigin, “and forces men out of the cyclical understanding of time in which no decisions are final.” If Christ is our epistemological clue to a linear history with a particular end, then we are forced to decide between a life of consonance or dissonance with this end.

IV. Conclusion

If one accepts a view of history that is grounded in the person and work of Christ as communicated through the New Testament, then one must accept a linear view of history. The linear road of history is the basis of many implications in Newbigin’s thought. When one accepts a road image of history over against the image of the wheel, then all kinds of fresh possibilities open up.

Corporate salvation is not something to be despised as yet another instance of historical multiplicity, but something to be longed for since society can be something radically new and different than it is. We do not have to escape history to escape the death that is evidently inherent in history. Moreover, our individual salvation is not necessarily separated from corporate salvation by the fact of death.

If one accepts a linear view of history, with a particular end to it, then one need not reject the possibility (in principle) that there is a meta-narrative in which all of our individual narratives find their meaning and significance. Viewing history as a road by itself does not entail a basic historical meta-narrative, because theoretically the road could have no end. However, if the road does have the end the Bible describes (as we see in Christ), then history finds its meaning, its primary plot line, in that end. Linear history

57 The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission, 40-1.
does not entail a meta-narrative. It makes meta-narrative possible. But linear history with an end *does* entail a meta-narrative that governs all of our smaller narratives.

One enormous implication of this is that it paves the way for someone to believe the Bible. If there is no meta-narrative, the Bible is as useful as the Bhagavad Gita or Aesop’s Fables, if not less so. The Bible claims to be the true story of the whole world, the meta-narrative of history that knows something about the end of the story while yet in the middle. Newbigin understands the Bible as distinct from merely illustrative religious or ethical books:

The Bible does not tell stories that illustrate something true apart from the story. The Bible tells a story that is *the* story, the story of which our human life is a part. It is not that stories are part of human life, but that human life is part of a story. It is not that there are stories that illustrate ‘how things are’; it is that we do not begin to understand how things are unless we understand how they were and how they will be.\(^{58}\)

Moreover, if history is indeed linear with an end, we cannot ask the question, “How do we know?” without prior epistemological commitments. All knowledge rests on certain dubitable, fundamental assumptions. They are dubitable because we are not yet at the end and cannot prove the meaning of history by experience. If these assumptions are good, and the narrative they produce is coherent, no doubt the story that unfolds from them will

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\(^{58}\) *The Open Secret*, 82-3. This does not mean that Newbigin believes all pieces of the Bible to be historical. As noted in chapter 1, there are a variety of genres in the Bible. With regard to creational and apocalyptic literature, Newbigin has this to say, “There is a real sense in which the Bible is a universal history, telling the story of the world from its origin to its end. But its accounts of the beginning and the end are imaginative and parabolic proclamations of its faith that the clue to the whole is to be found at the centre; of its faith that the origin and end not only of human history but of cosmic history (and the Bible requires us to work with this conception) are to be understood in terms of that series of events in which God has decisively acted and thereby revealed his character and his intention” (*The Finality of Christ*, 79-80).
be coherent with them to some degree. Therefore, in a certain sense, all our knowledge is circular because our history is linear.\footnote{Cf. “The Centrality of Jesus for History,” 206.}

However, while this might discourage some from wanting to place their faith in anything for lack of proof, the same shape of history that makes us imperfect knowers is the shape of history that makes our willful commitments finally meaningful. The stakes are high. Our decisions and actions are not only meaningful insofar as they illustrate timeless principles. They may very well change things, because history is the kind of thing in which newness is possible. That means our lives have ethical direction and ethical significance. That means that it is not an illusion that one’s choice of career matters. That means our sensibility that events like the attacks of September 11, 2001 are important to report is correct. The actions of human beings change things.

Before the 2012 presidential election in the United States, David Gregory asked Stephen Colbert (a satirist who’s viewers are often cynical about the importance of politics), whether or not it mattered who would be elected president. Newbigin would fully agree with Colbert’s response, “I know there’s got to be a difference between these two men or we are part of a huge, cruel joke.”\footnote{“Press Pass: Stephen Colbert,” Meet the Press, video interview, October 14, 2012 (http://www.nbcnews.com/video/meet-the-press/49407278#49407278).} Newbigin would say that the joke is more than political, it is cosmic. If history is cyclical, it does not matter in the end who was elected president. However, if history is a road with an end, it very well may matter, not in the sense that the end of history is in doubt, but that decisions, actions, and events may or may not participate in the what “ought to be” which someday shall be. If we put our
faith in Christ, we can know to some degree whether or not these events participate in his rule since, “In him the end has come. In him, therefore, history finds its meaning.”

Nevertheless, the road is not without twists and turns before the end. Newbigin writes:

The goal to which we look is the city that is the perfection of all that God purposes both for our personal and for our public life. But the road from here to there is not a simple ascent. There is no evolutionary process by which the cosmos finally arrives at this goal. Our picture of history — the history of what is to come — must be shaped less by the idea of evolution than by the New Testament Apocalypse. History is seen in this view under the sign of the cross. God’s [church] in history is not and can never expect to bear God’s cause in the sense that it is the agency through which God’s order is established within history. That is the Constantinian dream.

It is the bend in the road to which we turn our attention next

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62 *The Open Secret*, 109. I have replaced the word ‘cause’, with which the text was originally published, with the word ‘church’ because in my judgment the original was a misprint that does not convey Newbigin’s intended meaning. ‘Church’ bears this meaning out much more straightforwardly, in connection with his other works. This is part of what I will show in chapter 4.
CHAPTER FOUR
HISTORY IS U-SHAPED

I. Introduction

History is real, and history is a road. These two are basic components of Newbigin’s philosophy of history. However, they are not enough. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Newbigin’s history also ends, and the end is not up to humans to produce. When this is not believed one of the inevitable distortions that arises is a belief in what Newbigin calls the idea of progress. He writes, “One alternative is a view of the future shaped by an evolutionary, progress-oriented vision. Hope is then pinned to the vision of a perfect human society at some future date in history.”\(^1\) If there is no end to history, if history goes without any discontinuity forever and ever, then one is forced to believe one of two things: either 1) it will always be as broken as it is, or 2) it will progress someday past its brokenness into perfection. The former tend to seek solace in the hope of individual escape to heaven. The latter is what Newbigin calls the idea of progress, and it is an attack against the third essential in Newbigin’s philosophy of history: the U-shape or contingency of history.

I will use the “contingency” of history to describe history itself as something created by a God who is other than history, but I will also, more specifically, use the term to refer to the motive force behind history and the primary bearer of the meaning of history. The meaning of history is contingent on God’s activity because the end of history is radically contingent on God following through on his promises, and it is the telos that produces meaning. This is what Newbigin emphasizes because of the specific

\(^1\)“The Kingdom of God and Our Hopes for the Future,” 9.
interlocutors with whom he has to deal. In addition, Newbigin also maintains that “progress” does not inhere in history itself. There is no innate force moving history towards its proper end. This “force” comes from outside of history, in form of the Triune God who directs, guides and pushes history toward his chosen conclusion.

What is at stake in this conversation? What does it matter if humans drive history or merely participate in a God-driven history, a history dependent for its conclusion on someone distinct from but intimately involved in history?

First, there is the question of the moral nature of humankind. Are humans basically good or evil? If history is continuous and therefore forces the above described choice between perpetual brokenness or utopia, then one must also choose to believe either in the brokenness of human beings or a corporate salvation. In other words, one can either believe 1) that human beings are basically good, and therefore will throw off the shackles of evil institutions and master the natural world, or 2) that human beings are basically evil and therefore only a salvation of escape from history, society, and relationships is possible. Either there will be a perfectly blessed society one day, or people are basically broken and evil and must seek blessedness in an escape from society.

Of course, the idea of progress takes option number one. People are basically good. Newbigin explains:

Classical Christianity regarded man as a sinner, radically corrupt, unfit in himself for paradise. The idea of progress….takes it stand on the belief that man is essentially good. The evil in man, it has generally said, is secondary…. Hence in order to achieve progress, it is necessary to liberate man from the bondage of evil social institutions and to educate him — that is, to draw out and train the essential goodness in him.2

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But if one has experienced the evil inside himself or the evil inside others in a profound and tangible way, he will have a difficult time believing this doctrine of the good human. Victims of genocide, stock brokers caught up in self-perpetuating cycles of greed and exploitation, perpetrators of sexual violence who have come to recognize the disturbing evil of their actions, not to mention victims of such violence may all find it impossible to believe in the essential goodness of humankind. If they cannot, and history is not contingent, then the only hope they have is of individual escape from history and humanity. Hope for the world or humanity per se is lost.

Secondly, if the end, the final state of humanity, is that from which we derive meaning and purpose for the present, then whoever is the primary driver toward that end is the primary bearer of meaning for history. From that insight a question arises: is humankind the great power behind the progress of history and therefore the bearer of its own meaning? There are two basic groups who answer yes to this question.

The first group is social gatherings in the “secular” world. Companies, governments, and citizenries often live and act out of the belief that human beings are the bearer of their own meaning, that the motive power of history’s progress is found in human activity. Newbigin recognizes that when the perfect, human-created human community (i.e. Utopia) is sought, humans always employ ideology to accomplish it. Such ideology, whether it be Marxism or Capitalism, always ends up dehumanizing people for the sake of “progress” or its particular vision of utopia.  

3 Cf. The Open Secret, 104, where Newbigin says of Marxism, "Significance is found only in the vision of a future age of freedom and justice for all; the life of the person who dies before the new age has come and who will never share in it has no significance it itself. The human person is simply part of the raw material to be used or discarded in the process of creating a new world."

4 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 35.
opposite problem from individualism (which I will attempt to elucidate in the following chapter), utopian ideologies invariably place the vision of society over the welfare of the individual. Individual people, then, become the pawns for creating a society in which they most likely will never take part. If they are not part of that society, then they are quite literally not an end but rather a means to that end.

He recognizes this failure of ideology with some personal shame. In his youthful enthusiasm, Newbigin was taken in for a time by the ideology of German National Socialists party before it made its atrocious agenda fully explicit.\(^5\) This dehumanization breaks what Newbigin takes to be the fundamental command of ethics formulated by Kant, “The fundamental criticism of this belief, then, is that it violates what is generally felt to be the first commandment of ethics—that men are to be treated as ends and not as tools.”\(^6\) How can we then work in unity toward a better world without ultimately dehumanizing the people for whom that world is meant?

The sheer possibility of a truly united humanitarian effort toward a better world is one that many in our postmodern culture have rejected. Referring to perspectives on meta-narrative, Taber defines what he calls the postmodern model as, “…the rejection and the negation of the modern model [of meta-narrative] because the latter is said to be inherently and invincibly tainted by coercion and violence.”\(^7\) Indeed, Newbigin agrees with the insights of Nietzsche and Foucault that meta-narratives have often been used to maintain power, even violent power, over others. Is it possible to have a meta-narrative

\(^5\) Unfinished Agenda, 24.


that is not so triumphalistic and therefore tyrannical in the application of its optimistic vision? This is another question Newbigin addresses in his view of the U-shape of history.

However, it is not just ‘the world’⁸ that acts out of the conviction that human beings are the bearers of their own meaning. There are those in the Church as well who live in this way, believing that Jesus has come, gone, and left it up to his Church to fulfill his utopian vision for the world. The mission is ours and up to us. The church then sees itself as the motive power for the end and the primary bearer of meaning for the world. It is the church that redeems the world, and it is the church that establishes God’s Kingdom. It sees itself as coterminous with the Kingdom of God, and seeks “church extension” with ideological fervor rather than with love for the lost. How can the church seek to be passionately faithful to its nature as a church in mission without becoming just another power grabbing ideology? The contingent nature of history, specifically understood in the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit under the sign of the cross, answers this question.

Though these are not the only issues impacted by a U-shaped history, these are some of the questions most saliently addressed by this topic in Newbigin’s philosophy of history. If one wants a realistic perspective on the evil inside of human beings and in human communities without despairing of hope for the world, then he may well appreciate Newbigin’s view of history. If one sees a need for human unity and a cohesive meta-narrative with which to make sense of the world and one’s life, but rejects the oppressiveness of ideology, then he may well appreciate Newbigin’s philosophy of

⁸ In the Johannine use of the term.
history. If one wants to know why the church should pursue her mission actively but without triumphalism, then one will find solid ground in Newbigin’s U-shaped history.

II. Description

A. The Idea of Progress: Its Inception and Forms

The four lectures that Newbigin gave in Bangalore in 1941 were intended to “disentangle and criticize from a Christian point of view one of the seminal ideas of European civilization, the idea of progress.”9 The idea of progress comes in a few different forms, but it is helpful to grasp a very general component of the idea that is true of all of them individually:

In its very broadest terms, the idea of progress as we have become accustomed to it is the idea that human society has become better and will go on becoming better. It is the idea that ignorance and sin can be and will be gradually eliminated from human life, until a time shall come when men shall live together in perfect brotherly love, equipped with perfect knowledge.10

It is important to note three key elements in this idea: 1) the change is positive, 2) the change is gradual, and 3) the change is continuous.

Of course, all three of these elements include the concept of change. This is important to note in light of the previous chapters since genuine change could not take place without a history that is both real and in some sense linear. Newbigin comments on the first of these two elements in progress, saying, “The idea of progress can only exist where history is believed to be real. If you believe, as great masses of men have believed and do believe, that that which changes is unreal and that the real is the unchanging, then

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clearly you can have no doctrine of progress.”¹¹ That is why Newbigin asserts, on the one hand, that this view has only arisen because of its opportunity to incubate in the Christian preconceptions about history’s reality and linear shape. The idea of progress did not and could not have arisen in the worldview of the ancient Greeks and Indians who view that which changes as less than real. He credits the ancient Israelites and Persians with the key insight of real history with a goal.¹² The Christian framework, which derives from the Israelites, includes this conception of real, linear history, and it is from within Western European Christendom culture that the idea of progress has arisen.

On the other hand, Newbigin says this view of progress is absolutely alien to the Bible. He puts it quite bluntly:

> We must, I think, candidly admit that the idea of earthly progress towards a Kingdom of God on earth cannot possibly be derived from the Gospels by themselves, but is the interpretation of the gospel teaching by men who came to it with minds molded as to their whole preconceptions by the secular idea of progress. I think that is simply an historically true statement.¹³

It is alien to classical Christianity in the sense that, while it accepts the reality and linear nature of history, it rejects history’s contingency and asserts that the line of history is smooth, straight, and ever ascending.¹⁴ Because it rejects the contingency of history (i.e. that history is utterly dependent on God) but wants to retain the hope of salvation for

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¹² “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 9. In crediting the Israelites and Persians with this accomplishment he is following Hendrikus Berkhof in his *Christ the Meaning of History* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), 18-22. Remember the previous chapter, wherein I argued that to have a goal, history must be linear. Therefore, Newbigin argues that history must be both real and linear to entertain the notion of progress he has defined.


humanity, it also rejects the Christian conviction that humanity is desperately wicked.\textsuperscript{15} A wicked humanity in a necessary and gradual progression would be certain cause for despair, not hope.

If the idea of progress incubated within and used resources from Christianity, it took its guiding principles from the Romantic movement. In his early years, Newbigin locates the grounds for the idea of progress in the influence of the Romantic movement and Darwinian evolution.\textsuperscript{16} He says that the idea of development enraptured these philosophers, who worked out this idea differently but with the same basic structure: worse to better, crude to refined, partial to complete. He takes Hegel to be chief among the examples of this approach.\textsuperscript{17} He also blames the misappropriation of Darwinian evolution by the general populace for making this idea of progress palatable to the modern consciousness. Says Newbigin, “…it seemed to provide a scientific basis for the belief that progress—automatic and inevitable—was the law of life.”\textsuperscript{18} He clarifies that it seemed to provide such a basis, but does not actually do so.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, LD 2, which says, “Q. Can you live up to all this perfectly? A. No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.” (Biblical citations defending this doctrine include Rom. 3:9-20,23; 1 John 1:8, 10; 2 Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:23-24; 8:7; Eph. 2:1-3; Titus 3:3)
  \item \textsuperscript{16} In a later work (“The Centrality of Jesus for History,” 1979) he locates the philosophical grounds for the so-called ‘non-dogmatic’ study of history in a combination of Progress (defined differently as viewing the past as unimportant and even tyrannical) and the Romantic (which he defines here as seeing history as one continuous development of capacities inherent within it from the beginning).
  \item \textsuperscript{17} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 11. Both Marxism and the mystical nationalism of Russia falls under this approach as well according to Newbigin.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} For the curious reader, I have not found an explicit explanation for his unwillingness to say Darwinian evolution actually does produce such a basis. However, if I can carry over one of his arguments from a related topic, Newbigin does make quite clear that he has little patience for statements about “progress” which are really only statements about more sophisticated tools. Such instruments are merely
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Newbigin’s ‘disentangling’ of progress issues in four distinct positions which all have the aforementioned three characteristics: positive, gradual, and utterly continuous change. The first three are either atheistic or pantheistic in that they do not affirm a God who is distinct from the history of the world. The fourth version of the Idea of Progress is a ‘Christianized’ version, that describes the gradual process of development as flowing from the power of Christ. As a way of clarifying Newbigin’s view of the contingency of history over against various forms of rejection of contingency, and to exhibit the relative philosophical strength of his position, I will briefly describe these four positions and Newbigin’s rebuttals.

B. The Death of a Smooth Progression: Newbigin’s Rebuttals of the Four Ideas of Progress

The first dogma that Newbigin addresses is the strongest form of the idea of progress. Newbigin formulates it this way, “We may take first the idea of progress in its most extreme form — the dogma that progress is a law of human history.” He argues that this belief is misguided for two reasons. First, while there has indeed been technological development throughout most of history, there is little telling whether this is real progress. Does not real progress require using bacterial research to cure infections rather than to create chemical weapons? If humanity is really to progress, there must be good wills appropriating these morally neutral tools. Second, it is difficult, on this view of the law of progress, to judge what exactly a good will (i.e. actual progress) will look like. How can one who is inextricably part of the process, by the process develop criteria instruments in the hands of a someone with a good or evil will, and therefore do not represent “progress” or “development” in any historical or moral sense unless accompanied by the progress in the human will (cf. “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 15).

with which to judge the process? Newbigin’s phrasing is incisive, “If progress means
movement from worse to better, and if our idea of what is better is itself derived from this
movement, then to say that progress is a law of history is simply arguing in a circle.”\textsuperscript{21} To
state it even more explicitly, one argues in a circle because one trusts the product of the
process to develop criteria with which to judge the trustworthiness of the process, which
begs the question.

The second form of this view is one that defenders might call historically based
expectation. One looks back on history, sees progress as having already taken place, and
then extrapolates from that to the reasonable anticipation that progress will continue.
Newbigin levies three arguments against this particular view. First, sometimes what we
might recognize as progress in one area of life brings regress in another area of life.\textsuperscript{22} For
example, a highly effective tree-felling machine might be developed and then used to
decimate a forest. Sometimes the moral progress of a scientist might cause him to destroy
his potentially harmful but ingenious research. Therefore, given the concrete and
complex examples of progress in history, even if we assume progress in some areas of
life we \textit{therefore} must assume regress in other areas.

This leads to Newbigin’s second point. If progress is movement toward the good,
then technological development (which, in common parlance, is often synonymous with
‘progress’) is not progress \textit{per se} since technology is not \textit{intrinsically} good. Indeed,
neither is institutional, governmental, or organizational development. Newbigin argues,
“All other goods—good institutions, efficient instruments, sound organizations—may


\textsuperscript{22} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 14-5.
themselves become instruments of evil if those who use or conduct them do so for evil ends. The only thing which can be called good without qualification is a good will, not an instrument, but a source of action steadily directed to good ends."23 That which has moral character as its essential quality is the only thing which can be called unqualifiedly good. Here again Newbigin exhibits his teleological ethic that shapes many of the ethical and social implications of his eschatology. Other items or facets of life might be good relative to their intended purpose (in other words, efficient in bringing about their intended purpose), but if they can be purposed for evil from the outside then they cannot be intrinsically good and thus do not represent progress. Ostensibly, Newbigin thinks that while other things are given purposes by a will, a will has a purpose of its own choosing. Thus, if the will is good, its purpose is good. A good will is therefore necessarily good.24

Finally, if the first argument was simply that progress does not necessarily beget progress, and the second questions the historian’s criteria for assessing progress in the past, the third questions the de facto situation. It just does not seem to be the case that true progress has been made.

The true reading of history seems to be this, that every new increase of man’s mastery over earth and sea and sky opens up possibilities not only of nobler good, but also of baser and more horrible evil, and that even those movements of social progress which can point to real achievement in the bettering of society have to be


24 It seems, although it is unclear, that Newbigin’s argument here hinges on defining the will as that which purposes and not that which has purposes set for it by another. In other words, it cannot be used as an instrument. Is that true? It seems that the most insidious manipulation of a human being by another occurs when someone uses the good will of another to perform evil. For example, a child wants to be helpful to his father out of love for him. However, the father is a drug-runner who uses his child’s love for him to get him to unwittingly make illicit deliveries. Such examples of people using the good will of another toward evil ends are rampant in this world. Therefore, it seems that the will can be simultaneously good in its purposes and yet an instrumental evil. Does that still qualify in Newbigin’s book as intrinsically good? It is hard to say. Perhaps he would say it could still be good intrinsically because it purposes good, which is the core standard of moral judgment, while a tool or an institution cannot will the good.
put side by side with these equally real movements of degeneration which have sometimes actually arisen out of the same social improvements.\textsuperscript{25}

While this seems eerily similar to the first argument, that dispute was in the hypothetical improbability of neat and clean progress in every area of life simultaneously. Here, Newbigin claims that as a point of historical fact human beings have not achieved something worthy of the name progress. Right alongside the intensification of the good that is done by humans, the intensity of their perpetration of evil increases proportionally.\textsuperscript{26} Along with atomic energy has come the atom bomb.

Someone may respond to Newbigin’s arguments by saying, “Fine, I will admit it is hard to say what progress is, or that it in fact has happened to this point. But I still have faith in the possibility of a future world that gets better and better.” This is the third and weakest form of the idea of progress that Newbigin disputes. As the weakest view and thus the view which makes the fewest claims, it is perhaps also the most difficult to break down. However, Newbigin makes the attempt. He says that this view, in its purest concrete form, always ends up being an ethic that we ought to strive for the development of the perfect society. Against this Newbigin levies the same argument we have seen against the general idea of progress: these types of projects always end in the use of humans as tools toward an end, rather than as ends to be loved in themselves.\textsuperscript{27} He puts a similar concern this way in \textit{Foolishness to the Greeks}, “The project of bringing heaven

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\textsuperscript{25}“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 16.
\textsuperscript{26} Although there is no indication that Newbigin was familiar with Schelling, there is a similarity here with Schelling’s more metaphysically extensive theory of intensification of good and evil through the ages of the world. Cf. \textit{Of Human Freedom} (Chicago: Open Court, 1936).
\textsuperscript{27}“The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 17.
\end{flushleft}
down to earth always results in bringing hell up from below.”\textsuperscript{28} As seen in the introduction, he views this as breaking the cardinal command of Kantian ethics.

The fourth, and final, version of the idea of progress with which Newbigin debates is the Christianized version. This is what many call “the social gospel.”\textsuperscript{29}

It is sufficient that we should identify clearly this very widespread belief that the destiny of the world is that it should gradually be subdued and sanctified by the redeeming power of Christ so that at last a perfect state of society wholly obedient to God's will shall come to be on earth, and that the task of the Christian is to take his share in the accomplishing of this task.\textsuperscript{30}

Essentially, this amounts to a replacement of the word ‘utopia’ with the phrase ‘Kingdom of God.’ It communicates the ethical vision for such a perfect society in the language of the Bible. But it amounts to a similar belief. The fruition of our labors is the perfect human society on earth, as it is in heaven.

Now, according to Newbigin, many of the same Christians who believe that this is our aim also believe that Christians will never see this life because they will die. In the best case scenario for them, there is a disembodied state, heaven, wherein they will dwell for eternity. But that state is not ideal, nor is it the state which they are advised to seek. Newbigin puts it sharply:

If to seek the Kingdom of God means, as is often said, simply to labor for the coming of a perfect society on earth and not to bother about heaven, and if heaven be the place where those who have faithfully striven on earth go to when they die, then the Christian's fate is to seek that which he is absolutely debarred from ever finding and to find that which he is advised not to seek. Which, as the geometry books say, is absurd.\textsuperscript{31}

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\textsuperscript{28} Foolishness to the Greeks, 117.
\textsuperscript{29} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 5.
\textsuperscript{31} “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 22.
\end{flushright}
It seems that seeking the *Summum Bonum* faithfully should not entitle one only to the *secundus bonum*. However, this must be the case on the Christian idea of progress because of the one inevitable and irreversible reality of each and every human life in a purely continuous history: death.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, death cuts us off from history. Death cuts off our various enterprises from the stream of history. Death cuts off entire civilizations from the stream of history. Newbigin says, “Therefore man’s striving cannot and does not lead in a straight line to the full realization of the Kingdom. Death, failure, corruption, *(sic)* bar the way.”

It is difficult to know how this supposed continuous progression into the perfect society would occur when we experience the burial of so many lives and so much ‘progress’ underneath the ‘rubble of history.’ Newbigin puts it more bluntly yet, saying, “The fact of death — my personal death, the deaths of those with whose lives mine has been intertwined, and the death of the plans I have made, the institutions I have served, and the civilization of which I am a part — cuts across the attractive picture of an unbroken ascent from the origins of the world to the final consummation of history.”

No doubt this is an interpretation of the event of death. Death is a fact, a fact which many imbue with the meaning of tragic meaninglessness. But Newbigin maintains that a different interpretation, given us in the Bible, is more accurate based on the evidence we have from the experience of death. He says that “death, as the Bible teaches us, is not merely a biological fact. Like every fact of existence it has meaning. Its meaning is that all human life is so flawed and marred that is cannot lead straight to the perfect

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33 *The Open Secret*, 105.
consummation of history which God has promised.”\textsuperscript{34} The fulfillment of the perfect end seems impossible in the face of death.

We live in a world wherein there is seemingly endless struggle ended by death, and where ease of life leads not to blessedness but rather to corruption. If the ending is life—easy, abundant, righteous life—then something or someone must conquer this problem of death. Newbigin puts the dilemma in clear terms, “Then what place can there be for hope in a meaningful future and a meaningful history? None, unless sin and death have been dealt with. None, unless the goal is beyond the reach of death and yet not in such a manner as to destroy the significance of all that lies this side of death.”\textsuperscript{35} Although there is continuity of meaning between history before death and the end that conquers death, the progression of history into blessedness cannot be smoothly accomplished by human ingenuity. Therefore, the blessedness of the end utterly depends on the activity of a God who has power over death.\textsuperscript{36}

It is in this sense that Newbigin says history is \textit{not} linear. That is, history is not an unbroken path to utopia. Rather, “The Christian narrative has a shape which is neither cyclical nor linear. It is U-shaped. The creed is U-shaped, from the source of all being, down into the depths of hell, and back to the glory of the new creation.”\textsuperscript{37} A linear view of human mastery over history does not take into account for the depths of hell given witness by death. Newbigin’s biblical perspective does take account of this tragic fact,

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 114.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 114.

\textsuperscript{36} “The Secular-Apostolic Dilemma,” 68.

\textsuperscript{37} “The End of History,” 1.
but does not leave us in the depths. In order to be extricated from the depths of hell, history and humanity must depend upon the God of heaven.

C. The Active, Promise-Keeping God in Mission

Newbigin maintains that it is, “neither to an otherworldly heaven, nor to a gradual improvement of earth that the New Testament looks forward, but to a divine act by which all created things are to be renewed.” The renewal of all things is radically dependent on the activity of the only one who has conquered death. This present age is “to be terminated” and God’s sovereign rule is to be manifest on this earth as it is in his very presence.

It has to be this way not only because no life subject to death can progress to the perfect Kingdom of God, but also because such a life would not be appropriate for participation in that Kingdom. This is the basis for Christianity’s apocalyptic visions of the end as well as the conversion of individual Christians that ushers discontinuity into their spiritual lives.

We humans and our world must be radically changed to attain that end for which we long.

And the point is that that life is not just an extension of this life in the corruptible body of humanity. This life is under sentence of death. No conceivable extension of it could fit it for participation in the new kingdom. It is doomed to die—to see corruption complete its work. The physical frame, the personality as we understand the term, all achievements in personal character and in social effort—all is doomed to be lost in the dust of history. But yet, by a miracle of which the


40 Cf. The Open Secret, 109.

41 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 21. Newbigin is clear here about the parity between the discontinuity of the individual’s life and the discontinuity of the world with respect to its ability to enter into the Kingdom of God. He writes, “The Christian holds that every man, whatever the level of his ethical achievements, stands in need of a fundamental conversion. In this matter every man and every generation stands on the same level, and not on the shoulders of the generation before.”
sprouting of corn from the buried seed is a faint analogy, a new life is given by God—a resurrected life fit for the new age.\textsuperscript{42}

God actively changes the lives of human beings and the life of the world from one characterized by death to one that has come through death into eternal and abundant life.

Is it reasonable to anticipate this death-defying activity of God in the future? This question breaks down into two more nuanced questions: 1) “Why should we think that God \textit{can} do this in a world subject to death such as ours?” and 2) “Why should we think that God \textit{will} do this even if he can?” I will give Newbigin’s answer to the second of these questions here, and save his answer to the first question until the coming section on Christ as the foundation for the belief in a U-shaped history.

Assuming for the moment that God \textit{can} enact this kind of radical change to bring about the perfect end described above, why should we believe that he will? Simply put, we can believe it because God has promised it. The goal, the finale, the resolution of history is entirely dependent on the promises of God. Newbigin writes, “History does not reach its goal by the development of the forces immanent within it……it is a matter of the promise of God. History has a goal in the sense that God has promised it.”\textsuperscript{43} If history cannot reach its consummate end without God’s fulfillment of his own promises, then the purpose of God for world history is the content of history’s goal. Therefore both the power and faithfulness of God to bring his promises to fruition are required for hope in the future that the Bible describes. Stults is right to describe Newbigin’s view of the Bible’s content in this way, “The Bible, he says, is all about promise and fulfillment, a


\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 103.
record of the action of God in real history.’”\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, the Bible in Newbigin’s view is primarily a history of God’s activity in the world that he created: God’s mission.\textsuperscript{45}

Newbigin is clear and consistent in his view that the mission described in the Bible is \textit{God’s} mission to redeem his creation from the power of evil and renew it unto perfection. He is the active power, the active persons, driving history forward toward its end which it has only because of his purposes. Newbigin states quite succinctly, “…The mission is not ours but God’s.”\textsuperscript{46} History is rightly understood from the perspective of the one who’s purposes history serves and the one who primarily carries out those purposes, just as the machine or the building is rightly understood from the perspective of its inventor or architect. God’s activity toward that purpose, the eschaton, therefore, is definitive for the meaning of history. That is why Newbigin sees, “…the biblical picture of world history as centered in a series of ‘acts of God,’ among which is his act of choosing, calling, and sending a people to be the bearers of his universal purpose of blessing has the central place.”\textsuperscript{47} Still, while the people are the ‘bearers’ of this purpose, one should not be misled into thinking that it is \textit{their} purpose, or even primarily their activity which is responsible for the carrying out of that purpose.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Grasping Truth and Reality}, 69, citing ‘The Good Shepherd,’ 117.


\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The Open Secret}, 55 (cf. also p.18). Mission is not to be understood as an attribute of God in the classical sense, but rather an \textit{activity} of God in history. While the former would make God’s character contingent on the creation, the latter makes the creation radically contingent on God. There is no mission, no purpose, no meaning without this active God.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{The Open Secret}, 78. Importantly, this does not dethrone Christ from the central place of history. Rather, Christ is the Chosen One, the center of that act Newbigin describes here.

\textsuperscript{48} This is a clear refrain throughout Newbigin’s writings. However, cf. p. 92ff for a critique of Newbigin’s lack of clarity in the relationship of the church to history.
This is the point at which Newbigin’s theology of the Holy Spirit is informed by his philosophy of history. The Holy Spirit is “the active agent of mission” who is “a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God.” The Spirit of God makes the people of God witnesses, and in this sense Jesus’ statement to his disciples in Acts 1 is “not a command, but a promise.” The role of the church in mission is clearly secondary to that of the Spirit. Newbigin goes so far as to identify mission, in a certain sense, with the activity of the Spirit. He says, “Mission is not just church extension. It is something more costly and more revolutionary. It is the action of the Holy Spirit, who in his sovereign freedom both convicts the world (John 16:18-21) and leads the church toward the fullness of the truth that it has not yet grasped (John 16:12-15).” To the degree to which the church’s history can be read as faithfulness to the mission of God, it is understood, Newbigin says, “as the fruit of the promised work of the Spirit of God.” It is the Holy Spirit, therefore, who “is the source of hope—not just hope for ourselves, but hope for the completion of God’s whole cosmic work.” The Holy Spirit is active in the world and in his people to accomplish that contingent end of which he is both the creator and the proximate cause.

49 It is not the only point, however. Schuster accurately notes that Newbigin’s theology of the Spirit is twofold, “He is (a) a down payment and a foretaste of the end, a guarantee of things to come; and he is (b) the one who leads the proclamation of Christ’s lordship; he is in charge of God’s mission” (Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective, 159).

50 The Open Secret, 56.

51 The Open Secret, 58.

52 The Open Secret, 61.

53 The Open Secret, 59.

54 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 78.
This Spirit is not to be identified with the world, the people, or progress itself. This is no self-realizing Spirit of History or self-concretizing Spirit in History. The Spirit of whom Newbigin speaks is the Spirit of the living God, distinct from and independent of history but nevertheless lovingly active within it. If this were not so, and Newbigin’s ‘Spirit’ was described in the pantheistic or panentheistic way, the history of the world would no longer be contingent but rather a necessary aspect of the ultimate reality. This distinction between a pan(en)theistic Spirit and a Spirit who is distinct from yet active in history is one with which Newbigin was all too familiar due to his decades long ministry in India among Hindu people. He, not accidentally, describes the Spirit in such a way that it cannot be mistaken for another way of talking about the activity of human beings or even God’s chosen people.

There is yet another extreme on the opposite side of the issue that Newbigin also rejects. Not only pantheism but also deism challenges the U-shape of history. Against the view that an independent God acts in history, some have proposed a radical split between God’s realm and ours. God cannot and does not act in history. This is a charge brought against Newbigin’s view of providence from what he calls ‘the modern scientific worldview’ in which “all causes are adequate to the effects which they produce.” This view is picked up by modern historians and theologians as well. Newbigin responds to this objection in various ways, but I will only examine two here.

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55 *The Open Secret*, 63.

56 Contrary to the views of Hegel and Whitehead, among others.


58 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 68.
First, to say that God does not act in history is strip the word ‘God’ of any cognitive content at all. When uttering the phrase, “God does not act in history,” one empties the phrase of its meaning since we cannot conceive of a God who does not act. Newbigin writes:

If God does not act in history, what meaning can there be in saying that God acts at all? And if there is no category in which we can speak of God acting, what meaning can we attach to the word “God”? Many of our contemporaries would, of course, answer ‘Exactly! The word ‘God’ stands for nothing real at all.’ The presupposition of most historical scholarship since the Enlightenment has been that God is not a factor in history.⁵⁹

Notice this is not a concession of an accurate conclusion by Newbigin. He remarks that it is the presupposition of historical scholarship. Moreover, to say that God stays aloof from history is not to say that God does not exist, per se, but that we humans have no cognitive referent for the word.

Second, in rebutting the idea that the causes and effects of science remove God from the plane of physical, tangible history, Newbigin points out that this way of thinking is alien to our own intractable way of viewing ourselves. He says, “We are aware of no contradiction in the fact that something purely spiritual (an intention) can change the course of events in the visible and external world of happenings.”⁶⁰ This cuts right across the dichotomy of spiritual and physical, showing them as ontologically interlocking parts of the same universe. If we can speak of intentions causing things to happen, and yet also, complimentarily, describe the physical causes of the events, why can we not speak of God’s providence? There is no irrationality, Newbigin maintains, in believing that God

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⁶⁰ *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 70.
acts within the very tangible events of history that can also be viewed from a different direction in terms of physical, social, or psychological causes.

In sum, Newbigin’s own view of history is of a U-shape curve that takes seriously the death of our bodies, of our work, and our institutions. This death causes us to realize that history is radically dependent on the acts of a God who is the primary driver of history toward the goal which he himself promised and which is necessarily discontinuous with the present reality. In other words, history is contingent, from beginning to end, on God. As I will show, the cross of Christ is Newbigin’s most important clue to the contingency of history.

D. Excursus: The Problem of Agency

In his significant work on Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology, Goheen draws this conclusion about the church from Newbigin’s view of history, “Jesus, and those who have followed Him, are sent into the world, not as agents of, but as witnesses to the Father’s rule.”

Based on the preceding description in this chapter, that sounds entirely accurate. However, Newbigin explicitly says, “To be elect in Christ Jesus…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 first fruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all.” The evidence seems to suggest that what we are encountering is an inconsistency (or at least lack of clarity) in Newbigin’s view of the relation of church and history.

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61 “As the Father Has Sent Me,” 132.

Newbigin frequently states that the mission is not ours but God’s. Recall his statement that the Holy Spirit is “the active agent of mission.” Even more straightforwardly, he writes, “We cannot build the rule of God.” That seems clear enough. The church can still be the means God uses to build the Kingdom right? Indeed, by the time he writes *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin views the church as having a two-fold relationship with history: proclaiming and propelling. In its propelling role, “It presses events toward their true end.” He says that the church is a “history-making force” to use the phrase of H. Berkhof. Not long after he makes these claims he clarifies that the propelling function is served through the presence of Christ by his empowering Spirit in the community, which is a new reality that should accompany the words used to witness to the world. Indeed, he goes through great lengths to note that, “It seems to me to be of great importance to insist that mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the triune God….” So Newbigin attempts here to reconcile the Spirit’s activity and the church’s activity by saying it is merely an issue of primary and secondary agency.

However, what is the nature of the secondary agency? On this point Newbigin is unclear and somewhat inconsistent. He variously uses the terms “sign,” “foretaste,” “witness,” “agent,” and “instrument,” but it is hard to know how the instrument is being used. What is the church’s relationship to the success of the mission? It is difficult to

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63 *The Open Secret*, 56.


65 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 129.


understand in what sense the church is a history-making force pressing events toward their end. Newbigin’s language and following explanation in this case is unclear and perhaps co-opts some of the triumphalist rhetoric that he typically rejects to emphasize the church’s activity, granted that activity is primarily cruciform.

Still, in the whole scope of his work, Newbigin’s view on the church and the Kingdom can be summarized well by a line found in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, “They are not the means by which God establishes his Kingdom. They are the witnesses to its present reality.”68 In being the community wherein this reality is made known, the world sees the Kingdom of God and history gets a little closer to the end described by Jesus, “…this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”69 However the agency works, Newbigin is clear that the completion of the mission is God’s victory in which he graciously allows his church to share.

III. Foundation

A. Christ as Decisive Act of God

That history is a matter primarily of God’s activity, and not primarily about human activity, is a cue that Newbigin takes from Scripture and repeatedly argues throughout his works. However, this is not some arbitrary theological concept or principle. This truth, he believes, is rooted in the fact of Christ. The pivotal event in all of human history is that act of God by which he came as a human in Jesus Christ, died, and rose from the grave. Schuster is right to point out that Newbigin believes “…the decisive

68 *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine*, 43.

69 Matt 24:14. This text is quoted by Newbigin to confirm his statement that “The consummation depends upon sending, upon mission” (*Household of God*, 162).
event for the history of this world did not grow out of human history as a natural event. It is not a matter of development and progress but an act brought about by God.”

This act of God is not an obscure principle. It is found in the concrete events surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Newbigin says, “Paul presents himself not as the teacher of a new theology but as the messenger commissioned by the authority of the Lord himself to announce 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.” The sending of the Messiah was the decisive act of God, not the revealing of a doctrine but of a person.

Of these concrete events, Newbigin most frequently points out the resurrection as the clue to all history. He writes, “The tomb is empty…The Christian believes that this judgment is determinative for the understanding of all history, that it is the point at which the meaning of the whole story is disclosed, and that the whole story must therefore be understood from this point.” As Nicholas Wood summarizes, “For Newbigin the resurrection of Jesus is the crucial issue for Christian faith because it is the act of God, par excellence….” Why does Newbigin talk like this about the resurrection? He does so because we cannot believe in the resurrection without believing in a God who acts to change our world. He does so because he believes that the act of God in raising Jesus from the dead is that act which gives us hope for a future in the face of death. This hope is not just for me personally, but for the world. “[The resurrection of Jesus] has been

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72 *The Finality of Christ*, 85.

73 *Faiths and Faithfulness*, 151.
treated as the ground of our hope for a personal future. It is this, but it is much more than this: it is the ground of our hope for a new world.”

It is the pledge that we are given to secure the promise God has given us of a renewed earth and perfect fellowship. That is why the resurrection of Jesus is the decisive act for world history.

If this is indeed an act of God, and if it is indeed decisive for human history, then it stands to reason that God can and does act in human history. Resurrections do not happen without an act of God. If one takes the resurrection as his basis for belief, then of course they must believe God can act in history. And, Newbigin would argue, there is no other way to believe in the resurrection without making it the basis for your view of the world. He says, “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.” There is no other basis, no other proper ground, for belief. Christ’s resurrection cannot be incorporated into another worldview and remain the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God. Thus, it is either disbelieved or it is the basis of belief in a God who can act, and act decisively, in the history of humanity and the world to raise it out of the depths of hell.

B. Resurrection Only after the Cross

However, the resurrection only came after the cross. And without the cross, the resurrection loses its proper meaning and place in history. In fact, speaking about the idea of progress, Newbigin says, “…one could say that it was a one-sided development of the

74 *The Open Secret*, 106.


New Testament hope—one-sided in that it was an attempt to reproduce in history the power of the resurrection without the marks of the cross."  

But is not the cross merely an illustration of the brokenness of this present life and the resurrection a belief that we will rise out of the ashes like a phoenix one day? Newbigin says absolutely not:

    Beneath the view we are combating, there lies the implication that in Christ and His revelation the idea of divine punishment or retribution is superseded. In the cross, it is sometimes said, it is revealed that God, instead of punishing sin, Himself bears it. I am sure this is a disastrous mistake. What is revealed in the cross is this piercing paradox that God who punished sin and will punish sin Himself bears the punishment, and thereby it is made possible for the sinner to repent and turn to God in faith. So far from superseding the idea of divine punishment, the cross itself requires it.

The cross was an event wherein God did not pass over our sin and brokenness, but radically, wrathfully, and lovingly condemned it to death in Jesus Christ. Newbigin puts it plainly, “The cross of Jesus is the place where all human beings without exception are exposed as enemies of God….” On the cross, the death and decay in the world was called for what it is. Every individual is revealed as spiritually dead. He writes, “It is in the presence of the Cross that we are compelled to say: There is none righteous, no not one.”

Even beyond the individual, it unmasked the powers of the world, which contributed to Jesus’ crucifixion, as bankrupt.

In condemning this brokenness, Jesus’ death on the cross helps us to recognize the contingency of the world. Christ’s cross helps us to see that it is only by the radical

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77 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 112.
79 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 86.
80 The Finality of Christ 58.
81 Foolishness to the Greeks, 100.
activity of God that we could ever hope for the kind of world for which we long, a world of justice and peace, since on the cross the very Son of God was murdered by wicked human beings. The act itself was the epitome and the outworking of the evil of human beings and human societies. As we are, we are not fit for the world for which we long, and Christ’s death is the proof of that fact.

Furthermore, Christ’s cross shows us that the end of the best person that ever lived was death and ignominy. Newbigin draws his conclusion about history’s contingency directly from this fact:

This on-going history is not, however, a smooth ascent which leads gradually to ‘the kingdom of God on earth’. Such a vision of future history (post Christum) is precluded by the events of Jesus’ career. The ministry and teaching of Jesus do not lead to a chain of events in which the will of God visibly prevails over the powers that oppose it. They lead to rejection, failure and death. That this death is in truth the victory of God is a secret revealed only to those chosen to be witnesses of it. They are in turn told in the plainest terms that their path into the future will be the same as his—the way of the cross. But they are assured that as they follow this way to the end, they will become the inheritors of the victory of the kingdom.  

If there ever was a person whose life should have led to immediate, tangible progress, it was Jesus of Nazareth. And yet, it did not. He was the suffering servant, a phrase that Goheen points out is perhaps the most regularly employed image in Newbigin’s Christology.  

Newbigin says that the Christian’s life must be characterized by the same righteousness leading to the same suffering. He says that “…the relation between our present life in this world and our life in the new world of the Kingdom is understood in


83 “As the Father Has Sent Me,” 145.
terms of death and resurrection." That is not a mere metaphor for the church’s ethic, but a way of life patterned off of the factual accomplishment of the God who became a man and died on a cross. In that event, God revealed that death and resurrection is the pattern of victory that we will follow on our way to new and abundant life, including the life in the new earth. Newbigin says:

   Christ gives us the victory (cf. 1 Cor. 15:50) because He has broken the power of sin, He has broken the power of death. Death is still a fact. In Adam all die. The barrier is till there. What we are assured of in Christ is that death is not the last word, but that God in His mercy is able out of the ruin of corruption and death of men and of man’s social institutions to raise up that perfect incorruptible society which is our true goal. It is the assurance that that goal is the end to be reached—though we cannot reach it in a straight line by our own power.

The world and the persons in it must pass through death before it can raise to new life. And it can only do this by the power of the one who has already conquered death, the king who did not take the reins of worldly reign, but humbly died in submission to the will of the Father.

So, I have shown how Newbigin strongly stresses the u-shape of history itself, the contingency of history’s end, and (recalling the discussion in chapter three of the relation between the end of history and history’s meaning) the contingency of history’s meaning. It is entirely dependent on God. And Newbigin believes this because he believes the gospel of Jesus Christ. He summarizes:

   The gospel calls us back again and again to the real clue, the crucified and risen Jesus, so that we learn that the meaning of history is not immanent in history itself, that history cannot find its meaning at the end of a process of development, but that history is given its meaning by what God has done in Jesus Christ and by what he has promised to do; and that the true horizon is not at the successful end of our projects but in his coming to reign.

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IV. Conclusion

The incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ is the central and decisive act of God for human (and cosmic) history. In it, we learn that our public and our private history is radically contingent on the promises and acts of God who has conquered the barriers between us and full, satisfying life. Both us and our society will have to undergo death before even the possibility of the world we long for is complete, for the simple reason that we absolutely do not fit in such a world, individually or socially. But we know that we can go down this path toward suffering and death without despairing, because we follow the one who has gone down into the chasm before us and has come out the other side. Newbigin says, “The form of the cross is projected across the picture of world history. It is not to be a smooth story of successful struggle leading directly to victory. Rather it is a story of tribulation and faithful witness, of death and resurrection.”86 It is no smooth ascent, but it is a sure victory.

Therefore, and contrary to the situation posed in the introduction of this chapter, we are not forced to choose between believing that human beings are radically and tragically broken and that there is still hope for humankind. We do not have to choose between realism and hopefulness because reality is a hopeful one.

Humanity is broken. Human beings are not capable of bringing about the life for which we hope. We are not capable of creating the meaning of history. Knowing this, however, is part of the solution to another issue discussed at the beginning of this chapter: ideological trampling of people in search of utopia or the Kingdom of God. Christians

86 The Open Secret, 38.
know that it is not in our power to bring about the Kingdom of God, since we and our world are subject to death.

We are, nevertheless, entrusted with a vision of that future fellowship which God has promised us in Jesus Christ. It is our job, therefore, to share that vision in the way we live and talk. Newbigin says, “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God.”

That reign of the Father is the reign revealed to us in Christ that will be revealed to all at the end of history. We are only even able to enter into the missionary dialogue because we have been given a foretaste, an *arrabon*, of the kingdom in the Spirit who guides us and leads us in His mission. It is only in this recognition of our secondary status in the mission that we can faithfully seek to be used by God as a Church to do purposeful work without becoming an ideology that destroys individuals for the sake of the corporate vision. Newbigin says that knowing we are participating in the work of the Triune God radically affects our day to day work:

Such a faith gives us a place for free, responsible action. It gives the assurance that what we do is not lost in the abyss of meaninglessness, but is part of the fulfilling of God’s purpose for history. It delivers us on the one hand from the alternations of optimism and pessimism which beset any undertaking not rooted in faith concerning God’s whole action in history. It delivers us on the other hand from the kind of over-heated apocalypticism which is not content to leave ‘the day and the hour’ in the Father’s hands.

We can have a proper hope, rather and mere optimism or utter despair.

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87 *The Open Secret*, 110.

88 Newbigin puts the church’s secondary nature plainly in his *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, “…How is the life of Christ, the life which is a true foretaste of the kingdom, continued in the period between the ascension and the parousia? The answer must be somewhat as follows…. It will be in the life of a community which remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells and of which the central focus is the story told in the New Testament” (134).

89 *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 50-1.
It is because of this activity of the Triune God, particularly revealed to us on the cross that we can accept this meta-narrative as uniting without being coercive. The clue to our narrative is the ignominious and sacrificial death of our Lord. He did not come to violently coerce people into his Kingdom but rather to receive their violence on himself to give them an opportunity to choose life in a violence free human community. The cross is the place where we see, with Taber “…that the gospel of the kingdom of God is the only valid universal meta-narrative, the only one which is not ruthlessly homogenizing and totalitarian, because it is the only one based on self-sacrificing love instead of worldly power, the only one offered by a king on a cross….”

As the church performs its mission, it must remember its contingency and that of world history. It cannot expect that its work will produce the kind of success and progress that one might expect of creative, righteous, loving work. Christians live, work, and minister in the same stream of history in which Jesus lived, worked, ministered…and died. Newbigin says, “The Bible teaches us to recognize crisis, conflict and agony as the signs of the presence of God's kingdom.” The church is not greater than her Lord. The pattern of his ministry will be the pattern of hers.

The road is still U-shaped. We are still subject to radical contingency in the form of death. Any announcements of our redeeming the earth are rightly rejected as triumphalist and out of touch with reality. All of our programs and institutions, in fact, will crumble and be left in ruins beneath the rubble of history. We do not trust in the Jesus who gave us the best ethical program for self-fulfillment. We do not trust in the

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91 “The Secular-Apostolic Dilemma,” 68.
Jesus who gave us rules to guide us through the treacherous land of history into utopia.

We trust in the Jesus who walked through the death we will inevitably face, and came out on the other side. The end is contingent on the God of the resurrection. This is our reason for being willing to stand with the suffering in solidarity. It is also our reason for sure hope that God will one day end that suffering in unspeakable joy—because history belongs to him.
CHAPTER FIVE
HISTORY IS RELATIONAL

I. Introduction

In chapter 4, I introduced an eschatological dichotomy that Newbigin sees in a history without contingency: public versus private salvation. Newbigin uses the U-shape of history to address the mistaken view of a smooth ascent to public salvation through the successful application of ideology, and to offer an alternative vision. However, while the contingent nature of history makes it possible for humans to be fallen and yet salvation to still be corporate, a contingent history by no means entails such a social vision of the end. It would still be possible that while a corporate salvation depended upon God for its possibility, God would choose to save humans individually, quite apart from the world of which they are currently a part. He might choose to do this if the human relationship with God is ultimately an individual one, and if human beings could experience the fullness of salvation apart from meaningful relationships with other humans. How can we know what kind of destiny God has promised for humankind?

Newbigin shows that the answer to the eschatological question of public versus private salvation has impact on one’s view of events and their relations here and now:

The question at stake is as follows: Is the human counterpart of God's reign the human soul considered as a distinct monad having an eternally unsharable destiny, or is it human history as a whole, considered as one interlocking reality in which human life has its meaning and destiny? If the former, then it follows that contingent happenings at particular times and places cannot be of ultimate significance for all human souls: the way of entry into full fruition of God's reign must be equally available to all and to each in its time and place. But if the latter is the case, if the object of God's reign is human (and cosmic) history as a whole, then the working of his reign must be such that it binds each of us to all as part of
its very character. In that case a single happening in a particular time and place can be of decisive significance to all.\(^1\)

One’s eschatological beliefs, as we have seen time and time again in this treatment, are integrally connected with how one views historical events and persons in the past and present. This is true because history is both real and a road.

However, while a person may believe that all of our individual stories do not by their nature connect to one another and base this view in their eschatological belief in an unsharable, individual destiny, that does not mean that belief in the significance of events here and now finds its ground in eschatology. Rather, one’s philosophy of history is the logical basis for both beliefs. However, if one strongly believes in a particular eschatological future then, in seeking coherence, they will likely adjust their beliefs about the connectedness of history here and now so as to have the proper basis for that belief.

Newbigin uses Bultmann as a key example of someone who rejects the interconnectedness of history and individuals. He quotes Bultmann as saying:

> Eschatology tells us the meaning and goal of the time process, but that answer does not consist in a philosophy of history, like pantheism, where the meaning and goal of history are to be seen in each successive moment, or like the belief in progress, where the goal is realized in a future Utopia, or myth, which offers us an elaborate picture of the end of the world. Indeed eschatology is not at all concerned with the meaning and goal of secular history, for secular history belongs to the old aeon, and therefore can have neither meaning nor goal.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) *The Open Secret*, 51.

\(^2\) *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 45, quoted from Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1962), 116. It is not entirely clear here whether Bultmann means the answer does not lie in a philosophy of history *per se* or in one like pantheism. If the latter, Newbigin would certainly agree with at least that much of this quotation. However, if Bultmann means that “philosophies of history” as such are not to be sought, we will see in this chapter that someone like Bultmann, in having to disagree that the history of the world is a particular way (i.e. unified), indeed is making a statement about history itself and engaging the discipline of philosophy of history.
Bultmann therefore seeks meaning in the “personal spiritual history of each believer.”

One Christian belief that seems incoherent with contemporary thought about people and history is Federalism. How can it be that one person’s actions (Adam’s sin or Christ’s righteousness) has significance for everyone? This is a common question levied against Christians who hold to the classical doctrine of original sin. Is it not absurd to think that God would hold us accountable for the sin of the first people at the beginning of time? This question, however, is not only levied against the doctrine of original sin. When it is uttered, whether one recognizes it or not, it also challenges the very heart of Christianity: Christ’s atonement. Has Christ’s life, death, and resurrection done anything for us? Was he just an illustration of truths about God, truths that no doubt apply to us in our time as much as to him in his? After all, if the evil action of one man cannot significantly affect us and our relationships with God thousands of years later, then certainly the righteous actions of one man thousands of years ago cannot have a meaningful impact on us either. This is not to answer the objection, but rather to show how deep it penetrates into the core of the Christian faith.

Newbigin relates this objection to Federalism and to the scandal of particularity. For the same reason that many people cannot conceive of God punishing us for the sins of others, they also cannot imagine a God who would choose a particular nation out of all

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3 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 45.

4 As I will show, however, Newbigin believes this does answer the objection. We must choose whether or not to trust Christ in this way. If we trust him, then he and his work must be the basis of our beliefs. If believing his work has an affect on us entails the belief in a history that is relationally one, then Newbigin will believe in that kind of history.

5 Cf. The Open Secret, 67 and The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 72. N.B. that my use of the term ‘Federalism’ is not meant to indicate that Newbigin used this word in this way. I am merely using it as a helpful term to encapsulate those doctrines which are disturbing to those with a particular view of history.
the nations to be his special people. How can a God who is God over all people and things and events speak and act in a special way to particular people, in particular times and places? In Newbigin’s missionary context, this was a profoundly distressing Christian doctrine. He writes, “To a devout Hindu, heir to four thousand years of profound religious and philosophical experience, there is something truly scandalous in the suggestion that, to put it crudely, he or she must import the necessities for salvation from abroad.”6 Similarly, many cannot imagine why it might be a problem to represent Jesus variably as Caucasian, Asian, Latino, or African depending upon the ethnicity or background of the worshipping community. It seems unimportant to them that he was a particular person in a particular place at a particular time. Does he not just represent the best of humanity in general?

Again, for the same reason, Newbigin says, people have a difficult time understanding how one has to know and commit to this Jesus in order to be a part of God’s people, as the Christian message dictates. Has not God revealed himself in all religions, just in different styles or cultural forms? In a related issue, the language of election chafes. Why would God choose a particular community to reveal these supposedly life-changing events, especially if (as Christians maintain) they were not chosen for their exceptional qualities? Can he not (does he not) simply reveal these truths directly to individual human hearts? The intuitive weight one gives to this ‘scandal’ (i.e. the reason it appears to be a scandal at all) is dependent on her underlying philosophy of history—history is not essentially relational. It is not essentially one.7

6 The Open Secret, 66.
Recall that in chapter three, I concluded that Newbigin’s view of linear history is a necessary but insufficient condition for upholding a single meta-narrative of human history. If history is circular rather than linear, no unified plot of human history could possibly exist. However, one could believe in the basic linear nature of history and still disbelieve in the possibility of meta-narrative. Why? History, on this view, is like so many dots in a line, contiguous but not essentially connected. The people and events in history, similarly, are conceived of as radically disconnected. Newbigin points out that our question of how God relates to us is tied to how we relate to history. He writes, “What is at stake is the full integrity of our nature as human beings…. ‘Why cannot God deal with me as I am…?’ At the heart of that protest is the conviction that my own identity and my own destiny are, in the last analysis, mine alone.” Individuals are, in their most ultimate and meaningful parts of themselves (i.e. their histories) isolated. The problem is that this belief leaves life without meaning. Newbigin explains:

…but this purely individualistic conception of the Kingdom robs human history as a whole of its meaning. According to this view, the significance of life in this world is exhaustively defined as the training of individual souls for heaven. Thus there can be no connected purpose running through history as a whole, but only a series of disconnected purposes for each individual life. History, on this view, would have no goal, no telos.7

In order for there to be a meta-narrative of human history, history must be more than a real, U-shaped road. It must have a further quality of relational unity.

7 I will unpack the implications of history’s relational unity for the question of universality and particularity in the description of Newbigin’s own view.

8 The Open Secret, 68.

The issue of the relational nature of history and the humans in it is crucially important for our level of connectedness with a church community. Must a person, after he commits himself to Christ, become a member in a church or is he free to live his Christian life on his own if he so chooses? How does one decide which church to attend? Does she pick the church that is meeting her needs at that particular season in her life, or are there other criteria for church choice and level of commitment? These are practical questions that are dramatically effected by this particular issue in philosophy of history.

Not only is the church affected by one’s view of history, but the Scripture received by the church is also affected. If history is essentially a bunch of disconnected events and disconnected people all with their individual and isolated relationships with God, then Scriptural inspiration must be conceived of as verbal downloads from on high. The human authors must have absolutely zero significance in the entire process, since if they did their relationship with God would directly affect our relationship with God. Furthermore, in order to be reading the very words of God, Christians would need access to the autographa, since there is no way for us to know which copies we have correspond identically with the original (if any), and any translation would require human interpretation. Indeed, the actual Word of God becomes very difficult if not impossible to access unless God works actively through the enormous web of human relationships that connects us to the biblical community of God.

Finally, a view of history that sees people and events as in a series yet disconnected monads also strips people of the basis they need for ethically negotiating the basic problems of their everyday life. In fact, Newbigin believes that “this view in practice leaves man without any guidance in the vast majority of the actual problems of
life.” He makes this very strong statement because it is increasingly the case that the vast majority of our actual problems are far bigger, more complex, and more expensive than any single individual can solve. Newbigin describes the situation in 1941 in this way:

The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the books and newspapers we read and the opinions they propound are the products of vast industrial and financial groupings which control resources often greater than those of a medium-sized state. Consequently, in the vast majority of our actions, buying, selling, earning our living, reading and listening, we are dealing not with individuals whom we know personally but with vast anonymous organizations…. And insofar as this is so, a system of conduct based simply on individual character and individual destiny is powerless to control life as we actually know it.

His statement has turned out to be prophetic. This is arguably an even better description of the world today than it was of the world when Newbigin delivered those lectures. An individualistic account of human life cannot account for this kind of a world or provide an ethic by which to live in it.

Therefore, if one wants a view of history that yields a more helpful ethic for our increasingly corporate life, if one desires a Word of God that they can actually read, if one understands church as more than a commodity for individual spiritual consumption, if one is not satisfied to believe that history as a whole is ultimately meaningless and thus the individual’s story is similarly meaningless, then one needs a different vision of history than that of the isolated sequential lives of individual monads. If one wants to understand the Christian claims of the uniqueness of Christ or the effectiveness of his


death on the cross, one needs a philosophy of history that sees the entire story as radically, relationally one.

**II. Description**

*A. History Is a Net*

1. Atomic, Oceanic, and Relational History

Newbigin employs another image, in addition to the u-shaped road, to describe the nature and shape of history. This image is the net. In his introductory description of religious worldviews in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he utilizes the work of Turner:

Dr. Harold Turner, well known as a student and interpreter of new religious movements in primal societies, says that there are only three possible ways of understanding the world: the atomic, the oceanic, and the relational — symbolized respectively by billiard balls, the ocean, and the net.\(^\text{12}\)

In the first view, which Newbigin associates with Greek thought, the world is composed of individual units of matter (atoms) and the social structure is composed of individual human units. These occasionally bump into and affect each other but retain their own integrity and form regardless of the existence of the other individuals. Their relationships are not part of their essence. This worldview will tend to uphold autonomy and the value of the individual at the expense of the community.

The second view, that of the ocean, is more indicative of Hinduism and its derivatives. This represents the world as one unit, one undifferentiated ocean of being. The soul is the world. As Newbigin puts it, “Atma is Brahma.”\(^\text{13}\) This view, in a sense, preserves cosmic and corporate reality at the expense of the individual because the one loses their individual identity like a drop of water in the ocean.

\(^{12}\) 171-2.

\(^{13}\) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172.
Newbigin’s view, and what he believes is the underpinnings of a biblical worldview, attempts to retain the importance of the individual and the social reality of which they are an intimate part. He sees the components as parts of a whole that receive their meaning from their participation in the whole. He writes, “The third view sees everything as constituted by relationships, whether it is the material world or human society. This view, characteristic of what we are accustomed to call primitive societies and primal religions, is also the view of the Bible.”\(^{14}\) This is what Newbigin, following Turner, refers to here as the “net” of history and elsewhere frequently as the “fabric” of history.\(^ {15}\) Put simply, it is the view that the world is, as a part of its being, a vast network of relationships, and the individual components of that world are, as part of their beings, essentially relational.

2. Excursus: The Bible as Universal History

This view of reality as relational is fundamental to Newbigin’s understanding of Scripture. Newbigin says that the Bible is the place where we come clearly to know the world in this way, “The Bible is unique among the sacred books of the world’s religions in that it is in structure a history of the cosmos…. not of merely human history, but of cosmic history.”\(^ {16}\) He was profoundly influenced by a Hindu friend of his who, after having read the Bible, commented,

“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 — and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don’t need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the

\(^{14}\) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172.


\(^ {16}\) *The Open Secret*, 30-31.
history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it."¹⁷

The Bible, in its basic form, tells the story of the cosmos. It tells a single story that supposedly encapsulates the story of the entire extant universe. That is not to say that Scripture tells the story exhaustively.¹⁸ However, that is to say that the writers of the Bible understood the world to be the type of thing that one could tell a single story about. This would not be possible under the atomic view of history. Furthermore, it would not be possible in the oceanic view of history since there would be no distinctions and therefore no story with important individual characters and events to tell. The Bible in its very form assumes the ‘net’ view of reality and cosmic history.

Secondly, the Bible does not claim to be, Newbigin says, a separate story from that of the world in which we live and play our part. It is not a separate Heilsgeschichte. The view of human and cosmic history as a net precludes this understanding of Scripture. Newbigin puts it clearly, “The biblical story is not a separate story. It is not a special history (‘salvation history’) apart from human history as a whole. The whole story of humankind is one single fabric of interconnected events, and the story the Bible tells is part of it.”¹⁹ That means that the Bible cannot be segmented off from the rest of historical material nor cannot it be understood rightly unless it is understood to affect the world of which we are a part. He makes this point with characteristic boldness when he says:

¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, A Walk Through the Bible (Vancouver: Regent College, 1999), 4.

¹⁸ The Open Secret, 87.

¹⁹ The Open Secret, 87. In a different piece, he writes, “We read these pages [of Scripture], naturally, as part of our real history, secular history, the history of which we are a part. What other history is there? There are not different histories, but there are different ways of understanding history” (Foolishness to the Greeks, 60-1).
Whatever else it may be, the Bible is a secular book dealing with the sort of events which a news editor accepts for publication in a daily newspaper…. It deals with events which happened and tells a story which can be checked—and is being checked—by the work of archaeologists and historians. We miss this because we do not sufficiently treat the Bible as a whole. When we do this we see at once that the Bible —whatever be the variety of material which it contains— is in its main design a universal history.**20**

I will outline some of Newbigin’s practical implications of this view in the conclusion of this chapter.

Since it is a fully integrated part of the world and its history, and since it tells *the* decisive narrative of history, the Bible is the place where we find the clue to understanding our ongoing history. Newbigin claims, “The biblical story is not a separate story: it is part of the unbroken fabric of world history. The Christian faith is that this is the place in the whole fabric where its pattern has been disclosed, even though the weaving is not yet finished.”**21** This is only possible if history is of a piece, that is, if all aspects of history are integrally related to each other.

Furthermore, Newbigin says, the trajectory of Scripture is from the cosmic to the individual. It moves from the story of humanity to the story of the human. It views the story of individual humans as part of a much larger story that has to do with all of human society and the history of the creation. That is why Newbigin says:

Throughout these chapters I am suggesting that the gospel is to be understood as 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? In distinction from a great deal of Christian writing which takes the individual person as its starting point for the understanding of salvation and then extrapolates from that to the wider issues of social, political, and economic life, I am suggesting that, with the Bible as our guide, we should proceed in the opposite direction, that we begin with the Bible as the unique interpretation of human and

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**20** *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 20.

**21** *The Open Secret*, 88.
Newbigin calls out the tendency when addressing ultimate questions (i.e. soteriology) to determine our anthropology before addressing the bigger questions of philosophy of history. Instead, he says, we should take our cue from Scripture. Begin with history and move to anthropology. Then we will be able to draw appropriate soteriological conclusions.

3. Sacred versus Secular History?

If history is of a piece, and the Bible is a part of the whole of the cosmic story, then there can be no sacred history distinct from secular history. “The Bible is,” Newbigin says, “universal history.” It is not cordoned off from the rest of history. The events recorded in the Bible are highlighted as those events that reveal the most significant parts of the whole fabric of our cosmic story. The author(s) of every story must choose what events are significant or else get lost in the infinite detail of any given event. The Bible highlights certain events as most significant for understanding the whole, but this does not mean that the events in the Bible are necessarily in some special ontological category. Indeed, these same events can be (and have been) interpreted as irrelevant for the story of history. That is why Newbigin says, “It is clearly an illusion to

22 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 128.

23 It would be interesting to see research done on the prevalence of this tendency in contemporary theology. As a tentative hypothesis, it is likely that this approach became much more popular after the ardent defense of the primacy of the individual religious experience given by Schleiermacher.

24 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 89.

25 For example, if I told you the story of my day I would select and organize the material based on what I thought you (or I) might find significant about my day (I came to the library, wrote about Newbigin, etc). However, if I attempted not to select, I would have an interminable, probably meaningless list (I opened the door with my right hand, walked through the door, down the steps, pulled my keys out of my pocket, etc.)
imagine that there are two kinds of history—sacred and profane, salvation history and secular history. We who are at the moment making and suffering history know that there is only one history, but we know that it can be understood theistically or atheistically.”

Though it may have a plurality of interpretations, history is not two, but one.

In this view, Newbigin is explicitly following the work of Augustine of Hippo. Stults makes the claim that Newbigin relies heavily on Cochrane’s interpretation of Augustine in *Christianity and Classical Culture* for his view of history. Indeed, this book is on the short list of the books that had the most influence on Newbigin—a list that Wainwright made in collaboration with Newbigin as late as 1997. Newbigin mentions Augustine’s *De Civitas Dei* as based in a biblical vision of world history. He goes further to praise Augustine because, “…Augustine had made a decisive break with the classical conceptions of history and had inspired the first attempt to write a true world-history based upon the biblical story…."

Whether Newbigin derived his view of Augustine’s *De Civ.* from Cochrane or from the primary text, his destruction of the distinction between secular and sacred history is certainly in line with the thought of Augustine.

In his book *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Robert Markus is sometimes credited with showing the division of sacred and secular history in the thought of Augustine. However, this claim is misleading. Markus notes

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26 *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 61.

27 *Grasping Truth and Reality*, 54-56.


30 “The Centrality of Jesus for History,” 199. Cf. also *Sign of the Kingdom*, 49.
rightly that Augustine’s use of the word *historia* does not so much mean the events of the past as the recording of those events.\(^{31}\) So when Augustine distinguishes ‘sacred *historia*’ from the rest of historical recordings, he is claiming the uniquely infallible truth of the biblical *accounts* over and above other accounts of history, but not dividing the events in those accounts from the events not recorded therein. In fact, the whole of Augustine’s project in *De Civ.* militates against such a distinction since he interprets the events of his time by what he learns from the biblical narrative, indicating that the one has clear and present significance for the other. Newbigin follows Augustine closely in this line.

If all history is of a piece and there is no fundamental distinction between ‘sacred and secular histories,’ that means that the acts of God recorded in Scripture are part of the very same story as our story today. Newbigin points out that ‘happenedness’ requires historicity, “But what, exactly, do we mean if we talk of ‘God’s acts in history’? We do not mean, certainly, a series of events which are separable from the whole fabric of human history, a *Heilsgeschichte* which is separate from the history of the world. No such separation can be made, for the whole fabric is woven as one piece.”\(^{32}\) Again, in speaking of resurrection there has been an attempt to relegate this event to the hearts of believers rather than as part of the history of the world, without saying that it simply did not occur. Newbigin responds to this quite bluntly, “It is sometimes said that the resurrection is an event outside history. This seems to me simply a sentence without any meaning. If it happened it is not outside history.”\(^{33}\) There is one history, and nothing that


\(^{32}\) *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 51.

\(^{33}\) *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 54.
has happened is outside of it. A consequence of this is that we cannot relegate any event that has truly happened to the realm of meaninglessness. We cannot claim it happened, and yet isolate it so as to leave it without significance. As I will show in the next section, that fact is part of the reason God’s plan to redeem the world takes the particular shape that the Bible says it does.

B. The Net of Salvation

1. Election

When reading a Bible that is an interwoven part of history about acts of God that are interwoven parts of history, it should not be surprising when we discover God’s act of salvation is an interwoven part of history as well. As I explained in chapter 1 in dealing with the reality of history, Newbigin says that for God to act means that he acts in history. When we add to history that it is not only real but also a tapestry of interwoven people and events, we see that God’s activity of history can and must be instantiated in particular ways and people. Newbigin writes, “God's universal purpose of blessing has to be wrought out through specific acts at specific times and places and involving particular people. It is wrought out in history, and history is a matter of these specific and particular places, times, and people.”34 We see here that his view of history conditions his understanding of the connection of the universal purposes of God and his use of very particular people to carry out those purposes.35

34 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 145.
History and all that is contained within it is so integrally united that humans cannot be abstracted from history even for this act of salvation. It must come to them in history through historical means. When God gives his church the task of bringing the gospel to all nations, Newbigin says, “It is the giving of a commission to do something that will otherwise remain undone: to bring the forgiveness of God to actual men and women in their concrete situations in the only way that it can be done so long as we are in

35 Hunsberger helpfully notes that while Newbigin’s use of the term ‘election’ primarily has a corporate connotation (namely, the election of Israel or the Church), yet he does not by this token belittle the election of the individual to that community. Hunsberger writes, “[Newbigin’s] assumption is that a community is composed of individual persons whose individuality is affirmed, not denied, by their being incorporated into a chosen community” (Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 84). Election is seen primarily in its corporate dimension without losing its significance for the individual.

On the other side of the coin, someone may object that there are those in history who were directly connected with God, without an intermediary, both as corporate entities and as individuals. She might say, “Well, even in election God blessed Abraham and the nation of Israel directly in order to bear his blessing to the nations. Israel did not need the nations to be elect in order to receive God’s blessing from them!” Newbigin has a ready-made answer to this challenge. He would respond by using his favorite passage on the nature of election: Romans 9-11. In his interpretation of these chapters, Israel was elect in order to bear God’s blessing to the nations, which they have done in Jesus Christ, the true Israelite. But the people of Israel (not all Israelites) have rejected Christ, and so they need the elect Gentiles to bear God’s blessing to them. Newbigin puts it this way,

God, says Paul, has hardened the heart of Israel to that the gospel will—so to say—bounce off to the Gentiles….Does this mean Israel is lost? No! Impossible!…. The answer is that this hardening of the heart of Israel is until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved (11:25). In the end, therefore, it is through the Gentiles that Israel will be saved. So the logic of election is complete. (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 83-4)

However, Newbigin is the one who frames the question to which he responds in terms of salvation of peoples, communities, and nations. He speaks in terms of Israel, not Abraham (or, more accurately, Abraham as representative of Israel). But Abraham himself (among others) is difficult to reconcile as an individual with Newbigin’s radically relational salvation. The blessing he receives from God in Genesis 12:2-3 is certainly extended to his descendants (and eventually the descendants of his faith), but it is nonetheless an individual blessing directly from God. The second person personal pronoun in this text is singular in every case. It seems as though this knowledge of God, and his relationship with God is unmediated by other individuals.

Nevertheless, Newbigin’s relational view of salvation still holds against this biblical critique. I suspect Newbigin would have fielded this question by referring to Hebrews chapter eleven before conceding defeat. In vv. 39-40, the author says, “These [i.e. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, etc.] were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (NIV, 2011, emphasis added). The individuals of the Old Testament then, even those with seemingly unmediated relationships of blessing from God, receive the perfection of salvation ‘only together with us’ as we are in Christ, our consummate relationship. Thus ends this very self-indulgent note.
the flesh—by the word and act and gesture of another human being.”

To explain the same truth more imaginatively, Newbigin describes God’s salvific use of historical circumstances this way, “This means that the gift of salvation would be bound up with our openness to one another. It would not come to each, direct from above, like a shaft of light through the roof. It would come from the neighbor in the action by which we open the door to invite the neighbor in. But the neighbor would have to be sent (Rom. 10:14).”

As we learned last chapter, the mission is God’s. The driver of history, and of the salvific process, is the Holy Spirit.

Crucially, however, the Holy Spirit uses the real words and actions of real men and women to effect his saving plan. Newbigin says, “It is the universality of God’s saving love which is the ground of his choosing and calling a community to be the messengers of his truth and bearers of his love for all peoples. Once again we have to remember that neither truth nor love can be communicated except as they are embodied in a community which reasons and loves.”

To put it even more bluntly, Newbigin claims, “There is, there can be, no private salvation, no salvation which does not involve us with one another.” This is the case because we are so integrally connected to one another as members of the same story.

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36 The Open Secret, 48.

37 The Open Secret, 70-1.

38 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 85.

39 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 82.

40 Based on his objections to what he terms the ‘mechanistic’ and ‘showcase’ views of election as too ‘abstract’ from the lives and interactions of real people (cf. Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 101), I suppose Hunsberger may object to this “historical” view as well. In anticipation of this objection, I believe this is not a more abstract view, but a wider concrete view. History is emphatically the realm of the concrete. Newbigin repeatedly claims that the biblical perspective on salvation is broader than individuals,
Neither does the universality of God’s love and saving purpose contradict his method of choosing particular people to bear it. Newbigin says that “Universality and particularity do not contradict one another but require each other.”

They require each other because God has made all things meaningfully related to and interconnected with one another. Therefore, for the gospel to come to all it must come from some. Election is the connection point between the universal and the particular. He says, “This is the pattern throughout the Bible. The key to the relation between the universal and the particular is God’s way of election. The one (or the few) is chosen for the sake of the many; the particular is chosen for the sake of the universal.”

Newbigin gives a view of election that is meant to answer the one who objects, “But why do universality and particularity not contradict each other? Why would God go about his saving work by way of a process that incorporates the speech and acts of faulty human beings? How can God be the God of all, and yet choose only a few through which to affect his saving plan (i.e. The Israelites)? Why does God choose to employ election, a historical process, as the means of salvation and not simply decide to save all at once?”

Hunsberger asks this same question as a way of explaining how Newbigin’s view of election shows the deep “inner logic” of election in a way that the ‘mechanistic’ views of Cullman and Boer and the ‘showcase’ views of Van Dijk, Jocz, and Van Engen cannot address. He claims that Newbigin answers the question of “Why election?” more indeed even broader than humanity. It extends to the whole history of the entire cosmos that God created and loves.

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41 *The Open Secret*, 67.

42 *The Open Secret*, 68.

43 *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, 99.
satisfactorily than all of these others because his view of election relies on these three realities: 1) “the nature and destiny of humanity,” 2) “the personal character of God,” 3) and, “the nature of salvation.” While Hunsberger’s observations are incredibly insightful and appropriate for answering the question “Why election?”, he does not point out that each of these three finds their coherence in Newbigin’s philosophy of history. In the sections to come, I will describe how Newbigin’s view of history as intertwined and relational is related to his views on eschatology, anthropology, and personal knowledge of God.

2. Eternal Fellowship

Newbigin’s view of salvation is not only corporate in means but also in end. Salvation as Newbigin views it is not an individualistic enterprise. The Kingdom of God, says Newbigin, is not individualistic. “It is social and cosmic, concerning men as a whole, and not only men but the whole created world also.” Salvation is not merely the individual destiny of bliss in heaven. Salvation is not primarily about the individual’s isolated relationship with God. This view is contrary to the very prevalent “Christian idea

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44 Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 96-104.

45 Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 103. By “nature of salvation” here Hunsberger seems to mean the nature of the fully realized eschaton.

46 One will likely notice that I said Hunsberger’s reasons, including the personal character of God, find their cohesion in philosophy of history. That is not, of course, to say that God’s character is derivative from the history he created. As we saw in chapter 3, God is distinct from his creation. That is also not to say that Newbigin derives his theology proper from his philosophy of history. In fact, it is my contention that he derives both immediately from the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, Hunsberger’s description here of “the personal character of God” centers not on God’s relational character but the way in which we come to know him personally. It is difficult to say, since his section on this topic is neither long nor explicit, but it appears that he is focusing on the way God personally relates to us, which is not merely a function of God’s character but ours as well as members of the history God created.

47 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 27. N.B. This is an early articulation of Newbigin’s views on universalism. While one can see the beginnings of his later view in this early view, there is definitely progression. I will explain this further in the section on biblical universalism.
of salvation” in that, “It centers attention upon individual redemption out of the world rather than upon the redemption of the world.” This so-called ‘individual redemption’ would not be full redemption according to Newbigin. Individual salvation is not salvation in the full Christian sense. Newbigin writes:

This point is a very important one. If we speak only of the immortality of the soul, and if we think only (as many Christians do) of going to heaven when we die, we have forgotten the most important part of the Christian hope. We have again become selfish individualists. What God longs for, and what we must long for, is the salvation of the world.

The perfection of individual people and the perfection of society (and the world) as a whole go hand in hand. Newbigin says that “the aim of history is the creation of a perfect fellowship. For the only full fruition for the individual soul is in fellowship, and a perfect fellowship itself implies perfect souls who form it. Man is, we know, made for true community and without it there is not fullness of spiritual stature for him.” As we saw in the last chapter, imperfect human beings could not participate in a perfect society, but neither can human beings be perfected without full relational reconciliation to their God, their world and their fellow humans.


49 Sin and Salvation, 122-3. He goes on to make the point stronger still, “But this new creation involves not only our souls and bodies, it also involves the whole created world. None of God’s creation is irrelevant to His purpose. None of it is mere scaffolding to be thrown away when the building is complete. He made it all in love, and He loves it all. Therefore the completion of His purpose means not only the resurrection, but also a new heaven and a new earth” (123).

50 “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress,” 49. For the reason Newbigin gives for why humans are made for community, see the following section on anthropology. As a foretaste of that connection between eschatology and anthropology, cf. Foolishness to the Greeks, 118-9, wherein Newbigin says, “Human beings reach their true end in such relatedness, in bonds of mutual love and obedience that reflect the mutual relatedness in love that is the being of the Triune God himself.”

51 Newbigin points this out implicitly in his first chapter of Sin and Salvation wherein he says that salvation consists in the resolving of four contradictions: 1) against the natural world, 2) against other humans, 3) against oneself, and 4) against God.
In fact, this is the meaning of the eschatological vision of the city in the book of Revelation. Newbigin explains, “Consequently, the vision with which the Bible closes is not the vision of a purely ‘spiritual’ existence, but the vision of a city….the city is the place where the human calling to mutual relatedness and the human commission to subdue the earth have their sharpest focus.”

Therefore, all of our work in the direction of the telos of a perfect fellowship in a perfect world under the fully revealed rule of God will not be in vain. The fact of death reaches us and our work in this world, but the God who raises the dead also raises the dead work that was directed toward perfect human fellowship. Newbigin puts it emphatically:

Whoever is faithfully seeking—whether as an engineer, an economist, a politician, a craftsman, a teacher, or a friend—to overcome that which militates against true human fellowship and to create such fellowship in great ways or in small, may be assured that even though all the visible results of his labor perish before his eyes, it is no more lost than is he himself if he dies in faith. The outward implements of fellowship will perish; but in the day when the perfected people of God are gathered together in the fellowship of the Kingdom, he will know that his work was not in vain.

How is this eschatological vision of perfect fellowship related to history? As I argued in chapter two, according to Newbigin’s philosophy of history and the eschatology he espouses, history per se is ontologically, logically, and epistemologically prior to eschatology. That is, the possibility of the end depends on the structure of the whole, and Newbigin’s view of the end depends on his view of history. That is not to say that his view does not depend for its grounding on the words of Scripture. However, many read the same passages with differing conclusions. Newbigin’s reads Scripture as

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52 *The Open Secret*, 69-70.

having a very particular view of history and therefore a very particular view of
eschatology. Since history is prior to eschatology in the aforementioned ways,
Newbigin’s understanding of the end as perfect fellowship derives from his view of
history as utterly relational, and the humans within history as intractably relational as
well. As we will see, this view of history also serves as part of the basis for his
anthropology and his relational epistemology.

3. Excursus: Biblical Universalism

However, before I attend to Newbigin’s anthropology and epistemology as they
relate to history, the vision of the eschaton as perfect fellowship forces me give some
attention to the issue of universalism in Newbigin’s thought. Does the perfect fellowship
require that all will participate in this perfect fellowship? Does the universality of the
human story mean that all will come to the same end universally? To put it more bluntly,
will all be saved in the end? Newbigin gives insights into these questions, but he prefers
to avoid them and answer other questions that are, he believes, more to the point.

Some of Newbigin’s early reflections on these issues are the most direct. He
seems at one point to say that he does not believe in a universal salvation, “[The
Kingdom of God] is not universalist, for the prelude to it is the destruction of the
organized force of wickedness….” Reading more closely, however, we see that this
does not translate directly into, “Some people will be condemned.” It is clearly a
possibility for Newbigin, who prefers the question, “Will some be able to reject God in

54 Even if one is unconvinced of the ontological, logical, or epistemological order, one still ought
to recognize that Newbigin’s view of history as a whole intentionally coheres with his view of the eschaton
as perfected society, heavens and earth.

the end?”, to the question, “Will all be saved?” Looking at it from this perspective, Newbigin says, “I do not see how, once we have granted the fact that this is so, we can theoretically deny the possibility that it may continue to be so.” People do choose to refuse God’s love now. Therefore, they may choose to refuse God’s love in the end, and, if they do, their punishment will be that which they have chosen.

This in no way contradicts his later thinking on the subject. In The Open Secret, Newbigin says, “We must reject the kind of rationalistic universalism that argues from the omnipotence of God’s love to the necessary ultimate salvation of every soul.” This easy mathematical formula does not take seriously enough the freedom that God has given us to destroy ourselves if we so choose, nor does it take the warnings of Christ in the gospels seriously. Later yet, in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Newbigin writes, “It seems to me that the whole nature of the gospel requires us to maintain this tension and not to try to resolve it either by a rationalistic universalism which denies the possibility of finally missing the mark, or by increasingly fruitless arguments about who will and who will not be saved.” We see here that Newbigin not only rejects one easy formula answering this abstract question, but he also dislikes the formulation of the question itself.

At the same time, while Newbigin always holds out the possibility of eternal punishment for some, he nevertheless is not convinced that this will in fact be the reality in the end. Paul’s words in Romans seem, he thinks, to militate against this. While some,


57 The Open Secret, 79.

including many in the Reformed tradition, read Romans 9 to say that God has elected some to salvation and consigned some to damnation, Newbigin says that this interpretation abstracts Romans 9 from its concrete context in the history of God’s saving work (given in Romans 9-11) and thereby distorts it. He argues:

He could make some vessels for honor and some for destruction. Paul does not say that he has done so, but only that, if he did, we would have no ground for complaint. This is where false conclusions have been drawn from Paul. The whole passage makes clear that God has not done what he might have done. He has not made some for honor and some for destruction. What he has done is to consign all men to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all (11:32).  

This is what Newbigin calls ‘biblical universalism.’ One must believe in God’s universal salvific intent for the world per the words of Scripture while keeping that in tension with the clearly acknowledged reality that one might be rejected in the end.

However, this answer is purely hypothetical, which Newbigin thinks is only appropriate for a purely hypothetical question. The question of salvation the gospel poses, he says, is not abstract. It is not about them. It is about me. Even at the earliest stage in his dedicated theological thinking, we see Newbigin treating this question in the distinctively missionary style he used for the rest of his life. In his 1941 Bangalore lectures, Newbigin says, “…the only right way to think about this matter is to think about it in relation to oneself.” For the rest of his life, this was his primary way of addressing the question. He writes in The Open Secret, “The question of eternal salvation and judgment is not a basis for speculation about the fate of other people; it is an infinitely serious practical

59 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 83.
60 The Open Secret, 80.
question addressed to me.” In other words, when asking the question, “Will all be
saved?” we should be asking the question, “Will I be saved?”

For this question, Newbigin gives no final answer. In fact, one gets the impression
from his writings that one cannot give a final answer for herself. There is little room for
assurance of salvation. As Newbigin says, “The Christian life is lived in the life-giving
tension between a godly fear and a godly confidence.” The tension described in
‘biblical universalism’ above is applied not only to the abstract question of humanity but
also the personal questions of one’s own eternal destiny.

It is clear that neither Newbigin’s eschatology as perfect eternal fellowship nor his
more basic understanding of the intertwined nature and structure of history entails the
same necessary end for all human beings. While God’s saving purpose is as wide as the
whole world and all the nations of the earth, this does not entail, either logically or
ontologically for Newbigin, the salvation of everyone in the world. The reality and
contingency of the world and the humans within it gives human beings the freedom with
which they may choose to destroy themselves, and God certainly has the freedom to
make his justice known in particular people or show his mercy to them if he so chooses.

C. Beings in Relatedness - The Trinity and Humanity

1. An Anthropology Coherent with History

In addition to Newbigin’s eschatology, Hunsberger points out anthropology as
one of Newbigin’s ontological grounds for the process of election. In other words, the

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62 The Open Secret, 79.

63 The Open Secret, 81.
process of election is necessary because of the type of thing that a human essentially is.

Hunsberger is exactly right in this assessment. Newbigin puts it clearly when he says:

> God’s way of universal salvation, if it is to be addressed to human beings as they really are and not to the unreal abstraction of a detached ‘soul,’ must be accomplished by the way of election — of choosing, calling, and sending one to be the bearer of blessing for all. The biblical doctrine of election is fundamental to any doctrine of mission that is addressed to men and women as they really are in the fullness of their shared life in history and in nature.⁶⁴

The Christian doctrine of mission includes person-to-person evangelism, and a Word that comes through the fingertips of human beings and is transmitted through the church because it takes seriously the reality that humans are ‘beings-in-relatedness.’ Newbigin puts it starkly, “We are fully persons only with and through others.”⁶⁵ One can arrive at this knowledge of humans from two directions: the God they represent and the world in which they participate.

Newbigin believes we can recognize humans as ‘beings-in-relatedness’ first by understanding the imago Dei. While in Hinduism and (broadly speaking) Western culture the individual is viewed as an isolated spiritual monad, a single immaterial soul in contact with the single immaterial Soul which is God, the Bible views humans as inherently relational beings made in the image of an inherently relational God. Thus, Newbigin states, “Here, in contrast to both the Indian and the modern Western views, there is no attempt to see the human person as an autonomous individual, and the human relation with God as the relation of the alone to the alone. From its very beginning the Bible sees

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⁶⁴ The Open Secret, 71.

⁶⁵ The Open Secret, 178.
human life in terms of relationships.”

66 This beginning is a beginning in the creative work of the Father, Word, and Spirit. Human relationality is due to the fact that:

God is no solitary monad…. Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness. No one can be made whole except by being restored to the wholeness of that being-in-relatedness for which God made us and the world and which is the image of that being-in-relatedness which is the being of God himself. 67

While Western culture, Newbigin says, views the basic qualities of human beings as freedom and equality, the Bible says that the basic essence of a human is relatedness. He writes, “Man—male and female—is made for God in such a way that being in the image of God involves being bound together in this most profound of all mutual relations.”

From this we can begin to see that our awareness of human being-in-relatedness is not only derived from the image in which humans were created, but also the other creatures with which we were created.

This is the second way we can come to know humans as intractably relational according to Newbigin: through their necessary participation in the intractably relational world and history with other humans and creatures. Human beings were created as physical beings with necessary connections to the physical world around them. Newbigin

66 The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 82.

67 The Open Secret, 70. This is the closest Newbigin gets to articulating the interrelatedness of history based on the act of God in creation. This interrelatedness as it pertains to creation is mediated through anthropology. The relational God makes relational humans in his image, and thus humans live relationally in history. In my view, Newbigin could have gone a step farther. History necessarily involves creation as a whole, which is something with which God necessarily interacts since it is in his interaction with it that it is created and sustained. This fits perfectly with a relational, triune God. The act of creation by the triune God, therefore, implies relationality in history. All history is interrelated since it concerns an interrelated creation. Humans are made in the image of God in the sense that they relate personally (i.e., with active, conscious intent). That is not to say that they choose to relate or not, but rather they choose how to relate. (For this insight I am indebted to Dr. Michael Goheen and Dr. John Cooper.)

68 Foolishness to the Greeks, 118.
explains the Christian view of the human person in contrast to the Hindu view in this way:

Although there are thus very important differences between these two systems [of Hinduism], they are at one in understanding the central being of the human person as a spiritual monad that does not require either other persons or a created world for the achievement of its true destiny. Salvation, or liberation, or realization concerns the soul as a pure monad. Human beings are ultimately spiritual, and the world of things and of other persons is marginal to their eternal destiny. The biblical vision of human nature and destiny is very different. The human in the Bible exists only in relationship with other persons and only as part of the created world.69

Furthermore, in contrast to a Western view of the autonomous human who chooses whether to be in relationships with others at all and chooses between such relationships at will, Newbigin says that we are inextricably related to others whether we choose to be or not. He writes, “To be human is to be part of this closely woven fabric of relationships. By contrast, the Western post-Enlightenment understanding of the human person centers on the autonomy of the individual who is free to make or to break relationships at will.”70 What we choose is not whether or not to be related to other humans, but rather the way in which we relate to them.

The careful reader will observe that I have claimed the above two bases (i.e. the *imago Dei* and participation in creation) as grounds for our *knowledge* of this anthropological truth. Newbigin is clear that the only *ontological* basis for human relatedness is the Triune God and the fact that we were made in his image. We were not created in the image of world history. However, our *knowledge* of that anthropological truth can still come from either direction, as the anthropological truth is connected to our

69 *The Open Secret*, 69.

70 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 188.
participation in relational history. As quoted above, Newbigin says, “…we begin with the Bible as the unique interpretation of human and cosmic history and move from that starting point to an understanding of what the Bible shows us of the meaning of personal life.”\footnote{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 128.} In any case, whether the genesis of a person’s belief in this anthropology stems from their belief in the Trinity or the biblical vision of world history and relationships, the anthropology coheres with Newbigin’s philosophy of history which is the proximate basis for his eschatology and view of election.

2. Personal Knowledge Rooted in Theology Proper, Anthropology, and Relational History

Finally, we come to the last of Hunsberger’s three explanations for election according to Newbigin: the personal character of God. Of course, God’s character is ontologically primary to the nature of history. To argue otherwise would be to reject history as contingent on God, as we have seen that Newbigin firmly believes. It is by God and out of God’s character that the world of history was created and is sustained. However, election is not just about God’s personal character, it is about the revelation of that personal God to human beings. God’s personal character is vitally important for understanding this process. If we are to know a personal God, we will only be able to know him in a personal way, that is a way appropriate to knowing a person. Newbigin writes:

If it is the case that the ultimate reality which lies behind all our experience is, in some sense, personal…then it will follow that personal knowledge of that reality will only be available in the way in which we come to know another person, or at least in a way which is more like this than the way in which we come to know the working of the electrical circuits in the human brain.\footnote{The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 61.}
A proper understanding of God’s personal character is, therefore, important for understanding his way of election. He must reveal himself to us through actions over time if he is to reveal himself, according to Newbigin.

He must also reveal himself in this personal way in order to reveal himself. There are other components to the process of revelation. One of these components is the knower. God must reveal himself to someone if revelation is to occur, and the persons he created (as we have seen) are radically intertwined and relational. Their knowledge is therefore also relational. Newbigin uses the Old Testament idiom to make his point here:

The language of the Bible introduces us to yet a third view of knowledge. The central use of the verb ‘to know’ in the Old Testament is its use in respect of the mutual knowledge of persons. It expresses a relationship in which much more is involved than knowledge of facts, of concepts, or of mathematical or logical operations. One of the most significant uses of the verb in the Old Testament is its use to describe the act of love between a man and a woman. There is expressed, if you will, the ideal of knowledge from the biblical point of view—the total mutual self-revelation and surrender of persons to one another in love.73

This personal knowing, however, is not limited to knowledge of other persons.

Everything humans ever know is known in this personal way because the knower is a relational being. We come to know things through language and concepts that are inextricably connected to and meaningless without the plausibility structures of which they are a part. All of our knowledge is based in the plausibility structures that we accept a-critically. These plausibility structures are the products of human communities, the results of a history of persons living and speaking and learning together.74 Newbigin says:

73 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 79.

74 Honest Religion for Secular Man, 81.
The argument of the present chapter seeks to show that knowledge is all of a piece, and that even our knowledge of the kind of facts which can be stored in an electronic computer cannot be understood except as personal knowledge, knowledge which is the achievement of persons, living in a community of persons, and, in a very real sense, living by faith.\footnote{Honest Religion for Secular Man, 87.}

All knowledge is of a piece because humans come to know everything in the same way, in the history that is of a piece. This kind of communal, personal knowing can only happen in an interwoven history, wherein the persons and events are radically related and their knowledge intertwined. Newbigin writes, “One cannot even speak a sentence without accepting provisionally the framework of thought which this language expresses and which is itself the result of the particular history of the people who speak it.”\footnote{Honest Religion for Secular Man, 81.} The interwoven and relational nature of history, therefore, is the medium in which this personal knowing of a personal God can take place.\footnote{This explains why during the sixth chapter of epistemology in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Newbigin begins to weave into his epistemology his view of history. He follows that up with multiple chapters on issues in his philosophy of history, including election.} Newbigin is straightforward in this regard. He argues, “[Knowledge] is only achieved through sharing together in a common world of things, of experiences, of ideas. \textit{A fortiori} it is only through the shared world of nature and history that we have knowledge of God. It is in, with, and under this shared world of things and persons that we can know God.”\footnote{Honest Religion for Secular Man, 88.} Therefore, while God’s character is the ontological basis for historical relatedness, historical relatedness is ontologically prior to the personal knowledge of God, which happens in the process of election. It is thus also the more proximate basis for the question, “Why must we come to know God through the process of election?”
III. The Foundation of Relational History

A. Christ as Clue Entails Coherence

Newbigin speaks of history as one interlocking whole and the humans that are part of history as part of the same fabric. But how does he claim to know this about history? Does he base this belief merely on his interpretation of what he observes in the world? Like all of his other basic beliefs about history, this one is epistemically grounded in the person and work of Christ.

Of the various grounds that Newbigin finds for this view of interlocking history in Christ and his work, the first and most basic is the simple fact that Christ is the clue to history. Newbigin concisely says, “There is only one Jesus, and there is only one history.” The Bible names Christ as the one in whom all history finds its meaning and its true end. If one accepts Christ as final in this way, that simple fact means that history must cohere. No bit of history can be isolated from the rest. Newbigin puts this directly when he writes, “To speak of Christ as the clue to history means that history is understood as in some sense a coherent whole. This is not obvious. History appears to be full of incoherence and meaninglessness. Moreover history as normally understood is the history of some part of the human race or of some aspect of human culture.” In an age of skepticism about meta-narratives, Newbigin points out that the claim for Christ’s ultimacy per se rules out the billiard ball image of history. If history coheres than it is not

79 For Newbigin’s explanation of this belief, see the section in chapter 1 subtitled “Christ as the Epistemic Ground of History.”

80 Foolishness to the Greeks, 61.

81 Newbigin refers especially to Ephesians 1 when making this claim. Cf. The Open Secret, 71.

82 The Finality of Christ, 69.
a random assembly of occasionally connected but fundamentally isolated parts. Newbigin puts it this way, “To speak of the finality of Christ is to express such a conviction and such a commitment concerning the point of the human story as a whole.”

This is a conviction that must be maintained in the face of apparently senseless suffering, meaningless work, and sometimes aimless living. Belief in Jesus the Christ means belief in a history that is meaningfully, relationally one.

**B. Christ—Particular Man, Universal Lord**

As previously shown, Newbigin takes the unity of history to mean that there is not split between sacred and secular history. This is due to the belief that the gospel of God’s reign revealed in Christ is the gospel for the entire world. This is merely a fuller way of describing Christ as clue in the previous section. Newbigin says:

> The Gospel of God...does not refer merely to one of the strands of man’s cultural history. It refers to the beginning and end of all things and therefore to the real meaning of all that happens. It follows that there cannot be an absolute separation between the history of our redemption, and the sacred story of the Old and New Testaments, the story of the church and the whole story of mankind. The Bible does not make such a separation.

The Gospel is as big as the universe and as particular as a single man. One the one hand, “It is the declaration of God’s cosmic purpose by which the whole public history of mankind is sustained and overruled, and by which all men without exception will be judged.”

On the other hand, this truth is declared and performed in the life and work of one man: Jesus Christ. John tells us that the entire world was made through him. The Christian faith has always held that it will be Christ that judges humankind in the end.

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83 *The Finality of Christ*, 71.


85 *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, 46.
Furthermore, it is only through Christ that we are saved. We need to have a relationship with the Son of God who is the man Jesus Christ in order to have a relationship with the Father. This goes well beyond the “scandal” of particularity concerning the church community. God’s saving purpose has been decidedly acted out in the person of Jesus Christ. Newbigin notes, “Because it is a happening, it is part of history. It is located at a particular point of place and time in the whole vast fabric of human affairs…. It happened outside Jerusalem and not outside Tokyo or Madras, in the first century and not the tenth or the twentieth.” Any human who wishes to be saved must be properly related to this real, historical man. This is the epistemic ground for believing that God can and must proceed relationally in election: he has done so in Christ. Newbigin says, “God’s purpose for the world proceeds by the way of election, of choosing; and the Chosen and Beloved is none other than Jesus Christ.” The coming of the Son of God in human form and the fact that the events of his particular death and resurrection have lasting effects on us teach us that God works to save us through relationships with other humans.

**C. Excursus: Conversion, Church, and the Individual’s Connection to Christ**

How can we in the twenty first century West be connected relationally with a first century man in the Middle East? This question brings us to another way in which we see that all of history is relationally one and all humans within history are essentially beings-in-relatedness. According to Newbigin, the primary way in which any individual is connected to Christ is not through an isolated interface, like a spiritual Bluetooth

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86 *The Open Secret*, 50-1.

87 *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission*, 47.
connection, but rather through Christ’s body, the Church. We are historical beings and must be related to Christ historically if at all. Christ, by his incarnation, death and resurrection, introduced a new historical reality: the reign of God is present on earth. He continued this present but hidden reign of God in the Church by his Spirit. Newbigin says, “The new reality that he introduced into history was to be continued through history in the form of a community, not in the form of a book.”

He sent his Spirit to the community he left behind, who helped them to write, receive, and interpret the revelation of and testimony to that eschatological reign. “The presence of the kingdom, hidden and revealed in the cross of Jesus,” Newbigin claims, “is carried through history hidden and revealed in the life of that community which bears in its life the dying and rising of Jesus.” Therefore, one can only participate in that reign here and now if one is a member of that community where that reign is present.

This is why the contemporary mindset of loving Jesus and leaving the church is not one with which Newbigin could possibly agree. He dealt with this issue as a missionary in India. What if a Hindu convert to Christ will be negatively affected by connecting with a church community? May he practice his faith by himself? Newbigin’s answer does not equivocate, “‘Can a Hindu who has been born again in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit be content to remain without any visible solidarity with his fellow-believers?’ The answer to that question is No. The New Testament knows nothing of a relationship with Christ which is purely mental and spiritual, unembodied in any of

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88 The Open Secret, 52.

89 The Open Secret, 52. This truth, by the way, is not only the reality that governs the individual’s connection to Christ, but it also characterizes the life of the church. If Christ is only known in that community that “bears in its life the dying and rising of Jesus,” then the church must be characterized by the cross and new life. If that is not the case, it is not testifying to the Christ of the cross and resurrection. This is a consistent emphasis of Newbigin’s ecclesiology.
the structures of human relationship.\footnote{The Finality of Christ, 106.} This is part of the nature of conversion. If a relationship with Christ is not purely mental or spiritual, neither is the initial commitment. Whoever is drawn to commit their lives to Christ has been drawn to him by their relationship with the elect community of Christ, and they must commit to this community if their commitment includes the entirety of who they are. Newbigin quotes Dr. Paul Löffler to make this point, “Conversion is a commitment to a companionship on the way.”\footnote{Paul Löffler, Study Encounter, 1, no. 2, 98-99, quoted in The Finality of Christ, 113-4; Cf. also The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 165, wherein Newbigin claims, “A true relation to God cannot be independent of our relation with other people, and allegiance to Christ must necessarily be expressed in relationship with those who share that allegiance.”}

It is hard to see how, from Newbigin’s viewpoint, one could have a relationship with Christ without any relationship to the church.

\textit{D. Christ Reveals the Trinity}

An astute reader of Newbigin may object to my claim that Christ is the epistemic foundation of interwoven history. They may even point out that I argued earlier for the Trinity as the basis of our relational history. That objection would be true in part but importantly imprecise. The Trinity, in Newbigin’s thought, is the ontological ground for relational human persons in his image, and even the relational history of which they are a part. However, Newbigin maintains that Christ is the epistemological ground even for the Trinity.

The relationship between the Trinity and the person and work of Christ is somewhat difficult to parse out in the thought of Newbigin across the broad spectrum of his work. One example of this difficulty is evident in Newbigin’s ecclesiology, wherein Goheen traces Newbigin’s shift from an exclusively Christocentric view to a

\footnote{The Finality of Christ, 106.}
“Christocentric-Trinitarian” ecclesiology. He also identifies The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission as Newbigin’s first attempt to think in a Trinitarian way about the Church and mission. In that piece, one sees evidence of Newbigin’s tenuous relationship with Christocentricity and Trinitarian perspective. On the one hand, one reads his statement, “I have suggested that there is a danger in a kind of thinking which founds the whole missionary task solely upon the doctrine of the person and work of Christ and of the continuing work of the Church which is his body.” On the other hand, on the next page he says, “All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the Son. All history is directed towards that end. All creation has this as its goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as the foretaste of that consummation, as the witness to it, and as the guide of the Church on the road towards it.” We cannot found mission solely on Christ and his work. Yet, we cannot understand the Spirit’s missionary work except as the Spirit of Christ working toward the consummation of history which is Christ himself. Are we to see in the juxtaposition of these statements the confused alternations of a mind not fully coherent or decided? I would argue not. In fact, after 1963, Newbigin retains both his Christocentric and Trinitarian themes. It was six years later that he published The Finality of Christ wherein he says, “To speak of the finality of Christ must mean to claim that in Christ there is found the clue to history, and therefore to participation in the history of our times.”

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92 “As the Father Has Sent Me, So I Am Sending You,” 62-4.
93 The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission, 77.
94 The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission, 78.
Newbigin’s philosophy of history. Throughout the rest of his life of writing, Newbigin never gives up his Christocentric focus, nor does he relinquish his Trinitarian foundation.

The salient question is, “How is Christ related to the Trinity in Newbigin’s thought?” Newbigin’s view, I argue, is that Christ is the proper epistemological ground of our thinking while the Triune Godhead is the ontological ground of our thoughts. Christ reveals the Trinity. Without Christ, the Son of God come in the flesh, we would not know the Triune relational being of God. He says, “I believe that we must begin with the great reality made known to us in Jesus Christ, that God—the creator and sustainer of all that exists—is in his own triune being an ocean of infinite love overflowing to all his works in all creation and to all human beings.”\[^{96}\] When Newbigin is arguing for the relational nature of the Godhead over against views of God as a static, singular being, he says that the ultimate reality is “…a trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. This understanding is not the result of speculative thought. It has been given by revelation in the actual historical life and work of the Son.” So the Son reveals the Father and the Spirit to his people, and the Spirit in turn enables people to commit to the Son as the basis of their life and thought.

However, the work of Jesus is not fully understood, indeed cannot be understood at all, without reference to the work of the entire Trinity. Newbigin says that the answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” cannot be given without explicit reference to the other two persons of the Trinity.\[^{97}\] That is the framework given in *The Open Secret* (1978), but it is preceded by a similar statement in 1963. He writes:

\[^{95}\] *The Finality of Christ*, 64.

\[^{96}\] *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175, emphasis added.

\[^{97}\] *The Open Secret*, 19ff.
We have now to say that this question [of the uniqueness and finality of Christ] will not be rightly answered, nor will the question of the relation between what God is doing in the mission of the Church and what he is doing in the secular events of history be rightly answered, except within the framework of a fully and explicitly trinitarian doctrine of God.98

Likewise, throughout Newbigin’s writings, we see that Christ is the epistemic ground for the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the ontological ground for our anthropology and philosophy of history that views humans and the world as one in relationship. One must focus on Christ in order to know the foundation of the Trinity.

IV. Conclusion: Implications of Relational History

This vision of history as relationally one reverses all of the difficulties generated by individualist philosophies as seen in the introduction. First, it is a vision that can sustain a powerful ethic for our increasingly corporate life. If we understand that all of history and all of the humans in history are threads in the same fabric, we will be encouraged to engage meaningfully in political action. This was Newbigin’s explicit view as early as 1936.99 While the contingency of history keeps us from optimism or despair in politics, the interwoven nature of history keeps us from pessimism that the public space can be affected by the actions of a mere individual or small group. Newbigin’s view of history as a net, keeps us from the error of submerging the individual in the oceanic sameness of society as well as from the error of exalting the individual over the participatory history of which he is a part and without which he has no significance or salvation. This generates an ethic for public engagement that requires us to take the social

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98 The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission, 31.

99 Cf. Bearing the Witness of the Spirit, 125, and Hunsberger’s important reference to Newbigin’s unpublished theology paper written at Westminster College, Cambridge, entitled “Revelation.”
and political issues seriously over against a policy of “every person for herself.” However, it also militates against a utilitarian totalitarianism that will act for the sake of “public good” while expressly violating the life and dignity of individuals therein.

Secondly, this kind of interlaced history is conducive to a view of biblical inspiration and transmission that does not mitigate biblical authority or availability. On the one hand, a Christian may be concerned that if the Bible was written down by real people as part of their daily course of events (rather than in a supernatural, prophetic trance) then it is not the Word of God but rather the words of humans. To have God’s Word, it is thought, we would need a theory much more like the delivery of the Qur’an in inviolable Arabic to Muhammad, or like the Angel Moroni giving Joseph Smith the golden plates. On the other hand, if the Bible was delivered through the prophets and apostles without any regard to their personality, history, or theology, and yet it was copied and translated over and over by into various languages by various groups on its way to us today (which has, of course, happened), then the Bible we have must not be the actual Word of God. We would need the autographa, which we do not have, in order to have the text of God’s Word.

Both of these concerns assume a world in which we can truly come to know God outside of our ordinary historical circumstances. They assume a God who does not relate like a person but rather more like a downloadable principle. They presuppose human beings that are capable of knowing things without the use of language or concepts that are part of their historical communities’ plausibility structures. But in the midst of a history that is of a piece, human beings made in the image of the relational, Triune God can only come to relate to this God personally over time and through historical events.
This means that we have no reason to be skeptical about the process by which the Bible has come to us today, but rather we do have reason to be skeptical of the claims to divine purity made about the Qur’an and the Book of Mormon. God’s Word can be God’s Word and still come to us the way it seems to have done: through Spirit-filled people, his community.

Moreover, if history is both linear and completely interrelated, then we have reason to believe that the Bible is the meta-narrative of the world that it claims to be. In a history that is linear, the possibility of historical meta-narrative exists. In a history that is an interwoven road like ours is, there must be an overarching plot line. The various pieces must cohere as one consistent whole, yet without losing their distinction. As Newbigin puts it, “The biblical story is not a separate story: it is part of the unbroken fabric of world history. The Christian faith is that this is the place in the whole fabric where its pattern has been disclosed, even though the weaving is not yet finished.”

Furthermore, if Scripture tells the narrative of the whole world, than it is not immune from the investigation of historical scholars. Newbigin rejects the teaching of those who say we must try to keep the historical critic out of Scripture, since we would be in effect denying the unity of Scriptural history with that of the rest of the world. Rather, he says, the question is not whether historians can deal with the biblical text, but with which presuppositions, worldviews and axioms they approach the text.

Finally, Newbigin’s net of history impacts the way Christians view the church community. Church is not a place for individual spiritual consumption but rather our

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100 The Open Secret, 88.

101 The Open Secret, 88.
chance to participate in the historical stream of the ‘fact of Christ.’ We cannot be
connected to Christ historically outside of the historical community that he left behind.

Newbigin puts this emphatically:

The consequence is this. The particular happening of the living, dying, and rising
of Jesus, the 'fact of Christ' as a happening at one time and place, must, so to say,
enter into the stream of historical happenings and become part of its course. In
other words, if it is true that God's reign concerns history in its unity and totality,
we who live nineteen hundred years after the event must be related to it, and must
share in its power, not merely by reading of it in a book or hearing it in a verbal
report, but by participating in the life of that society which springs from it and is
continuous with it. 102

Church membership and activity is therefore vital for a vital connection to the Christ who
was not an illustration of a principle but a historical person connected to us through his
Spirit-filled historical community.

Finally, the church is the community God has created for the sake of the world, and
the relational nature of the world bears heavily on the way in which the church carries out
its mission. The church resides during the point in history wherein God is patiently
waiting to reveal his Kingdom so that people have a chance to know and commit
themselves to him in the only way they can: through a relational journey. Since the
church knows that this road of history is relational, it ought to be motivated to actively
bear witness to God’s Kingdom in Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul said, “How, then, can
they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of
whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to
them?” 103 They will only hear if the witness is public. Furthermore, if the process of

102 The Open Secret, 51.

salvation is inherently relational, it makes good sense for the evangelism of the church to be done, as often as possible in the context of solid, loving relationships. When the church attempts to bear witness in a way that communicates, “We don’t want a relationship with people like you,” the church is utterly failing in its mission.

Finally, the church cannot actively pursue a relational mission toward a relational fellowship in the eschaton if it is not itself attesting to that fellowship in its own life. Practically speaking, this means two things: 1) the fellowship within the local congregation should be loving and truthful, not shallow or divisive, and 2) the church must never stop striving for unity between the various factions that exist through various historical junctures. This is part of what it means for the congregation to be, in Newbigin’s term, the hermeneutic of the gospel. The church can only be a sign and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God if it has fellowship within and between churches. Newbigin says, “Insofar as the Church is disunited her life is a direct and public contradiction of the Gospel…” Private and public division will hamper its witness. If history, and therefore salvation history, is relational, then the church must be active, public, and united in its witness.

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105 *The Household of God*, 171.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

I. Introduction

Lesslie Newbigin was not a philosopher. He would not have claimed to be.
However, he thought philosophically about history in an effort to depose some of the
corroding effects of modernity from the throne room of his mind and the minds of those
who received his spoken and written words. He generated a cohesive and coherent
philosophy of history that he never fully and explicitly laid out, but of which he self-
consciously and intentionally made use in all of his various theological, biblical, and
cultural investigations. He understood this to be simply his task as an obedient
missionary. Newbigin believed that

Incomparably the most urgent missionary task for the next few decades is the
mission to "modernity"…. It calls for the use of sharp intellectual tools, to probe
behind the unquestioned assumptions of modernity and uncover the hidden credo
which supports them…. At the most basic level there is need for critical
examination from a Christian standpoint of the reigning assumptions in
epistemology (How do we know what we claim to know?) and in history (How do
we understand the story of which we are parts?). At a second level it means
probing the hidden assumptions behind our practice in economics, in education, in
medicine, and in communication (the media). All of this has to be seen and done
as part of missionary obedience.¹

At the most basic level of the modernistic plausibility structure into which Christian
scholars must probe and examine in order to effectively bring the gospel to their culture

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, “Gospel and Culture—But Which Culture?” Missionalia 17, no. 3 (1989):
214. I am indebted once again to Dr. Michael Goheen for this important reference.
lay epistemology and history. Only after that, and with that philosophical scalpel, can one incisively probe into the hidden assumptions behind various contemporary practices.

II. Summary

I have shown 1) that Newbigin’s philosophy of history is the central thread holding the fabric of his various theological and cultural thoughts together and 2) that in Jesus Christ the pattern of that fabric (and the nature of the thread) is revealed. Newbigin knew and committed to a Christ who is God in the flesh, entering into time and space. He therefore knew that the history into which the Son of God entered is real as well.

Newbigin knew and committed to a Christ who did something radically new in history, and he therefore knew history to be a linear road rather than cyclically repetitive. This same crucified Christ is the one Newbigin knew to be the decisive act of God in and for cosmic history which is why he knew history to be U-shaped, radically contingent on God’s activity for its progress and final end. Finally, Newbigin knew Jesus Christ, the real man in the u-shaped road of history whose life, death, and resurrection had real and crucial significance for Newbigin’s own life almost two thousand years later. He therefore knew all history to be of a piece and the people and events within it to be relational.

I have also shown how a wide variety of areas in Newbigin’s theological, philosophical and cultural analysis are affected by this view of history. Newbigin deals with anthropology, ecclesiology, missiology, ethics, politics, economics, existential meaning, and hermeneutics all in an attempt to address relevant topics out of the core

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2 The two, as the reader has no doubt noticed in this thesis, are necessarily interconnected.
insights of his plausibility structure, a structure self-consciously grounded in and centered on Jesus Christ.

III. Expansion

A notable lacuna in Newbigin’s description of Christ as the foundation of history is his lack of reference to the Word as the one for whom and through whom everything was made (cf. Jn 1 and Col 1). Newbigin of course, comments on this role of Jesus in his commentary on the Gospel of John.\(^3\) The question is metaphysical, “Why is there not nothing?” The answer is “Jesus.” The application, however, is restricted to the epistemological plain, “Jesus is the clue for understanding all that is….”\(^4\) Newbigin would do well to let this fact of Christ, as Creator, do some metaphysical heavy lifting for him. History, the meaningful succession of events in space and time, has its origin in the second person of the Trinity (not of course, to the exclusion of the first and third person).

It makes sense, then, that when that person entered space and time his life and ministry would be an accurate basis for the proper interpretation of history’s fundamental character. The fundamental newness of the incarnation reveals the linear nature of history, yes, but it is possible because of the incarnate One through whom and for whom that history was made. Christ’s death and resurrection point to the U-shape structure of history, but they are more than an epistemological clue to that structure. They are the climactic instantiation of a pattern built into that history by the One in whom the pattern is revealed. By expanding his understanding of the grounding of history in Christ to the Son’s role in creation, Newbigin would have the metaphysical grounding for the


\(^4\) *The Light Has Come*, 3, emphasis added.
metaphysical realities for which he has already identified the epistemological grounding. Nevertheless, Newbigin is able to helpfully identify the nature and the shape of history, and from his reflections spring a few enormously important insights for Western Christians in the early twenty-first century.

IV. Impact

Since Plato, a sizable population have answered the question, “Where can we find reliable truth?” with words like “ideas,” “concepts,” and “principles.” The story is usurped by the theme, and the theme is taken to be “more real” than the story. History, when distilled and communicated, is necessarily in the form of story, but the meaningfully compiled sequence of events has been interpreted as concretizations of a principle rather than the principle being understood as an aphorism abstracted from the historical event. This is still the *modus operandi* of many fundamentalist Christians, preferring so-called “timeless” truths to contextual interpretation.

Another approach to locating reliable truth, ostensibly spawned by Schleiermacher, is that which is grounded in a despair of getting behind one’s individual experience to the timeless truths that can be universally stated about God and human beings. Individual experience then, becomes the *sine qua non* of reliable truth because it is the only thing immediately available to us. In this view, exemplified today in liberal Christianity and followed up by some versions of postmodern thought, truth finds its roots again in space and time but it is relegated to the private experience of an individual and banished from public dialogue.

Jesus Christ, says Newbigin, if taken as our basis for understanding the relationship of history to truth, reveals that ultimately reliable Truth is found right in the
midst of our historical world of space and time. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Truth is not an idea, an intellectual object at which we can peer through a microscope or dissect with a scalpel. Neither is truth purely in our own mind. Truth is deeply personal yes, but Truth is also a person outside of us. Truth entered into space and time as a person, not a proposition and not a projection of our own imagination.

Propositions can be made about the person, but they cannot be static, timeless, and comprehensive statements. They are partial descriptions on the way to fuller understanding, an understanding that grows by way of relationship.

This at once undermines the modernistic confidence in “objective” historical and biblical scholarship and the postmodern subjective despair of knowing anything meaningful about public history. If we know anything at all (and it seems like we do) it is situated in or arising from history.

This has enormous implications for Christians today. In an age rightly identified by Newbigin as beset with the problem of a pervasive pluralistic plausibility structure, the Church has tended to take one of two approaches: 1) privatize its message and affirm the pluralistic hope that following Christ is merely one way among many equally good ways, or 2) stand strong on the message, refusing to reexamine or critically evaluate our distillations of it for fear of capitulating to the culture. The former say that truth is really found in one’s private history, and the latter say that if we indeed possess the truth then it is absolute in the sense of timeless and changeless (i.e. outside of history).

Over-against both of these positions, Newbigin would say that we ought rather to look for truth in the public history of this world as interpreted and written by the

\[\text{Jn 14:6}\]
community that Jesus left behind him to bring his message of God’s kingdom to the world. The truth, as the conservatives would say, is outside of us. The truth, as the liberals would say, is rooted in history. Truth can be rooted in history because history is fundamentally real. Truth rooted in history is not chaotic and completely inconsistent because history is a road. Truth is essentially public because history is fundamentally relational. Truth can conceivably change because history is not cyclical but rather u-shaped. Nevertheless, it can only change in a way that is consistent with the person on whom history is contingent.6

This understanding of history also drives the church toward a third way in cultural engagement, between the poles of assimilation and sequestration. If history is fundamentally real and relational, than removal of the community from the changing tide of culture is not merely wrongheaded but is actually impossible. Communities that follow Christ are a related part of the real, u-shaped road of history. That history is public and contingent for its development and end on the activity of God should give those leaning toward isolation a new confidence to look for what God is doing in the world to reveal his kingdom.

Yet, there were those in Jesus’ day who followed him and those who crucified him. The road is not a straight, ascending line. Not every historical development, not

6 That is not to say that at the same moment two propositions that are inherently mutually contradictory can be true at the same time. However, it is fairly self-evident that many things that are true at one point in time are not true at another. This is obvious with statements like, “I am eating dinner.” It is less obvious but equally accurate with statements like “The Sabbath must be observed on the seventh day” (cf. Col 2:16-17). Truths concerning who God is, are not subject to change with time in the same way, since God may enter into time but is not bound by it as one of his creations. However, we learn new things about God as he enters into our history through his actions, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of Christ. Moreover, the meaning of words expressing certain truths change with time and historical circumstances, meaning that even our expressions and apprehensions of (the relatively few) truths that do not change are contingent upon the history of which we are a part, a history superintended by God.
every act of a human community, is consistent with or even aware of the heart of God. For that reason, straightforward assimilation is not an option. Christians cannot welcome every historical development as straightforwardly coherent with the Christ of history.

Nevertheless, the crucifixion did not thwart God’s intention in history. Three days later there was a resurrection. Even unwelcome historical events, actions of people and peoples who oppose the reign of God, will find themselves in their various ways part of the story that the Holy Spirit is telling as he brings history to its final conclusion. If this is the way history works, then the Christian way of relating to the broader culture can never be one of passive isolation or overeager assimilation but rather active, discerning engagement. What God is doing in history now is not simplistic, but it is significant. What God is doing in history may make use of our evil, but it will be, after all, redemptive. What God is doing in history is what Christians of today and every age need to discern with the guidance of the Spirit.
A. Works by Lesslie Newbigin


B. Other Sources


