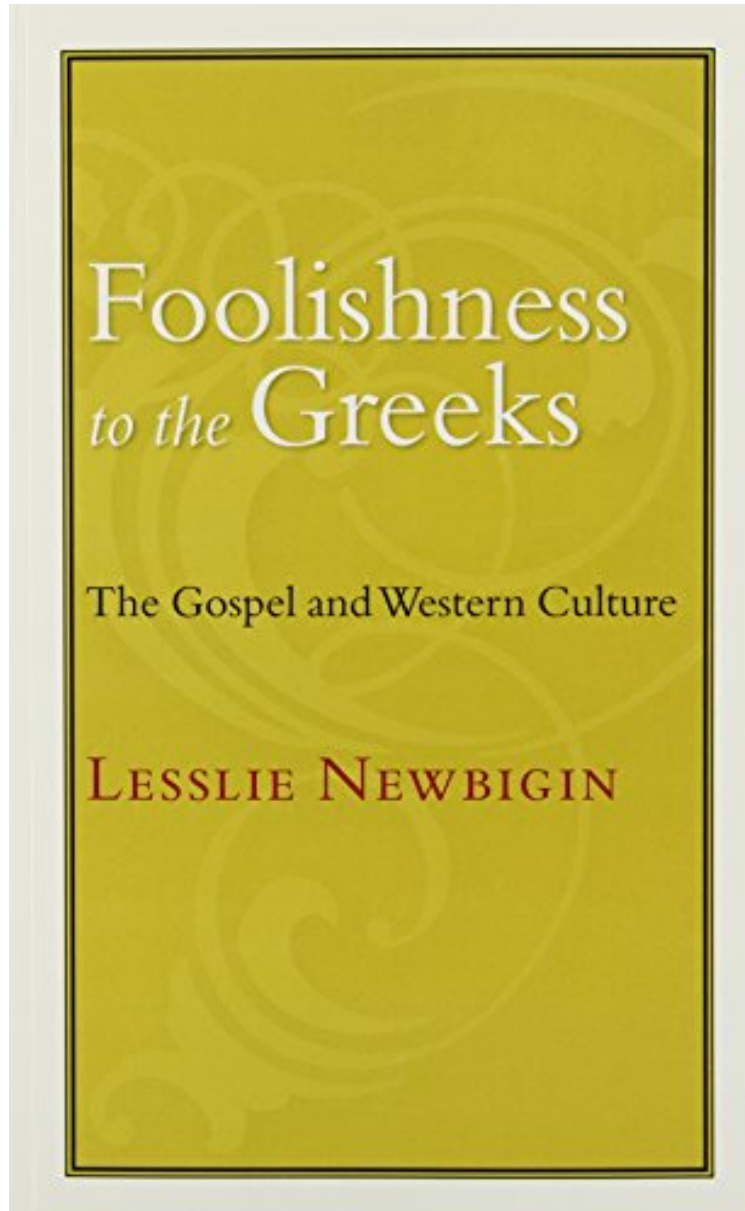


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Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture

Lesslie Newbigin

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Lesslie Newbigin : Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Dated, but way ahead of its time. By Zachary G. In Lesslie Newbigin's book *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, he lays out what he believes to be the best way to reach western culture with the gospel, by looking at several issues in our western society. He will survey post-enlightenment culture, Scripture, the dialogue between Christianity and Science, the dialogue between Christianity and Politics, as well as the role and purpose of the Church. The aim of his book is stated in chapter one, My purpose in these chapters is to consider what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and the culture that it shared by the peoples of Europe and North America, their colonial and cultural off-shoots, and the growing company of educated leaders in the cities of the world the culture which those of us who share it usually describe as modern (Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 1). Newbigin writes his book from the perspective of a missionary to India. He sets out to engage western culture on the basis of the way they perceive, think, and live. In chapter one, Newbigin argues that the cultural values of western society have so infused with the values of Christianity, that the two have often been confused. From his perspective as a missionary, Newbigin shows the dangers of this idea, ...It implied that what the missionary brought with him was the pure gospel, which had to be adapted to the receptor culture. It tended to obscure the fact that the gospel as embodied in the missionaries preaching and practice was already an adapted gospel, shaped by his or her own culture (Newbigin, 2). The argument Newbigin stands to make is that when we encounter a culture not our own, we tend to impose on that culture the values and understanding of the gospel we bring to them; a gospel shaped by our own culture. Western culture has changed the way missions is shaped and that has led to the church shrinking in its influence of the culture. Newbigin wants to see a church culture that has its eyes opened to the fact that the gospel and its communication across differing cultures, has been shaped by the culture it has grown out of. The church has failed to realize this and has lost its relevance in the culture today. Newbigin does, however, speak against the idea of being relevant, in being relevant one may fall into syncretism, and in an effort to avoid syncretism one may become irrelevant (Newbigin, 7). Another important aspect of Newbigin's argument in chapter one is his understanding of Peter Bergers plausibility structures which refer to the social structures of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question (Newbigin, 10). Newbigin rightly points out that Bergers view is itself a plausibility structure and so shows that there are no socially accepted structures, but that a person making their own choices is a plausibility structure in itself and the one of the modern world. In chapter two, Newbigin tries to objectively profile modern western culture by looking at his own presuppositions, and answering the question how can one objectively evaluate culture, if at all? Newbigin words it as such, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view to the place where we explain our modern scientific world view from the point of view of the gospel? (Newbigin, 22). This fits very well with what Newbigin sees as the main issue of the culture and what he has already stated the church has done: tied its cultural ideologies of western cultural with the gospel. Newbigin also rightly identifies the way individualism has trumped certain things life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Each individual has now taken those ideas and defined them how they have wished, and this has spread throughout every area of culture, Christianity included. Two other consequences have followed from this. First, the removal of work from the home has completely changed the way the family unit exists. Second, the mechanization of work has urbanized culture and therefore only added to the problem of family-based communities and networks of people. This has also affected the identity of people and the identity of culture. Individuals can choose what they want or not, and that also includes their own identity. This is very prominent in 21st century society with the acceptance of homosexuality or any cultural issue that has now become the norm. The third chapter looks at the bible's claims and influence on modern western culture. Most of the culture views the bible's claims as irrational and Newbigin uses the example of the resurrection of Jesus as the prime marker of Christianity that has a direct effect upon the culture, which the culture views as illogical and irrational. Newbigin rightly identifies the bible as a plausibility structure in itself but also sees the insights from culture as valuable to its understanding. Likewise, the view the culture holds of the bible does not change the values and claims the bible holds on its own. With that in view, a correct understanding of a genuine encounter with western culture in Newbigin's mind, calls for radical conversion. A new plausibility structure has been developed in the God whose self-revelation is the bible. Chapter four looks at the pursuit of science and it has shaped and even replaced thinking in modern western culture. The mindset of those in western culture has seen a shift from looking to the bible as its authority, essentially the idea of a Christian society, to the development of scientific thought and discovery and, as Newbigin puts it, Newtonian science (Newbigin, 67). The layperson in western society has now begun to replace their thinking from a Christian world-view to that of a scientific world-view. The cultural norm has now shifted to investigation through the scientific method. The chapter ends with five propositions that Newbigin thinks must be affirmed. The first is his refutation that everything can be explained in terms of efficient cause. In Newbigin's mind, this is absurd and leads to social destruction. He sees that in its shift in thinking, modern western culture has developed a self-defeating argument that will lead to the destruction of the social order as we have come to know it. Secondly, purpose is a personal reality that can only be known through one who chooses to communicate it. His third point answers the question how does the church fit in to all of this? If purpose is a personal reality, and is known through someone who has chosen to communicate it, then the answer to the question is that there is a God who has

spoken and revealed his purpose, for all mankind. Fourth, if the above statement is true about God, then the natural outpouring of that is the church's mission. That mission involves boldness to proclaim, by way of personal testimony, what this God's purpose is and how it fits within the culture's purpose. Lastly, if all of this is true about God, then science can be the servant of humanity, not its master (Newbigin, 94). In the end, what can be known and how it can be known are seen through the self-revelation of God and the work he has done through his Son on the cross and resurrection. For Newbigin, this is the purpose of humanity, not skepticism through the scientific method. The aim of chapter five is to determine whether or not the church has a place in politics. The place of the church in politics has been met with several objections, three of which he addresses. The first is the notion that the church should have no place in politics and Newbigin identifies this with post-enlightenment thinking. Those who know the facts are those who should be in control of political, social, and cultural ideologies of society, but this of course rides on two false premises; 1. The church and its members have no place to make decisions because they have a presupposition clouded by religion, and 2. Those who claim to know facts are the only ones qualified to make decisions about societal matters. Newbigin sees that the church's role in politics as the bearer of the vision that alone can give each nation a true unity of purpose (Newbigin, 123). This is accomplished by placing every area of society, political, economic, and cultural, in the context of the gospel. The final chapter looks at the call of church in every realm of society. Newbigin lays this out with seven ways the church can fulfill its call. The first is by grasping the true nature of eschatology. The last things are very important to understanding the goal of humanity and God's kingdom. Modern western culture longs for the best social order but Newbigin points out that this is not possible without correct understanding of God's coming reign. Secondly, is the idea of Christian freedom in a Christian social order. The view of post-enlightenment culture has been that man is autonomous and the social order has placed this at the pinnacle of its direction. Newbigin breaks this down by showing that true freedom is not in what man, society, or culture views as good, but a freedom given by God in His grace. Thirdly, Newbigin desires a change of mind in political, scientific, philosophical, economical, and artistic ways towards rigorous theological thinking in all of these areas in order to deemphasize the notion of otherworldly thinking that has become so prominent in Christian thinking. Denominationalism and the critique of it is the issue at stake for a genuine missionary encounter of the gospel with the culture in number four. Newbigin sees it this way, It follows that neither a denomination separately nor all the denominations linked together in some kind of federal unity or reconciled diversity can be the agents of a missionary confrontation with our culture, for the simple reason that they are themselves the outward visible signs of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of our culture (Newbigin, 146). The fifth way, the church is called to encounter the culture is through understanding and learning from, the view our own Christian culture through the lens of other minds shaped by different cultures. The church can benefit from the minds of others on a global scale. Sixth, Newbigin urges the church to hold to and proclaim a belief that cannot necessarily be proved by axioms in our society. If the church is to be the church in a post-enlightenment, modern western culture then it must be willing to take flak for holding firm to beliefs it deems necessary for all of humanity. Finally, the church's witness to the gentile nations comes from the glorious gift from God of his own Son Jesus. It is an outpouring of a lifestyle of praise and the church can never forget its mission to be a light in a dark world. After reading *Foolishness to the Greeks*, one gets a sense that Newbigin calls for a redoing of western culture, that we have gotten it all wrong. However, I think the main idea that Newbigin sets out is that a genuine encounter with modern western culture tries to infiltrate all areas with the glorious news that God reigns over the whole earth. If the gospel of Christ is true then the cultural norms of any society, whether it be Indian or 21st century America, are called upon to respond to the news of the Kingdom of God breaking into history and culture in the incarnation of God in Jesus. Modern western culture denies and rides on its own presuppositions that what cannot be proved empirically cannot be proved at all, and in making that statement, Newbigin shows that culture sets out, from that position, to defeat itself and produce social tyranny. The church is the representation of the kingdom in the world today and its mission is to teach the world what the reign of God looks like acted out in every area of a culture. If God has communicated his purpose to the leaders of the church, their role is to take that purpose to the world. The question is, is the church doing this today? If we are to take what Newbigin says are central to an encounter with the culture today, then the church and specifically evangelical Christianity, are doing a poor job of this. Certainly, many evangelical Christians have failed to encounter the cultural ideologies of western society with any sort of grace and truth. Rather, many Evangelicals have tied Christianity with their own political ideologies of republicanism and have made the argument an us versus them mentality. This is seen best in the ongoing cultural debate of same-sex marriage. Many churches have done a great deal of harm to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transvestite (LGBT) culture and the church's witness in being supportive of particular business rather than taking those moments as an opportunity to share the love of Christ with others. As a result of this, a backlash of political hate has been directed at the church and a sense of distrust has been shown from the culture outside of the church. The church's mission is still, despite its failures, to infiltrate every corner of society with the loving power of the gospel through the leading of the Holy Spirit. A genuine encounter of the gospel with our culture does not try to smother it with the gospel, but rather it attempts to reorient the culture around the gospel. If we as the church are to encounter our culture and expect to make a difference we must wholeheartedly agree with Newbigin, that our Eschatology is what forms our mission. If the imminent reign of God is

at hand, then it demands a response from all of humanity, in every area of its social, political, economical, ecclesiastical, and cultural life; God's mission is to all the nations, even the Gentiles. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. It won't be great recreational reading by John Heavy, but very challenging for evangelical Christians. The crux of the book is that we are drifting towards a culture / society that is comprised of public facts and private judgments / moral determinations. It was used in a Christian Theology and Ethics class. I wrote a book review after reading it. It was written by a British missionary to India with a heart to proclaim the clear message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a morally relative Western world. It won't be great recreational reading, but it would be useful for anyone engaged in Christian ministry in contemporary Western culture. I recommend it. 4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Incredible Work by Sam Creagar This is one of the greatest works of philosophy and Christian theology I have ever read. Newbigin's exegesis of American Culture and misunderstanding of true, biblical freedom has impacted the way I interact with my faith, Scripture, and the world around me. Read this book. Read it often. It can be a difficult read (his flow is a bit circular at times), but the content is WELL worth the effort.

How can biblical authority be a reality for those shaped by the modern world? This book treats the First World as a mission field, offering a unique perspective on the relationship between the gospel and current society by presenting an outsider's view of contemporary Western culture.

Myron S. Augsburger--in Mission Focus "This is an extraordinary book on contemporary missiology. Writing from four decades of experience in Christian mission, Lesslie Newbigin applies the same discernment involved in contextualizing the gospel in another culture to the issues involved in contextualizing the gospel in our Western culture. He lays bare the pervasive and subtle synergism that alters the gospel, and he calls us to a thorough critique of our culture and of the way in which we understand or misunderstand the gospel of Christ. . . Important reading for a stimulating perspective on the gospel and Western culture." Tim Stafford--in Christianity Today "Newbigin's analysis is the best part of this stimulating book. I do not know of another such brilliantly comprehensive treatment of Western society." Gottfried Oosterwal--in Missiology "The central question posed by Bishop Newbigin in this stimulating book is: What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture? . . . The result is a very profound study. . . Newbigin has given us a masterful analysis of the essential features of Western culture and has pointed the way for an effective missionary encounter." David Heim--in The Christian Century "Newbigin's missionary enthusiasm and his experience in cross-cultural missions make this book far more invigorating than the usual disquisition on the problems of belief in the modern age. . . With his vast learning worn very lightly and, above all, with a deep commitment to the gospel, Newbigin pierces some holes in the secular plausibility structure that Christians have come in large part to accept."