

The Gospel as Public Truth

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Abstract

The modern dichotomy between the public world of fact and the private world of value has meant that evangelicalism has preached a reduced form of the gospel, which is only relevant for the private world of value. This reduced form of the gospel emphasizes the salvation of the individual and hides the true claims of Christ from the world. To preach this gospel as public truth, evangelicals need to show that fundamental assumptions of the dichotomy between the public and private world are illusory. Then the dichotomy between private faith and public fact dissolves and evangelicals can boldly proclaim the gospel as public truth. This essay describes what is involved in preaching the gospel as public truth with regard to the writings of Lesslie Newbigin who describes the Church's task as finding a way to offer the gospel as a plausibility structure to the world and to proclaim the finality of Christ. Newbigin provides a critique of modernity and a view of the gospel as an alternate plausibility structure by which to view the world. In this context the 'finality of Christ' does not imply the 'the finality of Christianity' nor a purely personal salvation. Jesus Christ is the final clue to human history.

One of the consequences of modernity is the dichotomy between the public world of fact and the private world of value. One result of this has been that evangelicalism has, at times, inadvertently preached a reduced form of the gospel, which is only relevant for the private world of value. This reduced form of the gospel emphasizes the salvation of the individual from eternal damnation and although there is an authentic place for personal salvation in the gospel, such a reduced form of it hides the true claims of Christ from the world. Christ is the King of the entire world, public and private. His kingship is the truth by which all other claims to truth are to be tested. This claim of Christ is found in the gospel.

To preach this gospel as public truth, evangelicals need to show that the three fundamental assumptions of the dichotomy between the public and private world are illusory. The assumption that doubt is superior to belief is an illusion because all rational doubt requires belief; second, the claim that human reason is a source of knowledge is illusory because all human reasoning depends on the social and linguistic tradition in which the person lives; and third, the attempt to separate the subjective and objective elements of all knowing is futile because the human subject is always involved in the process of knowing. Once these are

shown to be illusions the dichotomy between private faith and public fact dissolves and evangelicals can boldly proclaim the gospel as public truth.

The aim of this essay is to describe what is involved in preaching the gospel as public truth with regard to the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin describes the Church's task as finding a way to offer the gospel as a plausibility structure to the world and to proclaim the finality of Christ without repeating the mistakes of the past. In preaching the gospel to the public in this way, it does not mean that everyone will or must accept it. Rather people must be given the freedom to accept or to reject it.¹ No coercive means are to be used, especially not the God-given authority of the state.² To preach the gospel as public truth is not an attempt to return to the *Corpus Christianum*.³ It is an attempt to offer the gospel as a starting point for all rational discourses about reality so that people are able to find a path through the world of today. This will be done by reference to Lesslie Newbigin's critique of modernity and his thinking concerning the gospel as an alternate plausibility structure by which to view the world.⁴

Newbigin served in India as a missionary from 1936 to 1974. While in India, he was involved in working out the union of the Church of South India (CSI). After the union, he served as a bishop of CSI in the district of Madurai. Then in 1959, Newbigin was seconded by CSI to The International Missionary Council (IMC) and served as its General Secretary. While working in IMC, he was involved in working out the merger between IMC and World Council of Churches (WCC). After the merger, he served as a director of World Mission and Evangelism of WCC and also an editor of the *International Review of Missions*. When his tenure with WCC was completed in 1965, he returned to India and served as the Bishop of Madras until his retirement in 1974. He then returned to England and taught at Selly Oak Colleges until 1979. While teaching at Selly Oak, Newbigin served as a minister of United Reformed Church (URC). Then in 1980, he took up the challenge to pastor a small church of URC in Winson Green, where most of the residents are Asians of Indian origin.

Meanwhile he continued to wrestle with the problem of relating the Christian faith to public issues. The result is a series of books dealing with the theme, "the Gospel is public truth." Since 1981, when Newbigin was invited by the British Council of Churches to write an introductory essay to initiate a study designed to promote a missionary encounter with the modern Western culture, he has written many books, such as *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greek*, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, *Truth to Tell*, and other writings

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 76.

² Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 76.

³ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 72. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell* (London: SPCK, 1991), 68

70. He argues that it is good to have the separation of the Church and State because the State could not force the Church to submit and the Church is free to speak the Word of God to the State.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 22. Newbigin writes, "The question with which I am wrestling ... is this: As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of

which critique modernity and show how the gospel can be preached as public truth instead of a private gospel. Newbigin continued to be engaged with this theme until his death in 1998.

Newbigin's theological writings are valuable for evangelicals because they display "a vision that is both broad and deep, coherent and timely."⁵ There are at least four reasons for evangelical churches to study Newbigin's contribution to the contemporary church's understanding of the gospel.

First, he was considered by many to be like a Father of the Church, a great bishop-theologian in early ecclesiastical history because he was decisively shaped and constantly nourished by Holy Scripture. He was a Trinitarian, a man of God, had a comprehensive ministry and sought the organic unity of the Church.

Second, he was an evangelical. His faith exhibits the characteristics of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism, which are the four foundational features of evangelicalism.

Third, Newbigin has an ecumenical background. He participated in the negotiation between the Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian and the Lutheran with regard to the reunion of the churches in South India. He served in different committees of World Council of Churches and also as a General Secretary of International Missionary Council. All these involvements gave him a global perspective in his thinking on the Gospel.

Lastly, he was a cross-cultural missionary. He spent 35 years in India. He was highly proficient in the Tamil language and had learned to present Christ to a powerful, religious worldview. All these suggest that Newbigin's view of preaching the Gospel as public truth should be taken seriously.

A. The Gospel as Plausibility Structure

To preach the gospel as public truth is to offer it as a plausibility structure for the public arena.⁶ In this regard, evangelicals should examine the way the gospel functions as a plausibility

its scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?"

⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 397. Wainwright writes, "My fondest hope, however, for Newbigin's ongoing influence is that Christian theology in the twenty-first century would pattern itself after Newbigin's lifelong embodiment of the historic conviction that Christian theology at its most genuine is practical, pastoral theology. As this book's narrative theological synthesis of Newbigin's life and work show, Newbigin's theological writings display a vision that is both broad and deep, coherent and timely." Since Wainwright's comment is on the overall theological writings, this comment is certainly applicable to his writings from *The Other Side of 1984* onwards.

⁶ Bert Hoedemaker, *Secularization and Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 46. Hoedemaker contends that Newbigin wants to revitalize the Christian faith as sole framework to understand life because he found it difficult to accept "the plurality of plausibility structures, with functional rationality taking the place of what was once an integrating center." He argues that Newbigin failed to appreciate this plurality as "the scene of many existential struggles, many choices for meaning and identity, in which fact and value are permanently intertwined." Hoedemaker is convinced that this plurality of plausibility structures has provided much more creativity in the public arena for the

structure in Newbigin's thinking.⁷ He maintains that in every rational discourse there is a starting point,⁸ which contains the presuppositions from which one's reasoning will begin.⁹ All rational discourse must take some things as given.¹⁰ The starting point is "a decision of faith, and it is validated — if at all — only as the outcome of this process of exploration."¹¹

The gospel is to be the starting point of one's rational discourse about the world and as such it functions as a "plausibility structure" which is "a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question."¹² At different times and places there are different plausibility structures that set the limits on beliefs.

1. The Gospel is Offered Without Apology

In modern Western culture, the scientific world-view is the reigning plausibility structure that sets the framework of what is considered to be a reasonable explanation of the world.¹³ Newbigin, in his critique of this culture, seeks to move from the place where the gospel is explained in terms of the modern scientific world-view vis-à-vis modern Western culture to the place where the modern Western culture is explained in terms of the gospel.¹⁴ To make this shift, Newbigin urges the Church to question the assumptions behind the dichotomy of the public world of facts and the private world of values. By uncovering the inadequacies of these assumptions, the evangelical church can offer the gospel as a new starting point for understanding reality.¹⁵

survival of the human community. This means any attempt to revitalize the gospel as a plausibility structure must take into consideration the modern situation. Hoedemaker's critique, however, shows that he has misunderstood Newbigin. The difficulty that Newbigin had with the modern situation is not the plurality of plausibility structures. To Newbigin, the challenge of modernity is not about the gospel as one plausibility structure among many structures. Instead Newbigin sees the challenge as one plausibility structure versus another structure. The plurality of plausibility structures with functional rationality as its integrating centre is one overarching structure, which domesticate all other structures. Thus in revitalizing the gospel as the plausibility structure, Newbigin is refusing to let the gospel be domesticated by this one overarching structure. To adopt any other approach in the modern situation is to be in danger of being domesticated by functional rationality.

⁷ Daniel W. Hardy, "A Response to the Consultation," in *A Scandalous Prophet*, ed. Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, J. Andrew Kirk and Werner Ustorf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 227. Hardy writes, "I think Lesslie would be the last person to want attention called to himself. The concern of his thought and of his very life was the gospel of Jesus Christ."

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 15.

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 8.

¹¹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 63.

¹² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 10. See footnote. See also Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 15-20. Berger writes, "Modernity pluralizes both institutions and plausibility structures. The last phrase represents a central concept for an understanding of the relationship between society and consciousness. For the present purpose, its import can be stated quite simply. With the possible exception of a few areas of direct personal experience, human beings require social confirmation for their beliefs about reality." See Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 16.

¹³ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 22.

¹⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greek*, 21-22. Newbigin writes, "The typical apologetic for Christianity in our Western culture has been one that attempts to 'explain' it in the terms of our culture, to show that it is 'reasonable' in terms of our ultimate beliefs about how things really are. We accept something as an explanation when it shows how an unexplained fact fits into the world as we already understand it. Explanation is related to the framework of understanding we inhabit, the firm structure of beliefs we never question, our picture of how things really are. Explanation puts a strange thing into a place where it fits and is no longer strange ... As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of its scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?"

¹⁵ The following are some of Newbigin's works that discuss how he evaluates Western culture from the standpoint of the Gospel: *Foolishness to the Greek*, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, *Truth to Tell*, and *Proper Confidence*.

The gospel as a new plausibility structure gives “a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel.”¹⁶ This structure is found in “God’s revelation of his being and purpose in those events which form the substance of the Scriptures and which have their center and determining focus in the events concerning Jesus.”¹⁷ This structure will set the limits of what is a genuinely reasonable explanation of the world.

To offer the gospel as a plausibility structure, the Church should confidently and without apology preach it to the world. There are at least two possible starting points in studying the gospel. The first stands outside of all religions.¹⁸ Various theories of religions are used to study, classify and compare “with the objectivity which one expects in the work of a botanist.”¹⁹ The student will study all religions impartially from outside, “being uncommitted to the beliefs of any of them.”²⁰ Although a student may have a strong commitment to one particular religion, this student, in order to be objective, will keep his or her commitment in abeyance and work with a standard acceptable to those having the same starting point.²¹ There is also the possibility that a student may begin with this impartial approach to religion but does not make explicit the standpoint from which they judge all religions.²² Regardless of the situation, this approach looks upon the gospel as one of the many religious teachings in the world.

The second starting point is from within one of the religions.²³ The student explicitly acknowledges his own religious commitment. From this religious commitment, the student tries “to enter understandingly into the religious convictions of others.”²⁴ Although the depth of understanding will vary greatly, it is natural that every religion will seek to interpret other religions because “if it does not do so, it cannot be the point of ultimate coherence and ultimate loyalty which religion is normally understood to be for a human being or a society.”²⁵

¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in A Pluralist Society*, 9.

¹⁷ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 28.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 15.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 16. Newbigin, relying on John Oman, lists at least three theories in the study of religions. The first is the Hegelian type, “which regard religion as a primitive or anthropomorphic form of science.” The second is the Schleiermacher type, “which regard religion as a product of our feelings — for example the work of Feuerbach.” The third is the Kantian type, “which sees religion as something which arises out of the necessity to preserve moral and social values — for example, the work of Durkheim.” Newbigin writes, “In all these cases there is an explicit theory of religion as illusion; from one or other of these standpoints religions can be classified and compared, and *inter alia* — the claims of Christianity considered.”

²⁰ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 16.

²¹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 19. Newbigin gives an example of such an approach. In *Comparative Religions*, A. C. Bouquet points out that he will not commit himself to any biased assertion about the nature of the culmination point of religious development. He aims to provide neutral statements so that the readers can form their own judgment.

²² Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 16-17.

²³ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 17.

²⁴ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 17.

²⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 17-18. Newbigin gives the example of Hinduism. He writes, “It is obvious, for instance, that Hinduism has its own very highly developed interpretation of other religions, and it classifies them in accordance with their capacity to lead men into the experience of realization — of unity with the ultimate ground of being through mystical experience. From this point of view Hinduism distinguishes in all actual religions between the essential and the peripheral, between what brings man to actual unity with the ultimate ground of all being and that which is tied up with the local, cultural, tribal peculiarities of the people concerned. Hindu understands other religions in accordance with its own deepest convictions about the nature of man and of the ground of his being.”

Hence it is natural for Christians to look at the world and all religions from the viewpoint of the gospel because “a committed Christian cannot leave his Christian commitment behind when he enters upon the study of other religions.”²⁶ The criteria of such a committed Christian in assessing other religions will be shaped by the Christian’s own commitment.²⁷ However, if the gospel deals with people’s ultimate commitment, then it is surely wise to recognize that a person committed to the gospel does not have a point of view which transcends the gospel and which enables him to judge other religious commitments impartially.

Newbigin thus argues that it is impossible to study other religions without the conviction of one’s own starting point, be it a viewpoint from outside all religions or from within a particular religion. To claim that one can study other religions from an unprejudiced approach is not merely impossible but positively fatal because the investigator’s complete personality will not be engaged in the task and, worse still, the presuppositions that influence the investigator are accepted uncritically.²⁸

Consequently, it is proper to openly acknowledge the gospel as the starting point to understand the world and all religions even though there is no way outside of the gospel to prove that this is the right starting point.²⁹ When Christians are asked: “But why start with Jesus? Why not start somewhere else?” they can confidently and without apology answer “Why not?” because “no rational thought is possible except by starting with something which is already given, in some human tradition of rational thought and discourse.”³⁰

On this basis, Newbigin argues that the only authority of the Christian missionary is the authority of Jesus. The missionary’s job is to bring people face to face with the total fact of Jesus because Jesus is himself the ultimate authority for mankind, an authority not requiring to be ratified by any other.³¹ Therefore it is reasonable to begin with the gospel as the starting point to understand the world and our personal life. This gospel will be proven only when those who start with it are able to truly grasp the whole of their experience.³²

Newbigin’s approach is not universally accepted. K. P. Aleaz argues that having the gospel as a starting point to engage the world can lead to “the most sectarian gospel” in the hands of a

²⁶ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 19-20.

²⁷ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 20.

²⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 20-21.

²⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 63.

³⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 243.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?* (London: SCM Press, 1961), 57.

³² Lesslie Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (Madras: CLS, 1968), 23. See also page 24.

Christian missionary.³³ Although he pays homage to Newbigin's integrity and sincerity, he rejects his approach.

Aleaz instead proposes that the globalised gospel should become localized. This means that people from within their localized context will decide the content of the gospel. The content should emerge from the experience of the oppressed and suffering people due to globalization and from the diverse and enriching religious experiences of humankind. The Jesus of this localized gospel is also the universal Jesus who belongs to all of humanity. Such a gospel should be a "gospel of interrelatedness in a community of communities in terms of pluralistic inclusivism, rejecting both exclusivism and inclusivism."³⁴

Aleaz's proposal to change the globalised gospel to a localised one is a question about starting points. One of his starting points is "the pathos of people and their striving for liberation."³⁵ From this starting point, he reasons that "the significance of Christ lies not in Christological formulations, but in his unique combination of suffering and hope at the cross."³⁶ Thus his starting point to understand the world and also the gospel is the experience of the oppressed and suffering people and the diverse and enriching religious experience of people.

Aleaz's starting point does not make Newbigin's starting point invalid.³⁷ Instead it shows that different starting points can lead to diverse results. Newbigin himself was seeking for a solution to the human condition.³⁸ He became convinced that the gospel must be the starting point.³⁹

When a person uses the gospel as a starting point, it is natural that others will ask "Why choose this starting point rather than another -- for example, the Qur'an, the Gita, or *Das Kapital*?" or "Why not from a point outside all religions?"⁴⁰ This kind of questioning obviously has no theoretical limit and can go on and on. It will not lead to "any clear conception of truth."⁴¹ Presuppositions are necessary in order to avoid endless uncertainty and to provide a starting point for all kinds of coherent thinking. And what is required for honest thinking is to explicitly state these presuppositions, which are taken for granted.⁴²

³³ K. P. Aleaz, "The Globalization of Poverty and the Exploitation of the Gospel," in *A Scandalous Prophet*, ed. Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunsberger, J. Andrew Kirk and Werner Ustorf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 172-173.

³⁴ Aleaz, "The Globalization of Poverty," 173.

³⁵ Aleaz, "The Globalization of Poverty," 169.

³⁶ Aleaz, "The Globalization of Poverty," 169.

³⁷ Aleaz, "The Globalization of Poverty," 169. Aleaz's agenda behind these starting points is to establish a new global order "through the mobilization of the resources of all religious traditions."

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993), 10-11.

³⁹ Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary*, 23. He writes, "I begin with the fact of Christ, because in His own mysterious way, Christ laid hold upon me, because at a time when I was deeply perplexed, when I did not know which way to turn to find firm standing ground, in the midst of a time of personal humiliation and failure, I saw the cross of Christ as the one reality that can span the whole dimension, the height and the depth, the length and the breath of human experience. From that day I have sought to find there the starting point of all my thinking."

⁴⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 8.

⁴¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 8.

Others would ask how do Christians know that the gospel is a reliable starting point to understand reality. When Christians are asked this question, they cannot offer “something supposedly more reliable than what is given to us in Christ.”⁴³ Newbigin explains, “To do so would be to embark on an infinite regress, since we would in due course have to find proof that these grounds were reliable and then to show further grounds for this and so *ad infinitum*.”⁴⁴ To accede to the request is to accept the assumptions of the dichotomy between the public and private world.⁴⁵ This means the Church cannot and must not offer proofs outside of the gospel to prove the reliability of the gospel. Instead the gospel must be the starting point of all rational discourses about reality.

2. This is Not Fideism

Is such an approach a form of fideism? Harold A. Netland thinks that Newbigin’s approach of preaching the gospel as public truth is theological fideism. He defines fideism as a belief that people’s worldview is “ultimately based upon certain basic faith postulates and that there are no neutral or ‘autonomous’ rationality norms by which to evaluate competing perspectives.”⁴⁶ He argues that Newbigin has made “unnecessary concessions to fideism.”⁴⁷ He points out that Newbigin’s claim of not having a standpoint “from which one can claim to have an ‘objective’ view which supersedes all the ‘subjective’ faith-commitments of the world’s faith” is a needless allowance.⁴⁸

However the charge of fideism rests on the assumption that there is a kind of knowledge, which does not rest on faith commitments.⁴⁹ This is an illusion because even in the Cartesian method, rational doubt requires beliefs.⁵⁰ This means there is a starting point from which rational doubt is able to question all truth claims. In *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, Roy A. Clouser has shown that all theories about mathematics and physics, sociology and economics, art and ethics, politics and law are influenced by religious beliefs. Such religious beliefs do not necessarily lead to worship and creedal adherence but they are nevertheless religious because they do not

⁴² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 8.

⁴³ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 28.

⁴⁴ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 28.

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 28. Newbigin writes, “What is really being asked, of course, is that we should show that the gospel is in accordance with the reigning plausibility structure of our society, that it accords with the assumptions which we normally do not doubt; and that is exactly what we cannot and must not do.”

⁴⁶ Harold A Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 178. Netland proposes that there are at least ten principles to evaluate the various standpoints or truth claims. Unfortunately he did not realize that his principles are based on a scientific worldview, which he also accepted by faith without defending it. He claims that there are criteria, which “are not context-dependent or relative to worldviews and, at least in principle, can be used to appraise various competing religious worldviews.” Thus he critiques religious worldviews from the standpoint of the scientific worldview. This standpoint, although it is outside of all religious worldviews is still a standpoint, which Netland did not make clear. It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique Netland’s model. It sufficient to note that his model is also based on a standpoint that has to be accepted by faith.

⁴⁷ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 178.

⁴⁸ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 179. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 168.

⁴⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, “Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 348.

⁵⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *Discovering Truth in a Changing World* (London: Alpha International, 2003), 2.

depend on anything else.⁵¹ This signifies that all truth claims about how things work in this world depend on starting points, which are not dependent on anything else. This is the only way that systematic thought can begin.⁵²

Another reason for dismissing the charge of fideism is that this approach is not a blind leap of faith. The gospel itself provides reasonable grounds for people to respond. The testimony of the apostolic witnesses to the facts of the gospel is evidence for people to consider. Although it is necessary that these evidences be examined publicly,⁵³ it would be irrational to assume that “this testimony cannot be trusted unless it is corroborated by philosophical argument which is (*ex hypothesi*) based on evidence other than this testimony.”⁵⁴ Consequently to insist that other proofs outside the gospel are necessary before the apostolic testimony can be accepted is “to have made a decision against that testimony.”⁵⁵ This decision would require faith in other proofs, which in turn would require more proofs. It leads to an endless search for evidence. Thus to break this endless search, it is not unreasonable to begin with the evidence provided by the gospel. Thus using the gospel as the starting point is not a form of fideism.

On the other hand, if the gospel is the true plausibility structure that makes contact with ultimate reality,⁵⁶ there are at least three results from using this starting point. First, the gospel gives a sense of meaning to the happenings of the world. A scientist who struggles to make sense of a whole lot of apparently random data and who suddenly sees a picture that gives meaning to it all together, will have the conviction that something true has been discovered. Similarly those who use the gospel as the starting point will be convinced that it makes contact with reality because the gospel gives a sense of meaning to the apparently random events of the world.⁵⁷

The second result is that the gospel will lead to further truth about reality.⁵⁸ If the gospel does not make contact with reality, it will encounter an epistemological crisis because it will cease to make progress in terms of discovering reality.⁵⁹ In other words, the gospel as true starting point

⁵¹ Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 21-22. Clouser writes, “A religious belief is any belief in something or other as divine. ‘Divine’ means having the status of not depending on anything else.”

⁵² Newbigin, “Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?,” 348.

⁵³ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 33.

⁵⁴ Newbigin, “Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?,” 349.

⁵⁵ Newbigin, “Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?,” 349.

⁵⁶ Newbigin, “Certain Faith: What Kind of Certainty?,” 348.

⁵⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *Discovering Truth in a Changing World* (London: Alpha International, 2003), 11.

⁵⁸ Newbigin, *Discovering Truth*, 12. Newbigin explains, “This is crucial. Any real discovery will always lead the researcher, the searcher or the scientist onwards toward further discoveries.”

⁵⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 361-362. MacIntyre writes, “At any point it may happen to any tradition-constituted enquiry that by its own standards of progress it ceases to make progress. Its hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally. Moreover, it may indeed happen that the use of the methods of enquiry and of the forms of argument, by means of which rational progress had been achieved so far, begins to have the effect of increasingly disclosing new inadequacies, hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems for the solution of which there seems to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief. This kind of dissolution of historically founded certitudes is the mark of an epistemological crisis.”

will lead people to discover further truth about life and reality.⁶⁰ If not, the gospel has no meaning to the lives of all people and world history.

The third outcome is the willingness of those using this starting point to publish what they learned.⁶¹ Christians must be willing to face the challenges of the world especially when they are convinced that the gospel is the true plausibility structure.⁶² To preach the gospel as public truth would require Christians to publish their beliefs and discoveries for the world to examine.

Therefore the Church must not shrink back in proclaiming the gospel as the new plausibility structure for the public arena. Without apology, the Church must seek to give a rational discourse about the world from the standpoint of the gospel because there can be no discourse without a starting point.

B. The Finality of the Gospel

The second aspect of preaching the gospel as public truth is to proclaim the finality of Christ. This means Christ is the final clue to the meaning and direction of human history.⁶³ Jesus Christ is “the unique and decisive revelation of God for the salvation of the world.”⁶⁴ It is through Christ that God has started the process of bringing human history to a consummation. Thus Christ is the final clue as to where human history will lead.⁶⁵

1. Not the Finality of Christianity

In claiming Christ’s finality, Newbigin is not arguing for the finality of Christianity.⁶⁶ He maintains that the distinction between Christianity and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is an important clarification in understanding the finality of Christ.⁶⁷ This does not mean that there is a total

⁶⁰ Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1-7. Lakatos argues that all scientific research can be classified as progressive or degenerative. A progressive scientific research program will lead to the discovery of hitherto unknown novel facts. On the other hand, a degenerative scientific program will lead to fabrication of theories to accommodate known facts. Thus if the gospel is a true starting point, it will lead to the discovery of new truth about realities.

⁶¹ Newbigin, *Discovering Truth in a Changing World*, 12.

⁶² Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, corrected ed. (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1964), 299. Polanyi writes, “I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and state my findings.”

⁶³ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 8.

⁶⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 171.

⁶⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 64.

⁶⁶ See also Tan Kim-Sai, “The Unique Christ in the Plurality of Religions” in *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World*, ed. Bruce J. Nicholls (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 68. Tan writes, “Focusing on the real issue at stake is needed. We Evangelicals do not argue for the superiority or finality of the Christian church on earth, nor any brand of Christianity; neither do we say that unless a person becomes a church member, he or she cannot be saved. Jesus Christ and his salvific grace has been defined by the Church, but it can never be confined by it. The grace and love of God is certainly broader than we ever realize.”

⁶⁷ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in A Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938). This book by Kraemer started a debate between him and A. G. Hogg over the issue of the relationship between Christianity and the world religions. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the debate here. Newbigin has written a good summary of the debate. See Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 33-41; see also Lesslie Newbigin, “Christ and the World of Religions,” in *Churchman* 97 (1983): 16-30.

discontinuity between Christianity and the Gospel; they are still related even though they are distinct.⁶⁸

Christianity like other world religions has “such things as the practice of individual and corporate worship, prayer, the reading and treasuring of sacred scriptures.”⁶⁹ Like all world religions, Christianity is “a constantly changing phenomenon.”⁷⁰ As the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached in different cultures and contexts, new elements from the interaction between the socio-cultural and religious contexts and the Gospel will result in a changing and developing corpus of belief, practice, association and culture.⁷¹ Thus Christianity is a growing phenomenon.

Nevertheless Christianity, a growing and changing community, is always related to the unchanging facts of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,⁷² which is the unique and decisive revelation of God, even though there is a disjunction between them. This growing and changing community comes into existence as a result of people’s response, starting with the faith response of the apostles, to the revelation of God. It is through the apostles that the fact of Christ is interpreted and passed down to us. Apart from the apostles’ faith, the name of Jesus would remain unknown.⁷³ Thus even though there is a disjunction between Christianity and the Gospel, the two are inseparable. Christianity came into being because of the Gospel.

Therefore the finality of Christ is not the finality of Christianity. Instead to accept the finality of Christ is “to endorse the judgment of the apostles that God himself was uniquely present in Christ’s life, death and resurrection and God revealed the meaning and origin and end of all things in the fact of Christ.”⁷⁴ Thus to make this claim is “to join with the apostles in making this judgment.”⁷⁵

2. Not Focusing On Personal Salvation

Secondly, in speaking about the finality of Christ for the salvation of the world, Newbigin does not focus on the question of the non-Christian individual’s salvation.⁷⁶ Questions such as “who can be saved”⁷⁷ and “what happens to the non-Christian after death”⁷⁸ are beyond human ability to answer. Such questions will lead to confusion.⁷⁹

⁶⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 34.

⁶⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 46.

⁷⁰ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 5.

⁷¹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 73.

⁷² Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 5-6. He writes, “The Gospel ... is news about things which have happened. What has happened has happened, and nothing can change it.”

⁷³ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 75.

⁷⁴ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 76.

⁷⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 76.

⁷⁶ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 60.

⁷⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176.

⁷⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 177.

⁷⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 176.

Some, such as Clark H. Pinnock, declare that such an attitude is a cop-out to avoid “answering a fair and urgent question in a responsible way.”⁸⁰ Pinnock argues that “the Bible speaks to the issue of the destiny of individuals.”⁸¹ Scripture warns of judgment to come upon individuals “who neglect God’s great salvation.”⁸² Thus there is no reason for avoiding the issue of individual salvation.

Newbigin acknowledges that the Bible talks about the need for those who heard the Gospel to put their trust in Christ in order to participate in the end-time salvation.⁸³ His point is that this teaching cannot be used to exclude those who have never heard of the Gospel. He gives at least three reasons.

First, questions such as “who can be saved” and “what happens to the non-Christian after death” focus on the soul of a person but ignore “the human person as an actor and sufferer in the ongoing history of the world.”⁸⁴ To focus on the soul instead of the whole person is a reductionistic approach similar to “the materialists and behaviorists who want to explain the human person simply as a bundle of physical activities.”⁸⁵ The concept of salvation in the New Testament has a past, present and future aspect. Newbigin points out that the verb “to save” is used in the New Testament in three tenses — past, present and future. This means “we were saved, we are being saved, and we look for salvation.”⁸⁶

Scholars agree that this verb must be understood “from its eschatological sense, from the end to which it all looks.”⁸⁷ This means salvation refers to “the completion of God’s whole work in creation and redemption, the summing up of all things with Christ as head.”⁸⁸ This implies that “the other uses of the verb (we have been saved, we are being saved) must be understood in the light of the end to which they look.”⁸⁹ Since salvation is the completion of God’s work in creation, to focus on saving the souls and ignoring the role of the persons in God’s story is inappropriate.⁹⁰

⁸⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 152. See also Jean Stromberg, “Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World: Report on A Mission/Dialogue Consultation,” in *International Review of Mission* 78 (1988): 412-36. In this report Wesley Ariarajah says, “There was a time when we had ‘theological hostility’ towards people of other faiths, simply asserting that they are wrong. When that no longer ‘worked’ because of the living experience with people of other faiths, we became ‘theologically neutral’ towards them. I remember an argument at Dr Visser ‘t Hooft’s house where he said, ‘I don’t know whether a Hindu is saved or not. I only know that salvation comes in Jesus Christ.’ And I replied, ‘Your generation worked on theological neutrality; our generation cannot.’ This is not just a theological question; it is becoming a very pragmatic question when people are called to pray together for peace, to work together ... There are many situations in the world today where people are asking for a theological assessment of how we relate to God. Theological neutrality just will not do any more.” Stromberg, “Christian Witness,” 419-20.

⁸¹ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 152.

⁸² Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 152.

⁸³ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61.

⁸⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178.

⁸⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178.

⁸⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178.

⁸⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178.

⁸⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178-179.

⁸⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 178-179.

⁹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

Second, these questions start with the need of the individual “to be assured of ultimate happiness, and not with God and his glory.”⁹¹ People have the natural tendency to long for ultimate happiness, which religions try to satisfy; even Christianity is doing the same thing when the focus of salvation is the individual soul. Although Christians do enjoy the grace of God in the forgiveness of sins, the focus of the gospel is on God and his glory. The most important question for Christians to consider is “How shall God be glorified?”⁹² Hence Christians should avoid focusing only on the salvation of individuals, as this is a perversion of the gospel.⁹³

The third reason is that no human being can answer these questions. Only God has the right to answer them. Jesus warned his followers against making claims to know the outcome of the final judgment of God. In fact Jesus warned his followers that the day of final judgment would be a day of surprises, of reversals, and of astonishment.

One good illustration of this warning is the story of the rich young ruler. This ruler has kept God’s commandments since young but refused to give up all his wealth to follow him. This incident prompted Jesus to make the famous statement that it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. This aroused Peter to ask “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answered him saying, “With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”⁹⁴ This implies that there will be many surprises at the final judgment. Thus Christians should avoid making any claims about the outcome of the final judgment.⁹⁵

Since Christians cannot answer the questions “who can be saved” and “what happens to the non-Christian after death,” Newbigin rejects the exclusivist claim that “all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour are eternally lost.”⁹⁶ He agrees with the Christian exclusivist’s claim that “Jesus Christ is the *only* Saviour.”⁹⁷ He concurs with the exclusivists that “explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.”⁹⁸

Thus Newbigin maintains that anyone who hears this Gospel and refuses it, the New Testament makes it clear that this person will lose “the possibility of salvation — to be lost.”⁹⁹ For salvation,

⁹¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

⁹² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

⁹³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

⁹⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 177-178.

⁹⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 177.

⁹⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173. See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 11. Race argues that exclusivism “counts the revelation in Jesus Christ as the sole criterion by which all religions, including Christianity, can be understood and evaluated.” See also Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 14-15. Pinnock defines exclusivism as “the position that maintains Christ as the Savior of the world and other religions largely as zones of darkness.” He further narrows exclusivism to restrictivism, “which restricts hope to people who have put their faith in Jesus Christ in this earthly life.” Thus restrictivism is a form of exclusivism.

⁹⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 11. Italic is part of the text.

⁹⁸ Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, 11.

⁹⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61.

explicit faith is needed from those who are given a chance to hear the Gospel. This need for explicit faith does not imply “that the vast multitudes who have never been presented with this Gospel call for conversion and commitment are thereby necessarily excluded from participation in God’s on-going and completed work.”¹⁰⁰

In affirming that the vast multitudes, which have never heard the Gospel, are not necessarily excluded from participation in God’s on-going and completed work, Newbigin does not mean that he is an inclusivist or a pluralist. The former accepts and rejects other faiths, “a dialectical ‘yes’ and ‘no.’”¹⁰¹ The inclusivist seeks to look for connections between the Gospel and the teaching of other faiths and “to discern ways by which the non-Christian faiths may be integrated creatively into Christian theological reflection.”¹⁰²

The pluralist believes that “God’s revealing and redeeming activity has elicited responses in a number of culturally conditioned ways throughout history.”¹⁰³ This means that “each response is partial, incomplete, unique; but they are related to each other in that they represent different culturally focused perceptions of the one ultimate divine reality.”¹⁰⁴ Thus all religions “must acknowledge their need of each other if the full truth about God is to be available to mankind.”¹⁰⁵

Newbigin agrees with the inclusivists and the pluralists that God is working among the non-Christian faiths. He is convinced that “some witness of God’s grace” is available to everyone regardless of their creeds.¹⁰⁶ He maintains that missionaries preaching the Gospel to a person of the non-Christian religion have to acknowledge in practice “that there is some continuity between the gospel and the experience of the hearer outside the Christian Church.”¹⁰⁷ Newbigin writes,

One cannot preach the gospel without using the word “God.” If one is talking to a person of a non-Christian religion, one is bound to use one of the words in her language, which is used to denote God. But the content of that word has necessarily been formed by his experience outside the Church. By using the word,

¹⁰⁰ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61. See also Tan, “The Unique Christ,” 68. Tan writes, “It is not proper to dogmatize that people who have never had an opportunity of encounter with Christ are automatically lost. However, dogmatizing the other way round is equally inappropriate. So stressing Christ’s salvific uniqueness is not to be equated with automatic condemnation of others.”

¹⁰¹ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 38.

¹⁰² Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 38. See Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 15. Pinnock writes, “By ‘inclusivism’ I refer to the view upholding Christ as the Savior of humanity but also affirming God’s saving presence in the wider world and in other religions.”

¹⁰³ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 77-78. See Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, 15. Pinnock writes, “By ‘pluralism’ I mean the position that denies the finality of Jesus Christ and maintains that other religions are equally salvific paths to God.”

¹⁰⁵ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173.

the preacher is taking the non-Christian experience of the hearer as the starting point. Without this there is no way of communicating.¹⁰⁸

Thus it is impossible “to affirm a total discontinuity between Christian faith and the religions.”¹⁰⁹ This means that God is working among the other religions.¹¹⁰

Newbigin agrees with inclusivists and pluralists that God has boundless mercy and desires everyone to be saved.¹¹¹ He points out that Jesus eagerly welcomes “the signs of faith among men and women outside the house of Israel.”¹¹² While hanging on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world, Jesus prays to the Father asking Him to forgive those who nailed him because they do not know what they are doing.¹¹³ All these show that God's grace, mercy and loving-kindness reaches out to every creature.¹¹⁴

However Newbigin rejects the idea that non-Christian religions are vehicles of salvation, despite the fact that God is working among non-Christian religions of the world.¹¹⁵ There is a discontinuity between God's final revelation in Christ and His working among non-Christian religions in the world.¹¹⁶ All thinking about the relationship between Christ and other religions must take into consideration the tension between “the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world.”¹¹⁷

Newbigin maintains that the Crucifixion compels him “to acknowledge that this world which God made and loves is in a state of alienation, rejection, and rebellion against him.”¹¹⁸ At Calvary the infinite love of God for the world is seen but it also unmasks “the dark horror of sin” in the world.¹¹⁹ The people who condemned Jesus to the cross are not “the dregs of humanity” but “the revered leaders in church, state, and culture.”¹²⁰ Thus the best people, represented by the religious and political leaders, of any society are opposed to God.

Consequently Newbigin concludes that any thinking about the relationship between Christianity and the world religions must be done “within the magnetic field set up between the two poles:

¹⁰⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 173.

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 174. Newbigin writes, “And anyone who has had intimate friendship with a devout Hindu or Muslim would find it impossible to believe that the experience of God of which his friend speaks is simply illusion or fraud.”

¹¹⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

¹¹¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175. See also Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 153.

¹¹² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹¹³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹¹⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹¹⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 174.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 59. He writes, “The total fact of the Cross, which is the focus of the Gospel, makes it impossible to describe the relationship between faith in Christ and other forms of religious commitment in terms simply of continuity and fulfilment. There is a radical discontinuity.”

¹¹⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹¹⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹¹⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹²⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

the amazing grace of God and the appalling sin of the world.”¹²¹ Hence Christians need to stop asking the question, “Who can be saved?” or “What happens to the non-Christians after death?” Instead Christians, who are chosen to proclaim the truth of Christ to the world, are to focus on fulfilling their responsibility.¹²²

In proclaiming the finality of Christ, Newbigin holds a position that is related to exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism and yet is beyond them. His position is exclusive because he affirms the unique truth of revelation in Jesus Christ but he is not an exclusivist because he does not deny the possibility of salvation of non-Christians. His position is inclusive because he refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church but he is not an inclusivist because he does not regard the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. His position is pluralistic because he acknowledges the gracious work of God in the lives of all people but he is not a pluralist because he does not deny the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ.¹²³ His position does not focus on the individual's salvation even though those who have heard the Gospel are invited to put their faith in Christ.

3. Final Clue to Human History

Instead, Newbigin's position focuses on Christ as the meaning and direction for human history.¹²⁴ The finality of Christ means that Jesus 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.”¹²⁵

Newbigin argues that the Bible provides a universal history of the world because it tells a universal story from creation to consummation.¹²⁶ This universal story has meaning because it has a goal.¹²⁷ There are two ways in which people can know the goal.¹²⁸ The first is to wait for the end of human history. The second is for the author of human history to reveal the goal

¹²¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 175.

¹²² The doctrine of election, as defined by Newbigin, plays an important motivating role for missions and evangelism. See Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 66-78. See also George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3. Hunsberger writes, “I was particularly curious why he grounded his theology in what he would most characteristically call ‘the missionary significance’ of the biblical doctrine of election. Tracking this initial clue would ultimately lead to the writing of a full dissertation on the way election functions in what I came to call Newbigin’s ‘theology of cultural plurality,’ which I suggest is basic to his theology of mission in general.”

¹²³ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182-83.

¹²⁴ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 8.

¹²⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 86-87.

¹²⁶ Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary*, 43.

¹²⁷ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 103. He writes, “History does not reach its goal by the development of the forces immanent within it. Human existence is not to be understood in these terms. On the contrary, all human life is a gift from God and all things exist by his will. History, therefore, is not the story of development of forces immanent within its history; it is a matter of the promise of God. History has a goal only in the sense that God has promised it.”

¹²⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 65-66. He points that there are two views of human history. One view sees history as a cyclical movement. In this view, people find unity and coherence by seeking “an existent reality behind the multiplicity of phenomena.” The other view of history sees human history as a journey toward an end. In this view, people look for a goal at the end of the journey that gives unity and coherence in the present world of phenomena. See also Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary*, 43-44.

before human history comes to an end.¹²⁹ Since human history has not reached its terminus, the second option is the only possible way to know about the goal.¹³⁰

The goal of human history has been made known through the Gospel. This Gospel describes “what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ.”¹³¹ It describes the reign of God through Jesus, and also through the coming, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has started the process, which will lead “to the consummation of all things.”¹³² The consummation of all things means “all things will be restored to the unity for which they were created in Christ, and God will be all in all.”¹³³ Thus the Gospel is “the announcement of the decisive encounter of God with men — not just with men as individual “souls” detachable from their place in human history, but with mankind as a whole, with human history as a whole, indeed with the whole creation.”¹³⁴

This decisive encounter between God and world in Jesus Christ is the basis to claim the finality of Christ.¹³⁵ To claim finality is to say that Christ is the clue to universal history.¹³⁶ The revelation of God in Christ gives people “the standpoint” to understand human history as a coherent whole.¹³⁷

This standpoint reveals that with the coming of Christ, the journey to the consummation of all things under Christ has started. Anyone who accepts this standpoint is endorsing the apostolic testimony concerning Christ. It means agreeing with the apostles that what God has done through Christ is “the decisive point, the turning-point” of the whole of human history.¹³⁸ Thus every event and situation in this world between the coming of Christ and the consummation of all things must be interpreted from this perspective.¹³⁹

To accept this standpoint is “to express such a conviction and such a commitment concerning the point of the human history as a whole.”¹⁴⁰ This commitment can be criticized because it is not possible to appeal to another standpoint to prove the finality of Christ.¹⁴¹ If there is another

¹²⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 91-92.

¹³⁰ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 22-23. He writes, “If we are considering the cosmos as a whole and the human story within the cosmos, and if we are asking whether there is any purpose which would enable us to understand it, the first option is not available. We shall not be around to observe the final moments of the cosmic story. The only available possibility is the second: that the One whose purpose it is should reveal it.”

¹³¹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 63. See also Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 104-111.

¹³² Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 49.

¹³³ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 61.

¹³⁴ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 49.

¹³⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 49.

¹³⁶ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 69.

¹³⁷ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 72.

¹³⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 76.

¹³⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 83.

¹⁴⁰ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 71.

¹⁴¹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 15-22. The standpoint is also the starting point in understanding world history. Newbigin writes. “The more one reads the literature of the inter-religious discussion, the more one is impressed by the fact that the real decisions are made at the beginning of the argument, not at the end. The decisive question is the question of starting point.” See Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 15. See also Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 15-39. He writes, “We cannot demonstrate the truth of Christianity by reference to something else. We have to abandon the idea that

standpoint that can prove the finality of Christ, then the commitment of the believers is shifted to this “another standpoint.”¹⁴² The claim of the finality of Christ is no longer the final standpoint to understand universal history. Thus anyone who accepts the standpoint that Christ is the final clue of the human history must be prepared to live out his or her conviction and commitment in the world. This is the only way to express their conviction of the finality of Christ.

The followers of Christ must be willing to live out their conviction in at least four ways. First Christians must challenge every interpretation of human history that looks to an end other than what God revealed in Christ.¹⁴³ In other words, Christians must publish their provisional interpretations of the contemporary secular events of the world from the viewpoint of the finality of Christ.¹⁴⁴ This provisional interpretation must be followed through by “concrete actions in the various sectors of secular life directed toward the true end for which God has created humanity and the world.”¹⁴⁵ By doing these things Christians are challenging other interpretations of human history.¹⁴⁶

Second, Christians must allow the biblical story to be examined critically since it is not separated from human history as a whole.¹⁴⁷ This means “no fence can be erected around the biblical story; it is part of the human story ... Therefore it is and must be open to all the critical probing of the historian.”¹⁴⁸ If Christians evade such critical probing of the historian, they are compromising their commitment to Christ, who is the final clue to the meaning and direction of human history.¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, Christians must also challenge the assumptions of historians because “historical enquiry is never an ideological neutral enterprise.”¹⁵⁰ Historians are also products of their culture; they will bring along the underlying presuppositions, axioms, models, analogies, and paradigm of their culture into the critical probing.¹⁵¹ Thus Christians must allow scholars to ask critical questions of the bible story,¹⁵² and at the same time must explore and question “the hidden presuppositions that underlie every exercise in historical inquiry.”¹⁵³

there is available to us or to any other human beings the sort of certitude that Descartes wanted to provide and that the scientific part of our culture has sometimes claimed to offer. We have to thank the scientists for keeping alive at least in one part of our culture the belief that there is truth to be known. We also have to thank scientists in more recent times, like Polanyi, for their recognition of the fact that all knowing involves the commitment of the fallible subject.” See page 35.

¹⁴² Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 62-64. He contends there is no way to demonstrate in advance whether which starting point is the right starting point. If we could do this, then this starting point will no longer be the starting point.

¹⁴³ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 89.

¹⁴⁴ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Seceret*, 89.

¹⁴⁶ Newbigin, *The Open Seceret*, 89.

¹⁴⁷ Newbigin, *The Open Seceret*, 87.

¹⁴⁸ Newbigin, *The Open Seceret*, 89.

¹⁴⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, “Christ and the Culture,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978): 19. Although Newbigin was talking about critical research in the New Testament, his point is valid also for the whole Bible.

¹⁵⁰ Newbigin, “Christ and the Culture,” 19.

¹⁵¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 88.

¹⁵² Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 53.

¹⁵³ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 89.

Thirdly, Christians must shape their community life according to their claim of Christ.¹⁵⁴ The apostolic testimony about Christ must remain in the centre of church life. This testimony is the norm to judge all subsequent reinterpretations of apostolic testimony in the face of new human situations.¹⁵⁵ In other words, the fact of Christ as given by the apostolic testimony remains unchanging but the understanding of the fact in different human situations would evolve. By holding firmly to the original apostolic testimony, the Church continues to be shaped by it even as she encounters different situations in human history.¹⁵⁶

Fourthly the followers of Christ must be prepared to suffer for their commitment to the Gospel as the clue to human history. Newbigin writes, "Jesus is crucified; his Church is persecuted; those who follow him are promised suffering, rejection and death."¹⁵⁷ The followers of Christ who proclaim the finality of Christ through concrete actions must be ready to face rejection.¹⁵⁸

However Christians do not have to fear defeat because of Christ's resurrection, they can expect their defeat to turn into victory "even in the midst of the appalling triumph of human blindness and wickedness, evidence will be continually forthcoming — manifest to eyes of faith — the victory of God."¹⁵⁹ Thus Christians can move forward in serving God despite the rejection by the world.

In brief, the finality of Christ means what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ is the final clue to human history. Christians are to prove their claim of Christ by living out their lives according to this conviction. This means they must participate in the history of the present time by means of concrete actions that arise out of their commitment to the judgment that Jesus Christ is the standpoint from which one truly interprets history.

Therefore to preach the gospel as public truth is to offer it as the plausibility structure for the public arena. This means the gospel functions as a starting point for all rational discourses about reality. This starting point is the finality of Christ. It means Christ is the true clue to human history. It is the standpoint from which Christians can interpret history and offer themselves to service of God in history.

There is no other standpoint from which the finality of Christ can be proved. If there were another, then the commitment of the believer would have to be shifted to this other standpoint.

¹⁵⁴ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 77. He writes, "The claim that the fact of Christ is decisive for all human life is a meaningless claim except as it is interpreted in the life of a community which lives by the tradition of the apostolic testimony."

¹⁵⁵ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 77.

¹⁵⁶ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 77.

¹⁵⁷ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 84.

¹⁵⁸ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 84.

¹⁵⁹ Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 85.

The only way to prove the finality of Christ is for believers to live out their conviction and commitment in this world.