LESSLIE NEWBIGIN
FOOLISHNESS TO THE GREEKS

TAUGHT BY ROBERT CUNNINGHAM
What would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and our post-Enlightenment culture?

Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*
RECAP

Week 1: Intro & the Question of Missionary Encounter
Week 2: Missional Analysis of Western Culture
Week 3: Gospel as Public Truth
TODAY’S AGENDA:
Recovering the Missionary Nature of the Church
- Church as alternate “Plausibility Structure”
- Competing and Contrasting Narrative
- Church and the Kingdom
THE DICHOTOMY OF THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW: DEFAULT PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE

- Public
  - Facts
  - Science
  - Cause/Effect

- Private
  - Values
  - Religion
  - Purpose/Meaning
“The modern scientific worldview functions as a “plausibility structure”... [and the] Christian claim is that, though that other way of understanding the world can in no way be reached by any logical step from the axioms of this one, nevertheless that other way does offer a “wider rationality” that embraces and does not contradict the rationality of this.”

Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 54
“The Bible functions as authority only within a community that is committed to faith and obedience and is embodying that commitment in an active discipleship that embraces the whole of life, public and private. This is the "plausibility structure" within which the faith is nourished.”

Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 58
How is the church an alternate “plausibility structure”?
A Battle of Plausibility Structures

Temple of Modernity

Enclave

Private Values

Religious Pluralism

Heterodox Imperative

Nature = God

Nation-State = Source of "happiness"

Public Fact

Based on Empirical Evidence

Centerpiece

Cause + Effect

No Telos

Death and Resurrection

The only "evidence" is witness


Faith

Scripture

Traxis

Community

Shapes

We may often be wrong:

Both → in our understanding

→ in our attempted obedience

At best we can hope to

Choose the relatively better

Reject the relatively worse

"Proof" belongs to the end (telos)

→ by Those who are called.
SIXTH SENSE: DISCOVERING A NEW PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=XpxazHhPqCw
A battle of plausibility structures

Temple of Modernity

Public Fact

Enclave

Private Values
- Religious Pluralism
- Heretical Imperative

Nature = God

Enclaved

Faith

Scripture

Praxis

Community

Tradition

Shapes

We may often be wrong, both in our understanding and in our attempted obedience.

At best we can hope to choose the relatively better, reject the relatively worse.

"Proof" belongs to the End, by those who are called.

Future growth: more cross-cultural dialogue

Need for conversion

Death and resurrection

* This only works within plausibility structures.
The difference between the two plausibility structures is seen most sharply at the point where we have to come to terms with the resurrection of Jesus... The statement – “the tomb was empty” – can be accepted as fact only if the whole plausibility structure of contemporary Western culture is called into question.

Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 62
“The resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point. Some happenings which come to our notice may be simply noted without requiring us to undertake any radical revision of our ideas. The story of the resurrection of the crucified is obviously not of this kind. It may of course, be dismissed as a fable, as the vast majority of people in our society do. This has nothing to do with the rise of the modern scientific world-view. The fact that a man who has been dead and buried for three days does not rise from the tomb was well known even before the invention of electric lights. If it is true, it has to be the starting point of a wholly new way of understanding the cosmos and the human situation in the cosmos.”

Lesslie Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 13
“Live in the kingdom of God in such a way that it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.”

Leslie Newbigin
Habits

Aim/intention (Love)

Target/Object (Kingdom of God)

Communal Practices (Liturgy)
IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE:
I want to suggest that in our concern to communicate the gospel to our European home, we can regard the postmodernists as allies up to a certain point. . . . Among all the stories that human beings tell about themselves and the world, there could be a true story. No logic requires us to deny this possibility. And this, of course, is what the Christian Church confesses. We believe and confess that there is a true story that gives the clue to the meaning of the whole human and cosmic story, because God has chosen a people to be the bearer of the meaning of the whole story. This is the story the Bible tells, with its center in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our task is to tell this story and to indwell it as a community.

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*
IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE:

“I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”

Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 216
Competing and Contrasting Narratives—

All of the following come from Christian Smith’s “Moral Believing Animals.” In this book he lists over a dozen recognizable narratives, not to critique them but to demonstrate the power of narrative to shape the way we see the world.

A few for us to consider –
American Experiment Narrative
The Capitalist Prosperity Narrative
The Progressive Socialism Narrative
The Expressive Romantic Narrative
The Scientific Enlightenment Narrative
The American Experiment Narrative

Once upon a time, our ancestors lived in an Old World where they were persecuted for religious beliefs and oppressed by established aristocracies. Land was scarce, freedoms denied, and futures bleak. But then brave and visionary men like Columbus opened up a New World, and our freedom-loving forefathers crossed the ocean to carve out of a wilderness a new civilization. Through bravery, ingenuity, determination, and goodwill, our forebears forged a way of life where men govern themselves, believers worship in freedom, and where anyone can grow rich and become president. This America is genuinely new, a clean break from the past, a historic experiment an democracy standing as a city on a hill shining a beacon of hope to guide a dark world into a future of prosperity and liberty. It deserves our honor, our devotion, and possibly the commitment of our very lives for its defense.
The Capitalist Prosperity Narrative

For most of human history, the world’s material production was mired in oppressive and inefficient economic systems such as primitive communalism, slavery, feudalism, mercantilism, and, more recently, socialism and communism. In eighteenth-century Europe and America, however, enterprising men hit upon the keys to real prosperity: private property rights, limited government, the profit motive, capital investment, the free market, rational contracts, technological innovation – in short, economic freedom. The capitalist revolution has produced more wealth, social mobility, and well-being than any other system could possibly imagine or deliver. Nevertheless, capitalism is continually beset by utopian egalitarians, government regulators, and antientrepreneurial freeloaders who foolishly seek to fetter its dynamic power with heavy-handed state controls. All who care for a world of freedom and prosperity will remain vigilant in defense of property rights, limited government, and the free market.
The Progressive Socialism Narrative

In the most primitive days, before the rise of private property, humans lived in communities of material sharing and equality. But for most of subsequent human history, with the rise of private property, the world’s material production has been mired in oppressive and exploitative economic systems, such as slavery, feudalism, mercantilism, and capitalism. The more history has progressed, the more ownership of the means of production have become centralized, and the more humanity has suffered deprivation and injustice. As the calamitous contradictions of capitalism began to intensify in the nineteenth century, however, a revolutionary vanguard emerged who envisioned a society of fraternity, justice, and equality. They proclaimed the abolition of private property, the socialization of production, and the distributions of goods not according to buying power but according to need. Right-wing tycoons and magnates who have everything to lose to the cause of justice fight against the socialist movement with all their power and wealth. But the power of workers in solidarity for justice will eventually achieve the utopia of prosperity and equality.
The Expressive Romantic Narrative

Once upon a time, people were free to experience the exhilarating power of nature, to assert their primitive selves, to shout raucously, to dance wildly, to fight hard, to love harder. They were noble, authentic, primal, unrestrained. The encroachments of civilization, however, have gradually domesticated humanity, smothering our authentic, primeval selves under blankets of repressive and artificial manners, refinements, restraints, proprieties, denials, and formal rationalities. Modern people hardly know any more who they are, what they feel, how to express their will and passions. Only a few free thinkers have broken through the suffocating restraint, and at great cost, but they point the way to authentic life and self-expression. They flaunt convention. They walk the less trod roads. They get in touch with their deepest selves. They are not bound by the bourgeois mores and manners that extinguish the human spirit. They are troubled souls on wild and lonely quests, yet are society’s only hope for authentic and expressive living, perhaps even for redemption itself through pain and art.
The Scientific Enlightenment Narrative

For most of human history, people have lived in the darkness of ignorance and tradition, driven by fear, believing in superstitions. Priests and lords preyed on such ignorance, and life was wearisome and short. Ever so gradually, however, and often at great cost, inventive men have endeavored better to understand the natural world around them. Centuries of such inquiry eventually led to a marvelous Scientific Revolution that radically transformed our methods of understanding nature. What we know now as a result is based on objective observation, empirical fact, and rational analysis. With each passing decade, science reveals increasingly more about the earth, our bodies, our minds. We have come to possess the power to transform nature and ourselves. We can fortify health, relieve suffering, and prolong life. Science is close to understanding the secret of life and maybe eternal life itself. Of course, forces of ignorance, fear, irrationality, and blind faith still threaten the progress of science. But they must be resisted at all costs. For unfettered science is our only hope for true enlightenment and happiness.
Christian Metanarrative

A personal, loving, holy God created the heavens and earth for his own glory, making humans in his very image, and establishing a relationship of care and friendship with humanity. Tragically, however, humans in pride have chosen to rebel against and reject God, the source of all life and happiness, thus plunging the world into all manner of evil, death, and spiritual blindness. But the love and grace of God is more powerful and determined than the sin of humanity, so through Israel God continued his covenant relationship to redeem the world from its sin. Rather than allowing creation to reap death and utter destruction as the full and just consequences of sin, God himself became human and freely took upon himself those evil consequences. Through the undeserved crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God conquered death, set aright the broken relationship, and opened a way for the redemption of creation. God now calls all people to respond through his Spirit to this divine love and grace by repenting from sin and walking in a new life of friendship with and obedience to God in the church and in the world. Those who perish in their denial of God’s love will finally get exactly what they want, the end of which is death. But those who embrace God will enjoy and worship him together as his people forever in a new heaven and earth.
How do we inhabit the story of Scripture?

It is part of a living process in which we share with all who have gone before us in the school of discipleship, and with all who are our contemporaries in the same school... We are continually asking questions [all the while] we are also continually retelling the Story in its relevance to ever-new situations. The asking and answering of our questions can greatly enhance our understanding, provided it is within the context of the same ultimate faith that governs the life of the whole community, and of our contemporary struggle to understand and be faithful in our own time.

Lesslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 56-57
How do we inhabit the story of Scripture?

Its uniqueness can most simply be indicated by saying that from start to finish it is marked by the sign of the cross. Every 'master narrative' has an in-built tendency to imperialism, because it looks for an intra historical triumph of the truth for which it stands. Christians (God forgive us) have frequently been seduced into thinking and acting in precisely this way. But when they are so seduced, and we still are, they deny the true story. At the centre of the Christian story stands the fact that the incarnate Lord, by whom and for whom all things exist, suffered rejection and death. That fact precludes any expectation that there can be a total union of truth and power within history.

Lesslie Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 223
A Battle of Plausibility Structures

Temple of Modernity

Public Fact
- Enclave
- Private Values
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  - Heretical
  - Imperative
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Death and Resurrection

need for conversion

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"Proof" belongs to the end by those who are called.
Missionary Nature of the Church: How does the Church share in the mission of God?
The business of this 7 percent [Christians in Madras] is to be an effective sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s purpose for the whole city. Each of those three words is important. They are to be a sign, pointing humanity to something that is beyond their present horizon but can give guidance and hope now; an instrument (not the only one) that God can use for his work of healing, liberating, and blessing; and a foretaste, a place where men and women can have a real taste now of the joy and freedom God intends for all.
The Church as –
Foretaste
Instrument
Sign
When we have to go to a distant village in our pastoral duty we try to start very early in the morning, so that we do not have to walk in the heat of the day. And it sometimes happens that we have to set off in total darkness; perhaps we are going towards the west so that there is no light in the sky and everything is dark. But as we go, a party of people traveling the opposite way comes to meet us. There will be at least a faint light on their faces. If we stop and ask them: “Where does the light come from?”, they will simply ask us to turn round (do a U-turn) and look towards the east. A new day is dawning, and the light we saw was just its faint reflection in the faces of those going that way. They did not possess the light; it was a light given to them. The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is given already the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness.
“...the church is both a means and an end, because it is a foretaste. It is precisely because the church now has a real foretaste of the life of the age to come that she can be a witness and instrument of the kingdom. Or as he phrases it: “It is precisely because she is not merely instrumental that she can be instrumental.” And “the means by which the good news of salvation is propagated must be in line with the nature of the salvation itself.” If salvation is a making whole, a healing of all things in Christ, a reconciliation to God, then the church can only proclaim this reality if it is itself a living embodiment of this healing and reconciliation.”

Michael Goheen, A Light to the Nations
“Live in the kingdom of God in such a way that it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.”

Lesslie Newbigin
Church as “hermeneutic” of the Gospel
CHURCH AS HERMENEUTIC OF THE GOSPEL:

“I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”

Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 227
We ask, “Where does God fit into the story of my life?” when the real question is where does my little life fit into this great story of God’s mission.

We want to be driven by a purpose that has been tailored just right for our own individual lives (which is of course infinitely preferable to living aimlessly), when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.

We talk about the problems of “applying the Bible to our lives,” which often means modifying the Bible somewhat adjectivally to fit into the assumed “reality” of the life we live “in the real world.” What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, assuming the Bible to be the reality – the real story – to which we are called to conform ourselves?

We wrestle with the question of how we can “make the gospel relevant to the world” (again, at least that is clearly preferable to treating it as irrelevant). But in this Story, God is about the business of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.

We wonder whether and how the care of creation, for example, might fit into our concept and practice of mission, when this Story challenges us to ask whether our lives, lived on God’s earth and under God’s gaze, are aligned with, or horrendously misaligned with, God’s mission that stretches from creation to cosmic transformation and the arrival of a new heaven and new earth.

We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.

I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for his mission.
“The victory of God is finally accomplished in the rejection and death of Jesus. The king reigns from the tree. That fact, hidden from the world, is proclaimed to those chosen as witnesses (and only to those) by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Those witnesses are sent forth to proclaim and to embody in their common life the victory of Jesus, the reality of the reign of God. They are to go, bearing about in their body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus – the life of the victorious kingdom – may be made manifest in their bodily life (2 Cor 4:10). They proclaim and embody the victory of God under the sign of the Cross.”

Foolishness to the Greeks, 99