
Pro Rege

Volume 21 | Number 3

Article 3

March 1993

Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Goheen, Michael W. (1993) "Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 3, 23 - 24.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss3/3

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Book Reviews

Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth, by Lesslie Newbigin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1991. 90 pages, paperback, \$6.95. Reviewed by Michael Goheen, Instructor in Theology.

During a plenary debate at the Bangkok meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in 1973, Lesslie Newbigin was sitting next to an Indonesian Christian leader. After this Indonesian had made a public comment he returned to his seat and muttered under his breath: "Of course, the Number One question is, Can the West be converted?" In the following years Lesslie Newbigin became more and more convinced that this Indonesian believer was right.

Newbigin has devoted the last few decades of his illustrious career to pressing the question of what would be involved in a genuine encounter between the gospel and Western culture, between the good news of Jesus Christ and the modern scientific worldview. His three books, *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, contribute to this project and are required reading for the Christian who longs to see the light of the gospel shine in secularized Western culture. While not nearly as substantial as his former books, his most recent book, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, develops the same themes while adding new and provocative insights.

Truth to Tell consists of three lectures given in the 1991 Osterhaven Lecture Series at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. The encounter between the gospel and Western culture is an encounter between a living community that embodies the gospel and a living culture that embodies the modern scientific worldview. The first lecture, titled "Believing and Knowing the Truth," is devoted to analyzing the crisis in Western culture that provides the opportunity for God's people to proclaim the gospel. Newbigin draws an analogy between the contemporary church and Augustine. Augustine lived in the Roman Empire that, after a period of extraordinary brilliance, was being destroyed by fundamental conflicts that were unresolvable. He provided a new starting point for thought, offering a framework within which the ancient dichotomies could be overcome and the insights of classical culture saved. In a similar way, the West

is faced with a crisis after the remarkable accomplishments of modern science. The West, too, is in danger of being destroyed by a fundamental dichotomy that threatens the integrality of life. This fundamental dichotomy has been produced by the consistent application of the critical method as the sole criterion for truth. Any truth claim that can pass through the grid of critical reason is granted the superior status of a public fact that is universally true and can be known by all. All other truth claims are relegated to the inferior realm of values or private opinions that may be believed by certain individuals. Thus a dichotomy between fact and value, knowing and believing, truth and opinion, public and private, lies at the heart of our culture's worldview. This dichotomy eliminates purpose. Without purpose, the technological achievements of the past 300 years can serve only some will to power, scantily disguised in the language of values. This kind of public doctrine cannot provide normative direction for technological progress. This crisis opens up the opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ to offer the good news of Jesus Christ in life, word, and deed as a new starting point for the public life of our culture. It is only in the gospel that the fundamental dualism of the West can be resolved and the accomplishments of Western culture can be saved.

If the church is to challenge the existing dichotomy in Western culture between fact and value, object and subject, public and private, she must overcome this dichotomy in her own life. Newbigin addresses this issue in his second lecture, "Affirming the Truth in the Church." The Western church is compromised and split by this fundamental dualism. The liberal tradition of the Western church has chosen the subjective side of the split. Thus Scripture has become for them a human record of religious experiences that cannot claim any uniqueness or divine authority but must be placed along side of other religious books to be weighed in the scales of reason. As this form of the gospel is embodied in this tradition, the church loses its particular identity in its search for relevance. The fundamentalist tradition of the Western church has chosen

the objective side of the split. Scripture is objective truth in which human subjectivity plays little or no role in original authorship, editing, compilation, translating, and interpreting. Practicing obedience to this kind of scriptural authority leads to a ghetto mentality that seeks to protect ahistorical, objective statements of fact that have little relevance for the public life of the West.

Newbigin sees a solution to this fundamental split in the church in the work of Michael Polanyi, who struggled against the false objectivism of science. Newbigin draws on Polanyi's understanding of "indwelling." When we indwell some worldview we do not look *at* the worldview but *from* the worldview to the object of our attention. It functions below the level of consciousness, providing clues for understanding the meaning of particular objects. The use of a worldview is analogous to our use of language. I indwell language in the sense that it becomes a part of me, and is the means through which I try to understand the world. Newbigin believes that the liberal and fundamentalist traditions indwell the modern scientific worldview and look *at* the Bible rather than dwelling *in* the biblical story and looking at our culture. Newbigin believes that the rift will only be healed as the Bible becomes the living story of the people of God and they vigorously proclaim the gospel to Western society.

In his final lecture, "Speaking the Truth to Caesar," Newbigin addresses the issue of *how* the church can vitally impact the dominant non-Christian ethos that exists in the public life of the West. The Western church lives in a society that is neither a totalitarian regime whose public doctrine suppresses the gospel nor a

Christian state in which the gospel is the dominant plausibility structure for public life. We live in a democracy and are, therefore, one voice in a continuing conversation with many voices. Our task is twofold. Negatively, we are to recognize, unmask, and reject ideological demonic powers that bind our culture. Positively, we are to affirm the truth of the good news as a starting point for public life. To accomplish this task three things are necessary. First, the people of God must be equipped and nourished by the internal life of the institutional church for their callings in the world. Secondly, future leaders must be trained to participate vigorously in the public life of our nation. Finally, and most importantly, the church must embody the gospel herself, and as a counter community, challenge the reigning idols and ideologies of the day.

I find Newbigin's work to be informative, provocative, and helpful as I struggle with crucial questions. I would recommend reading this book, although I would steer an interested reader to *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and/or *Foolishness to the Greeks* first. While I have been helped tremendously by these books, one nagging problem continues to haunt me. Newbigin seems to reduce revelation to the events of Jesus Christ. If he does not affirm that God reveals himself and his will through his creation and throughout the whole of Scripture, it is difficult to see where he finds the norms for Christian obedience. How is the gospel normative for society? The truth we are to tell—is it simply the events of Jesus Christ? It seems to me that robustly affirming the whole organism of revelation would shore up his whole project.

The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism, by Ronald L. Numbers (New York: A. A. Knopf) 1992. 456 pages, \$27.50. ISBN 0-679-40104-0. Reviewed by Richard G. Hodgson, Associate Professor of Planetary Sciences.

For all who are seeking to understand the historical roots of current-day "Young-Earth" Creationism and its Flood Geology, Ronald L. Numbers, a distinguished historian of science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has supplied us with a masterpiece. Numbers is in a good position to write: he grew up in a family of Seventh-Day Adventist preachers, in a denomination that has had much to do with the origin and recent promotion of "Scientific Creationism."

Unlike many books that seem to have an axe to grind in the Creation/Evolution debate, Numbers' presentation of the historical facts is broad, comprehensive, extremely well-documented, and irenic. It is also a highly readable book that is very hard to put down.

Numbers deals with each contributor to the debate, whatever his or her position, in as positive and kindly

a manner as the historical realities permit. It is unusual to find praise for any book on this controversial topic coming from people of radically opposing views, yet such is the case. On its back cover jacket there is high praise from Walter R. Hearn, well-known theistic evolutionist, and from Henry M. Morris, a major figure in the promotion of Scientific Creationism over the past 35 years. In giving *The Creationists* the Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History, the American Society of Church History said, "This is a superb work of historical scholarship . . . a landmark book." This reviewer fully concurs.

As George M. Marsden rightly suggests in a recent review, *The Creationists* is in large part the history of a struggle between the orthodox and the hyper-orthodox. Much of this history is unknown to most