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Bow Ties and Blue Jeans: Philosophers and Missionaries Partnering to Evangelize in a Post-Christian Culture

George G. Robinson
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

What do we do with the masses in this post-Christian era who are not overtly asking the epistemological questions? Those masses are unanchored in a sea of ideas, adrift and rudderless. A lighthouse, like Schaeffer's L'Abri, is only effective when a ship is approaching the shore. It offers no hope to those adrift in the open sea. This rudderless, distracted generation necessitates a rescue mission. We should look to Newbigin and Schaeffer together as complementary prophetic voices. Schaeffer provides an intellectual apologetic for the skeptic, while Newbigin provides a missiological strategy to equip Christians for that open sea rescue mission. I embark on this endeavor, then, by weaving the complementary wisdom of the philosopher Schaeffer together with his contemporary Lesslie Newbigin, a renowned missiologist. I am convinced that it is going to take both bow ties and blue jeans, academics and practitioners, philosophers and missionaries working together in obedience to the Great Commission.

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I am blessed and honored to provide a response to the essay "Evangelism in a Post-Christian Culture," authored by my esteemed colleague, Dr. Bruce Little. Little is a brilliant Schaeffer scholar, and I have learned much from both him and his muse. To frame my complementary response, I will go back to a Schaeffer quote referenced in Little's essay: "It is so easy to be a radical in the wearing of blue jeans when it fits in with the general climate of wearing blue jeans." Here I sit in my office, a missionary wearing worn jeans—the dress code for the common man. On the other side of our campus, Dr. Little is most likely donning his fashionable suit complete with bow tie, not uncommon in the academy. Though our dress and our overall style may seem quite dissimilar, what we have in common beckons us to work together. Both "radicals," Little and I have devoted our lives to the spread of the gospel in this increasingly complex post-Christian culture.

I embark on this endeavor, then, by weaving the complementary wisdom of the philosopher Schaeffer together with his contemporary Lesslie Newbigin, a renowned missiologist. The apostle Paul made clear in Col 4:3 that we need to pray for an open door to communicate the gospel. Keep in mind that doors serve two purposes: to invite the seeker in, as Schaeffer did so well, and to beckon the Christian out, like Newbigin did, into a broken world where many may not even be seeking. Paul used the door both ways, and so must we. Thus, I am convinced that it is going to take *both* bow ties and blue jeans, academics and practitioners, philosophers and missionaries working together in obedience to the Great Commission.

By way of reminder, Little's thesis is "*that understanding implications associated with the vision of reality controlling the intellectual life of any society is crucial to developing approaches to the proclamation of the gospel.*" Schaeffer understood the intellectual currents of his time, which led him to provide an attractive safe harbor with L'Abri serving as a lighthouse. Maybe it was the fact that Schaeffer listened before speaking. Or that those he spoke with were seeking to be heard. By creating an open door through which they could have him as an astute audience, those seeking made their way to Schaeffer's "Shelter."[1] Five decades later, we still need compassionate Christian intellectuals, like Dr. Little, with a listening ear and an open-door policy. Some who are seeking will make their pilgrimage and engage, precisely because they are looking for answers and for meaning in life.

Yet we live in a time when fewer seem to be intentionally, or even consciously, looking for answers. The cultural zeitgeist leaves the masses looking for the meaning of a moment rather than the meaning of life. Randy Newman writes, "At times (far too many, I'm afraid), I've answered questions with biblically accurate, logically sound, epistemologically watertight answers, only to see questioners shrug their shoulders. . . . My answers had, in fact, hardened them in their unbelief rather than softened them toward faith . . . an answer can push them further away."[2] He continues, "Not all unbelief is intellectual at its core; therefore, reason alone will fail to sway such unbelief."[3]

What, then, do we do with the masses in this post-Christian era who are not overtly asking the epistemological questions to which Schaeffer and Little are so adept at responding? Those masses are unanchored in a sea of ideas, adrift and rudderless. This necessitates both understanding

[1] *L'abri* is a French word that means shelter. See www.labri.org.

[2] Randy Newman, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 29.

[3] Ibid., 68.

and intentionality on the part of the minister. A lighthouse, like L'Abri, is only effective when a ship is approaching the shore. It offers no hope to those adrift in the open sea. This rudderless, distracted generation necessitates a rescue mission. And that is why I look to Newbigin and Schaeffer together as complementary prophetic voices. Schaeffer provides an intellectual apologetic for the skeptic. Newbigin provides a missiological strategy to equip Christians for that open sea rescue mission. The two approaches, I reiterate, are complementary—just like bow ties and blue jeans, just like Dr. Little and me.

So, who was Newbigin, and why is his voice relevant to this conversation on evangelism in a post-Christian culture? Lesslie Newbigin served as a missionary for decades in India, and on his return to Britain in the early 1970s, he recognized the philosophical shifts of his day necessitated a "missionary encounter" with the culture of his birth. Goheen notes, "A missionary encounter, for Newbigin, involves the recovery of three things: the public truth of the gospel, the missional nature of the church, and a missional analysis of Western culture."[4] Newbigin's concept of a missionary encounter addresses each of Little's cultural concerns regarding contemporary evangelism.

Newbigin's notion of "the public truth of the gospel" addresses Little's concern regarding "the serious decline in conversation skills" *and* "the loss of rational argument in private and public discourse." In a post-Christian society where the gospel is being increasingly marginalized, Newbigin would say that we must initiate and engage in intentional conversations, relating all things back to God.

Newbigin's understanding of "the missional nature of the church" is a response to Little's concern for "*the cry for community that boundless consumeristic options have destroyed*." In a post-Christian society where we have moved culturally from the rocking chair on the front porch, to fenced in back yards, to living rooms staring at a big screen, to individual hand-held devices, Newbigin would say that Christ-followers must look up and around and be present in the broader community living as cultural exegetes.

Finally, Newbigin's "missional analysis of Western culture" confronts "the fading sense of the sacred" lamented by Little. In a post-Christian society, the church must live as though everything is sacred—because Christ has made it so. The grand metanarrative of the Bible, then, becomes our corrective lens both inside and outside of the church. How we live our part in God's story matters. All of it!

Schaeffer was masterful as a philosopher who understood the

[4] Michael Goheen, "The Lasting Legacy of Lesslie Newbigin," Q Ideas, http://qideas.org/articles/the-lasting-legacy-of-lesslie-newbigin/.

worldview of his audience. As a result, he frequently brought truth propositions to bear on their thinking. As postmodernity spread, those propositions needed the canvas of story in order to connect with the masses who could not articulate the questions of philosophical or theological inquiry. Newbigin captures the dilemma of their day:

> The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. . . . In our contemporary culture . . . two quite different stories are told. One is the story of evolution . . . The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God's election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is to be fulfilled. These are two different and incompatible stories.[5]

If the church is to be faithful to its missionary calling, it must recover the Bible as one true story. Newbigin continues:

> I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives—both personal and public. If the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits it can easily be absorbed into the reigning story of culture rather than challenging it.[6]

One contemporary evangelism resource taking into consideration the cultural/philosophical insights of Schaeffer and the missional impulse of Newbigin can be found at www.thestorytraining.com. Several fingerprints of both philosopher and missiologist can be seen in the methodology:

1. *We emphasize conversations, not presentations, making observation and listening primary tools.* By listening to and studying the person with whom we are communicating, we can discern the story by which they interpret all of life.

2. *We begin with universal worldview questions: How did it all begin? What went wrong with the world? What hope is there? What does the future hold?* Most conversations center on the good or bad in life, providing an

[5] Michael Goheen, "Lesslie Newbigin and Reading the Bible as One Story," Newbigin House of Studies, http://newbiginhouse.org/2012/12/lesslie-newbigin-and-reading-the-bible-as-one-story/.

[6] Ibid. See also http://newbiginresources.org for full transcripts of interviews, speeches, sermons, etc.

opportunity to transition to the gospel by asking a worldview question surfacing their assumptions.

3. *We communicate the propositions of the gospel against the backdrop of the grand metanarrative of the Bible.* Stories have a way of taking truths on that formidable journey from the head down into the heart. We see this exemplified in the disciples' Emmaus Road experience in Luke 24, at the end of which was their declaration: "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road explaining the Scripture to us?" Eugene Petersen says, "Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into become participants in what is being said. . . . We may start as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the Bible is), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but inhabiting the story."[7]

4. *We must become compelling storytellers by both embodying the transformative power of the gospel and intentionally communicating it in such a way that they wish it were true—because it is.*[8] Perhaps story is the very thing that helps the person far from God see the inevitable consequences of their worldview. Any worldview devoid of the sacredness of humanity will inevitably devolve into a "survival of the fittest" philosophy. The irony is that on the one hand culture eschews the sacred while at the same time it desires happiness. Little notes that our cultural zeitgeist has us "*always holding out for a better option thinking it will increase happiness.*" Schaeffer adds insight as to how evangelism begins with bad news producing the need for the good: "We ought not try first to move a man away from the logical conclusion of his position but towards it. . . . We should try to move him in the natural direction his presuppositions take him."[9] The true story of the whole world does not end with a cross or even an empty tomb. It ends with everlasting and indefatigable happiness.

5. *Invitation does not equal evangelism.* We must, like God, enter into the brokenness of those who are adrift and without hope and tell the

[7] Eugene H. Peterson, "Introduction to the Book of Jonah," *The Message Remix*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 1352.

[8] Pascal argued for such an approach in his *Pensées*. He notes, "Men despise religion, they hate it and are afraid it might be true. To cure that we have to begin by showing that religion is not contrary to reason. That it is worthy of veneration and should be given respect. Next it should be made lovable, should make the good wish it were true. Then show that it is indeed true."

[9] Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 138.

story that both shows them their need and meets it. In today's post-Christian culture, we must engage in a real "missionary encounter," making the gospel public truth. This will require the work of ministers acting both as lighthouses to the few still seeking and embarking on rescue missions that pursue those who are far from God where they are—without leaving them there.

In conclusion, I welcome Little's insight and am grateful for Schaeffer. My hope is that we add to them the likes of Newbigin, helping us to live like missionaries in the increasingly strange and disconnected culture we find ourselves a part of. In the end, we can trust that there is indeed power in the gospel message, whether emanating from the lighthouse or delivered on the rescue mission at sea. Both Newbigin and Schaeffer affirm that, as do Bruce Little and I—a philosopher and a missionary, bow ties and blue jeans can work together to evangelize in a post-Christian culture.