

*Mission and the Public Life of Western Culture:
Lesslie Newbigin and the Kuyperian Tradition*

Michael W. Goheen

On 21 June 1996 Lesslie Newbigin commented that “the Gospel and Our Culture network has hardly begun to answer the questions of mission in the public square” and that the “Reformational, Kuyperian tradition has obviously been at work long ago spelling out concretely in the various spheres of society what it means to say ‘Jesus is Lord.’” He continued, “unfortunately this Kuyperian tradition is almost unknown in Britain” and expressed his fervent wish that it “would become a powerful voice in the life of British Christianity.” Such were Newbigin’s closing remarks at a colloquium held at the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies in Leeds, England on the topic of ‘A Christian Society? Witnessing to the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Public Life of Western Culture.’ The comments followed three days of dialogue between Newbigin and twenty-five leading Kuyperian scholars from five different countries on the subject of mission and the public square. I, too, share Newbigin’s concern that the Reformational tradition be more widely known and so am pleased to respond to David Kettle’s request to write a short piece introducing this tradition.

The Reformational tradition (called also Kuyperian and neo-Calvinist) was born in response to the secularisation of cultural, intellectual and political life as represented in the French Revolution and introduced in the Netherlands after 1795. It became a powerful culturally formative force in the Netherlands under the efforts of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) but its founding fathers were a number of precursors of both of these men. The Kuyperian tradition parted company with theological liberalism, pietism, and scholastic orthodoxy which they believed to be syncretistic accommodations to the Enlightenment. The tradition developed with a commitment to the gospel of the kingdom as the starting point for understanding and living in the world. Especially characteristic is the concern to embody the comprehensive claims of Christ’s Lordship in all of societal life. An oft quoted statement by Kuyper summarizes this concern: “There is not a square inch within the entire domain of human life of which Christ, the Sovereign of all, does not claim: ‘Mine’”. From Holland its influence has included Canada, United States, South Africa, Australia, South Korea, Japan, and Britain. The Kuyperian vision is embodied in various institutions that struggle with a witness to the gospel in the public square: for example, Citizens for Public Justice (politics), Christian Farmers’ Association (farming), Christian Labour Association (labour union), networks of Christian primary and secondary schools, the Institute for Christian Studies (graduate school), and Redeemer College (undergraduate university). Perhaps its greatest strides have been taken in the area of higher education. A number of universities have been established in Holland, Canada, South Africa, and the U.S.A that consciously embody the Reformational vision. The entire Coalition of Christian Colleges in North America has been affected by the Kuyperian worldview. In 1987 the American historian George Marsden spoke of “the triumph of Kuyperian presuppositionalism” in the North American evangelical scholarly community.

While the Reformational tradition has not had a powerful presence in Britain, it has directly or indirectly inspired such diverse actions and movements as The Shaftesbury Project, The Third Way Magazine, the West Yorkshire School of Christian Studies in Leeds, Christian Impact, and the movement for Christian Democracy. Via Hans Rookmaker, the Art Historian from Amsterdam, it has inspired the formation of the Arts Centre Group with its annual conference

attended by nearly a thousand practising Christian artists. It is one of the roots of the Christian school movement in England today. Working in Britain today out of the Kuyperian vision are (among many others) Craig Bartholomew, Peter Heslam, David and Ruth Hanson, Arthur Jones, Richard Russell, Alan and Elaine Storkey

To get to the heart of the Reformational tradition, I begin with a basic definition of the Christian faith given by the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck. “God the Father has reconciled His created but fallen world through the death of His Son, and renews it into a Kingdom of God by His Spirit.” The reformational tradition takes all the key phrases in this definition as cosmic in scope. The terms ‘reconciled’, ‘created’, ‘fallen’, ‘world’, ‘renews’, and ‘kingdom of God’ are related to everything except for God. The kingdom of God announced and embodied by Jesus was the power of God to heal and restore his fallen world. Thus God’s healing and renewing power extends to the full range of God’s creation. Salvation is restorative in nature and comprehensive in scope. Salvation is comprehensive because the breadth of sin’s power also extends to the ends of creation. However, since God did not bring his final judgement upon sin and the powers of darkness, there remains at this time a titanic struggle between the power of God’s reign in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit to renew the creation and the parasitic power of darkness to twist and distort the creation in all of human life. In other words, there are two spiritual regimes and powers struggling for control of every aspect of the one creational domain. The church’s mission is to be engaged in this struggle as bearers and instruments of God’s rule in Christ.

In this brief description of the heart of the Reformational worldview, we can identify a number of common concerns that shape both the neo-Calvinist and Newbigin’s vision of mission in the public life of western culture. First, neo-Calvinism and Newbigin share a common commitment to understand western culture from the standpoint of the gospel rather than the gospel from within the presuppositions of modernity. Second, both neo-Calvinism and Newbigin are centred in the confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life. It is instructive to compare Newbigin’s confession of the church’s obligation “to declare the sovereignty of Christ over every sphere of human life without exception” with the famous statement of Kuyper quoted above. Third, both the Reformational tradition and Newbigin understand salvation to be restorative and comprehensive. In this regard, it is instructive to note the different contexts in which this developed. The Kuyperian tradition has developed over against the Platonizing of salvation in Pietism while Newbigin’s understanding has been shaped in an encounter with Hinduism. Platonism and Hinduism understand salvation to be an escape from this world. Fourth, both Newbigin and the Reformational tradition understand the church to be more than a “religious” community; it is the new humankind that shares in the comprehensive salvation of the kingdom. Fifth, both recognize the antithesis—the struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness—during this already/not yet time of the kingdom. Since the salvation of the kingdom and sin are comprehensive in scope, there is an encounter at every point in creation. At the same time neither Newbigin nor Kuyperianism absolutize the antithesis in such a way that mission is simply protest. Both recognize the positive task of cultural development that the church has as a result of being part of a particular culture. Sixth, both Newbigin and the Reformational tradition hold a high view of Biblical authority. If the church is not to be absorbed into the reigning idolatry of culture, the Biblical story must become the starting point. This does not mean a fundamentalist capitulation for either Newbigin or neo-Calvinism. Rather both recognize that the Bible tells one story about the whole creation (universal history) with a creation, sin, redemption, consummation story line. Seventh, a recognition of the creational good

and the distortions of idolatry in the public square lead to a similar understanding of the missional task of the church. Newbigin speaks of ‘challenging relevance’ or ‘subversive fulfillment.’ In the public square this means that the people of God are subversive agents who neither pursue revolution nor conservatism. This is quite similar to the neo-Calvinist notion of ‘inner reformation.’ Both want to preserve what is creationally good and oppose what is distorted by idolatry.

There are a number of differences that emerge in a close study of Newbigin’s work and the Reformational tradition. I believe that there is the possibility for mutual enrichment and correction. I will only mention a couple of differences. First, while the Reformational tradition stresses creation (including law, creation order, and cultural development) in their understanding of the social witness of the church, Newbigin emphasizes the cross and eschatology. This leads to strengths and weaknesses on both sides. The strength of Newbigin is his stress on the missionary implications of eschatology—on mission as the meaning of this already/not yet time period, on the antithesis and a “missionary encounter.” There is a tendency for many in the Reformational tradition when emphasising creation to tone down this eschatological and missionary thrust of Scripture. On the other hand, the Kuyperian stress on the doctrine of creation has enabled that tradition to develop a much more positive and defined agenda in politics, education, and other areas of public life. The neo-Calvinist tradition has much to learn from Newbigin’s stress on missionary encounter, the cross, and eschatology while those who embrace Newbigin’s vision have much to gain from a deepened understanding of the Reformational understanding of creation. (A good introduction to the Reformational understanding of creation is chapter two of Wolters’ book listed below.) Second, for Newbigin the local church is the primary instrument of the church’s mission in public life while in the Kuyperian tradition, the complexity of politics, education, and other spheres has led to specialized organizations of Christians devoted to an area of public life disconnected from the local Eucharistic community. The lack of connection with the local congregation is a weakness in the Reformational tradition. Newbigin did speak of ‘frontier groups’ and other kinds of Christian bodies that resemble what the Kuyperians have developed but always stressed their connection to the local congregation. About these ‘frontier groups’ in Newbigin’s writing, little has been cultivated beyond generalizations; the Reformational tradition has developed a clearly defined witness in many areas of the public square as embodied in these groups.

The Reformational tradition has a rich history of distinctive and fruitful involvement in public life and reflection upon it. The literature is vast and has addressed many different subjects. Those who have been galvanized by Newbigin’s call to a missionary encounter with the public life of western culture can benefit greatly from the insights of this tradition.

Introductory Bibliography

Dooyeweerd, Herman. 1979. *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*. Toronto: Wedge Books.

Dooyeweerd, Herman. 1980. *In the Twilight of Western Thought*. Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press.

Goudzwaard, Bob. 1979. *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Heslam, Peter. 1998. *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press.

Kuyper, Abraham. Reprinted 1987. *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Walsh, Brian and Richard Middleton. 1984. *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.

Wolters, Albert M. 1985. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

For those interested in literature in this tradition on various subjects, areas of public life, or academic disciplines may contact the Canadian historian Harry Van Dyke (email address: vandyke@redeemer.on.ca). He has compiled a vast bibliography.

Mike Goheen
Ancaster, Ontario, Canada