



BIG ON NEWBIGIN

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*Everyone has been influenced by certain pastors, theologians, missionaries, and other men and women of God. Isaias reflects on themes of leadership gleaned from Leslie Newbigin's autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, and applies it to his own life.*

In a workshop I attended a couple of years ago, the speaker asked his audience some questions about Christian leadership. After participants answered with a variety of interesting responses, the speaker offered his definition of a leader. Without entering into details, I found myself struggling with this speaker's definition of a Christian leader: everything he said reminded me of a corporate boss. I have to accept that at the end, a boss is kind of a leader. What I cannot accept, however, is that this kind of leadership is how Scripture depicts an "after God's own heart" leader.

Unlike other kinds of leadership that tend to overemphasize only what a person does, Christian leadership focuses on both what the leader is *and* what the leader does. Acquiring some personality traits and skills will surely help Christian leaders with their mission, but will never fix their heart. In this respect, if I had to choose a modern theologian who has impacted my understanding of Christian leadership, it would be Leslie Newbigin. He was one of the most prominent missionaries and theologians of the twentieth century. His theology—developed around the relationship between the Gospel and culture—was strongly reflected in his missional work in India throughout almost forty years.

In his theological autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, Newbigin shares with his readers the process of how he developed his calling in the environment he was serving. India, far from being a homogenous society, has been a pluralistic society not only culturally, but also religiously. Sharing the Gospel in a context like this was difficult and challenging. It was during his time spent in India that Newbigin realized the ways that modern Western Christianity approached the mission field was not good at all. As a response to these challenges, Newbigin embraced the Gospel as a universal calling to participate in the Kingdom of God and His blessings. Newbigin's new understanding of what missional work should be led him to approach Christian leadership in new ways. After reflecting on the topic, there are four main things Newbigin's autobiography taught me about Christian leadership.

TRUE CHRISTIAN LEADERS ARE FAITHFUL AND DEPENDENT WORKERS

One of the reasons I enjoyed reading Newbigin's autobiography was that he discussed both his calling to ministry and his hard-learned lessons about leadership. This is an opportunity to appreciate how a Christian leader dealt with a non-Christian and pluralistic world, and at the same time, how Newbigin dealt with his own ministry and personal growth. His work in evangelism and leadership led me to ask myself about some characteristics a Christian leader ought to possess in order to flourish in ministry. Newbigin developed a humble, approachable, and servant-minded leadership: he was not looking to promote himself or what he had done, but his desire was to reflect Christ's work in him. He was also very aware of his calling into ministry despite the lack of specific details about how such calling would be later shaped by God. Such awareness is seen, for instance, when Newbigin spent a significant time in different Indian villages to understand better the work of a pastor/bishop. By reflecting about his own calling, Newbigin states, "A bishop is not first an administrator but first a minister of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral care." From this insightful and thought-provoking statement, I learned that true Christian leaders are recognized not only for what they do but also for who they are! These are just two sides of the same coin. Christian leaders are called to be both: faithful followers of Christ and dependent workers in the house of God.

TRUE CHRISTIAN LEADERS KNOW THEIR LEADERSHIP IS TIME-LIMITED

A second valuable thing I learned from Newbigin's autobiography is about the preponderance of leaders' constant awareness regarding the length of their leadership. Newbigin knew that his



leadership was short-term. This timing aspect is not always easy to accept. However, one should take into account that God is always reforming His Church, and one of those reforming areas is church leadership: God is always raising up new leaders who continue what others started. By recognizing that one's leadership is time-limited, one may focus better on the needs and struggles of the present church.

TRUE CHRISTIAN LEADERS ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT There is a third lesson where Newbigin's vision of ministry has provided me with wisdom. I observed that Newbigin's way of proclaiming the Good News was not one given from an authoritarian position. Instead, he wished to prepare others to continue the ministry work he had started. Thus, throughout his enriching theological thoughts, Newbigin challenged the traditional way most missionaries of his time had done missions. Taking into account that the church's mission is a task started by God and that Jesus' work was introducing the Kingdom of God to people, Newbigin rightly said that the church needed many autonomous leaders in different places in order that this task (introducing the Kingdom of God to people) could be accomplished. It grabs my attention that Newbigin used to look for different ways to enable other people to continue his ministry work: "The young people of the diocese were taking an increasingly active part. We had altered the constitution so as to require that 30 percent of the membership of all church committees at local and diocesan level should be under 35 years of age and this had a real effect on the whole life of the diocese." How encouraging is this! Newbigin empowered and enabled local leaders in his ministry because the Church must fulfill her calling in the world. Newbigin noticed how other missionaries reflected a rigid and dogmatic point of view about missions and did not enable local people to be Christian leaders at all—these missionaries tended to make local people always dependent on them in several aspects. In an individualistic culture like ours, this third aspect of enabling and empowering other Christians to be leaders must be a priority in the church because, not only is it counter-cultural, it challenges our personal interests.

TRUE CHRISTIAN LEADERS ARE HOLISTIC The fourth and last noteworthy aspect I learned from reading Newbigin's autobiography as a whole is that certain behaviors—such as being bossy, always being unavailable and inaccessible to the community, developing an authoritarian attitude, heavy compartmentalization of one's life, and so on—are not signs of a strong leader. Through his ministry experience, Newbigin shows us that true Christian leaders are those who take care of other's needs while at the same time taking care of their own needs. They are those who are humble, those who are accountable to the Church, those who live out a holistic life without compartmentalization, and those who are not ashamed to imitate and follow Christ even in times of trouble.

Throughout Newbigin's autobiography, one learns that the Gospel was always meant to be proclaimed faithfully and in community—in a relational context where we commit each other to praise and worship God. Christian leadership, then, is an outstanding opportunity which enables us to be faithful witnesses to the Church and the world. True Christian leaders not only do their work with excellence but also work for God's glory and the Church's sake. They have no space to disconnect being from doing, and word from deed. In a nutshell, Newbigin shows us that Christian leadership must be integral and not disconnected from our environment and people around us. ∞