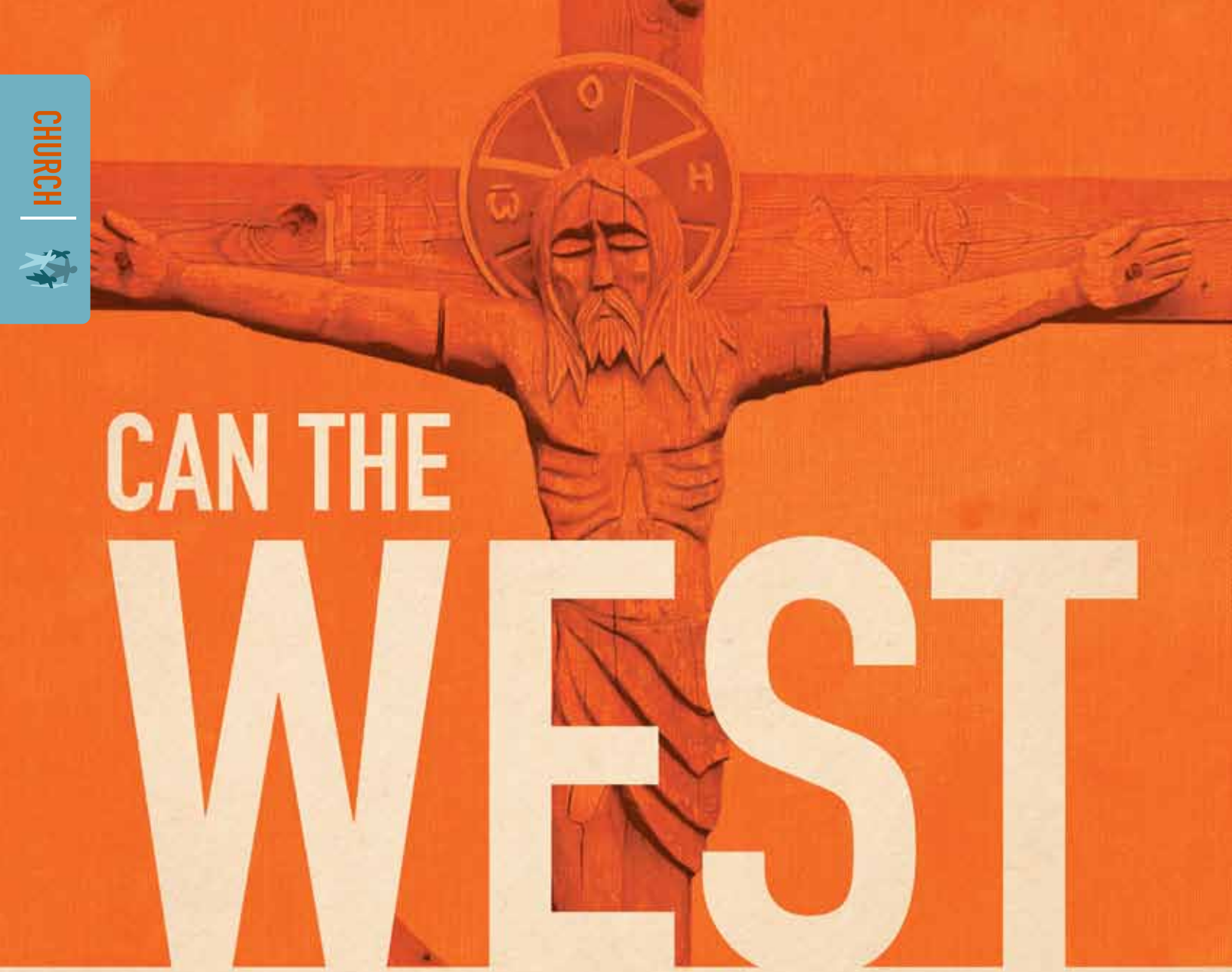

CAN THE WEST BE CONVERTED?

LEADERSHIP, YOUTH AND THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

BY ALAN ROXBURGH

I write this article sitting in a lounge at terminal 3 in Heathrow Airport on my way home to Vancouver.

In Glasgow, Scotland, I recently met with about 60 young leaders in the Church of Scotland trying to figure out the nature of Christian witness in a culture that has, for all practical purposes, given up on the Christian story. I also watched TV coverage of the Pope's visit to Glasgow. Like most Western countries, the images of these events remind one how dramatically our world has changed from when Christian confession and religious commitment made sense in cultures that shared one's own conviction, habits and outlooks.

We don't need international travel to know that our neighborhoods are in the throes of massive cultural and social change. These realities are constantly before us.

Benedict's visit to the UK was underscored by hand wringing and deep concern. Would the crowds turn out as they had done 30 years prior, when John Paul flamed across the emerging, post-Communist firmament like a bright comet, signifying resurgent hope in the Western narrative? Would the crowds be a respectful size so the visit wouldn't seem like a complete shamble in the midst of a secular England that cares little for things Christian?

What a change this signified. Who could have imagined a pope needing to stand in Westminster Hall and lecture social and political leaders about the centrality of the Christian narrative to a free, open, democratic society? This was more like an apologetic pleading for place and standing in the secular culture—like a once powerful, rich business baron going about among old friends, begging for money.

The Challenge of the West

North America contains two different cultural experiments. In the U.S., this story of Christian slippage and the move of the culture away from its Christian roots are far less observable than in Canada, where the Christian story is now a sideshow. One cannot compare the one to the other. The two stories are vastly different and continue to evolve in different ways.

That being said, Christian life in the United States cannot ignore the European/UK story of the past 50 or more years. As Rodney Stark states in *What Americans* ***Really*** *Believe,* while there are important differences, America must recognize that, at least in Protestant denominations, the European story is becoming their story. This is because America, in the 19th and into the early 20th century, had huge intakes of Europe's unwanted and unwashed. These "off scourings" of mother countries were hard workers, deeply religious in their conserving habits, and shaped American religion in the 20th century. The decline in numbers has been slower in the U.S. because, thanks to immigration, there were a lot more people in the pool. All that is now over. We are genuinely in a new place.

In the '60s, Lesslie Newbigin returned to Birmingham, England, after 30 years as a missionary in India and statesman for the World Council of Churches. When he arrived back in the UK, he became acutely aware that the Christian England he'd left in the late '30s no longer existed. Christianity had become irrelevant and disconnected from the aspirations and concerns of a new Europe. He saw the depth of this malaise among young people who seemed lost and without compasses. In this context, he raised the question: *Can the West be converted?* It is the question Benedict is asking again as the leader of the Catholic communion.

Missional Refocusing

The worst thing we can do to our youth is bore them with questions of how to make the church work or which styles and types of church are worth their attention. The last things we need are more Christian youth bands or the public-stage needs of an aspirational culture that seems to need its time on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. There is far, far more at stake than these frivolous diversions.

Over 20 years ago, Newbigin's question was taken up by a group of young, North American missiologists seeking to translate it into a late-20th-century North American Protestantism diverted by debates about worship styles, sex, the nature of inspiration or the means of creating growth.

Some 10 years ago, some of these missiologists coauthored *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. It sounded an alarm over the state of the church and offered an ecclesiology shaped by the mission of God rather than methods of

attracting more people. This book gave us, for good or ill, the term *missional church.*

As one of the contributors to that volume, it has been a terrible disappointment to watch how this promising conversation about the nature of Christian life in North America has become so deformed. *Missional*, in a short period of time, has gone from a word filled with promise and hope for us to re-found the gospel in our time to one of utter banality. Books now churned out from Christian presses with *missional* in their titles are little more than a re-hashing of church growth, church health and church-effectiveness strategies repackaged with slick, new, *missional* titles.

What is tragic is that the instincts and imaginations of people like Newbigin and Ratzinger, about the state of life in the West and the meaning of Christian witness, have been thrown aside for slight tropes on nothing more significant than how to turn a church from the inside to the outside. Our malaise is deep. Our captivity to notions of success and health seems unbreakable. What is it to which we are calling young adults to give their lives in the Protestantisms of North America?

Connecting to the Missionary God

When it comes to asking about the nature of Christian leadership in our time and the forming of a new generation, the challenges before us have to be stated in the starkest of terms. By the mid-point of the last century, it had become clear that the long-assumed and well-practiced narratives of success, power, dominance and control that had shaped European and North American imaginations was over. A new, yet to be understood world was emerging, moving from dependence on Western management toward different alignments. There appeared a spreading loss of confidence in some of the most basic convictions of Western modernity. The displacement created new levels of uncertainty and confusion about the thriving of Western cultures. All of this was an unsettling experience for the Western imagination.

North America would feel separated from and above all of this continental disease and French dystopia, still experiencing economic growth and at ease in its versions of these modern myths. Living within its supposed exceptionalism and the comfort of its Atlantic moat, it would continue for some years more as a bystander and observer of these continental turmoils. Its young people could rebel and create their own music or make their own rules about relationships. They would borrow the continental language of postmodernism, trying on the theories of French thinkers who talked about the incredulity toward metanarrative as being like clothes bought off a rack. It was an exciting, exhilarating game, rented sets of narratives shaped by borrowed angst.

All of this has changed. The moat has been breached; exceptionalism seems a fairy tale from another time; and our world has been turned upside down. Most of us sense that the cant of postmodern language doesn't even come close to naming the tectonic shifts upturning our worlds. The conversations and strategies about church styles, seeker-driven ministry, multi-site churches, meeting people's needs, etc., sound like the final gasps of those well-cared-for, well-fed French dilettantes just before the Revolution.

Newbigin and Benedict were caught by a differing imagination. These products of Reformed and Catholic upbringings had apprenticed into a way of life that invited attention to God and a calling to something bigger than themselves. They were each shaped inside a disciplined Christian narrative framed by the God who comes, sends and participates in the life of the world. Their attention was upon the God of creation, the Trinitarian God who comes, enters, loses, dies and gives him/herself away for the sake of the world. They seemed to grasp that this strange body of human beings, this twisting, turning institution called the church, had a vocation that most of its members had lost in the death dances of self-actualization that characterized the ennui and lostness of the second half of the 20th century.

Newbigin grasped that the mission of God was for the sake of the world. In India he observed Western young people turn up, discard their Western clothing and search, like lost souls, for some new order of experience and personal values that might satisfy their needs and fill their empty souls. What drew Newbigin to sound the call of alarm on his return to the UK was the shock of seeing what was happening to people in

the West he had left. He was convinced that God was up to something far, far greater.

He and Benedict looked back at other times and places when we had lost our moorings and whole cultures had come adrift. They saw that—in peoples like the Celts and Benedictines, Cappadocians and many more—in this great movement of God's people was this strange, counter-intuitive, other story that believed the gospels called them out into a desert world for the sake of its redemption and healing. The missional language was a fragile attempt to express this narrative of the missionary God who participates in the world for the sake of its healing; who called into being a people, a church, to lose itself and participate in this unfolding future.

Committing to the New Missional Call

In the fourth through sixth centuries, as the Roman world broke apart, there emerged on its western edges, around the bleak peripheries of Northern England and Ireland, a movement of Christian missionaries who banded together under the name of Celts. It is easy to romanticize them. When it comes to the question of Christian leadership and the formation of our youth, these peoples of the cold northern extremities have much to teach us about forming a future different from the churches we've created.

These missionaries to an emerging Western society, under the direction of abbots and abbesses, shaped by simple rules of life and living together out of some basic practices of Christian life, remade society. These small bands settled and began to rebuild a culture out of the simplicity of their common life that, in the name of Jesus, transformed our world. They played a primary part in the rebuilding of European society and the flowering of Christian civilization.

Newbigin and Benedict are shaped by that story. They fear its loss—not because of nostalgia but because they know what the gospel does when people are shaped by its life. They are not calling for a return to some prior time but that God's people recognize what's at stake and give their lives to this Jesus of the church who can only be known from within and as a part of this church. Missional leadership must work itself out from this starting point. The formation of our youth requires leaders who live within this imagination.

Nothing less is required today. The challenge this missionary God confronts us with is the rebuilding of society, the remaking of culture. This is not about some movement of the right seeking to rehabilitate national power or underwrite free enterprise, nor is it a move of the left toward the inviolability of individual rights. It is not about church styles or types nor which group has truly got the 16th-century reformation right. It is about the conviction that this Jesus calls us onto a way, to give up our rights for the sake of the world. If there is a new kind of church that is needed today, it is one whose leaders determine that only by calling people into these practices and virtues can we join with what God is doing in the world.

Can the West be converted? Only if there are leaders and people willing to shape their lives as the Celts once did in a commitment to place, people and the practice of God's life. All else—all the mission trips and youth events, all the small groups and worship styles, all the moves from inside to outside, from programs to people and so on—are just fancy ways of fiddling while Rome burns compared with the challenge to Christian life and witness our young people and our old people are longing to engage.

What is missional church? How do we live into it as leaders? Leaders, like those abbots and abbesses, indwell a place in order to discover and demonstrate a way to live that is God's; a way of life that is more than self-development, or financial independence and style. It is a doxological community living for the sake of the world.

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Alan leads conferences and seminars in the areas of leadership development and systems change for missional transformation. When he's not traveling or writing, Alan enjoys mountain biking, hiking, cooking and hanging out with his wife, Jane, and their five grandchildren, as well as drinking great coffee in the Pacific Northwest.