

“AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, I AM SENDING YOU”: LESSLIE NEWBIGIN’S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN*

Introduction

Ecclesiology has become the central organising principle of 20th century theology. The Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan states that

The doctrine of the church became, as it had never quite been before, the bearer of the whole Christian message for the 20th century, as well as the recapitulation of the entire doctrinal tradition from preceding centuries.¹

Many factors have contributed to this renewed interest in ecclesiology but perhaps none is so important as the new missionary situation in which European and North American churches find themselves. Jürgen Moltmann believes that “Today one of the strongest impulses towards the renewal of the theological concept of the church comes from the theology of mission.”² According to Moltmann, Western ecclesiologies were formulated in the context of a christianized culture. European churches were established churches that lacked a missionary self-understanding because they found their identity as part of a larger complex called the Christian West. Today, the Christian West is disintegrating, both culturally and geographically, and the Western church finds itself in a new missionary situation. Consequently, it is waking up to its missionary calling in the world. This has led, not simply to a fresh look at our mission in the world, but to a whole re-evaluation of the nature of the church and its role in God’s redemptive programme. Hendrikus Berkhof believes that what is needed is nothing less than a whole reformulation of our entire ecclesiology, from the standpoint of mission.³ The resources of the missionary tradition that have grappled with the church’s calling in cross-cultural settings hold much promise for this renewal of ecclesiology.

Perhaps few people have been as insistent, in both writing and practice, that the church is missionary by its very nature as Bishop J. E. Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin is one of the leading mission and theological thinkers of the 20th century. He spent almost forty years in India, much of that time as bishop in the Church of South India, where he attempted to nurture a missionary church. During that time he was also active in the ecumenical movement and held top positions in the International Missionary Council (IMC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC); he was also editor of the *International Review*

*Dr Mike Goheen is associate professor in the Religion and Theology Department at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, Canada, where he teaches worldview studies, mission and world Christianity, and biblical theology. He is also minister of preaching at the First Christian Reformed Church, Hamilton, Ontario. He received his Ph.D. in missiology from the University of Utrecht, Netherlands. His dissertation was on the subject of Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology.

of Missions. Upon his return to Europe at retirement, in addition to teaching missiology at Selly Oak Colleges and pastoring an inner city church in Birmingham, he issued a challenge to the Western church that has been heard worldwide. In a number of successive publications he called the Western church to recover a missionary encounter with its culture. During his life he authored over thirty books including a significant book on the nature of the church.⁴ Throughout his entire ministry Newbigin maintained that the church can only be properly understood in terms of its missionary calling. This paper examines the missionary ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin.

Two major shifts in Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology

There are two major shifts evident in the development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. Newbigin's first ecclesiological articulations came in the early 1940s. A comparison of these writings with his ecclesiological formulations in the next decade show that a shift has taken place from a Christendom understanding of the church to a missionary one.⁵ In his earliest ecclesiological reflection, the church is a gathering of individual believers who have responded to the testimony of scripture and are gathered together so that the life of Christ might be nourished. Discussion of the church is far from central to his reflection on the gospel. In the decade of the 1950s this had all changed. Since Jesus did not write a book but left behind a community to communicate the gospel of the kingdom, the church now played a central role in Newbigin's understanding of the gospel.⁶ The church must be defined in terms of its call to bear the gospel to the world.

Two important formative factors account for this shift in Newbigin's ecclesiology. First, his missionary experience challenged his Christendom theological training. He writes of moving the church to a central place in his theology thus:

I found that the experience of missionary work compelled me to it. I saw that the kind of Protestantism in which I had been nourished belonged to a "Christendom" context. In a missionary situation the Church had to have a different place.⁷

Second, Newbigin was closely associated with the ecumenical tradition during the time when a missionary ecclesiology was taking shape in that tradition. Up until the 20th century the *corpus Christianum* formed the context for ecclesiological reflection. This all began to change in the 20th century with the rise of the third-world church, the decay of the "Christian" West, and the breakdown of the distinction between church and mission. The twenty-year period between Tambaram (1938) and Ghana (1958) saw fruitful developments toward a more missional ecclesiology. Newbigin's actual participation in ecumenical meetings began in 1948 in Amsterdam where he delivered an important address. In Willingen (1952) he was a major participant where he delivered a plenary address and played a major role in drafting the famous conference report. From 1952 on Newbigin was immersed in the ecumenical

tradition and attended all the conferences of the WCC, IMC, and later the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). Along with his participation, he carefully studied all the reports of the earlier missionary conferences. In this interaction, Newbigin shaped and was shaped by these ecclesiological developments.

The two books that best exemplify Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology during this period are *The Household of God* (1953) and *One Gospel, One Body, One World* (1958). These books both consolidate gains made in ecumenical developments in ecclesiology to that point, as well as make a creative contribution to the ongoing discussion.

Between 1957-1961 a **second shift** toward an increasingly trinitarian missionary ecclesiology is discernible.⁸ The integration of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches at the New Delhi assembly in 1961 was a fitting symbol for the process of theological reflection that had begun in Tambaram twenty three years earlier. Here was institutional expression that church and mission belonged together. However, it was precisely at this conference that there was clear evidence that the ecumenical consensus was breaking down. The challenge, already evident in the debates at Willingen ten years earlier, came at two points. The first was the sufficiency of a christological basis for mission. Many believed this to be too narrow; only a trinitarian foundation was sufficient. Closely related to this was an ecclesiological concern. The ecumenical ecclesiology of the mid-20th century was church-centric. God's redemptive work in the church was given clear expression but his work in the events of world history was neglected. This critique of a Christocentric and ecclesiocentric understanding of mission within the ecumenical tradition took hold in Newbigin's thinking at New Delhi. He writes:

Already at New Delhi I had recognised that the missiology of *One Body, One Gospel, One World* was not adequate. It was too exclusively church-centred in its understanding of mission. Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate, setting the work of Christ in the Church in the context of the over-ruling providence of the Father in all the life of the world and the sovereign freedom of the Spirit who is the Lord and not the auxiliary of the Church.⁹

Two closely related factors challenged Newbigin's ecclesiology. The first was the revolutionary events in world history. The collapse of colonialism, accelerated westernization and globalization, resurgent secularism, and revolutionary optimism drew attention to dramatic changes in world history and raised the question of how this related to God's activity in the world apart from the church. Moreover, these turbulent times had a dramatic impact on the mission theology and ecclesiology of the ecumenical tradition. A striking shift in mission theology emerged at Willingen (1952), came to mature expression in the WCC study on the missionary structure of the church (1967), and became the "received view" at the Uppsala Assembly (1968).¹⁰

This new view of mission featured a shift in focus from God's work through Christ in the church to His providential and salvific work by His Spirit in the

world. The goal of mission was the humanization or *shalom* of society through the efforts of the laity, in cooperation with other social institutions that aimed at the transformation of oppressive political, social, and economic structures. The Geneva Conference on Church and Society (1966) stated this understanding of mission clearly:

We start with the basic assumption that the triune God is the Lord of his world and at work within it, and that the Church's task is to point to his acts, to respond to his demands, and to call mankind to this faith and obedience...In this document, "mission" and "missionary" are used as shorthand for the responsibilities of the Church in the world.¹¹

The new winds blowing in ecumenical circles alerted Newbigin to deficiencies in his own understanding of the church and mission. His first attempts to respond to these new insights were his books *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963) and *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966). While Newbigin believed later that his own response at this time capitulated too much to the current secular trends, his broadening trinitarian understanding of God's mission and his attention to God's work beyond the bounds of the church remained a fixture of his missionary ecclesiology.

Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC, does not believe that Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is sufficiently informed by this shift in the ecumenical tradition. In 1994 Newbigin offered a critique of Raiser's book *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement*.¹² In his book Raiser argues that a decisive shift is taking place in the ecumenical movement away from the Christocentric-universalist paradigm that had shaped the WCC from its inception until Uppsala. Raiser sees this as a positive shift that needs to be seized, developed, and implemented. Newbigin responds that Raiser's vision is a departure from the central vision of the WCC. In turn Raiser states that Newbigin has not taken account of the insights developed from Willingen to Uppsala, and that his "entire critical reflection is based on the conviction of the non-negotiable truth of the earlier paradigm."¹³ Newbigin protests that he has accommodated the insights of this time period and modified his missiology and ecclesiology.¹⁴ Newbigin's ecclesiology did remain heavily indebted to the classical ecumenical paradigm; it is also true that there is literary evidence that his ecclesiology did benefit significantly from the insights of this crucial period.

Related to God and to the world

In Newbigin's understanding, the church is missionary by its very nature:

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you" defines the very being of the Church as mission. In this sense everything that the Church is and does can be and should be part of mission.¹⁵

Mission is not one (even the most important) of the many tasks of the church. Mission is not secondary to its being nor does mission simply belong to the

bene esse of the church. Rather, mission is essential to the church's being and of the *esse* of its nature.¹⁶

Newbigin formulates the church's missionary identity in terms of two poles: its relation to God and to the world.¹⁷ An examination of the terminology that the apostolic church chose for itself makes this twofold relation clear. That self-chosen name was *ecclesia*. The original meaning of *ecclesia* was a public assembly to which all the citizens of the city were summoned. The town clerk issued the call and the public gathering of citizens discussed and settled affairs that were important for the city's life. This self-chosen name must be contrasted with the names that were given to the church by its enemies. Celsus and others referred to the church as *thiasos* and *heranos*. Both of these words were selected to interpret the church as a private religious cult that offered personal salvation by way of knowledge, self-discipline, and religious practice; religious communities of this kind received the protection of Roman law because they did not threaten the public doctrine of the Roman empire. The church refused to accept the designations of private religious fraternities but saw itself as a people participating in the end-time kingdom of God and launched into the public life of the world to challenge all competing allegiances, including most urgently, of course, the *cultus publici* of the Roman empire – the emperor cult.

In the New Testament *ecclesia* is modified by two phrases (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2): *tou theou* and *en Korintho* (or another city). The significance of the modifier *tou theou* is that it is God, not the town clerk, who summons the citizens to the public assembly.¹⁸ The significance of the geographical qualifier is that God is exercising his kingly authority in every place to gather together the new humankind. This new community represents the first fruits of God's eschatological gathering of His end-time people. As such they witness to God's purpose for each place. The church is the only human community that does not exist for itself; it exists for God and for the world that Jesus came to save.

A. Related to God: sent to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus in between the times

Newbigin elaborates the relation of the church to God in Christ in three inter-related themes: the role of the church in God's story narrated in scripture, the participation of the church in the *missio Dei*, and the relation of the church to the kingdom of God.

The church is defined by the role given to it in the scriptural narrative. For Newbigin, the Bible is in the form of universal history. Therefore, the unique role of the church must be understood in the context of the biblical story. The Bible tells the story of God's mighty acts of redemption in history for the whole creation. In the Old Testament, the redemptive purpose of God moved toward its consummation in Christ. According to the prophets, at the end of history the Messiah, in the power of the Spirit, would usher in the end-time kingdom of God, and history as we know it would draw to a close with the

renewal of all things. The old age would pass away and be replaced by the age to come. Christ arrived and announced the arrival of the kingdom but, surprisingly, the final consummation did not appear. The liberating and healing power of the kingdom was present in the work of the Spirit but the final judgement is held off. The gospels give us a picture of an overlap of the ages – the evil power of the old age and the renewing power of the age to come are both present. God opens up a space in redemptive history between the arrival of the kingdom in Jesus and the final consummation at his return. The burning question for all who knew well the story line of the Old Testament is, 'Why has God held off the end?' According to the New Testament authors, this time has specific meaning: the witness of the Spirit through the church to the end of history. Newbigin writes:

The meaning of this "overlap of the ages" in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is – so to say – held back until the witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgement and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.¹⁹

Closely related to this is the church's participation in the *missio Dei*. God is a missionary God; mission is the activity of God to redeem his creation. The source of this mission is God's love for the world. His long path of redeeming work culminates in sending Jesus. Jesus revealed and accomplished the kingdom and sent the Spirit so that his people might share in the salvation of the kingdom. The mission of God has created the church; it is the locus and place of God's redeeming work. The *missio Dei* has also taken the church up into its work as an instrument. The church is sent in the power of the Spirit to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). There is no participation in Christ's redemption without participation in his mission. The mission of God is one of sending. The Father sends the Son to make known the kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit. The Son sends the Spirit to continue his work of renewal. The Son also sends the church to continue his mission in the power of the same Spirit. This sending defines not one task of the church, but its very nature and being. We are a people sent to witness to the good news of the kingdom.

All of this assumes the close relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. Indeed, the church can only be understood in an eschatological context. Newbigin frequently employs three terms to define the relation of the church to the kingdom: sign, foretaste, and instrument. The church now has a foretaste of the salvation that God intends for the whole creation. God uses the church as an instrument for his work of healing, liberating and redeeming his world. As such, the church is a sign that points human beings beyond their present horizon to the coming kingdom of God which can give direction and hope.

B. Related to the world: existing for the sake of the world

The church is designated also by reference to the world in which it exists. Since God's redemptive work is directed towards his world, and the church has been taken up into that work, then the church's calling will be shaped by its call to bring good news to the world. The church is the church for others in the sense that it "does not exist for itself or for what it can offer its members."²⁰ When the church "tries to order its life simply in relation to its own concerns and for the purposes of its own continued existence, it is untrue to its proper nature."²¹

What does it mean for the church to be *for* the world, and *for* the particular place in which it is set? Newbigin defines this relationship christologically:

It is of the very essence of the church that it is *for* that place, for that section of the world for which it has been made responsible. And the "for" has to be defined christologically. In other words, the Church is *for* that place in a sense that is determined by the sense in which Christ is *for* the world.²²

This relation of Christ to the world can be described in a threefold way.²³ First, Christ is related to the world as Creator and Sustainer. This means that the church in each place is to love, cherish and embody all of its created cultural goodness. Second, Christ is also the one that will bring the world to its appointed end; he is the one in whom all things will be reconciled and consummated. Therefore, the church is called to be a sign and picture of the true end for which that place exists. Finally, Christ is the one who has died and rose again for that place. In his atonement, Christ both identified with the world but was also separated from it. He identified with the created world he loved but rejected the sin that had distorted it. The cross stands as the salvation and the judgement of each place – salvation of God's good creation, judgement on the deforming power of sin. Thus the church, while identifying with its culture, rejects the idolatrous twisting power of sin present in cultural idols.

There are two primary ways in which the church has failed to live up to its true nature and be the church *for* its place. The first is irrelevance. The church fails to be for the place when its theology, ecclesiastical structures, worship, and churchmanship is imported from a foreign culture or is a survival from another time. When the church is irrelevant it does not communicate good news in forms that are recognisable in the place it is set.

The second way the church fails to be for the world is when it assumes a wrong relationship to its cultural context. The church is called both to live in solidarity with its culture and to stand in antithetical tension. On the one hand, it is possible to affirm only solidarity and thus live in uncritical identification with the culture around it. This is a syncretistic conformity to the world. On the other hand, it is possible to stress only the antithetical tension and thus live in polemical confrontation with the culture in which the church finds itself.

Newbigin most often speaks of the relation of the church to culture in terms of a "missionary encounter with culture." A missionary encounter occurs

when the church embodies the comprehensive demands of the gospel as an alternative way of life to the culture in which it is set, and thereby challenges the culture's fundamental assumptions. In this way, the church offers the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its culture, calling for radical conversion, and issuing an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel.

We can briefly note here that Newbigin's emphasis, especially in the latter part of his life, was decidedly on the antithetical side of the church's involvement with culture. While much of his writing acknowledges the positive side of contribution to cultural development, his primary accent is the encounter that takes place when the church is faithful.

C. Related to God and the world: different construals

There are different ways of construing the relationship of the church to God and the world. Reference to Hendrikus Berkhof's brief discussion, and reference to the debate between Newbigin and Raiser can highlight different ways of understanding this issue. Berkhof takes issue with the "apostolary ecclesiology" of Johannes Hoekendijk and *The Church for Others* (1967). Berkhof criticises this understanding because ecclesiological reflection begins with its mission to the world and then move on to the mission of God. Berkhof claims that a proper ecclesiology must move the other way. The church's relationship to Jesus Christ must shape the content as well as its directedness to the world or a number of problems will emerge.²⁴

Differences between Raiser and Newbigin in their ecclesiologies have similarities to the contrasting views of Berkhof and Hoekendijk. The starting point for Raiser's reflection on the church is how it can address the pluralistic tension, economic oppression, gender and racial strife, and ecological danger that threaten our world. Newbigin, on the other hand, begins his ecclesiological reflection with the mission of Jesus. The church is a body entrusted with a message about universal history to be spoken and embodied.

This different starting point issues in divergent understandings of the *missio Dei*, the church, and mission. Newbigin interprets *missio Dei* in a Christocentric manner; the church participates in the mission of God by continuing the work of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The mission of Jesus governs the mission of the church; mission is in Christ's way. Raiser's understanding is more pneumatological; the church participates in God's mission by working with the Spirit toward justice, peace and ecological healing. This understanding of God's mission leads to contrasting understandings of the church. Raiser criticises classical ecclesiologies for their exclusivism "which not only draw a distinction between the church and world but actually separate them."²⁵ He calls for an ecclesiogenesis in which "the institutional distinctions between church and world and church and society fall into the background."²⁶ Beginning with Christ Newbigin comes to a very different view. If Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of universal history, and if the

church, through the Spirit, has begun to share in that life, the church will be distinct and even separate from the world. Finally, Raiser and Newbigin differ on the mission of the church. Beginning with the burning global needs, Raiser's understanding of mission can be captured in the terms "solidarity" and "dialogue." The urgency of world need demands that the "primary task" of the church be to "further the process of reconstructing sustainable human communities."²⁷ Newbigin believes that Christ has entrusted the church with a message of universal significance and therefore its primary task is to make known that message in its life, deeds, and words.

Factors crippling a missionary consciousness

According to Newbigin, the consciousness that needs to permeate the church is that of a body taken up into God's redemptive work, and sent into the world to continue the mission of Jesus to make known the good news of the kingdom. However, as Moltmann notes, European and North American churches have trouble seeing themselves as missionary bodies and their cultural context as a mission field. Newbigin points to three factors that have crippled the missionary consciousness of the church in the West.

A. Corpus Christianum

The first factor is the relationship of the church to the state in the *corpus Christianum*. Newbigin's interpretation of the Western church's missionary existence in history can be divided into three eras: the pre-Constantinian church, the *corpus Christianum*, and the church in modern, post-Enlightenment culture. The pre-Constantinian church was a missionary community; their identity was defined by their mission in the Roman empire. All this changed with the new sacral unity of church and state during the Constantinian period. Hemmed in by Islam to the south and to the east, Christianity became a "folk religion" for European peoples.²⁸ "To put it in one sentence", Newbigin writes, "The Church had become the religious department of European society rather than the task force selected and appointed for world mission."²⁹ Within European culture "the whole community was baptized", while in terms of world mission "the great pagan world was out of reach and out of sight."³⁰ The *corpus Christianum* was a self-contained world and "the sense that the Church is a body sent into the world, a body on the move and existing for the sake of those beyond its borders, no longer played an effective part in men's thinking."³¹

This Christendom situation brought at least three negative effects for the missionary understanding of the church: non-missionary ecclesiological reflection, non-missionary patterns of churchmanship, and the loss of an antithetical tension with culture.

The *corpus Christianum* was the background for the self-understanding of the church and thus for all ecclesiological reflection. This is clearly seen, for

example, in the Reformation theologies and confessions, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The shared tacit assumption is that the church is not in a missionary situation but in a cultural context where the Christian faith is taken for granted. Each confessional ecclesiology of the Reformation period is defined over against another within the context of *corpus Christianum*, rather than in the context of the pagan world.³²

The context of the *corpus Christianum* also shaped patterns of churchmanship:

The period in which our thinking about the Church received its main features was the period in which Christianity had practically ceased to be a missionary religion...It was in this period, when the dimensions of the end of the earth had ceased to exist as a practical reality in the minds of Christians, that the main patterns of churchmanship were formed.³³

Ministry becomes primarily the pastoral care of established communities rather than leadership in mission. The congregation is considered to be an inward-looking gathering place for the faithful to be edified rather than a staging post for witness and service to the world outside.³⁴ Baptism is no longer incorporation into a missionary body with a commitment to Christ's mission but a *rite de passage*. The eucharist is no longer renewal to the missionary commitment of making the life of Christ present in the world but the feeding of the community with the bread of life.³⁵ Theology is not formulated in the context of a struggle between the gospel and the non-Christian culture, but is shaped over against rival interpretations of the gospel.³⁶ Church history is not taught in terms of the missionary advance of the church and its encounter with non-Christian cultures, but in terms of doctrinal and polity conflicts within the life of the church.³⁷ The structures of congregational life are patterned in a medieval undifferentiated society and are simply invalid for the mission of the church in a secular and differentiated society.

A third negative manifestation of the *corpus Christianum* for the missionary understanding of the church is a loss of the antithetical tension with culture. This problem is especially evident in national churches that fall within the Christendom trajectory. The church takes responsibility for the cultural development and social life of the community. However, the antithetical tension between church and culture is slackened; the church loses sight of its calling to be a community that is separate from the world. Newbigin comments:

We are painfully aware of the consequences of Constantine's conversion; for centuries the Church was allied with established power, sanctioned and even wielded the sword, lost its critical relation to the ruling authorities.³⁸

When the church loses its prophetic-critical stance in relation to its culture, it accepts a role as the "protected and well-decorated chaplaincy in the camp of the dominant power."³⁹ And when "the Church is the spiritual arm of the establishment, the critical role of the Church devolves upon separate bodies – monks, the radical sectarian groups, the millenarian movements on the fringes of the Church."⁴⁰

Newbigin does not elaborate only the negative consequences of Christendom but also the positive results. He believes that the church was right in taking responsibility for the cultural, social, and political life of Europe. He describes the Constantinian settlement as “the first great attempt to translate the universal claim of Christ into political terms.”⁴¹ The result of this attempt was that “the Gospel was wrought into the very stuff of [Western Europe’s] social and personal life.”⁴² Newbigin’s missionary experience in a culture dominated by the Hindu worldview enabled him to see that Western culture had been shaped positively by the gospel and “that we still live largely on the spiritual capital which it generated.”⁴³

While the Christendom model was carried over in the churches of Europe, a number of factors combined to break down the *corpus Christianum*: the missionary experience of the 19th and 20th centuries, the rise of the third-world church, the dechristianization of the West, and the idolatrous power of secularism. Thus, while there may have been some validity to Christendom at one time in history, it is no longer valid.⁴⁴ Today, theologians are questioning the whole traditional doctrine of the church from a missionary angle. The church has been set in a new relationship to society. That has forced a new ecclesiological reflection and led to the “beginnings of a recovery of a biblical doctrine of the Church as a missionary community.” This biblical understanding of the church could only be recovered when the “identification of Church and society in western Europe had been broken.”⁴⁵

B. The privatization of the church in the Enlightenment

A second historical factor that has crippled the church’s missionary self-consciousness is the privatization of the gospel in post-Enlightenment culture. With the breakdown of the historical *corpus Christianum*, the Enlightenment offered another vision of public life based on the idol of autonomous, scientific rationalism. In this new situation, the Christian faith and the church move from the centre to the margins of culture. Newbigin has made an important contribution to missiology here by offering an analysis of the idolatrous core of modernity that has shaped Western culture and relegated the Christian faith to a private religious realm.

The vision of the Enlightenment seemed promising at the time because of two converging historical currents. On the one hand, the religious wars of the 17th century appeared to give evidence that when the formative core of culture was the Christian faith, there was only division and bloodshed. On the other hand, the success of the Newtonian paradigm in solving numerous anomalies gave the impression that scientific reason stood above confessional differences and offered unity. The shift to the Enlightenment worldview was a shift from one set of religious commitments to another. The religious commitment now was to autonomous human reason as the sole arbiter of truth and the primary instrument of social progress. Reason, disciplined by the scientific method, and translated into technological power and the rational organization of soci-

ety had the ability to transform our world into a materially and socially prosperous utopia.

Methodological and neutral reason was the new revelation and the sole judge of truth. All truth claims must be brought before the bar of scientific reason for ultimate judgement. Truth claims that could be validated by scientific reason were accorded the high place of facts and truth, and were to be allowed a place in the public life of culture. All other truth claims were relegated to the lower realm of values and opinions; these beliefs could be held privately but were to be kept from the public square. Thus, the idolatrous commitment to scientific rationality created a fundamental dichotomy that lies at the heart of modern Western culture. A foundational dualism between facts and values, knowing and believing, public and private, truth and opinion, science and religion was created in which the former concept of each pair is granted a higher place and trusted to shape public life. Newbigin believes that this dichotomy has become an unquestioned article of faith in Western culture; it is a hidden religious assumption that gives shape to our society.

The claims of the gospel must also be submitted to the dictates of scientific reason. Since such claims cannot be proven by the scientific method, the claims of the gospel have been shunted to the lower place of private values that are a matter of subjective opinion and personal preference. The gospel is not public truth but private taste. One may find the gospel privately engaging but its truth claim can be dismissed. The gospel can have no place in shaping the public life of a nation.

Newbigin's indictment of the church is that instead of resisting this idolatrous faith commitment to scientific reason, the church has been absorbed into and domesticated by it.⁴⁶ It has quietly and meekly conformed itself to this alien faith commitment and accepted its role in the private realm. The church may offer an other-worldly and entirely future salvation to interested individuals, may influence the morals of its members, and may meet the religious needs of its adherents. However, woe to the church that dares to believe that the gospel is the true starting point for understanding all of human life including social, political, economic, and educational life.

As Newbigin sees it, the task today for the missionary church in Western culture is to recover a shape that manifests Christ's rule over all of life, yet does not fall into the trap of the *corpus Christianum*. We cannot strive for a new *corpus Christianum* nor accept relegation to the private sector of post-Enlightenment culture.

The Christendom era is behind us. Around us is the situation I have tried to describe where Christianity has become a *cultus privatus* tolerated within a society whose *cultus publicus* has been shaped by the vision of the Enlightenment. Before us is the new task of developing a pattern of churchmanship which can credibly represent Christ's claim to universal dominion over all of the life of the world without attempting to follow again the Constantinian road. That is our task now.⁴⁷

C. The separation of church and mission in the modern missionary movement

A third historical development that has crippled a missionary understanding of the church is the separation of church and mission in the context of the modern missionary movement. In the thinking of many Christians, the words “church” and “mission” designate two different bodies. A “mission” describes a society responsible for the propagation of the gospel. The “church”, however, is a society devoted to worship and the nurture of its members. The church in the West supports mission as a good cause in other parts of the world. The church in the non-West is where converts of mission activity are passed on for safekeeping.

The separation of these bodies is rooted in the origins of the Protestant missionary movement. In the Protestant churches of the 18th century the majority of people were blind – some even hostile – to the missionary responsibility associated with church membership. The missionary movement resulted from a fresh re-discovery of the Bible and a new work of the Spirit in the churches. Those who were eager to obey the great commission expressed their obedience through extra-ecclesiastical channels. They banded together to form separate bodies for mission. To quote Newbigin:

As so often happens, the correction of a deformity in the Church was itself deformed by its opposition to that which it sought to correct. The New Testament knows of only one missionary society – the Church. The eighteenth century knew Churches which had totally ceased to be missionary societies and saw the birth of missionary societies which made no claim to be Churches.⁴⁸

There have been harmful results for both missions and church:

The separation of these two things which God has joined together must be judged one of the great calamities of missionary history, and the healing of this division one of the greatest tasks of our time.⁴⁹

This separation has had deleterious effects on both the older churches in the West and among the younger churches where the dichotomy has been perpetuated. The primary effect on the church is that it “becomes an introverted body, concerned with its own welfare rather than with the Kingdom of God.”⁵⁰

Newbigin places the Bible’s teaching and his own missionary experience over against this distortion. In the book of Acts we do not find two different organizations labelled “mission” and “church.” There was only the church and “that body was both the Church and the Mission – the place where men were being saved, and the agent of God’s saving purpose for all around”⁵¹. Newbigin’s missionary experience confirmed the disaster of separating church and mission; when church and mission were separated in India, the church became an introverted body concerned with its own maintenance. When new converts were taught from the beginning that being a Christian means being involved in Christ’s mission to the world, they became the vanguard of the church’s evangelistic work and also understood their callings in culture in a missional way.

The significance of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology

Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology continues to be the source of much theological reflection on mission and the church. His work has also prompted debate, especially on the issue of moving beyond Christendom and the privatization of modernity. But perhaps the most important discussions issuing from Newbigin's work are taking place within the gospel and culture networks that are intentionally committed to working out the implications of Newbigin's work in their own setting. The three biggest of these networks are found in Britain, New Zealand, and North America. Reference specifically to The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in North America highlights the continuing fruitfulness of Newbigin's work.

The GOCN is a fast growing and significant movement in North America. It is made up of theological educators, pastors, denominational administrators, and local congregational leaders from a variety of confessional traditions devoted to the task of fostering a missionary encounter with North American culture. The work of GOCN has been three pronged: theological, cultural, and ecclesiological. In all three of these areas Newbigin's work has been foundational for their reflection. The development of a missionary ecclesiology for North America has been an important item on the GOCN agenda, and has led to a number of publications. In 1998 six leaders within the movement co-authored a book entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. This ecclesiology has become increasingly important in theological discussion within North America.

Missional Church is heavily indebted to Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.⁵² It is especially Newbigin's critique of Christendom that features in the book. It adopts as a central metaphor an alternative or contrasting community.⁵³ With this fundamental ecclesial designation, the authors want to highlight the need for a church that embodies the critical dimension of the church's mission over against the accommodation that has resulted from Christendom. These authors have blazed a helpful trail for the recovery of a missionary church in North America. More critical of Christendom, however, their ecclesiological reflection has moved in a more Anabaptist direction than Newbigin. Newbigin merged more Reformed ecclesiological emphases, such as the calling of the laity and the Christian contribution to cultural development, with Anabaptist elements like the communal and antithetical dimensions of the church's mission. It is the latter emphases that the authors of *Missional Church* have fruitfully explored in their ecclesiology.

Conclusion

Hendrikus Berkhof argues that the "necessity of restudying ecclesiology... from the standpoint of the relationship to the world has (only) begun to take hold" in the 20th century.⁵⁴ He believes that the church as institution and community needs to be rethought in light of its mission to the world. Newbigin

was not first an academic theologian but a missionary and a churchman with a wealth of experience almost unmatched. He began the task of bringing the biblical perspective of mission to bear on many traditional ecclesiological themes. It remains for others to work this out in a more systematic and comprehensive way, both in theological reflection and in ecclesial practice.

NOTES

- ¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. Volume 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 282.
- ² Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1977, p. 7.
- ³ Berkhof, Hendrikus, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979, p. 410.
- ⁴ Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, New York, Friendship Press, 1954.
- ⁵ See Goheen, Michael W., "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You": J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology, Chapter 2, "From a Christendom to a Missionary Ecclesiology (1909-1959)", Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, pp. 12-59.
- ⁶ Perhaps this shift is most evident in the way Newbigin orders his theological subjects in *Sin and Salvation*, London, SCM Press, 1956. He reflects on the change in order at the beginning of the book, p. 8. The church is no longer an addendum as it was in 1942 when he elaborated the basic teaching of scripture in a similar way. Now it becomes central as the basic way God made provision for the communication of the gospel. In *The Household of God* Newbigin seeks to resolve the ecclesiological tensions within the WCC at the time between Roman Catholics and Protestants in two concluding chapters on the eschatological and missionary nature of the church (*op. cit.*, p.123-174).
- ⁷ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography*, Edinburgh, St Andrews Press, 1993, p. 138.
- ⁸ See Goheen, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3, "From a Christocentric to a Trinitarian Ecclesiology (1959-1998)", pp. 60-114.
- ⁹ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, *op. cit.*, p. 187. Cf. p. 144.
- ¹⁰ Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1991, p. 383.
- ¹¹ *World Conference on Church and Society: Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time*, Geneva, July 12-16, 1966 (the official report with a description of the conference by M.M. Thomas and Paul Abrecht), Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1967, p. 179f.
- ¹² Newbigin, "Ecumenical Amnesia," in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 18, 1, pp. 2-5. Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1991, '96, p. 19.
- ¹³ Raiser, "Is Ecumenical Apologetics Sufficient? A Response to Lesslie Newbigin's 'Ecumenical Amnesia'", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 18, 2, p. 50.
- ¹⁴ Newbigin, "Reply to Konrad Raiser", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 18, 1, p. 51.
- ¹⁵ Newbigin, "The Bishop and the Ministry of Mission", in *Today's Church and Today's World*, ed. John Howe, London, CIO Publishing, 1977, p. 242.
- ¹⁶ Without mission, Newbigin says, "the Church simply falls to the ground. We must say bluntly that when the Church ceases to be a mission, then she ceases to have any right to the titles by which she is adorned in the New Testament" (*Household of God*, p. 163).
- ¹⁷ Newbigin, *A Word In Season: Perspectives on Christian World Mission*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Jackson, E., ed., 1994, pp. 50-51.
- ¹⁸ "The *ecclesia tou Theou* could only be an assembly to which all men and women, citizens, slaves, Romans, barbarians, were called not by the town clerk but by a much higher authority – an assembly in which even the imperial claim of Caesar could only have a subordinate place" in "The Basis and the Forms of Unity", *Mid-Stream*, 23:7.

- ¹⁹ Newbiggin, *Household of God*, *op. cit.*, pp. 154.
- ²⁰ Newbiggin, *Your Kingdom Come: Reflections on the Theme of the Melbourne Conference on World Mission and Evangelism*, Leeds, John Paul the Preacher Press, 1980, p. 45.
- ²¹ Newbiggin, "What is the 'Local Church United'?", *Ecumenical Review*, 29 (1977), pp. 115-128.
- ²² Newbiggin, *A Word In Season*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.
- ²³ Newbiggin, *What is the 'Local Church United'?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.
- ²⁴ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, *op. cit.*, p. 413.
- ²⁵ Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, *op. cit.*, Geneva, WCC Publications, p. 73.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ²⁷ Raiser, *To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1997, p. 26.
- ²⁸ Newbiggin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, London, SCM Press, 1966, p. 102.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- ³¹ Newbiggin, *A Faith for This One World?* London, SCM Press, 1961, p. 110.
- ³² Newbiggin, *Household of God*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.
- ³³ Newbiggin, *How Should We Understand Sacraments and Ministry?*, Unpublished paper written for the Anglican-Reformed International Commission, 1; *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- ³⁴ Newbiggin, *A Faith for This One World?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111; *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, *ibid.*
- ³⁵ Newbiggin, *How Should We Understand Sacraments and Ministry?*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ³⁶ Newbiggin, *A Faith for This One World?*, *op. cit.*, p. 111; *Honest Religion for Secular Man*; *ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Newbiggin, *Your Kingdom Come*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- ³⁹ Newbiggin, *Priorities for a New Decade*, Birmingham, UK, National Student Christian Press and Resource Centre, 1980, p. 4.
- ⁴⁰ Newbiggin, *Your Kingdom Come*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Newbiggin, *Household of God*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ⁴³ Newbiggin, *Priorities for a New Decade*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁴ Newbiggin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ⁴⁶ Newbiggin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*, Geneva, WCC Press, 1983; *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986; *The Gospel and a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.
- ⁴⁷ Newbiggin, *Your Kingdom Come*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
- ⁴⁸ Newbiggin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, London, SCM Press, 1948, p. 10.
- ⁴⁹ Newbiggin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today*, London and New York, International Missionary Council, 1958, p. 26.
- ⁵⁰ Newbiggin, *Household of God*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
- ⁵¹ Newbiggin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ⁵² Guder, Darrell, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 5.
- ⁵³ Guder, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.
- ⁵⁴ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, *op. cit.*, p. 411.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.