

**“As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You”:  
J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology**

“Zoals de Vader mij gezonden heeft, zend Ik u”:  
J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s missionaire ecclesiologie

Proefschrift

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To Marnie,  
with love and gratitude



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# APPENDICES

## 11.1. ABBREVIATIONS

BEC	Base Ecclesial Communities
BCC	British Council of Churches
CASA	Christian Agency for Social Action
CICCU	Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union
CSI	Church of South India
CWC	Christian World Communion
CWME	Committee on World Mission and Evangelism (WCC)
DWME	Division on World Mission and Evangelism (WCC)
EACC	East Asia Christian Conference
GOC	Gospel and Our Culture (Britain)
GOCN/NA	Gospel and Our Culture Network (North America)
IMC	International Missionary Council
LWF	Lutheran World Fellowship
NCCC	National Council of Churches in Christ in the USA
PTE	Program for Theological Education
RCC	Roman Catholic Church
SIUC	South India United Church
SCM	Student Christian Movement
SVMU	Student Volunteer Missionary Union
TEF	Theological Education Fund
URC	United Reformed Church
USA	United States of America
WCC	World Council of Churches
WSCF	World Christian Student Federation

## APPENDICES

## 11.2. LIST OF MISSIONARY AND ECUMENICAL CONFERENCES

*World Missionary Conference*

1910     Edinburgh, Scotland

*International Missionary Council Conferences*

1928     Jerusalem, Israel  
 1938     Madras, India  
 1947     Whitby, Ontario, Canada  
 1952     Accra, Ghana

*Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches*

1963     Mexico City, Mexico  
 1973     Bangkok, Thailand  
 1980     Melbourne, Australia  
 1989     San Antonio, Texas, U.S.A.  
 1998     Salvador, Brazil

*World Council of Churches Assemblies*

1948     Amsterdam, Netherlands  
 1954     Evanston, Illinois, U.S.A.  
 1961     New Delhi, India  
 1968     Uppsala, Sweden  
 1975     Nairobi, Kenya  
 1983     Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
 1991     Canberra, Australia  
 1998     Harare, Zimbabwe

*Lausanne Meetings*

1974     Lausanne, Switzerland: First Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization  
 1980     Pattaya, Thailand: Consultation on World Evangelization  
 1989     Manila, Philippines: Second Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization

## 11.3. CHRONOLOGY OF J. E. LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S LIFE

1909	Born 8 December in Newcastle, England
1909-1928	Early years in Northumbria
1928-1931	Student at Cambridge University, Queens College
1931-1933	Student Christian Movement secretary at University of Glasgow
1933-1936	Graduate theology degree at Westminster College, Cambridge. July 1936: Ordained in Church of Scotland; 20 August 1936: Married to Helen Henderson, Edinburgh
1936-1937	October 1936-October 1937: Tamil language training at Chingleput and Kodaikanal, India (September 1937: Bus accident—broken leg)
1937-1939	November 1937-September 1939: Edinburgh (Recovery and Candidates Secretary for Foreign Missions Committee of the Church of Scotland)
1939-1946	District Missionary in Kanchipuram
1946-1947	Furlough in Edinburgh. Candidates secretary. Church of South India united
1947-1959	Bishop of Madurai and Ramnad, Church of South India
1959-1961	General Secretary of the International Missionary Council, London
1961-1965	Director of Division/Commission on World Mission and Evangelism; Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Geneva
1965-1974	Bishop of Madras, Church of South India
1974-1979	Lecturer in Missiology and Ecumenics at Selly Oaks College, Birmingham, England. Taught Hinduism at Westhill College, Birmingham. 1977-1978 Moderator of General Assembly of United Reformed Church
1980-1988	Minister of inner city church (United Reformed Church) in Winson Green, Birmingham
1988-1992	Active in Gospel and Our Culture Movement, Birmingham.
1992-1998	“Retired” in London: active in The Gospel and Our Culture Movement, writing, lecturing
1998	Died 30 January in London, England

## PREFACE

I have two vivid recollections of the summer of 1994 when this dissertation was initiated. The first was a visit to the home of Jan Jongeneel to propose the theme for my dissertation. The other was the prompting of Jan Van Butselaar to visit Lesslie Newbigin in his home in London. Both have borne wonderful fruit. Jan Jongeneel accepted me as a doctoral student; my weekend with Newbigin was the first of five such occasions when I would have opportunity to spend the better part of three or four days with him. Six years later the dissertation is complete, and I know Newbigin better after carefully tracing his life and thought. My life has been enriched immeasurably. My only regret is that Newbigin has passed on and could not be at the promotion in Utrecht as planned.

The arduous and enriching process of writing a dissertation has made me aware of the marvellous fact that God has created us to live in community. I would like to acknowledge and thank three educational institutions that have made a direct contribution to my work. Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada has given me opportunity to teach mission studies for seven years and allowed me a leave of absence in the winter term of 1999 during which time much of this dissertation was written. In that time period Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA provided a wonderful environment for research while I taught two courses on Newbigin and Mission in Western Culture. Calvin's library, ample office space, and the interaction with students and faculty of that institution enhanced my work significantly. Finally, the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, was where my doctoral work began. Doctoral seminars—one of which was in ecclesiology—and guided reading studies provided a firm foundation for this dissertation.

There are a number of people who have made contributions in one way or another to this dissertation. Over the last ten years, my mission students from Dordt College, Calvin Seminary, and Redeemer University College have been reading Newbigin and sharpening my thinking with their questions and comments. My colleagues in the Foundations Division at Redeemer have provided much stimulation and encouragement; I mention especially my two colleagues in the Theology Department, Gene Haas and Al Wolters. I am deeply grateful to Harry Van Dyke who has spent hours reading every line of this dissertation and offering much helpful advice toward content and style. Gerald Anderson, Stephen Bevans, Sander Griffioen, H. W. De Krijff, and Wilbert Shenk have all read part or all of this dissertation; I have benefitted from their wise counsel. George Hunsberger and Tom Foust, both who have written doctoral dissertations on Newbigin, acted as sounding boards a number of times when I ran stuck.

I have been fortunate to have two very fine promotors—Jan Jongeneel and George Vandervelde. Both have been very critical and very encouraging. I have learned much from Jan's critique of structure and content that will remain valuable for years to come. His handbooks have also provided helpful context on many missiological issues. The shape of the dissertation owes much to his hand. George has been a friend, teacher, and mentor for fifteen years. He has given himself tirelessly to sharpen my thinking and writing. His patient analysis and critique of several versions of this dissertation have enhanced it considerably. Much that is good about this dissertation is owing to the able guidance of these two men; what is lacking is probably because I didn't listen or was unable to carry out their instructions.

Finally, I want to thank my family who have provided support and encouragement. In 1994 when I decided to focus on the theme of mission in western culture, my wife

Marnie advised me to limit myself to Newbigin; she said I would learn more from his life than I could put in a dissertation. She was right! In many ways Marnie has been my closest companion on this journey, and so I dedicate this book to her. My four children have also shared in this project: Erin, Ben, Brittany, and Brielle have all read at least one book by Newbigin. One, at the age of twelve, when reading *Mission in Christ's Way*, wrote, "Dad, when I read this book I can't stand the urge to yellow the whole book in." Another did some editing for me. In the early summer of 1997, we all had the privilege of spending several memorable days with Lesslie Newbigin in Birmingham, Alabama. The last time I saw him, Lesslie was sitting at the airport in Birmingham with my four children all leaning forward as he told a string of entertaining jokes. My journey through the dissertation has been a shared one. It is therefore appropriate that this family support was symbolically represented when Erin and Ben stood as paranymphs at my defence in May 2000. I also want to thank my son Ben for all the work he put into getting this manuscript ready for publication.

In conclusion I want to offer my thanks to God who I have come to know in Jesus Christ. It is fitting to end my preface on this note since I have learned so much from Newbigin about the centrality of Christ. If anything remains in my thinking from this study, it is that in Christ, God has acted to reveal and accomplish the end of history. And so, from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!

Mike Goheen  
Ancaster, Ontario, Canada  
November 2000

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. THE NEED FOR A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY FOR WESTERN CULTURE

In the early 1980s, fresh out of seminary, I was appointed by my presbytery to be an evangelist and church planter on the edge of Toronto. The two dominant trends in my church during that time were the church growth tradition and a confessionalist tradition. Both of these traditions had clear, yet unexamined ecclesiologies. I found the first, the church growth model, to be pragmatic and unrooted in Scripture, the gospel, or the Christian tradition. Yet there was a concern to be relevant to the culture and bring the gospel to bear on the lives of people living at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The confessionalist model was more rooted in Scripture and tradition but was addressing the concerns and issues of the past. I found myself vacillating; I wanted the church to be rooted in the gospel and tradition, and yet to be relevant to the lives of the people in my congregation and community. The issue for me was, what is the church? This led into a Ph.D. program in which I examined ecclesiology from a Scriptural and historical perspective. Late in that program I came across Lesslie Newbigin's *Foolishness to the Greeks* and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Here I heard a new voice—one rooted in the gospel and struggling to be relevant to the issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newbigin's call for a missionary encounter with western culture was firmly rooted in a certain ecclesiology that was unfamiliar to me. This spurred me to inquire into the nature and origin of this ecclesiology.

I have since found that I am not the only one who believes a missionary ecclesiology for the West to be an urgent need. After David J. Bosch had completed his *magnum opus* entitled *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991), he acknowledged that a missiology of western culture must be a priority concern for our day. He recognized that he had not included this topic in his book and so felt an obligation to turn his attention to this theme (Bosch 1995:ix). His tragic death hindered him from pursuing this issue beyond the small book that was published posthumously. When Bosch formulates the contours of a missiology of western culture, the first order of business is a missionary ecclesiology (:27-32; cf. Jongeneel 1997:88-92). This priority informs the entire discussion that follows.

This reference to Bosch's book is significant for the topic of this book for two reasons. First, the issue of mission in western culture has become an urgent matter in missiology in the last few decades. To speak of mission in western culture means that the word mission is being used in a new way (cf. Jongeneel 1995:58-61). In the popular mind 'mission', 'missions', 'missionary', 'mission field', or 'missiology' denotes the idea of geographical expansion. Mission or missions is considered to be an activity that proceeds in one direction: from the West to other parts of the world. A missionary is one who is the agent of this expansion; a mission field is a potential area outside the West where this expansion is carried out; and missiology is a discipline that studies the issues arising from this expansion.

Numerous developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have rendered this older view of mission obsolete. The most important of these factors are the collapse of colonialism, the dramatic rise, growth, and vitality of the non-western churches, and the decline and marginalization of the church in western culture.

Mission understood exclusively as geographical expansion must be replaced by a

fuller Biblical understanding. A number of Dutch missiologists have suggested that mission as *expansion* must be replaced by an understanding of mission as *communication* (Verstraelen, Camps, Hoedemaker, and Spindler 1995:1; Jongeneel 1995:64). That is, mission is not defined geographically but in terms of the church's calling to communicate the gospel in life, word, and deed in every part of the world. Missiology is the discipline that studies the issues that arise from the attempt to bear witness to the gospel. Mission takes place in, to, and from all six continents (cf. Jongeneel 1995:60). Mission issues from the West but also in and to the West. In this situation many long neglected issues arising from the attempt to communicate and embody the gospel in western culture can find renewed attention.

Another way of highlighting the significance of this renewed attention is to note the attention given in 19<sup>th</sup> century mission thought to the theme of “reflexive action” or “blessed reflex.”<sup>1</sup> Mission advocates argued that the missionary impulse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a century that the eminent American missionary historian Kenneth S. Latourette describes as “the great century” of Christian mission (Latourette 1941-1944)—would result in a reflexive action that would benefit the sending church. The mission impulse would rebound back on the sending church in the West and it would reap some of the benefits of this missionary activity. These benefits were never spelled out and the theme gradually disappeared from the writing of missiology at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as mission more and more became woven together with colonialism. In the latter part of this century mission has gradually extricated itself from the colonial framework. In this post-colonial period the dynamic of the “reflexive action” is becoming increasingly evident as the missionary movement has come full circle, providing a critique from the non-western churches that can lead to a more faithful witness in the West.

Closely related to this is the second reason for a brief reference to David Bosch's book: a missionary ecclesiology is a central feature in this whole study of mission in western culture. Today it is commonplace in missiology to speak of the church as missionary and mission as ecclesial. Yet this has not penetrated the self-understanding of the average congregation in western culture nor the official theology of academic theologians (Berkhof 1979:411). The reason is that the ecclesiologies that have been formative for the churches in the West—both at the academic theological level and at the level of the congregation's self-understanding—have been largely shaped by Christendom.

The church of Christendom was moulded by the changes that took place in the fourth century when Constantine became a Christian and legalized the Christian faith. From the time that Theodosius made Christianity the religion of the empire (A.D. 392) the development of a Christendom ecclesiology was further accelerated over the centuries. The church moved from a marginal position to a dominant institution in society; from being socially, politically, and intellectually inferior to being in a position of power and superiority; from being economically weak and poor to being in a position of immense

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<sup>1</sup>I owe the following insights on reflexive action to Wilbert Shenk in private communication.

wealth; from being an oppressed minority to being the oppressive majority; from being a *religio illicita* to becoming the only religion in the civic community; from being resident aliens in a pagan environment to being an established church in a professedly Christian state. This could not help but have a dramatic impact on the church's self-understanding.

H. Richard Niebuhr (1935) has described the transition that takes place when the church is part of a culture for a long period of time. When a church is young and a minority, its identity is shaped by tension with the world—defined as civilization or culture in the grip of idolatry—and an “aggressive evangelism.” Its members recognize that they are a distinct people and this moves them to a rigorous evangelism. This missional posture proves to be successful as the gospel salts the society and helps shape the public life of the culture. There are signs of repentance and faith among the powers of the culture. But it is precisely in this success that the problems lie. The salting of the society has the effect of diminishing the church's missionary consciousness. It “relaxes its rigorism” and “begins to live at peace in the culture” (Niebuhr 1935:123). The church no longer considers itself a distinctive community in a hostile environment. The empire is considered Christian and any distinctiveness is undermined. The church is no longer an alternative community living in contrast to the cultural community. It now takes its place as just one power within the constellation of powers which make up the Christian empire. Thus it merely functions alongside of the military, political, economic, and intellectual powers of the empire. The church is at peace in its societal context. It has become an established church. The Roman Catholic scholar Roger Haight describes the established church as follows:

The word established indicates a theological category which characterizes a church whose mission has ceased; an established church is at peace with society and content with and in its own forms and inner life. The term is negative for it implies the presumption that the missionary task has been completed so that the church is no longer a mission but simply a community. In terms of missionary and pastoral activity ... an established church assumes only pastoral responsibilities (Haight 1980:10).

Niebuhr's evaluation is more negative. He calls the established church a captive church (Niebuhr 1935:128), a church corrupted by the idolatry of its culture (:123). Therefore, he argues, the “task of the present generation appears to lie in the liberation of the church from its bondage to a corrupt civilization” (:124, 128).

The Christendom church in the medieval period was an established church. Central to this church was its close link with the state. The church was often an instrument of state policy rather than a bearer of the coming reign of God.

The churches of the Reformation period hardly challenged this ecclesiology. Jose Miguez Bonino argues that the classical ecclesiologies of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation presupposed a Christendom context (Miguez Bonino 1975:155). They did not define themselves in terms of their calling to the world but rather in contrast with one another. When the Reformation shattered the unity of the church each of the various splinters was now compelled to define itself over against the other splinters. The churches of the Reformation distinguished themselves by the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. In the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic church responded by accenting historical continuity and institutional

visibility and unity. Each prided itself in accentuating what they possessed and the other lacked. Both ecclesiologies were formed over against other churches rather than in terms of their calling in the world. And as David Bosch has observed:

In all these instances the church was defined in terms of what happens inside its four walls, not in terms of its calling in the world. The verbs used in the Augustana are all in the passive voice: the church is a place where the gospel is *taught* purely and the sacraments *are administered* rightly. It is a place where something is done, not a living organism doing something (Bosch 1991:249).

Stephen C. Neill has examined the ecclesiologies of this period by comparing the various confessional statements of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions (1968:71-77). Wilbert Shenk summarizes his findings:

The confessional statements of the other three traditions strike the same stance [as the Augsburg Confession of 1530]: all emphasize the *being* rather than the *function* of the church. Ecclesiologically the church is turned inward. The thrust of these statements, which were the very basis for catechizing and guiding the faithful, rather than equipping and mobilizing the church to engage the world, was to guard and preserve. This is altogether logical, of course, if the whole of society is by definition already under the lordship of Christ (Shenk 1995:38).

This kind of Christendom ecclesiology has shaped the self-consciousness of the church in western culture to the present day. There are a number of things, however, that are challenging this ecclesiology and encouraging a re-conception of the church. First, Christendom is dissolving in the acids of the Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment marked the end of the Christendom connection of church and state, the ecclesial mentality has not dissolved as quickly.<sup>2</sup> Not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century has the Christendom ecclesial consciousness begun to break down. This is happening as western culture becomes increasingly neo-pagan. The church, pushed to the margins of

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<sup>2</sup>This is especially true in the United States. Perhaps this can be explained by looking at the thesis of Martin Marty (1969). He distinguishes between three kinds of secularity. There is *utter* secularity that took place in France. Here the state is violently opposed to the church and Christianity, seeking actively to eliminate it from the public square. Secondly, there is *mere* secularity as can be found in Britain. In this form there is not a concerted effort to rid society of God and religion but the church is simply ignored. The final form, *controlled* secularity, can be found in United States. There is a division of labour between church and state in terms of responsibility. The public/private dichotomy of modernity is structured into public policy. The church then is taken up into the larger society as another power alongside others, all of which strive toward the same goal. "In God We Trust" and "One Nation Under God" describe the umbrella under which all public institutions supposedly operate. This new form of Christendom has only begun to break down in the United States since the 1960s.

the public life of western culture, can no longer assume any kind of privileged place of power, influence, or standing in its cultural context.

The second factor that has challenged the reigning Christendom ecclesiology is the development of a missionary ecclesiology flowing from the cross-cultural missionary experience of the church. The world missionary conferences of the ecumenical tradition and Second Vatican Council are of decisive importance in this shift. For both, mission is no longer separated from the church; the church is “missionary by its very nature.” What does this mean for the church in the West? What impact would this have on the structures and ministry of the local congregation in western culture?

A third factor challenging a Christendom ecclesiology that has dominated the West is the rise and vitality of ethnic minority churches in the West. These churches have not embraced a Christendom ecclesiology and while there is a serious decline in the majority of older mainline churches these minority churches are among the fastest growing and most vital churches in the West.

Out of this dissolution of a Christendom ecclesiology, a missionary ecclesiology is developing. Two contemporary discussions highlight the need for a missionary ecclesiology. The first involves the continuing conversations within the World Council of Churches on ecclesiology. It was in the missionary conferences of the IMC and the WCC that a missionary ecclesiology emerged. The church was defined in terms of its participation in the *missio Dei*. However, there was a shift from an ecclesiocentric to a cosmocentric understanding of mission in the period following the Willingen meeting of the IMC (1952). Out of this shift two divergent understandings of the missionary church have emerged. The first emphasizes the church as a distinct body that continues the mission of Jesus in the world. The second emphasizes the work of the Spirit in the world of culture with the church restructuring itself to be involved in the social, political, economic, and ecological problems facing the world community. These two missionary ecclesiologies remain in tension to the present (Bosch 1991:381-389; Raiser 1991a). The second discussion is within the growing Gospel and Our Culture network in North America. Galvanized by Newbigin’s call for a missionary encounter with western culture, this network opened a vigorous conversation on the issue of ecclesiology (Guder 1998). These two discussions open up many issues surrounding a faithful missionary ecclesiology in the West.

## 1.2. NEWBIGIN’S SIGNIFICANCE FOR A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY FOR WESTERN CULTURE

This book will examine the missionary ecclesiology of Bishop J. E. Lesslie Newbigin that underlies his mission in western culture project. The promise of Newbigin for this issue is significant for three reasons. First, Newbigin’s work has served as the catalyst for bringing the issue of mission in western culture to the forefront of the agenda of mission studies (Hiebert 1997:230). The appearance of *The Other Side of 1984* (Newbigin 1983d)<sup>3</sup> marks a major milestone for a missiology of western culture. With unusual skill the book crystallized a number of issues which have stimulated vigorous

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<sup>3</sup>Hereafter all references to Newbigin’s work will simply note the date and page number.

discussion. Philip Morgan, former General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, described Newbiggin's little book this way: "... with that peculiar skill possessed by Newbiggin, it [*The Other Side of 1984*] brings together a range of ideas, relates them together and very sharply focusses a series of highly controversial positions and questions. The power of this small book to stimulate to excitement or vigorous refutation lies here" (Morgan 1985:4). The stream of books and articles written by Newbiggin since that time has continued to focus the issue for many people. The Gospel and Our Culture movements in Britain, North America, and New Zealand, the Missiology of Western Culture project headed up by Wilbert Shenk, and a growing stream of publications on the issue bear witness to the stimulus that the work of Newbiggin has produced in the last couple of decades. The promise of Newbiggin for discussions on a missionary ecclesiology in North America is clear.

Second, Newbiggin played an active and central role in the International Missionary Council and the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. After serving as a missionary in India for twenty-three years, Newbiggin took the post of general secretary of the IMC and then director of CWME of the WCC. His influence was formative for many of the discussions throughout since 1948. Newbiggin was shaped by the theology, missiology, and ecclesiology of the early ecumenical movement. Yet when there was a dramatic challenge to that paradigm, Newbiggin was able to appropriate many of the insights of the new challenge. His flexibility along with his commitment to tradition makes his insight for the current ecclesiological discussions significant.

There is a third reason for focussing on the work of Newbiggin. Not only has he provided an impetus for renewed reflection on the issue of mission in western culture and been an active participant in the ecumenical movement, Newbiggin has also paid close attention to ecclesiological questions throughout his long and distinguished career (Verkuyl 1978:56) as a recognized leader in the context of three settings: as a missionary in India; as an ecumenical leader in a global context; and as a missionary to the West (cf. title of Stafford 1996). A glance at his bibliography reveals at once the interest that Newbiggin has had in ecclesiological issues in his published work. His record as a missionary, bishop, ecumenical administrator, and pastor all testify to his commitment to the local church. Indeed, it is his vast experience in struggling for a missionary church in many different contexts that has nourished his deep and valuable theological reflection on ecclesiology. It is precisely the missionary ecclesiology developed by Newbiggin that has been foundational for and formative of both his work within the ecumenical movement and his call for a missionary encounter with western culture. It is the purpose of this book to examine that ecclesiology.

### 1.3. METHOD OF RESEARCH: HISTORICAL AND SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS

The method of research followed is both historical and systematic. Newbiggin's theology is first and foremost *ad hoc* and contextual. He never accepted the title of a scholar but viewed himself as a pastor who wanted to bring the light of the gospel to bear on the urgent issues of the day. Any examination of Newbiggin's ecclesiology, therefore, must pay attention to the historical context in which his view of the church developed. My

research into Newbigin's ecclesiology has been carried out historically, examining his writings chronologically in the context of the day. This historical treatment of Newbigin's work will inform every page of this book. However, the presentation of his ecclesiology will be both historical and systematic.

The historical analysis will uncover the development of Newbigin's ecclesiology. It traces two inextricably intertwined factors. First, his experience as a churchman. Newbigin has varied from district missionary and evangelist in India, bishop in the Church of South India, ecumenical administrator in The International Missionary Council (IMC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), member of a house church in Geneva, professor of missions at Selly Oak, to pastor in an inner city church in Britain—experiences that have had a formative impact on the development of his missionary ecclesiology. The second factor is the intellectual development of his ecclesiology as found in his publications. Newbigin has published many writings forged in the heat of a missionary engagement, hammering out clear lines of a missionary ecclesiology. Part One, the historical section of this book, treats certain themes and issues in his life and writing that are important for the development of his missionary ecclesiology.

Part Two, the systematic analysis will examine Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology in its relation to God, in relation to its mission, and its relation to the religio-cultural milieu. While I am careful to take full account of the historical context and development, my analysis of Newbigin's ecclesiology will be systematic. This venture is fraught with danger for a number of reasons. Newbigin is not a systematic theologian; he never wrote a systematic ecclesiology. Moreover, his writings are occasional and contextual, shaped by the burning issues of the day which he felt needed Scriptural reflection. Then, too, Newbigin's ecclesiology developed throughout his life. There are several major shifts in his thinking about the church that reshape his entire ecclesiology. Any distillation of a systematic ecclesiology runs the risk of presenting an ecclesiology that is a mirror of the author's understanding rather than that of Newbigin. Perhaps these objections would dictate against the attempt to express Newbigin's ecclesiology systematically were it not for a fundamental continuity in his thinking about the church. This continuity is succinctly expressed in the title of this book—*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*. This text is taken from John 20:21, a verse Newbigin quoted numerous times in his ecclesiological articulation. Even though he never wrote a systematic ecclesiology, Newbigin dealt with the urgent concerns of his day from the standpoint of a consistent and deeply held understanding of the nature of the church. It is precisely because he did not write a systematic ecclesiology that this exercise is valuable; we can uncover the systematic theological reflection on the church that informed his approach to many matters in the course of his ministry. The various components of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology will be uncovered and systematically explicated.

#### 1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This work will be made up of three primary parts—the historical development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, a systematic treatment of his missionary

ecclesiology, and a concluding analysis.

Following this introductory chapter, there are two chapters that trace the historical context and formation of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. Newbigin's life is briefly sketched paying close attention to the historical factors and the ecclesial experiences that shaped his doctrine of the church. The historical formation of his ecclesiology is traced in terms of two basic shifts: the shift from a Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology and the shift from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. Chapter two analyzes the first shift and chapter three, the second.

During the early period of his life, Newbigin was nourished by an ecclesiology that belonged to Christendom. By the decade of the 1950s, two fundamental factors led to a shift in which he understood the church in a missionary way. The first was his missionary experience in India. Eight years as a district missionary in Kanchipuram and another time period of similar length as bishop of Madurai led him to a reconsideration of his Christendom ecclesiology. The second factor was the influence of the developing missionary ecclesiology in the ecumenical tradition. Newbigin was a creative participant in this historical development. His missionary ecclesiology that formed during this time is most explicitly articulated in the books *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d) and *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958b). He became fully conscious of the new place the church now had in his thinking during the writing of *Sin and Salvation* (1956c). A comparison with earlier books that treat ecclesiology, *What is the Gospel?* (1942) and *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme* (1948b), indeed shows that Newbigin moved from a Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology.

The second shift took place between 1957 and 1961. At the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 Newbigin realized that the ecclesiology of *One Body, One Gospel, One World* was inadequate. This was the result of a process begun four years earlier (1993h:144). Two factors were significant in this shift. First, the times were revolutionary. The collapse of colonialism, increased globalization, the modernization of the world, and the secularization of the West led to a time of rapid social change. These events had a deep impact on the church, theology, missions, and the ecumenical movement as they forced a rethinking of the activity of God in the world. Secondly, Newbigin was at the centre of the storm as an ecumenical leader in the IMC and the WCC. This ecclesiological shift was from a more Christocentric ecclesiology to a Christocentric-Trinitarian one and from a church-centric basis for mission to a notion that places the church in the context of God's purposes for the entire world. His first attempt to formulate this new understanding came with the book *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g).

While Newbigin would modify, fine-tune, and reshape his ecclesiology in many contexts, his Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology remained in place throughout the rest of his life and came to undergird his call for a missionary encounter with western culture.

Two brief quotes from Newbigin's autobiography will point to the logic of this

division.<sup>4</sup> After seventeen years of missionary service, both as a district missionary and as a bishop in the Church of South India, Newbigin wrote:

I found as I wrote that book [*Sin and Salvation* (1956b)] that my thinking had changed in a significant way. Twenty years earlier in writing on this theme I had referred to the Church only in a very marginal way at the end of the essay. In answer to the question 'How does the salvation wrought by Christ become ours?' I had begun with faith and then moved on to speak of the Holy Spirit and the Church. Now I found that I had to begin with the Church ... and then go on to speak of word and sacraments, faith, regeneration, and justification (1993h:137).

This describes the shift from the first to the second period of Newbigin's ecclesiological development. His missionary and ecumenical experience contributed to this major shift that put the church into the centre of his theological thinking.

The second quote points to the second significant shift in Newbigin's ecclesiology. Reflecting on his new appointment as bishop of Madras in 1965 he wrote:

And my own point of view had changed.... Looking back in 1965 upon my earlier ministries in Kanchi and Madurai I felt that I had been too narrowly ecclesiastical in my concerns, and I resolved that I would challenge the strong churches of Madras City to think less of their own growth and welfare and more of God's purpose for the whole of the vast and growing city (1993h:203).

If the missionary context challenged Newbigin's thinking about the church during his years in Kanchi and Madurai, then his ecumenical experience amidst global revolutionary times sharpened his insight into the cosmic context of God's mission in the world. His experience in the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches broadened his vision further. The comprehensive scope of the kingdom and the mission of the Triune God in the world formed the setting for his ecclesiology. This was worked out in practice and writing both in Madras and in Britain.

For Newbigin, theology is reflection on the Scripture in the practice of mission. To understand his development, it is necessary to take account of both his faith and life experience as well as his theological reflection. Indeed, these two were so closely tied together that they cannot be separated. It will be important, therefore, to take account of the historical situation and ecclesial issues that shaped his writings. It is for this reason that the historical section contributes an important dimension to our understanding of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

The second major part will consider Newbigin's systematic ecclesiology. The church has three primary relationships: to God, to its mission, and to its environment. The systematic section unfolds each of these relationships. The first relationship of the

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<sup>4</sup> The historical analysis that follows shows that Newbigin's recollection and self-consciousness of his ecclesiology is consistent with the historical evidence.

church to God is examined in chapters four and five: chapter four treats Newbigin's understanding of the *missio Dei*; chapter five examines the church's missionary identity as it participates in God's mission. The second relationship of the church to its mission is investigated in the next two chapters: chapter six deals with the institutional and communal dimension of the missionary church while chapter seven analyzes the church's task in the world. The third relationship of the church to its religio-cultural environment is sketched in the next two chapters: chapter eight considers Newbigin's understanding of contextualization; chapter nine examines a specific context—the mission of the church in western culture.

The final chapter, Part Three, poses the question of the promise of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology for current discussions on the church. Two conversations are chosen: the discussion within the ecumenical movement regarding the relationship of the church to the world, and the discussion about the missional church within the Gospel and Our Culture network of North America.

## 1.5. SOURCES

The bibliography for this work is divided into three sections: Newbigin's own writings, works of other authors about Newbigin, and background works.

### 1.5.1. Primary Sources

The primary source for this work is Newbigin's own published and unpublished writings. These works are listed in the first part of the bibliography. This bibliography has been updated and expanded from the bibliography found in George R. Hunsberger's dissertation (1987).

Newbigin's writings range broadly, including systematic theological works (e.g., 1953d; 1956b), Biblical studies and commentaries (e.g., 1960b; 1982c), autobiographical reflection (e.g., 1951c; 1993h), speeches given in the context of his ministry (e.g., 1948b; 1950), occasional books and articles addressing important issues of the day (e.g., 1948d; 1982b), and essays in systematic missiology (1963g; 1978e; 1989e). Of special interest is Newbigin's autobiography *Unfinished Agenda* (1993h), first published in 1985 and updated in 1993. This autobiography enables us to follow the chronological development of Newbigin's life.

### 1.5.2. Secondary Sources

The secondary sources that deal with Newbigin can be divided into four parts. First, there are theses, dissertations and published books about Newbigin (e.g., Hunsberger 1987, Veldhorst 1989, Thomas 1996). Second, there are numerous book reviews that assess his publications. I have included only the book reviews cited in the text. Third, there is a growing body of literature dealing with twentieth-century theology, missiology or church history that reserves a prominent—and often large—place for a critical discussion of Newbigin's thought (e.g., Yates 1994:239-244; Ramachandra 1996:143-176). Fourth, there are several encyclopedia articles on Newbigin found in dictionaries of mission (e.g., West 1998, Thorogood 1991).

### 1.5.3. Background Works

There are many background works that have informed the writing of this book that are listed in the third category. First, there are books that give historical background to Newbigin's ministry and life. Books that deal with the history of the church in India, primary source documents and histories of the ecumenical movement, and mission histories are valuable in providing the historical context for Newbigin's life. Secondly, there are many books that Newbigin refers to throughout his writings that have shaped his thinking. For example, in 1912 Roland Allen wrote a book entitled *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's Or Ours?* which challenged the missionary practice of the Protestant churches in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Allen's work has had a formative influence on Newbigin's critique of the relationship between western missions organizations and the younger churches. Out of this critique has developed much fruitful reflection on the missionary church. Instances like this could be multiplied: Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938), Charles Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* (1939), Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (1962) and Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christ and the Powers* (1962) and *Christ, the Meaning of History* (1966) are obvious examples. Thirdly, there is a growing amount of literature on the subject of a missiology of the West. This literature, developed from the questions asked by Newbigin in the 1980s, continues to provide the contemporary context for many of the issues that make the study of Newbigin's work valuable today. Fourth, current works in ecclesiology and missiology provide the theoretical backdrop against which Newbigin's contribution can be understood. Finally, I list some of the books that have significantly shaped the philosophical and theological lenses through which I view the church and Newbigin's development.

## 2. FROM A CHRISTENDOM TO A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY (1909-1959)

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces the ecclesiological development of Bishop J. E. Lesslie Newbigin until 1959. The chapter is divided into two primary sections. Following this introduction, the first section surveys the early period of Newbigin's life (1909-1939), noting important convictions and experiences that shape his later missionary ecclesiology. The second section examines the shift in Newbigin's ecclesiology from a Christendom to a missionary understanding of the church. Specifically we will investigate the impact of his missionary experience in India and his involvement in the ecumenical movement at the time when a missionary ecclesiology was developing. Newbigin served as a district missionary in Kanchipuram (1939-1947) and as bishop in the Church of South India (1947-1959). This cross-cultural missionary experience transformed Newbigin's view of the church. In the ecumenical movement, the same period (from Tambaram 1938 to Ghana 1958) was an ecclesiocentric period in which great gains were made towards a missionary ecclesiology. Newbigin's roots in the ecumenical tradition also shaped his doctrine of the church.

### 2.2. SEEDS OF A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY: NEWBIGIN'S EARLY YEARS (1909-1939)

Reflecting on the various experiences that shaped Newbigin's ecclesiology, one might be inclined to overlook the first three decades of his life. That would be a mistake. A number of foundational experiences provided compass headings for his later ecclesiological development.

#### 2.2.1. *Summary Sketch of Newbigin's Early Years*

This early period of Newbigin's life is divided into five different stages. The first nineteen years were spent in Northumbria. His father, a devout and articulate Christian, lived out the gospel in the context of his shipping business. His mother was a homemaker who provided a loving home for Lesslie and his siblings. Until his eighteenth birthday he attended a Quaker boarding school in Reading. During his teenage years Newbigin abandoned the Christian faith of his early childhood.

The second stage of his life commenced when he entered Queens' University, Cambridge, as a student of geography and economics. During his first year in Cambridge Newbigin returned to faith in Christ and was drawn into the Student Christian Movement (SCM). In turn, this led Newbigin into a number of service and evangelistic projects and also exposed him to numerous ecumenical leaders who visited Cambridge. In his later years at Cambridge his vocational direction changed. His early

ambition was to follow his father, joining him in the shipping business and eventually taking it over. During a SCM Swanwick meeting, Newbigin experienced God's call to the ministry of the gospel. With reluctance he took the advice of John Mott who advised him that the Christian ministry was "the most highly multiplying form of Christian service" (1993h:16).

Upon graduation from Cambridge Newbigin assumed the post of SCM secretary at the University of Glasgow. During his years in Scotland, Newbigin became engaged to Helen Henderson and together they committed themselves to cross-cultural missionary service in India. He participated in the SCM Edinburgh Quadrennial in January 1933, a conference that was to have a shaping effect on his life.

After three years of service in Glasgow, Newbigin returned to Westminster College, Cambridge as a theological student. His academic prowess at Cambridge is legendary. His theological work during this time, especially in the book of Romans and the topic of revelation, led him to consider himself much more of an evangelical than a liberal, although his commitment to unity and social issues continued unabated. His time at Cambridge climaxed with his ordination in the Church of Scotland, marriage to Helen, and a call to missionary service in India.

The final stage of this early period of Newbigin's life is a three-year period (1936-1939) during which he travelled to India. One year after he arrived in India in 1936, he was forced to return to Edinburgh as Candidates' Secretary because of a serious leg injury incurred in a motor vehicle accident.

### *2.2.2. Foundational Experiences: The Birth of Ecclesiological Awareness*

During these early years Newbigin became aware of the importance of the church through a number of foundational experiences that planted seeds which would later bear ecclesiological fruit. In the light of Newbigin's later ecclesiology, eight foundational experiences can be identified.

#### *2.2.2.1. The Centrality of Christ and the Cross*

The 'fact of Jesus Christ' was the compass that gave direction to Lesslie Newbigin throughout his life and was also at the core of his ecclesiology. The centrality of Jesus Christ was cemented in his mind during his early years as a result of two formative experiences—his conversion and an intensive study of the book of Romans.

Newbigin's stirring account of his conversion points to the cross of Jesus Christ as the clue that would give meaning to his life. The context of his vision was the social work he was carrying out among unemployed miners in South Wales and mill-workers in Lancashire. His early hope in the progress of humanity toward a new social order was shattered. What hope could he offer in this hopeless situation? This is how he records that formative experience of the cross:

As I lay awake a vision came to my mind ... It was a vision of the cross, but it was the cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world. I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the

clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would know how to take bearings when I was lost (1993h:11f; cf.1946b:106).

During his years at Westminster a second formative experience focussed this same issue. In his first year he undertook an intensive study of the book of Romans which, by the end of the exercise, led him to say that he was “much more of an evangelical than a liberal.” He relates that this study of Romans “was a turning point in my theological journey. I began the study as a typical liberal. I ended it with a strong conviction about the ‘finished work of Christ’, about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary” (1993h:29).

One final significant event must be noted. During the years of Newbigin’s convalescence in Edinburgh (1937-1939), the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Conference was held. One of the hallmarks of this conference was the powerful voice of Hendrik Kraemer. The theology of mission had been dominated in the years preceding Tambaram by the report of the famous Laymen’s Foreign Mission Inquiry (1933) and the book *Rethinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry After 100 Years* edited by W. E. Hocking (1933). These documents had proposed a mission theology that eclipsed the central place of Jesus Christ, except as a supreme religious teacher and pattern of religious life to be commended to those who wished “to carry out the same venture” (Hocking 1933:55). The debate provoked by the theology aroused J. H. Oldham and others to commission Hendrik Kraemer to author a book for the Tambaram Conference that would address the issue of the gospel of Jesus Christ and other faiths (Yates 1994:108). Kraemer’s book (1938) dropped like a bomb-shell focussing the discussions at Tambaram and for the next several decades. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Tambaram, Newbigin noted Kraemer’s fundamental theme:

Kraemer’s book was—by implication—a direct repudiation of this attempt to domesticate the gospel within western, European, and American values. It was an affirmation of the uniqueness, the decisiveness, the sufficiency of the gospel—of those mighty acts of God, which have their centre and climax in the incarnation, ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1988i:327).

Newbigin appended a lengthy autobiographical note recalling that “for those of us who lived through those days it is hard to communicate to others the sheer liberation that this simple message brought... . We were part of the great confusion, the great betrayal, which had bracketed the gospel with all sorts of causes and interests... .” (*Ibid.*). Newbigin remembered Kraemer as one who carried the protest against the marginalization of the gospel to the heart of the missionary movement. His bold witness made an impact on Newbigin (1988i:327f.). Kraemer’s writings strengthened the

centrality of Jesus Christ in Newbigin's life during this time.<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.2.2.2. Life of Christian Service Rooted In Prayer

Prayer played a central role in Newbigin's life as a missionary and as a church leader. He would later articulate its pivotal place in the life of a missionary church and among its leaders. His convictions about prayer were formed early in life.

In the brief descriptions of his parents' home, Newbigin included the memory of his father's commitment to prayer every morning before he took up the task of working in the tough world of business. The significance that prayer would have for Newbigin himself can be understood by noting the first answer he received to his queries about becoming a Christian. As he was being drawn to faith in Jesus Christ, Newbigin asked one of the SCM members: "If I wanted to be a Christian, how would I begin?" The answer: "Buy an alarm clock", which Newbigin understood as a reference to the 'morning watch', a tradition of early morning Bible reading and prayer (1993h:10). He began the practice of rising early to read the Bible and pray—a habit that continued to his death. He was drawn to Christ especially through the life of Arthur Watkins, a fellow SCM member. He describes Arthur in this way. "As I came to know him I realized that the centre of his life was a profound devotion to Christ. Prayer was his deepest being, and he made me want to learn to pray" (1993h:10).

Newbigin did learn to pray and its importance is revealed in the further references he made to prayer at several other points during his early years. It was while he was praying at the Swanwick Conference in 1930 that he was called to the ministry of the Word. During his years of theological education, he expressed thankfulness that Herbert Farmer, a theology professor at Westminster College, introduced a quiet day during which the students were encouraged to meditate and pray. However, he lamented

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<sup>1</sup>It is surprising to note that Newbigin does not refer to Tambaram or Kraemer's influence in his autobiography. Yet his later reflections refer to this as a significant event in his life. On my first meeting with Newbigin in his London home in 1994, after he had ushered me into his room, his first gesture was to point to one of two pictures he had kept when he moved into his smaller apartment at retirement. It was a picture of Hendrik Kraemer. (The other was a picture of Karl Barth.) He asked me if I knew who he was and then proceeded to talk at length about Kraemer's shaping influence on him.

that Westminster College and the Reformed tradition of ministerial training largely ignored the interior life of prayer and meditation.

The repeated references in Newbigin's autobiography to prayer and the nourishment of the interior life by Bible reading, contemplation, and meditation, and the importance that he ascribes to these exercises, adumbrate later developments in his ecclesiology. The life of service can only be sustained if it is nourished by prayer and meditation on the Scriptures.

### 2.2.2.3. An Ecumenical Vision: The Unity of the Worldwide Church

The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of a new paradigm of ecclesiastical unity. Growing in the soil of global confessional alliances and comity agreements in the late 19th century, and continuing in the international student movements and the international missionary conferences, this new paradigm was a unity born out of a missionary concern for the world. Willem Saayman begins his study on mission and unity with these words: "The ecumenical movement does not derive simply from a passion for unity; it sprang from a passion for unity that is completely fused in mission" (Saayman 1984:8). Unity and mission were inextricably intertwined in this new paradigm. A milestone in this growing concern for unity was the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. This conference gave rise to several structural initiatives that fostered cooperation: *International Review of Missions*, International Missionary Council (IMC), Faith and Order. This growing tide of commitment to the unity of the church would lead to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) at Amsterdam in 1948.

William Richey Hogg notes four tributary streams of co-operation that flowed together to make Edinburgh and the formation of the IMC possible (Hogg 1952:16, 81). The most important of these was the student movements that arose in the universities. The Student Christian Movement (SCM) at Cambridge and the Student Volunteer Mission Union (SVMU) of Glasgow were instrumental in nourishing Newbigin with a passionate vision for the unity of the body of Christ. The Cambridge SCM was able to attract many great men and women to come and speak to the students. These were men and women with an ecumenical vision and a breadth of cross-cultural experience. Many of them, like John Mott, Joseph H. Oldham, Hendrik Kraemer, and William Temple, were leaders in the ecumenical movement. It is not surprising that exposure to these men and women began to give Newbigin a "thrilling sense of sharing in a worldwide Christian enterprise which was commanding the devotion of men and women whose sheer intellectual and spiritual power was unmistakable... the Christian faith into which I was growing was ecumenical from the beginning" (1993h:13). Consistent with the development of the ecumenical movement, Newbigin's longing for unity was very closely related to the mission of the church; the church, as a foretaste of the new world, must witness to the power of Christ to draw all people to Himself in one body.

From his early years, Newbigin attempted to heal division in the body of Christ. In Cambridge there was a division between the evangelical Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU) and the more ecumenical SCM. The official view of the CICCU was that the SCM members were unbelievers. This division was displayed at every evensong in the college chapel when the bodily posture of the various groups

broadcast deep division. Later as an SCM president Newbigin pled with the CICCUC president to join together in a public celebration that would honour the work of the 'Cambridge Seven' whose offer for missionary service triggered the formation of the SVMU; but his pleas were to no avail. The adamant refusal of the CICCUC to recognize the SCM as a legitimate part of the Christian church brought Newbigin bitter disappointment.

#### 2.2.2.4. The Unity of Evangelism and Social Concern

Newbigin's early years coincided with a scandalous and crippling controversy that was polarizing the body of Christ. The conflict raged over the understanding and practice of mission. Flowing from revivalism of the late 19th century, the evangelical tradition stressed verbal proclamation. Rooted in the social gospel movement of the same time period, the ecumenical tradition emphasized social action.

The early years of Newbigin's life were occupied with this struggle. His association with the ecumenically oriented SCM involved him early in social activity. However, his interest in social issues and ministries of service to the needy were displayed before his conversion and involvement in the SCM. In his first year at Cambridge he became involved in Quaker social projects to boys on the street and miners in South Wales. At the same time, he recognized that these men needed "some kind of faith that would fortify them for today and tomorrow against apathy and despair... . They needed the Christian faith that was beginning to draw me" (1993h:11). It was in this context that the vision of the cross that "reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory" came to him (1993h:11).

After his conversion, involvement in the SCM reinforced this commitment to merciful service. His life continued to offer him opportunities to be involved socially and politically. His reflection on the relationship between evangelism and social concern was forming during this time. While struggling with Romans and understanding himself to be much more of an evangelical than a liberal, he makes the following statement: "But this shift in no way implied a lessening of commitment to political and social issues" (1993h:29). His frequent contact with Oldham in preparation for the Oxford Conference on 'Church, Community, and State' and his Scriptural studies on the Kingdom of God kept him resolute in his commitment to social issues.

As a young theological student Newbigin was aware of the tension that existed between social concern and evangelism. He manifested a commitment to overcome this division. In his years in theological college he was involved in evangelistic campaigns as well as in work camps that laboured to help the needy. "There was always a certain tension between those who were keen on direct evangelism and those who were concerned about social justice" (1993h:33). In 1935, he became involved in an operation to bring the evangelistic campaigns and work camps together. The result was that in July of that year a substantial group of students spent eight hours a day building a playground for needy children and more hours at night preaching the gospel in the streets. In his later ecclesiological formulations the inextricable unity between word and deed would play an important role.

#### 2.2.2.5. The Gospel and Believers in Public Life

Throughout his life issues of gospel and public life were central to Newbigin's understanding of the missionary church. The early years of Newbigin already demonstrated this deep interest as he struggled to relate the gospel to the public life of society. He comments:

National and international politics, the rise of Italian and German Fascism, the question of Indian independence and the ever-present reality of unemployment and destitution among Clyde shipyard workers—these were the living issues in relation to which we tried to understand and articulate the Christian faith (1993h:23).

Perhaps it was his struggle with the relationship of the gospel to business that was most formative. Newbigin would later identify the mission of the “laity” as the primary place where the missionary encounter occurs. That conviction was nourished early in his life by at least two things: his father's faithful witness, and the missionary report he compiled for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

His father was a businessman who faithfully attempted “to apply his Christian faith to the day-to-day issues of business and politics” (1993h:3). His commitment fostered this interest in young Lesslie. He struggled with issues of capitalism and socialism, describing his first exposure to “structural sin”, as he would later learn to call it, in the fierce and exciting jungle of the market. As a new believer he noted that he was the only committed Christian that was not moving toward ordination. Preparing instead to follow his father in business, he “had seen in him that to be a Christian in the world of commerce was a difficult thing” (1993h:14). SCM did not challenge its members to consider this calling, or to struggle with these issues. He formed a society for “Christians *not* intending to be ordained” but willing to struggle with issues of gospel and public life. When later he was called to the ministry of the Word part of his distress was the question: “And what about the vocation to be a Christian in business, and the group of fellow-students at Cambridge whom I had encouraged to accept this calling?” (1993h:15, cf.16). The ‘Christians in Business’ society was to wilt when he withdrew—an event that brought him shame, distress and much pondering in the years to come (1993h:17).

While Newbigin was recovering from his serious leg injury, he was given the full-time job as Candidates Secretary for the Foreign Missions Committee of the Church of Scotland (1993h:43). Part of his task was to plough through the annual reports of several hundred missionaries and compile a popular annual account of the foreign missionary enterprise for the members of the church. In his concluding chapter he records three lessons for the home church. The reports of the missionaries pressed him to register his conviction that “the success or failure of the Church depends supremely upon the witness to Christ of the ordinary lay member” (1938b:58).

#### 2.2.2.6. The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Missions

On 5 October 1987, Newbigin delivered an address at the service of dedication and inauguration of the new Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut which was given the title that heads this section (1994k:113-120). More than 54 years before this he gave an address at the SMVU Missionary Conference in Edinburgh that

could have been given the same title (1933). This address demonstrates Newbigin's early conviction that cross-cultural missions is central to a missionary church. The nature of the church is ecumenical and this worldwide nature must be demonstrated in cross-cultural mission (1933:100). These two addresses bracket a life committed to foreign missions as a necessary dimension of the church's calling.

This conviction was undoubtedly shaped by the SCM, which nourished his early faith. He comments that early in his Christian life he had "a thrilling sense of sharing in a worldwide Christian enterprise which was commanding the devotion of men and women whose sheer intellectual and spiritual power was unmistakable" (1993h:13). He began to read the *International Review of Missions* during these early years. He sealed this commitment with his life's service. Upon his engagement he and his fiancée Helen committed themselves to foreign missionary service. His conviction had to withstand a powerful challenge from Oldham who was determined to dissuade Newbigin from going to India so that he might work for the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State.

#### 2.2.2.7. Mission and Western Culture

Since Newbigin's ministry would culminate in a call for a missionary encounter with western culture, it is important to attend to the early formative experiences that would shape that challenge. During his high school years in the Quaker boarding school he remarks that in his last year he read a book that shaped his thinking significantly (1993h:6). That book, entitled *The Living Past: A Sketch of Western Progress* (1920) written by Francis S. Martin, led Newbigin to believe that the human story was an upward striving towards freedom, happiness, and enlightenment that would be achieved by science, technology, and social organization that began in the West and was spreading across the globe. He saw himself as part of that "noble campaign."

Six years later another formative experience would lead him to reflect on the challenge of the gospel to the story that shaped western culture. This was the Edinburgh Quadrennial of January 1933. It brought together several thousand students from nearly fifty nations to put before them a call to world mission. This conference was different in that the issues of western culture, and not the concerns of traditional mission fields, dominated the agenda. The German theologian and Lutheran church leader Hans Lilje, for example, spoke of "the falsification of Christianity which had made it a 'mere appendage of bourgeois thought'" (1993h:25; cf. Lilje 1933:49). However, the significance of this event for Newbigin's life was in "a profound and prophetic address" of Oldham in which "he spoke of the radical departure of Europe from the Christian faith when it followed Descartes and the pioneers of the Enlightenment" (1993h:25). He challenged the students—although not in so many words—to regard the western world as a mission field.

The significance of this address for Newbigin's development is reflected in an observation he made in 1985: "I would dare to say that missionary thinking in Europe and North America has not yet met the challenge which Edinburgh gave to develop a genuinely missionary encounter with post-Enlightenment European civilization"

(1993h:25).<sup>2</sup> These words were penned when his book *The Other Side of 1984* (1983d)—the book that would launch such an encounter—was coming off the press. Oldham's challenge of 1933 would bear fruit in the later work of Newbigin.

Already in these early years that encounter was forming. The single subject that dominated his thinking in his early years was the relationship of God's kingdom to history. He worked on this subject during his last years at Westminster College

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<sup>2</sup>Oldham's address never explicitly speaks of a radical departure from the Christian faith when Europe followed Descartes and the Enlightenment leaders. He never mentions the Enlightenment at all. He mentions Descartes once (Oldham 1933:58) as the starting point for modern thought. Further, he does not refer explicitly to the West as a mission field. Newbigin admits this when he adds "though it was not said so bluntly" (1993h:25). Oldham does address modernity's reductionism (not his term) to what he calls the dimension of appropriation. However, in the written form of the address I cannot hear what Newbigin heard. In the speech given the day before by Hans Lilje there is much more of a call for a missionary encounter with western culture: in an encounter with Communism western Christians must "get away from the bourgeois falsification of its message" (Lilje 1933:50f.). When one looks at the schedule of the Edinburgh Quadrennial a recognition of the West as a mission field is undeniably present. There were afternoon sessions each day on "The Western World" and "Industry" along with sessions on India, Africa, China, Japan, Moslem World, and Jews. This bears out Newbigin's comment that missionary thinking has not yet met the challenge issued at *Edinburgh* "to develop a genuinely missionary encounter with post-Enlightenment European civilization." Perhaps Oldham's address must be heard in this context to understand that the mission field is now in the "Christian world."

(1993h:68). That reflection bore fruit in a series of lectures he gave at the United Theological College in Bangalore in 1941. In the first of those lectures he criticizes the doctrine of progress that has shaped western culture and has also shaped the Christian church. This lecture contains seeds of his later critique of progress, science, and the syncretism of the church with western culture.

Hendrik Kraemer also contributed to Newbigin's consciousness of the syncretism which takes place in the West between the gospel and culture. Years later Newbigin would reflect on the significance of Kraemer's book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) prepared for Tambaram. Newbigin remembered it at that time as "a direct repudiation of this attempt to domesticate the gospel within Western European and American values." The churches of Europe and North American "had become domestic chaplains to the nations, rather than bearers of the word of God to the nations." Kraemer's powerful voice challenged this "dangerous syncretism between Christianity and the values of nation and of western civilization" (1988j:81). Commenting on Kraemer's impact, Newbigin says:

His deepest concern was for the integrity of the Christian message, for its sovereign freedom, and therefore for its sharp separation from the contemporary confusion between the gospel and the values of western civilization (1988j:82).

#### 2.2.2.8. Theological Reflection on Revelation

In Newbigin's last year of theological training he wrote a thirty-six page paper that would prove to be significant for his later thinking on the church. In this essay he reflects on the doctrine of revelation. On the first three pages he articulates two foundational assumptions that emerge a number of times in his later writing.

The central importance of revelation in Christianity depends on two fundamental beliefs about the nature of the world and humankind (1936:1). First, the world is personal. By this Newbigin means that ultimately a personal God gives meaning and purpose to the creation. If this is the case, then scientific knowledge—marked by skepticism and experiment—is not an appropriate way to understand the meaning and purpose of the world. We can only know a person's will or purpose by listening to that person if he chooses to reveal himself.<sup>3</sup> Second, human life is fellowship or community. If it were not, every human being could receive a direct revelation from God. However, the communal nature of humankind means that "revelation which is the key to our highest blessedness does not descend to us straight from heaven, but has to reach us passed from hand to hand of our fellow men along the chain of a historic community" (1936:2).

These two assumptions in this paper would play an important role in Newbigin's

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<sup>3</sup>This contrast of scientific knowing with personal knowing appears to be indebted to Martin Buber I/Thou, I/It distinction (Buber 1937). How Newbigin was influenced by Buber is not so clear. Newbigin never mentions Buber in this paper but notes his indebtedness a number of times in later works (e.g. 1989e:60). Buber's *I and Thou* was not translated into English until 1937—a year after Newbigin's paper was written. Ronald Gregor Smith, translator of Buber, mentions in his introduction to the second edition of *I and Thou* that contemporary theology was shaped by Buber. Specifically he points to J. H. Oldham and H. H. Farmer who acknowledge their indebtedness to Buber's book. Oldham's influence on Newbigin was significant. H. H. Farmer was Newbigin's theology professor during the time he wrote this paper. Perhaps it was through these men that Newbigin embraced this important distinction.

ecclesiology: revelation is the disclosure of God's purpose and will for the creation; this disclosure is given to a community that becomes the bearer of that revelation for the sake of the rest of humanity.

### 2.2.3. *The Tambaram International Missionary Council Conference (1938)*

It is surprising that Newbigin does not make reference to the influence of the Tambaram Conference of the IMC in his autobiography. While he did not attend this conference his later writings show the importance of this conference in his thinking. This is most clearly seen in the debt he owes to Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. It can also be observed in the number of times he registers Tambaram as a turning point in ecumenical thinking on mission (1963g:11; 1980f:9f.). It was at Tambaram that a truly missionary ecclesiology began to develop.

If the notion of a missionary church was to blossom, a number of foundational assumptions about mission would need to change. If mission is considered to be primarily an enterprise of Christian expansion that takes place from the West to the third world, then the church will be either an institution in the West which nobly supports such projects or a parallel institution in the third world alongside mission that functions as a container in which to place converts. This misunderstanding of mission leads to the following problematic conclusions: mission and church are separated; the western church supports missions as one of its worthy causes; the third world church stands alongside the work of western missions as a parallel organization; the world is divided between a Christian West and a pagan non-West; the West is the home base and the non-West is the mission field; the world church is divided into older and younger churches wherein the older western churches take the primary initiative for mission. If an understanding of the congregation as the fundamental unit of mission—wherever it is located—was to develop then these assumptions would need to be challenged.

The rise of the modern ecumenical movement is customarily dated from the time of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910. In the period up to 1910, including Edinburgh, the dominant understanding of mission was expansion (Yates 1994:7). At this conference the issue of the relationship between church and mission was not touched. The overwhelming emphasis was on the responsibilities of all believers to proclaim the gospel and a major concern was the absence of such a missionary enthusiasm among individual church members. Mission was to bring the gospel to every individual: "the evangelization of the world in this generation." The world was divided between the home base for mission in the West and the mission field outside the West. The West was made up of Christian nations while the non-West was considered non-Christian. The primary concern was how to carry the gospel to the whole non-Christian world (cf. opening message) and the agenda revolved around "missionary problems in relation to the non-Christian world" (cf. subtitle of conference proceedings).<sup>4</sup> A spirit of conquest permeated the Edinburgh understanding of mission.

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<sup>4</sup>There is one statement in the report of Commission II on "The Church in the Mission Field" which questions this division. "The whole world is the mission field, and there is no Church that is not a Church in the mission field. Some Christian communities are younger and some are older, but that is all the difference" (Edinburgh 2:4). However, this statement was contradicted by the very structure of the commissions (e.g., Commission 2 was "The Church in the Mission Field; Commission 6 was "The Home Base

By 1928 when the World Conference of Jerusalem met, the geographic expansion model of mission was being challenged. The relationship between older and younger churches received considerable attention (cf. Jerusalem 3: The Relations Between the Younger and Older Churches). The Chinese Christian leader S. C. Leung argued that “the time for two parallel organisations, the mission and the indigenous church, was past” (Yates 1994:67). Rufus Jones challenged the geographic distinction between the Christian West and non-Christian world: “We go to Jerusalem, then, not as members of a Christian nation to convert other nations which are not Christian, but as Christians within a nation far too largely non-Christian, who face within their own borders the competition of a rival movement as powerful, as dangerous, as insidious as any of the historic religions” (Jerusalem 1:273; quoted in Hogg 1952:247). Consideration of these issues would pave the way for the development of a missionary ecclesiology. However, that reflection was only in its infancy; the expansion model remained the norm.

In 1938 Kraemer<sup>5</sup> posed the question that would set the tone for ecumenical thinking for at least a quarter of a century: “The church and all Christians ... are confronted with the question, what is the essential nature of the church, and what is its obligation to the world?” (quoted in Stransky 1991:688). The watchword of the 1937 meeting of the Oxford Life and Work Conference on Church Community and State that defined this emerging period was “let the church be the church.” The Church which had so long been ignored or taken for granted in missionary discussion now came to centre stage.

The third missionary conference in Tambaram 1938 marks the beginning of a new period of church-centred missiology. John Mott sounded this note in his opening address. “It is the church which is to be at the centre of our thinking ... the Divine Society founded by Christ and His apostles to accomplish His will in the world” (IMC 1939a 7:4). Bishop Azariah of Dornakal, one of the influential figures at Tambaram, also sounded a clarion call to recognize the central redemptive significance of the church. He opened his address with these words:

That the Church is the divine society created by God for the continuation in the world of the work that Jesus Christ began through his life, death, and resurrection is a truth that has not yet received universal recognition (IMC 1939a 3:32).

These opening summonses found frequent expression throughout the official report.

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of Mission”) and the consistent use of language identifying non-western nations as “non-Christian” and western nations as “Christian” (Edinburgh 6:272).

<sup>5</sup>In 1936 Hendrik Kraemer received a *doctor honoris causa* (Honourary Ph.D) from the University of Utrecht on the occasion of the university’s 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

“World evangelism ... is inherent in the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ created by God to continue in the world the work which Jesus Christ began in His life and teaching, and consummated by His death and resurrection. This conception of the Church as the missionary to the world is given in the New Testament” (IMC 1939b:35). Indeed, the central subject of the entire Tambaram report is the church. As Newbigin points out: “the Church is the subject of almost every significant sentence about mission” (1980f:9; cf. Hogg 1952:297). This emphasis on the church led veteran Indian missionary E. Stanley Jones to complain that missions was taking a wrong road and that the proper concern for mission ought not be the church but the kingdom of God (Anderson 1988:107; Hogg 1952:298,425). Jones notwithstanding, mission took an ecclesiocentric path. In this emphasis on the church a new note was sounded: mission is not only an aspect of the church’s life but the church is constituted by mission. As the IMC historian Hogg says: “One point they [Tambaram Council] made pre-eminently clear: the mission is not a segment of the church’s life. On the contrary, the church exists to fulfill a divinely ordained mission ...” (Hogg 1952:298).

These insights would be developed further until, at Willingen, they were given consistent theological expression in the *missio Dei*. Tambaram and the future developments of a missionary ecclesiology in the missionary conferences of the IMC would play a significant formative role in the Newbigin’s ecclesiological formulations.

#### 2.2.4. Summary

The first three decades of Newbigin’s life were significant for the future development of his ecclesiology. Early family life, subjects of study in college and seminary, service projects, significant people, and the theological formulations of the Tambaram Conference were among the life experiences that gave clear direction to Newbigin’s later ecclesiology.

Newbigin immediately became involved in the life of the church. He refers appreciatively to his involvement in St. Columba’s Presbyterian Church in Cambridge where George Barclay was pastor (1993h:14). During this time Newbigin did not author anything on ecclesiology. His first writing on the topic in the next decade would show evidence of a Christendom understanding of the church.

### 2.3. FROM A CHRISTENDOM ECCLESIOLOGY TO A MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY (1939-1959)

Newbigin’s first ecclesiological articulations came in the decade of the 1940s (1942; 1944a; 1948d). A comparison of these writings with his ecclesiological formulations in the next decade show that a shift had taken place from an understanding of the church shaped by Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology. Although by 1948 the impact of Newbigin’s missionary experience led him for the first time to refer to the church as missionary (1948d:10, 165), he does not yet develop this insight. The shift to a more consistent missionary ecclesiology would take place in the decade of the 1950s.

To understand this shift we must take account of two important formative factors in Newbigin’s life—his missionary experience and his close association with the ecumenical tradition during a time when the contours of a missionary ecclesiology were

taking shape. This section will briefly sketch this ecclesiological shift and then account for that change by describing Newbigin's missionary experience and involvement in the ecumenical tradition.

Newbigin's thinking changed significantly concerning the place of the church by the time he wrote *Sin and Salvation* in 1956 (1993h:137). While the church played a somewhat marginal role in his thought early in his missionary career, there is a gradual transition which brings the church to a much more central role. This shift can be seen by comparing a brief tract on the gospel (1942) with this new formulation (1956c).

The little booklet *What is the Gospel?* (1942) was part of the SCM study series written for Bible Study leaders in the Indian church. Following several sections on the faith, the authority of Scripture and the nature of God, Newbigin turns to the heart of the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ. In the next nine sections he treats the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Following a section on the testimony of the apostles to the Lordship of Jesus, he devotes the next three sections to the "new powers which follow" (1942:15-17). Here we find a treatment of the Holy Spirit, the new relationship between the individual believer and God, and the freedom and good works of the believer. Tacked on to the end in one short section of one paragraph is a discussion of the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit." Here he speaks of the work of the Spirit in creating a new community of believers. So the order we find in this booklet is faith, gospel, Spirit, individual salvation, and church.

We can note the following. First, the gospel is treated primarily from an individual standpoint. The challenge in the first section is to each person to believe the testimony of Scripture. Then the gospel or the content of belief follows. The Holy Spirit is the One who makes the salvific work of Christ effective in producing a new relationship of freedom and good works. The church is then a community of individual believers who have believed and received the Holy Spirit. Second, there is no recognition of the indispensable and central place of the church as the primary instrument by which the gospel is transmitted. The challenge is to believe the testimony of Scripture. This can be contrasted with an emphasis that surfaces for the first time in *The Reunion of the Church* (1948):

If God's purpose of salvation could be accomplished by providing each one of us with an infallibly correct statement of the truth about Him expressed in the form of propositions, then Christ would have written a book. There would have then been no need for a Church... . It would be sufficient for each individual to know and accept what the book contained (1948d:131).

Newbigin emphasizes that we meet Christ in the Bible, but this cannot be understood in individualistic terms, in fact, "this meeting is always in the context of the fellowship of His people" (1948d:135). Third, there is no mention of the church as a missionary community. In keeping with Christendom ecclesiologies, the church is described simply as a community of individuals who have experienced the new powers of the Holy Spirit. Its instrumental role in the coming of God's kingdom is not even noted.

By the time he wrote *Sin and Salvation*, Newbigin had almost twenty years of missionary experience behind him. Commenting on the fact that the church had moved to a central place in his theology, he writes: "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 logical place” (1993h:138). What was that logical place?

The order of themes in *Sin and Salvation* is as follows. Following three chapters on sin and one chapter on the preparation for salvation in the Old Testament the work of the Saviour follows. Chapter seven is entitled “How Salvation Becomes Ours.” Here the order has changed from that of the 1942 booklet. Instead of faith, gospel, Spirit, fruits of salvation for the individual, and church we find gospel, church, Spirit, faith, fruits of salvation. The church is no longer an addendum but finds a primary place after the gospel as the primary vehicle by which it is communicated. “Now I found that I had to begin with the Church—the point at which the unbeliever came into contact with the redemptive work of Christ—and then go on to speak of word and sacraments, faith, regeneration and justification” (1993h:137; cf. 1948d:29). In his preface Newbigin explains the logic of this decision:

When I came to write that chapter [How does salvation become ours?] I found that I had to make a decision about the order of the sections. In the tradition in which I was brought up it would be normal to begin with a section on ‘Faith’ and work through to a (probably brief) concluding section on the Church. After a good deal of reflection I decided to reverse the order... there seem to me to be two good reasons for the order I have adopted. Firstly, it is the order which the reader of the New Testament finds himself following: the Acts of the Apostles come before the Epistles—the fact of the Church before the clue to its inner life. Secondly, it is the order which the non-Christian has to follow when he comes to Christ. What he sees is a visible congregation in his village. It is that congregation which holds out to him the offer of salvation. Only when he has come within its fellowship does he (usually) come to any deep understanding of its inner source (1956c:8f.).

In the section on the church we no longer find a description of the church as a fellowship of redeemed individuals. Rather the question of how do the benefits of the gospel become mine is answered: “It becomes mine when I become part of this society, this fellowship, He left behind Him to be the continuation of His life on earth” (1956c:93). As he moves on to the Spirit, faith, and the benefits of salvation the church is never out of the picture. In fact, it is explicitly mentioned in each part. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the new man. This putting on of the new man means two things. First, it is “a constant participation in the life of the fellowship of God’s children, and in the means of grace with which it has been furnished” (1956c:113). Second, the task of witness to the world is noted—a theme not mentioned in 1942. “[T]he extension of this life in Christ will be seen in the acts of witness and service by which we go out to bring all things under the power of Christ’s atonement” (1956c:113; see also :124, 125).

While it was his writing of *Sin and Salvation* that brought the recognition of the ecclesiological shift that had taken place, we find a much more comprehensive, systematic and nuanced discussion of the church in two other books written during this time—*The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d) and *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958b).

The central insight in Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology is expressed in the commissioning words of Jesus in John 20:21, a verse that would define his understanding of the missionary church to the last days of his life: “As the Father has

sent me, I am sending you.”<sup>6</sup> This commission gives the church its existence and its identity: it is a body chosen and called to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus in this redemptive time period between the coming of Christ and his coming again (1953d:153; 1958b:17ff.). Mission is not one function or ministry of the church but rather, in the words of Emil Brunner that Newbigin is fond of quoting, “the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning” (Brunner 1931:108, quoted in 1953d:162). Or put in Latin, mission belongs to the *esse* of the church, not to the *bene esse* (1953d:163). Since the church has received the eschatological Spirit, it participates already in the end-time kingdom. This participation in the kingdom of God establishes the church, during this redemptive era, as a sign, first fruits, and instrument of the age to come (1953d:167). As such it is called to witness in life, word, and deed to the good news of the kingdom locally and to the ends of the earth (1958b:23f.).

### 2.3.1. *Newbigin’s Early Missionary Experience*

The shift to a missionary ecclesiology was the result of at least two factors—his missionary experience and his ecumenical experience. After his convalescence in Edinburgh and return to India, Newbigin spent seven years (1939-1947) in Kanchipuram, one of the seven most sacred cities to the Hindu. As a district missionary he oversaw the mission work in the city and the surrounding villages. When the South India United Church (SIUC: made up of former Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches) united with the Methodist and Anglican communions to form the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947, Newbigin was appointed as the bishop of Madurai. He laboured the next twelve years in that city (1947-1959). It was, in large part, this missionary experience that reshaped Newbigin’s understanding of the church.

### 2.3.2. *Ecclesiological Themes Arising Out of Missionary Experience*

A number of issues and themes arose out of this missionary experience that played a formative role in Newbigin’s ecclesiology. Seventeen such themes are noted here. The order of these themes is determined by Newbigin’s later mature ecclesiology. The question that will occupy us in this section is, how did Newbigin’s missionary experience shift his ecclesiology from a Christendom to a missionary understanding?

#### 2.3.2.1. *Missionary Conviction Applied to the Church*

As a missionary Newbigin learned that the difference between most believers and a

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<sup>6</sup>One of Newbigin’s last sermons given at Samford University in June 1997 is based on this text and given the title of the words of Jesus.

missionary is that the missionary knows he is in a place for one reason: to bear witness to the gospel faithfully. This is not one more task alongside others but shapes every aspect of his or her life. He would affirm in 1948 in Amsterdam that the church must proclaim the good news of the kingdom because “the Church’s duty to preach the gospel belongs to its very nature” (1948:32). This missionary conviction deepened as a result of his ministry in India. He recounts how his street preaching would often produce sharp encounters from questioners amidst a hostile crowd. “Such experiences test as with fire those views which first took intellectual shape in friendly battles round college coffee cups, test and also sharpen one’s missionary convictions” (1993h:52).

These missionary convictions as applied to the church in India gradually deepened throughout his time there. The church’s fundamental purpose is evangelistic (1993h:87): Newbigin’s experience in India, where the church is a tiny minority of the population in the midst of other religions made this clear. Later as he carried out his job as bishop he saw his whole task as developing missionary congregations (1993h:99).

#### 2.3.2.2. The Church Chosen to Continue Christ’s Witness

This missionary conviction was nourished by an understanding that God had chosen a particular people to continue Christ’s witness to the salvation of the world. This conviction was fostered by the Indian context of his missionary experience. Preaching the gospel raised opposition in India. The gospel was “unwelcome teaching” to the Indian ear because of its historical particularity. Newbigin places this objection in the words of a hypothetical questioner: “We are inclined to ask: ‘Why should I study the history of this obscure and unattractive tribe? Why should I not study what God has done for my own people and my own land? Can I not find Him in these things?’” (1956c:44). Opposition to this particularity of the gospel raised the question of authority. What right did he have to preach the gospel in India? How could a missionary in India claim universal validity for a particular history—the history of the Jews culminating in Jesus?

Newbigin’s answer was twofold. First, the duty and authority of the Church to preach the gospel spring from the authority of Jesus Himself. Jesus received authority from God the Father to embody and preach good news. The mission of the church is continuing what Jesus began based on the authority of the name of Jesus (1948b:20f.). The texts that he refers to at this point to summarize this commitment (John 20:19-23 and Acts 1:1-8) will become foundational for Newbigin’s missionary understanding of the church. The second reason Newbigin gives in answer to the authority of the church to preach the gospel is a missionary understanding of the doctrine of election. The central theme of the Bible “is God’s choosing (election) of a people to be His own people, by whom He purposes to save the world” (1954e:75). The church has been chosen by Jesus and, therefore, it “has the duty and authority to preach the Gospel... because God has chosen it for this thing” (1948b:30). The doctrine of election became a central feature in Newbigin’s ecclesiology early as a result of his missionary experience in India (Hunsberger 1998:48-58).

#### 2.3.2.3. The Witness of the Church in Word and Deed

A third conviction that continued to develop during this time as a result of his

missionary experience was that the witness to the gospel is given in word and deed. Newbiggin early began the practice of street preaching. While he questioned the value and effectiveness of street preaching, he believed it to have some effect because it was clear that those who preached were also those who taught their boys and girls in the schools, helped the poor in their desperate poverty, were involved in attempts to make a more just society, and cared for their sick in the hospital (1994k:62). High schools, hospitals and dispensaries, leprosaria, orphanages, colleges, and agricultural co-operative societies were among the many institutions that western missions had established in India. Although Newbiggin would have occasion to criticize these institutions in the mission of the Indian church, he recognized that the institutional work gave weight to the preaching and preaching gave point to the institutional work (1993h:53).

It was not only the institutions of mercy that shaped Newbiggin's convictions about the importance of witness in deed; it was also the pervasive presence of the poor (1993h:73). The caste system, a growing population (5 million per year), the technological revolution, and natural disasters all contributed to poverty on a massive scale.

From the beginning of his ministry, Newbiggin identified himself with the poor. E. H. Johnson, General Secretary of the Student Volunteer Movement for Christian Mission in 1951, summarizes Newbiggin's solidarity with the marginalized as follows:

The message of His mighty acts, culminating in the life, the death, the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, must be preached. It preaches to all men, but in particular reaches out to the outcastes, the dispossessed, the poor.

Here is where Newbiggin begins. He spends much of his time with the poor, for his task is to identify himself with them.... His mission is to be one with these who are struggling out of poverty, injustice, and filth.... He considers his primary task so to identify himself with those in trouble that they might feel that he is one of them, sympathetic with their needs and determined to help them. When the poor find their wells dry, he tries to help them get water. When a farmer is hurt, he goes to serve him. When a mother is deserted, he is there to find ways of support. He writes, "Surely it is of immense significance that the Church has become rooted here and among the lowest strata in society" (Johnson 1951:17).

The villages where Newbiggin spent much of his time during this period were made up of "the inarticulate and exploited millions whose labour keeps the world going" and upon whom "that other world [the West] is built" (1993h:58). These were among the poorest in the world, the exploited untouchables, who were excluded from participation in the social and religious life of the nation by traditional Hindu law. These people were subject to systematic humiliation at every point. Newbiggin was involved in numerous efforts to help improve their economic position, such as introducing high-yielding poultry and village school gardens (1993h:59).

While these efforts did not have big results, the gospel did. Later, he looked back at the church's involvement with the poor: "One could not fail to see that the Gospel was doing what it has always done, making it possible for those who were formerly 'no people' to become 'God's people'. The reality of the term Ghandi coined for these people—*Harijan*, meaning God's people—was actually experienced and enjoyed by those who had been enabled through Jesus to look up and say 'Father'" (1993h:59).

#### 2.3.2.4. Incarnation, Involvement, and Identification

Newbigin's later descriptions of a missionary church as a congregation whose life is "deeply involved in the ordinary life of its neighbourhood" (1987a:20; 1989e:229) was also shaped during his missionary years. He learned and practiced this kind of "incarnation" as a missionary and learned of its importance to a faithful witness to the gospel. In his description of what a foreign missionary should be, Newbigin mentions the "principle of identification" with those to whom the missionary is sent, a principle "which derives its sanction from the Incarnation itself" (1945:88). If missionaries are to foster and enrich the pastoral and evangelistic work of the church, then they must "identify themselves much more closely with the life of the people... . This kind of identification will increasingly be the condition of any future missionary service in the Indian Church" (1945:92). He wrote these words seven years after he arrived as a district missionary in Kanchipuram. In those seven years in India and the years that followed Newbigin exhibited this principle in his own missionary practice.

Early, he involved himself in both the great and small problems of the villagers (1993h:51). His priorities and methods of missionary work put him in the midst of the people (1993h:55). The habit of quick one or two hour missionary visits to the villages that had been practiced by his predecessors ended with Newbigin. From the beginning he made it his practice to spend more time in the villages including overnight stays (1993h:57). He vigorously opposed the idea of a district missionary who ossified in the office away from the lives of people (1993h:61). He writes: "I did not think that the proper role of a foreign missionary was to sit at a desk and organize the work of Indian pastors and evangelists. I thought that he ought to be himself a pastor and evangelist sharing in their joys and sorrows as a colleague" (1993h:65; cf. 1945).

One sees this identification with the Indian people especially in two particular incidents in Newbigin's life. He was the first missionary who gave up his ministerial credentials in the Church of Scotland in order to become a minister in the South Indian United Church. This has become standard practice today but he was the pioneer in this identification (1993h:67). The other circumstance was the expected invasion of Madras by Japan in April 1942. The United States ordered all missionaries to leave. He describes the "unedifying spectacle generally known among Indians as the 'Great White Flight'" as a "cataract of missionaries" came down from the Kodai hills where they were spending their holidays. Newbigin believed that it was his "duty to stay with the church" (1993h:77) and thus donned Indian clothes and disappeared into one of the village congregations.

#### 2.3.2.5. The Local Congregation: The Radiating Centre

Both word and deed along with identification with people in their needs are essential for a faithful witness. But Newbigin learned in India that what is even more essential is that it must be plain that those words and deeds flow from the radiating centre of a local community that believes the gospel. As he puts it: "What matters is that word and deed are not separated. What matters more is that they are seen to flow from a centre where Jesus Christ is confessed and worshipped" (1993h:53). It was through Newbigin's missionary experience that he learned the importance of a community that

embodies the gospel. In 1985 the picture of the church impressed on his mind at this time continued to give guidance to his ecclesiology (1994k:48-65). He writes: “My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind” (e.g., 1994k:55). This was a picture to which he would return repeatedly. He expresses it in the early 1960s as follows:

During my visits to the hundreds of small villages in my old diocese in South India, I was often asked to speak to the non-Christians of the village just before going into the village church to conduct a service with the Christian congregation. I have often stood at the door of a little church, with the Christian congregation seated on the ground in the middle of a great circle of Hindus and Muslims standing around. As I have opened the Scriptures and tried to preach the Word of God to them, I have always known that my words would only carry weight, would only be believed, if those standing around could recognize in those seated in the middle that the promises of God were being fulfilled; if they could see that this new community in the village represented a new kind of body in which the old divisions of caste and education and temperament were being transcended in a new form of brotherhood. If they could not see anything of the kind, they would not be likely to believe (1961e:24; cf. Niles 1962:197).

He also saw “many who where sufficiently interested by what they had experienced in school, in hospital, in listening to a street preacher or in reading a Gospel, to want to come and listen in the place where it all had its centre” (1993h:53f.). And so the importance of a congregation that believes and embodies the gospel was etched in his mind. Since these “village congregations were the foundation for everything else” (1993h:118), Newbigin spent much time visiting these congregations encouraging them to be signs of the kingdom, breaking down the distinction between church and mission, promoting unity, and building up local leadership in the congregation. A reading of Newbigin’s memoirs as a bishop in the churches of Madurai (1951c) impresses one with the fundamental commitment he had to “helping each one of them to be a living sign and foretaste of the Kingdom” (1993h:99).

Enabling these congregations to understand their proper nature was complicated by the history of the relationship between the Indian church and western missions. As a young bishop Newbigin realized that many of the congregations of Madurai saw themselves as branches of an organization whose headquarters was in the old mission station now occupied by an Indian successor of the former western missionary. In this setting he found that one of his most important tasks as a bishop was “to help local congregations to understand their real nature as local manifestations of the full reality of the Catholic Church, not local branches of it” (1982a:152). In this experience “the significance and integrity of the local congregation” (*ibid*) was firmly impressed upon him.

#### 2.3.2.6. The Work of the Spirit in the Mission of the Church

One of the things that Newbigin noticed quickly as a young missionary in Kanchi was that even though he was involved in the kinds of activities a missionary ought to be doing, the conversions and baptisms seemed to have no visible connection with his activities. A later experience in Madras of taking confession of faith from a number of new converts taught him the same thing. No human strategy could program conversion.

It was a work of the Spirit operating through several different experiences spread over many years. The witness of the church was secondary to the witness of the Holy Spirit. Reflecting later on this fact in the context of his work in India Newbigin concludes:

But one factor was common to all: it was the presence of a believing, worshipping, celebrating congregation of people deeply involved in the ordinary life of their neighbourhood. These many different happenings had their centre there, and drew those whose lives had been touched in so many different ways to ask what was the source from which all this radiated. This was no humanly devised programme for mission. It was the work of the Spirit, present in the life of the congregation, flowing out into the community through the faithful words and deeds of its members (1987a:19f.).

At this time Newbigin was also deeply shaped by Roland Allen. In *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (1912) Allen argued that the methods of western missions stood in contradiction with the practice of St. Paul. What was the fundamental difference between Paul and western missions? According to Newbigin: "Allen answers that, from the start, the Apostle assumed the power and sufficiency of the living Holy Spirit to create, sustain, and guide the Church, and to equip it with all the gifts and abilities needed for its life" (1950b:2). Newbigin's own missionary practice squared with Allen's observations. His own experiments in church leadership led to thriving evangelistic congregations (1993h:117, 138f.). This deepened Newbigin's confidence that the mission of the church was first and foremost a work of the Spirit. Reflecting on his missionary experience in an address entitled "Missions and the Work of the Holy Spirit" (1960) he states that the reason why the work of the Spirit became central to his thinking was "not through pure theological reflection in a state of abstraction from the world, but rather by facing concrete and ordinary practical missionary experiences" (1994k:23).

### 2.3.2.7. The Kingdom of God and History

Already during his Westminster days Newbigin struggled with a Biblical eschatology and its relationship to historical progress. While in India in 1941, he was invited to give a series of lectures at the United Theological College in Bangalore. He chose the topic "The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress" (1941). In those lectures he criticizes current notions of progress in western culture, emphasizes the importance of history, and develops a Biblical eschatology by criticizing both a view of the kingdom that is this-worldly, optimistic, and entirely realized, and a view that is otherworldly, pessimistic, and entirely future. He solves the issue of the continuity and discontinuity between the kingdom and history with an exposition of death and resurrection.

Newbigin's time in India only nourished these convictions. Hindu philosophy displays an ahistorical mindset that Newbigin would oppose throughout his life. He notes the surprise of one of the Hindu monks in Kanchi at his statement that he was willing to stake his future on the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1998b:4). The importance of history, God's revelation in history, and the revelation of the culmination of world history in the events of Jesus Christ all receive increasing attention during this time in the Hindu environment.

His eschatological views developed further in his participation with the ecumenical

movement. In his book *Hope in Action* (1962), Hans Jochen Margull argues that the developments at the Willingen meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) (1952) and the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (1954) mark the entry of the eschatological into the ecumenical movement (Margull 1962:13-37). Commenting on Evanston, Margull observes: “This step marks *the breakthrough of eschatology* in the ecumenical discussion, which was immediately followed by the breakthrough of the eschatological ground of missions” (Margull 1962:36, emphasis his). Newbigin was deeply involved in both Willingen and Evanston. He wrote the statement that was finally adopted at Willingen entitled *The Missionary Obligation of the Church* (Willingen 1952). He chaired the meeting of the famous twenty-five (1993h:123-125, 131, 140) that was appointed by the WCC Central Committee in 1950 to prepare for the theme at Evanston of ‘Christ the Hope of the World.’ Their task was “to clarify the nature of our hope for human history as distinct both from the nineteenth-century idea of progress and the popular religious idea of personal immortality” (1993h:124). The intense struggle between the different eschatological orientations of the Europeans and the Americans sharpened Newbigin’s own eschatology, which lay somewhere in between the two.

#### 2.3.2.8. The Church as Sign, Foretaste, and Instrument of the Kingdom

This emphasis on the eschatological context of the church led Newbigin to his most characteristic description of the church. The church is a sign pointing men and women to the kingdom of God. The church is the first fruits, deposit, or foretaste of the kingdom. It is a community that already has a real enjoyment now of the salvation of God’s kingdom. The church is an instrument or agent that God uses for his kingdom work today. This threefold description of the church that becomes so common throughout Newbigin’s life emerges for the first time in the Kerr Lectures (1953d:166). From that point on these ecclesiological images become central for Newbigin.

During this period the influence of Hoekendijk’s functional ecclesiology which emphasizes the church as exclusively an instrument of the kingdom motivated Newbigin to underline the Biblical description of the church as both first fruits and instrument (1953d:168-174). According to Hoekendijk the church’s nature could be defined by its instrumental role in the world. Against this Newbigin believed the church could only be an instrument of the kingdom if it was first of all the first fruits of the kingdom.

#### 2.3.2.9. The Relation of the Church to Western Missions

The critical role which the village congregation played in drawing people to Christ highlighted three barriers to the missionary witness of these local churches. First, the relationship of western missions to the village churches was hindering the emergence of a missionary congregation. Second, western forms of ministerial leadership threatened a spontaneous evangelizing church. Third, caste and denominational division threatened the witness of the gospel. Newbigin devoted himself to these concerns during his missionary work. The next three subsections will expand on each of these.

Newbigin’s understanding of the church as a missionary congregation was sharpened during these early missionary years by his experience of the relationship between the western missionary organizations and the Indian church. Newbigin pointed out that

western missionary practices hampered the church's calling to be a missionary congregation:

At this stage the Mission necessarily overshadowed the Church, and to the casual onlooker the impression given was that the whole organization (Mission-cum-Church) was a large, heavily financed organization engaged in a series of activities somewhat parallel to the government social services, and building up round itself a community of people who were the primary beneficiaries of those activities.... in spite of all we believe and teach about the Church, to the ordinary man both inside and out it is apt to appear not very different from the caricature given above.... there seems to be a peculiarly grave danger that the real character of the Church, as the congregation of those who are bound to Christ by faith, should be obscured by its character as a heavily financed and highly centralized organization based on paid agents (1945:86f.).

In 1946, he wrote a letter about the situation in Madras. It describes a church that had become introverted and involved in institutional maintenance with a "complete absence of evangelistic outreach." This depiction demonstrates Newbigin's awareness of the devastating effects of a wrong understanding of the relation between church and mission.

Madras is a field which has suffered tragically from a wrong policy with regard to the relations of Church and Mission. Pursuing the ideals of independence and self-support, and seeing that the Madras congregations comprised many people of wealth who could well support their own churches, missions have largely withdrawn from Madras except for the maintenance of large institutions. But if independence and self-support are interpreted too narrowly, they lead only to sterile introversion, the fruits of which are perpetual internal quarrels and the complete absence of evangelistic outreach. The unity of Church and Mission should have been secured and self-support gradually developed within that unity. That, at least, seems to be the moral to be drawn from the situation in Madras. The congregations are largely ineffective, repudiate any responsibility for or relation with the Mission, and spend their time in disgraceful quarrels (1993h:66).

We can summarize the problems Newbigin encountered with the current relation between church and missions with two words: separation and dependence.

The first problem was that mission had been separated from the church, leaving the impression that they were two different societies with different functions. This had obscured the missionary nature of the church. Missionary work came to be considered primarily the business of full-time specialists employed by mission agencies. While it is the duty of all church folk to support mission work by giving and praying, the work is taken care of by full-time paid agents (1958b:16). However, for Newbigin the "missionary agency" that is called to preach the gospel is the church (1950:141f.; 1958b:16f.). Unfortunately the mission-church relationship in India during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had obscured the theological point that the church is mission. Mission and church are conceived as two parallel organizations and this has profoundly corrupted the nature of both (1950:142). No longer is the congregation considered to be the "fundamental unit of the Christian church" (1951c:4).

The idea that the mission can be an enterprise apart from the Church, acting over its head, directed from elsewhere, and the Church a receptacle into which the products of mission can be deposited, is surely one which corrupts both. The truth is that the Church is not the Church in any New Testament sense unless it *is* mission. The Church is the outflowing of God's love into the world. It is the body of Christ who came to seek and save the lost and, if it is not all the time actively seeking and saving, it is—to that extent—not the Church. I like very much the phrase of Emil Brunner, "The Church

exists by mission as fire exists by burning'. . . By detaching mission from the Church, and thinking of it as a separate activity, we have grievously corrupted in practice our whole conception of what the Church is (1950:142).

When the church is no longer regarded as mission but as a receptacle for the results of missionary activity, it corrupts both the congregational life of the local church and Christian action in the world (1958b:16). A separation of mission from church corrupts the congregational life by forcing it into passivity: viewing itself as a container for converts and as an institution constantly receiving outside funds. This same separation distorted the Indian church's understanding of Christian action in the world: mission was considered the maintenance of large institutions, such as schools and hospitals, which eclipsed the "primary witness" of all believers in their tasks and occupations (1960n:28). Maintaining these organizations that had been established in past generations was draining the human resources of the church. There were no fresh impulses for creative work and witness in a new situation with changing needs. The enormous preponderance of the church's witness occurred where the church members spent most of their time—at work in the office, field, home or shops. Newbiggin was convinced that a "much greater proportion of our energy... must be put into this work of helping our lay members of different professions and occupations in the day-to-day details of their Christian warfare" (1951c:6). Thus, when church is separated from mission, the church is reduced to a repository for converts and mission is reduced to the management of large institutions, which paralyzes the missionary calling of believers.

The second problem Newbiggin encountered in the relation between church and mission was that the Indian church was heavily dependent on western missionary organizations. These patterns of dependence in India were having a crippling effect on the church. Instead of being independent from the beginning they had learned to depend upon the western church for money, leaders, and patterns of church life (1960k; 1960n:29). In a lecture in 1959 at the Founding Assembly of the East Asian Christian Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Newbiggin pleaded with the Asian churches not to continue the patterns of missionary work that had been practiced by the West but to attend to more Biblical models (1960k:40).

Over against the current practice of western mission organizations Newbiggin argues that the thinking of Roland Allen is much more faithful to the Scriptural model (1951b:2).<sup>7</sup> Allen calls the church to reconsider its missionary methods by contrasting them with the missionary work of the apostle Paul (Allen 1962a, b: the former originally published in 1912, the latter in 1927). The missionary methods of Paul and the current western missionary organizations clash at four points. First, Paul spent ten years in Asia Minor and then considered his missionary work done in those regions. Western missions had been involved in missionary work in India for 150 years and the work was far from done. Second, the churches of Asia Minor were fully equipped with an ordained ministry and able to carry on their own life. The churches in India were still heavily dependent on the churches of the West for leadership. Third, the churches of Asia Minor were largely independent financially. They were treated as fully mature churches, sisters of the church in Jerusalem. The churches in India, on the other hand, were still heavily dependent financially on the churches of the West. This financial dependence contributed to an immaturity that characterized the Indian church. Finally, Paul did not attempt to shape the life of the churches in Asia Minor according to the pattern of the

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<sup>7</sup>In the American edition of Allen's books, Newbiggin wrote an introduction strongly recommending the theses put forth by the author (1962c, d).

church in Judea. There was a great deal of freedom for the church to shape their own life in the light of the gospel by the work of the Spirit. The Indian church had for years been patterned after the western church in worship, structure, and theological education (1960n:29). What was the underlying difference between the apostle Paul and western missions organizations? Allen answers that from the very start Paul believed that the power of the Spirit would create, uphold, and guide the Church (1960k:39; 1960n). The Spirit would equip the church with all the gifts—financial and ministerial—that would be necessary to sustain and nourish its life.

Newbigin did not simply theorize about what was wrong but also constructively sought to build new models and practices that would lead to a more independent church. When, as a result of a flurry of conversions in Dharapuram at the northern border of the diocese, a great number of people came asking for baptism, Newbigin saw an opportunity to establish a different pattern that would lead to a truly responsible church. The traditional practice would have been to launch a big campaign among the American churches, raise lots of money and new workers, and establish these churches with the newly paid workers. But this would have led to the old patterns of dependence on foreign money and leadership. With the backing of the diocesan council, Newbigin embarked on a different path. It was a six point plan.

First, identify the person that God had used to bring about this new interest in the gospel and accept him as the leader that God had chosen. Second, baptize without delay the people who had made clear their intention to turn from idols to serve the living God. Third, provide a team of four workers who, like Timothy and Titus, would assist the new leaders by providing an intensive teaching opportunity. Fourth, at the end of this period confirm and receive these people into full communion. At the confirmation of the people Newbigin would say: “Now you are the Body of Christ in this village. You are God’s apostles here. Through you they are to be saved. I will be in touch with you. I will pray for you. I will visit you. If you want my help I will try to help you. But *you* are now the mission” (1958b:32). Newbigin comments that when that is the approach, “the effect is that the new congregation takes it for granted from the first day that being a Christian is being part of a mission—and the Gospel spreads. To deny that responsibility to the young church is to do it an irreparable injury” (*ibid*). Fifth, provide a long period of training—normally four years—for the leader to prepare him for ordination. This training is to be done in the villages when there is no field work to be done. Sixth, the work of the village leader is to be supported and supplemented—but not displaced—by the teaching ministry of fully trained and paid pastors (1993h:138f.). This plan was put into effect from 1954-1959. During this time twenty new village congregations were born through the spontaneous witness of these people. Newbigin comments: “They were, however small, truly indigenous and responsible expressions of Christian faith. I believed, and I still believe, that this is where the power of the Gospel is to be seen and known” (1993h:139). His successor George Devadoss did not approve of this experiment and the program was discontinued (cf. Wingate 1983 for analysis of this experiment). In a paper published in 1953 Newbigin wrote why he believed—in spite of his successor’s views<sup>8</sup>—that this experiment was so important for a missionary church.

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<sup>8</sup>In Andrew Wingate’s discussion of this experiment he writes that the “plan may have been ahead of its time” and “in the long run could surely have been the right answer.” Unfortunately, “it was never given a chance and was too dependent on his [Newbigin’s] personal vision and initiative” (Wingate 1983:58).

When a new congregation understands from the beginning that the responsibility for its own life is a responsibility which it must itself discharge before God, it can stand on its own feet and propagate its own faith without the presence of a resident paid worker. On the other hand there is also abundant evidence to show that if, at the beginning, a new congregation is taught to lean upon a paid worker sent from outside, it will be almost impossible for it to outgrow that dependence (1953e:354).

### 2.3.2.10. Church Leadership

As the previous section has already shown, it was not only patterns of missions-church relationships that prevented a missionary church from emerging; it was also patterns of church leadership. Leadership in a missionary church has been a dominant concern throughout Newbigin's life. This theme appears in perhaps his most important book published near the end of his life. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin writes a whole chapter on "Ministerial Leadership for a Missionary Congregation" (1989e:234-241). Newbigin's early missionary experience was a catalyst for this enduring concern. He writes that the development of local ecclesiastical church leadership was one of his main preoccupations for the whole of the twelve years he was in Madurai (1993h:118).

In his Indian missionary experience, three factors pushed issues of leadership for a missionary congregation to the forefront. First, Newbigin struggled with the relationship of western missions organizations to indigenous churches. Like Saul's armour on David, western missions had weighed down the Indian church with certain forms of leadership that required advanced levels of education and large amounts of money. These western forms of leadership patterns and training had forced the church in India to depend upon the western church and its money. New patterns of leadership and theological education had to be a priority. During his time in India, Newbigin was deeply involved in experiments in the field of indigenous leadership and theological training (see previous section; 1993h:138-140; 1994k:30; Wingate 1983).

Western missions contributed to the problem of leadership in the church in another way. The Indian pastorate had taken a subordinate position under the administrative post that had been filled by the district missionary. A hierarchy had been built up in which the key posts were held by western missionaries: district missionaries, superintendents of hospitals, principals of schools and colleges, etc. Under these respected administrators a hierarchy of Indian workers came into being—pastors, catechists, evangelists, teacher-catechists, teachers, Bible women—each group conscious of its place in the hierarchy. The chief position of honour was the district missionary with his desk, files, and safe. The administrative had triumphed over the pastoral in the Indian church (1945:87). The church was more a foreign organization than an indigenized community of good news.

The administrative policy of the western missions organizations did not merely frustrate a few missionaries. The steady pursuit of this policy, not only in India but in all so-called Third World countries, caused a lack of missionary consciousness in the life of the churches (1993h:65). Mission was the work of a western organization. The church was an insignificant container for converts when compared with the real administrative work of mission. In other words, mission and church were separated structurally by this policy.

Over against this practice, Newbigin called for a dismantling of this system and for a new role for the foreign missionary. But probably the most significant action he took was the training of Indian pastoral leadership. "I was sure," Newbigin writes, "that the

strengthening of local leadership in the villages was the key to future expansion. It was the same principle that I had learned in the Cambridge SCM, that the health of the whole depends on the health of the smallest unit” (1993h:64).

A second group of experiences forced Newbigin to reflect on church leadership for a missionary congregation: issues of church reunion. Prior to the reunion of 1947, matters of church leadership in the united church were central to the whole discussion. In fact, the form of ministry that was to be accepted in the new united church had become an insurmountable problem. Anglican church leaders claimed that the ministerial order—specifically the historical episcopate—was a necessary element in the united church; they demanded that all other ministers must submit to a supplemental ordination. Many SIUC and Methodist ministers did not agree. Newbigin played a crucial and critical role in defining a mediating position that ultimately contributed to a resolution and the union of 1947. It is important for our purposes to note two things. First, the controversy forced Newbigin to reflect theologically on the nature of the church. Was apostolic succession a necessary element in the church? In this connection an important development in Newbigin’s ecclesiology was the reading of Michael Ramsey’s book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1993h:70; cf. Ramsey 1936). This book was, for Newbigin, “the first bridge of understanding which enabled a Protestant to begin to enter into the Catholic understanding of the Church.” Even more importantly for Newbigin’s ecclesiology was the fact that this book compelled reflection on the relationship between the structure of the church and the gospel it embodied. He learned from Ramsey’s main thesis that “the structure of the church is itself an expression of the Gospel” (1975e:172; cf. for example, Ramsey 1956:50). In terms of ecclesiology, Ramsey’s book convinced him of three things: the church cannot be defined solely in terms of the word and sacraments; that a body existing in unbroken continuity through history was central to a proper understanding of the church; and that the ministry of bishops in succession with the apostolic church could play an important role in the life of the church in the present (1982a:149f.). Newbigin’s later ecclesiological formulations in *Household of God* (1953) that appreciate both the Protestant and the Catholic ecclesiologies was forged during this time. A second observation to be made about Newbigin’s struggle with church leadership in the reunion discussions was that his deliberation of these issues always centred on what kind of ministerial leadership would produce a missionary church in India.

After the reunion of the church a whole new set of issues obligated Newbigin to continue theological reflection on church leadership. Four different confessional traditions with four different ministerial orders were now united in one church. This produced complex and delicate problems. Throughout this time the guiding principle continued to be what kind of leadership would contribute to a missionary church.

The third and final experience that led Newbigin to fresh consideration of church leadership was his appointment as bishop. Newbigin was a Presbyterian! What was the role and calling of a bishop? How could a bishop contribute to making the church what it is called to be? His ministry as a bishop also opened up the opportunity to pastor pastors and urge them to be what they are called to be.

We will take up in some detail Newbigin’s theological work on church leadership at a later point (6.6.). At present it is important simply to recount how Newbigin’s missionary experience led him to a deeper understanding of the importance of church leadership for a missionary church. Struggling with issues of western missions and the Indian church, unifying leadership in a united church, and defining the role and responsibility of a bishop contributed to this reflection.

### 2.3.2.11. Ecclesial Unity and Mission

Newbigin's passion for the unity of the church is well known. This passion was forged in the heat of various controversies, concrete problems, and ministry responsibilities that took place during his missionary career. There are at least three experiences that forced Newbigin to consider the issue of church unity.

The first was his missionary experience. He notes that the western churches manifest an "astounding complacency" about disunity "which so plainly and ostentatiously flouts the declared will of Church's Lord" (1948d:9). This indifference contrasted sharply with the younger churches who, as a minority facing ancient and powerful systems, felt bound together by what they held in common. Newbigin believed that it was the missionary impulse that motivated these younger churches to pursue unity, while a loss of missionary identity in the western churches led to a scandalous indifference. Further, Newbigin was deeply aware that it was only if unbelievers could see a "new community in the village represent[ing] a new kind of body in which the old divisions of caste and education and temperament were being transcended in a new form of brotherhood" (1961e:24) that they would believe the gospel. Denominational divisions exported to India by western missions and the hostilities of the deep-rooted caste system flared up in disgraceful quarrels. However, the younger churches as a minority amidst a hostile, Hindu majority understood the importance of unity. This experience further confirmed his ecumenical commitment.

During this time Newbigin's deep conviction about the importance of unity for a missionary church forced him to wage battle for ecclesial unity on two fronts: nationally, in South India, and internationally, in the World Council of Churches. Only a few years after his arrival in India he was drawn into the ongoing discussions on the reunion of the church. In the early 1940s, the movement which had been initiated to bring together the Anglican, Methodist, and South India United Church (Presbyterian and Congregationalist) had reached an impasse. The early initiators and leaders were dying or retiring. There was much weariness about the matter since talks over a quarter of century had produced nothing. Newbigin remarked that "some of my colleagues openly regarded the whole enterprise as a waste of time and a diversion of energy from the real business of a missionary" (1993h:69). For Newbigin, unity and mission could not so easily be separated and so he pursued the reunion of the church with fervour. In 1942, he was elected as the convener of the Union Committee of the Madras Council. Subsequently he was elected to convene the Committee of the South India United Church as a whole. This launched him into discussions about church unity. Both in India and in England Newbigin played a central role in the struggle that eventually led to the formation of the Church of South India in 1948.

The experience of the unity of the CSI and its importance for a faithful witness was a theme that was often raised in Newbigin's later writings. His visits as a bishop became the occasion by which the disparate churches in Madurai began to know the reality of unity (1982a:150). This unity produced a church much more concerned for witness to the kingdom. Reflecting back on his Indian ministry, Newbigin noted that before 1947 the churches he knew in India were "separate congregations each concerned about its own affairs" (1975c:25). After union, congregations were more willing to think about the needs of the city and to become deeply involved in addressing the social problems of the city. Newbigin writes that "no one could live through the experience that I have had, from 1936 to 1947, and from 1965 to last year [1974], without being conscious of

the difference” (*ibid.*). For Newbigin “union was not just a matter of organisational efficiency, but a matter of learning from one another to be more truly the Church of Christ.” It was also true, he went on to say, “that a united church is in a position to think and work for the whole community more easily and more effectively than a number of bodies which are committed to nothing more than occasional co-operation” (*ibid.*). These words were written a couple of decades after this time when “ecclesiastical joinery” was pitted against concerns for justice, peace and human survival. Newbigin’s missionary experience in a united church in India taught him that this is a false dichotomy; mission and unity belong together.

This struggle for unity in South India did not only produce new models for unity, but also, as Marcus Ward has noted, led to a deepened reflection on the nature of the church. Ward specifically mentions the ecclesiological awareness of Newbigin in *The Reunion of the Church* that had come “out of the life of the Church of South India and rais[ed] general issues of primary importance” (Ward 1953:155). He notes that it was this struggle in South India that led to the (then) upcoming Kerr Lectures, in which Newbigin would formulate the ecclesiological understandings gained from this whole process. Those Kerr Lectures were published under the title *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d).

In a similar way Newbigin was forced to reflect on the doctrine of the church as he was drawn into discussions in the World Council of Churches on the nature of unity. He was asked to comment on the famous ‘Toronto Statement’ on unity (1951a). The issue was ecclesiology. In the Toronto Statement the WCC attempted to assuage the fears of member churches by assuring them that membership in the WCC did not mean they had to compromise their own conflicting ecclesiologies since the WCC was neutral on the matter. He challenged this stance, arguing that models of unity always give some kind of answer to the ecclesiological question and that the present form was the wrong answer.

This comment on the ‘Toronto Statement’ led Newbigin into a deeper involvement in the ecumenical movement with questions of mission and unity. He chaired a session of the WCC Central Committee at Rolle in 1951 that produced “the most explicit and significant document on this interrelationship [mission and unity] that had yet appeared” (Saayman 1984:14; cf. Bosch 1991:459; Bassham 1979:31). Newbigin continued in further discussions in the Faith and Order division of the WCC that wrestled with the question concerning the nature of unity which the WCC was seeking. He delivered a lecture at the Evanston Assembly in which he argued that the proper form of churchly unity included a local and an ecumenical dimension (1955:15; 1991i:1044). In the summer of 1958 Newbigin was asked to prepare a paper articulating more fully what he meant by ‘churchly unity.’ The debate on this paper led to a minute addressed to the central committee. In this paper, presented to the Working Committee, Newbigin calls the WCC to take the next step and face questions of ecclesiology and the nature of unity. He details his views on the type of unity which is to be sought—an organic unity with local and ecumenical dimensions. After this paper was revised it was passed along, each time with further revisions, to the Central Committee of the WCC and then on to the New Delhi assembly where it was adopted (New Delhi 1962:116). This now famous New Delhi Statement on Unity was shaped to a great extent by Newbigin (Fey 1970:148f.). These ecumenical discussions challenged Newbigin continuously to develop his ecclesiology.

### 2.3.2.12. Church, Gospel, and Culture

In *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986e), Newbigin begins his profile of western culture with the following words: “A missionary going to serve in another country is advised to make a thorough study of its culture. When I was preparing to go to India, and during my years there, I spent much time in trying to understand the whole complex of ideas and practices that make up what western peoples during the past 150 years have called ‘Hinduism’” (1986e:21). He goes on to say that wrestling with questions of gospel and culture enabled him to see how he had been blinded to many assumptions of his European worldview.

Those questions of gospel and culture were forced upon Newbigin by a number of experiences: learning a new language, hearing a different “explanation” of his broken leg, proclaiming the gospel on the streets of India, teaching the book of Mark to villagers, and studying the Upanishads and the gospel of John with monks at the Ramakrishna monastery.

Newbigin’s lengthy convalescence before his return to India in 1939 offered him a unique opportunity to master the Tamil tongue. He learned its intricacies and became an expert linguist in both the traditional Brahmin Tamil with Sanskrit roots and the contemporary Tamil that used only Dravidian roots (Dharmaraj 1969; Sundkler 1954:302; Jebaraj 1969; Devanesan 1969; Gnanadason 1969). Learning Tamil had implications that went far beyond the mastery of a particular language. Newbigin began to see things in a new light. He began to realize how language shapes one’s lens for understanding and viewing the world. His mastery of Tamil opened up the Hindu worldview. As a result of this experience, he later said that he felt “the immense power and rationality of the Vedantin’s vision of reality—in many ways much more powerful and rational than the ‘modern’ world view” (1982c:9). In his later writings Newbigin reflected more systematically on how the worldview of a culture shapes language.

Breaking his leg, an event which may have been a “decisive turning point in his life” (Veldhorst 1989:6), also provided an opportunity to learn about the way culture shapes our understanding of the world and the gospel. Looking back, Newbigin described himself as a young missionary who was confident of his criticism of Hinduism based on the work of Christ. However, he learned to see that his assumptions were shaped more by his own culture than he realized and that immersion in another culture enabled him to gain a critical stance in relation to western culture (1986e:21). The experience of breaking his leg was a first step in that process. He explained the event in terms of the stupidity of the driver. An Indian pastor explained it as the will of God (1983d:18; 1993h:44). This set in motion a process that would lead him to see how his “explanation” was governed by the cause-and-effect reductionism of a naturalism and scientism that shaped western culture (1983d:18).

His street preaching also provided an opportunity for deepening his understanding of gospel and culture. As he preached the gospel on the streets of India, he wrestled with the question how one could communicate the gospel in the language and categories shaped by Hinduism and still remain faithful to the gospel. His later reflections on that experience are illuminating (1978b:1-3). How can one preach to a crowd of people who have never heard of Jesus? The evangelist must use the language of the hearers. Yet that language uses terms that reflect a worldview by which the hearers make sense of their world. Their language expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. How can the gospel be expressed in a way that is faithful to the gospel itself and relevant to the culture? This question burned itself into Newbigin’s heart.

As a young missionary explaining the book of Mark to village teachers in India,

Newbigin was also challenged to rethink his syncretistic fusion of gospel and western culture. Trying to make sense of the miracle stories in India the way he had learned in British theological college brought bewildered questions from his listeners and drew the response, “Why are you making such heavy weather over a perfectly simple example?” The villager who had posed this question proceeded to recount a number of healings and exorcisms that had taken place in his village congregation. If only he could induct that villager into his own western culture, Newbigin thought, he would be able to “see things as they really are” (1994k:99). At this point he recognized that the Indian’s worldview was much closer to the gospel of Mark than was his own western understanding (*ibid.*). That which presents a problem for the modern scientific worldview is no problem at all in India. “Christ was already known as the one who heals and casts out devils” (1978a:5). The evangelist must try to understand the culture through the spectacles provided by the gospel rather than the other way round.

Early in his years in Kanchipuram, Newbigin began the practice of spending time studying the Svetasvara Upanishad and John’s gospel with Hindu monks at the Ramakrishna monastery. He learned to “see the profound rationality of the world-view of the Vedanta” (1993h:54) and to see how the Hindu viewed the Christian. For the Hindu, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ belonged to the world of *maya*. It was precisely this encounter with the Hindu worldview that would lead Newbigin to place such emphasis on revelation as the acts of God in history. This is illustrated by his evaluation of contrasting interpretations of *bhakti* Hinduism. One of the teachers at the Ramakrishna monastery was a respected teacher in the school of Visishtadvaita, a *bhakti* form of Hinduism in the tradition of Ramanuja’s thought. Rudolf Otto had argued that this form of Hinduism had many close parallels with Christianity (Otto 1930). Hendrik Kraemer critiqued Otto in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Kraemer 1938:168-173). Kraemer argued that Hindu monism had not been overcome in Ramanuja’s thought. A serious concern for history and the world is entirely absent from the whole field of *bhakti* theology and experience (Kraemer 1938:171). Newbigin concluded that Kraemer had more fairly evaluated *bhakti* religion. Newbigin’s view of the relationship of the gospel to other religions was shaped significantly by Kraemer’s “subversive fulfillment” (1992e:80) This study of a form of Hinduism, purportedly continuous with the gospel, led Newbigin to recognize a deeper discontinuity.

### 2.3.2.13. Mission in the Public Square

The context in which Newbigin carried out his first bishopric in Madurai (1948-1959) was charged with tension. In the wake of independence an explosive mixture of renascent Hinduism, a budding Communism, and a powerful secularism all vied for the hearts of people during this revolutionary time of nation building (Devanandan 1956:1-39). The double-pronged threat of Hinduism and Communism is pictured in two processions that Newbigin witnessed one Sunday evening. The first was a Hindu parade in which an idol was carried by a number of men, accompanied by Brahmins chanting slogans from the Vedas, and followed by a crowd. The second was a Communist demonstration in which a rigidly disciplined crowd marching four abreast, arm in arm, chanted slogans in unison directed by the leaders (1951c:56f.). Newbigin challenged both secularism and Hinduism in the sphere of education. Under the syncretistic acceptance of Hinduism and the religious tolerance of secularism, the government limited the right of Christians to teach the Bible, even in Christian schools. Newbigin comments: “These two factors [Vedanta philosophy and secularism] powerfully reinforce one another. Their effect is that ‘religious neutrality’ becomes a determination

to push religion to a harmless place at the periphery of life, in which syncretism appears as much a necessity of life as it did to the Roman empire” (1951c:61). While Newbigin was sympathetic with the explosive religious situation that gave rise to this policy he remarks that “we must constantly resist and expose the fallacy that ‘education’ is neutral and ‘religion’ an optional extra” (1951c:60).

Hinduism threatened the church in two ways (Johnson 1952:14). First, its elastic syncretism threatened to neutralize the gospel and render it powerless. Jesus can be regarded as another manifestation of God along with numerous other idols. Christianity becomes a drop in the ocean of Hinduism. Second, economic, social, and political pressure is effective in a country where jobs are scarce (1951c:91). While the official government policy was religious freedom, the coercive pressure was real.

Communism was appealing to the university students and the dispossessed. Poverty, economic injustice, deep resentment toward Britain, impatience with the speed of development in technology and in material prosperity, and the failure of western missions all combined to make communism an attractive option. Raymond Dudley, a former missionary to Madurai, assessed the threat of communism in a letter to Newbigin:

In spite of 120 years of history, and in spite of our great institutions, even yet we know all too little as to how to redeem village life... . Sometimes I wonder if the communists will combine with the outcastes (including Christians) in a strenuous protest that missions have done little to raise the standard of living of poor village people (1993h:116).

Upon independence India declared itself to be a secular state. It quickly entered the global race to master western ideas, technology, and institutions. This provoked a counter awakening in Hinduism. The combination of these factors created a new and revolutionary India.

How was the church to be a faithful witness in all this? After commenting that “village congregations were the foundation for everything else,” he makes an important observation: “If the Gospel was to make its full impact on all the vast, varied and profound experience of India, leaders were needed who had really come to grips at a deep level with the issues which were posed for the Church not only by traditional Hinduism but also by the new intellectual and spiritual movements that were agitating the newly free nation” (1993h:118). Early in 1951 Hendrik Kraemer made a visit and declared that “the Church in India was not equipped and was not equipping itself for its real theological and missionary tasks—meeting the challenge of renascent Hinduism at a deep level, finding a prophetic and priestly role in the midst of the turmoil and conflict of nation-building, discovering its proper role in education and (above all) equipping its lay membership for its secular witness” (1993h:119; cf. Kraemer 1952). Over the next number of years, Newbigin threw himself into the creation of a centre for study, research, and training that would analyze the currents of Indian culture from both a theological and a sociological perspective. Some of his writing on the issue during this time shaped his thinking for the rest of his life (1952a).

#### 2.3.2.14. The Christian Laity in the World

We must not miss the “above all” in the above quotation by Kraemer. Newbigin agreed that the CSI was not equipped nor equipping its “lay” membership for “secular” witness. The flame that was ignited during his early years concerning a faithful witness

in the sphere of business was fanned into a burning fire during his missionary years. Newbigin began to speak of this particular dimension of the church's mission as the primary place where a missionary encounter takes place.

Newbigin's interest in the role of the laity coincides with a growing interest in the ecumenical tradition. A "theology of the laity" was slow in developing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The church-centric vision of the ecumenical movement that dominated from Tambaram (1938) to Willingen (1952) went hand in hand with a clericalism that viewed the church as an organization managed by professional clergymen. However, this same period also saw a gradual rediscovery of the laity prompted by ecumenical lay movements founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the work of J. H. Oldham and the Oxford World Conference on Church, Community, and State in 1937, the establishment of lay academies throughout Europe after 1945, and the growth of secularization and the breakdown of the *corpus Christianum* (Adler 1991:581). In 1946 the Ecumenical Institute was founded at Bossey, led by Hendrik Kraemer and Suzanne de Dietrich, to nurture discussion among the laity about the relevance of the gospel for their work. In 1949, following strong emphasis on the issue at the Amsterdam Assembly, a Secretariat for Laymen's Work was established. The work of the Secretariat and the Ecumenical Institute combined to make the issue of the laity a focal point. All of these developments led to a rediscovery of the laity that would come to dominate the ecumenical agenda commencing with Evanston.

At the Evanston Assembly in 1954 the issue was among the six major subjects dealt with and this bore ecclesiological fruit. It stated:

We must understand anew the implications of the fact that we are all baptized, that, as Christ came to minister, so must all Christians become ministers of his saving purpose according to the particular gift of the Spirit which each has received, as messengers of the hope received in Christ. Therefore in daily living and work the laity are not mere fragments of the church who are scattered about in the world and who come together again for worship, instruction and specifically Christian fellowship on Sundays. They are the church's representatives, no matter where they are. It is the laity who draw together work and worship, it is they who manifest in word and action the lordship of Christ over the world, which claims so much of their time and energy and labour (Evanston 1954:161).

The growing significance of the laity for understanding both the church and its mission led the Evanston Assembly to replace the provisional Secretariat for Laymen's Work with a permanent Department on the Laity led by Hans Ruedi Weber. Books by Kraemer (1958) and Yves Congar (1957) on the laity and the church deepened theological reflection on the issue.

It was not only the ecumenical tradition that fostered this conviction in Newbigin; it was again his missionary experience in India (1993h:62). As a district missionary and bishop he inherited great mission institutions of education, healing, and service. The enormous size of these institutions in relationship to the church eclipsed the fact that "the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ must be given, and can only be given, in the ordinary secular work of lay men and women in business, in politics, in professional work, as farmer, factory worker, and so on" (1960n:28). The failure to recognize this goes far back into the history of the church. However, Newbigin remarked that in India the problem was "accentuated... where the Church is dominated by large mission institutions, and those church members who are not employed in these institutions come to feel that they are mere camp-followers in the Christian enterprise, instead of knowing that they truly are its front-line troops" (*ibid.*). In the revolutionary

context of India where education, politics, business, and industry were being fashioned by a new secular ideology, an eclipse of the witness of the laity by large mission institutions was a major problem.

### 2.3.2.15. Conversion and Suffering

Newbigin's experience of street preaching and his attempt to proclaim the gospel in a hostile Hindu culture sharpened his understanding of the incompatibility of the regnant worldview and the gospel. This meant two things. First, a radical conversion was necessary. Newbigin commented that in a Hindu culture the way of proclamation lies along a knife's edge: "on the one hand the kind of words that lay one open justly to the charge of embittering India's already bitter inter-religious tensions; on the other the kind of words that will allow the crowd to disperse happily reassured that no fundamental conversion is necessary, peace restored and the cause decisively betrayed" (1993h:53). This also meant, secondly, that suffering would be the lot of one who was faithful. The dominant worldview in a particular culture will strive to become the exclusive worldview. This brings pressure on believers who live in a different story to conform to the public doctrine of the dominant community. If one continues to stand on the gospel, suffering will result. Newbigin speaks of "sharp encounters with questioners generally hostile, often very able, and always backed by a crowd ready at any moment to flare up in resentment and anger when it seems that the ancient faith is being attacked" (1993h:53). Later in his life he would often make reference to his encounter with these questioners who posed challenges based on other religious assumptions (e.g., 1961e:20f.). In the context of his visitation to village congregations he noted the antipathy towards conversion in India:

To those who are under the influence of the Vedanta, Christian evangelism is an intolerable assertion of truth on behalf of one among the many forms of illusion. Activities aimed at conversion from one religion to another are both an offense against the ultimate truth of man's existence, and also destructive of the ordered harmony of social life based upon the proper performance by every man of the duties of his station. For the vast majority of our well-educated contemporaries the attempt to persuade a man to change his faith is something that arouses the deepest hostility and disgust. (1951c:61).

One incident, among many, that impressed the truth of this on Newbigin, took place during his bishopric in Madurai (1951c:90-93, 115). After independence the government of India required all elementary schools to switch to the Gandhian model of education. Hindu syncretism was built right into the program. The teachers were to be tightly knit communities that engaged in daily acts of worship that acknowledge all religions to be equally valid paths to God. A village boy who took up a teaching position in Madurai lost his teaching certificate because he refused to compromise his faith by participating in this syncretistic worship. Newbigin reports the result: "the costly witness of a village boy who was willing to lose his teaching certificate rather than compromise his faith so shook the whole institution that I was soon baptizing students within the college campus" (1993h:120). This event—and others like it—convinced Newbigin of three things: the incompatibility of the gospel with the dominant doctrine shaping public institutions, the cost of faithful witness, and the power of a costly witness to draw others to Christ.

As Newbigin visited the village congregations around Madurai, the social fabric of village and caste became evident to him. The church had taken root among the lowest

castes and in the villages. The gospel had spread along the channels provided by the social structure. Often this meant the church was made up of one caste in a village. In this setting Newbiggin struggled with the issue of how to make clear the nature of the church as a community that transcends caste. Newbiggin concluded that it is “part of the mission” of the church to set up a tension between the culture shaped by Hinduism and the church shaped by the gospel. “The church, as a totally new kind of community, must challenge the older form of community, and a painful tension is set up. It is part of the mission of the Church to set up such a tension.” As an alternative community the church was not to be taken captive by the sinful social structures of caste and village. However, this did not mean that the church was to disown those social ties. “It must not evade it [the tension] either by seeking to deny and repudiate all ties of kinship, or by capitulating to them and allowing them to have control. It must demonstrate its character as something of a wholly different order” (1951c:51).

Newbiggin’s experience as a bishop in India was formative for his understanding of a faithful witness, a hostile culture, conversion, and suffering. He learned the incompatibility of the gospel with the reigning idolatry of Hindu culture and caste. This demanded radical conversion which was often followed by suffering. This insight would prove to be seminal for his mission in culture project. Then he would stress the incompatibility of the gospel with the public doctrine of western culture (1993k:41, 58).

### 2.3.2.16. The Necessity of Prayer

The centrality of prayer in Newbiggin’s understanding of the Christian faith was already noted in the first part of this chapter. His missionary experience strengthened this resolve. Later references to the importance of prayer for the faithful missionary witness of the church find much of their inspiration from this time. Insight into the way that his missionary experience deepened the importance of prayer can be found in a reference he made to J. S. Subramaniam, a close Indian friend. He comments that “it was an enormous strength to be able to share all our problems and to spend time in prayer together seeking God’s help at the many points where we felt helpless” (1993h:56). The demands of a faithful missionary witness broke down western self-confidence and self-sufficiency. It was at the point of weakness and helplessness that Newbiggin understood anew the importance of prayer for a faithful witness.

In the accounts of his bishopric, a demanding ministry frequently “crystallizes into a prayer” (1951:119). “Holy Spirit! take these words and make them living and powerful to the creating of faith” (1951:35); “Lord grant us Thy people to worship Thee in spirit and in truth and being nourished by Thy Word to be strengthened for Thy service...” (1951:37).

In “My Personal Reminiscences of Bishop Newbiggin” written on the occasion of Newbiggin’s sixtieth birthday, A. C. Dharmaraj, secretary of the National Council of Churches in India in 1969, comments about Newbiggin’s reputation in Kanchipuram: “One spoke about the regular and punctual morning devotions in which he used to sit engrossed in meditation in the mornings on the terrace of the Mission Bungalow, on the Railway Road, till the rays of the sun disturbed him” (Dharmaraj 1969). Eugene Blake, the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches from 1966-1972, comments as follows about the life of Newbiggin just after his first stint in India: “The new Director strenuously maintained the inseparability of evangelism and service. Moreover, he has demonstrated by his example that both find their source in a life of prayer and meditation” (Blake 1969).

The necessity of a faithful missionary witness rooted in prayer would be translated into the necessity of a faithful witness by a missionary congregation likewise deeply rooted in prayer.

### 2.3.2.17. Partnership in the Task of World Evangelization

In both his ministry and theological reflections on missionary ecclesiology, Newbigin strongly stresses the local congregation. Each congregation is the church of God for that place. It is responsible before God to witness to the coming kingdom in that particular location. However, the responsibility for local witness did not eclipse the obligation of all churches for world evangelization: “The Church’s mission is concerned with the ends of the earth. When that dimension is forgotten, the heart goes out of the business” (1958b:27).

The Church in South India must not only be concerned for the evangelization of its neighbourhood, according to Newbigin, but also the whole world (1950:144f.). This is not something to be carried out only when the church appears to be strong enough but is a call from the very beginning. In fact, the spiritual health of the church depends on this broader vision of world evangelization. This broader vision, which is vital to the health of the church, will be achieved only by the “steady and sacrificial giving of ordinary church members to the missionary work in other lands” (1950:145).

Newbigin was part of an effort to establish a strong board of missions for the newly united Church of South India that would “co-ordinate and encourage fresh missionary outreach throughout South India and to support the newly launched mission in Papua” (1993h:101; cf. Ward 1953:16-19, 27-29). The missionary initiative in Papua was a challenge put before all the members of the Church of South India and Newbigin commented on this when he spoke to all the churches in Eastern Asia: “The fact that we have to put before each member this responsibility for the evangelization of a distant part of the world is of great value for the development of the Church’s sense of missionary responsibility. I covet for every church this same privilege” (1950:145).

### 2.3.3. *Toward a Missionary Church: Missionary Conferences from Tambaram to Ghana (1938-1958)*

Along with his missionary experience, another important factor played a formative role in Newbigin’s ecclesiological shift: the missiological developments in the IMC between Tambaram (1938) and Ghana (1958). Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century the *corpus Christianum* formed the context for ecclesiological reflection. All this began to change in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 need for the reformulation of ecclesiology was recognized in the ecumenical movement early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ecclesiological reflection was prompted by the fusion of mission and unity that characterized the early ecumenical tradition. Jurgen 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” (Moltmann 1977:7). The twenty-year period between Tambaram and Ghana saw fruitful developments in a missionary ecclesiology.

Newbigin’s participation in the ecumenical movement began in the founding Amsterdam Assembly of the WCC in 1948. The first IMC conference he attended was at Willingen in 1952 where he was a “major participant” delivering a plenary address

and playing a leading role in drafting the conference report (Bassham 1978:333; Thorogood 1991a:69). Along with his actual involvement, he studied all the reports of the earlier missionary conferences (1973f:52). From 1952 on Newbigin was immersed in the ecumenical tradition attending all the conferences of the WCC, IMC and later CWME. He was often called upon to write the assembly or conference reports. He was involved in many different committees associated with the IMC and WCC. Between Willingen and Ghana he was heavily involved in the IMC/WCC joint committee to draft an integration plan (1993h:153f.).

The two books that best exemplify Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology during this period are *The Household of God* (1953d) and *One Gospel, One Body, One World* (1958b). These books have a twofold relationship to the ecumenical movement as it developed its missionary ecclesiology. On the one hand, they summarized the ecumenical discussion to that point. *The Household of God* summarizes and interacts with the two Christendom ecclesiologies that shaped the ecumenical discussion—Protestant and Roman Catholic. Geoffrey Wainwright has referred to this book as the best ecumenical ecclesiology written in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1994). David Bosch said that *One Gospel, One Body, One World* “summarized a consensus that had now been reached” (Bosch 1991:370; cf. Scherer 1987:102, 251). On the other hand, each of these books is a creative contribution to the ongoing discussion. *The Household of God* draws a “Pentecostal” ecclesiology into the discussion and consolidates the insights of all three traditions in an elaboration of the eschatological and missionary nature of the church. It attempts to provide an ecclesiological foundation for the quest for visible unity since “the Ecumenical movement was not being undergirded by an adequate doctrine of the church” (1993h:128). *One Gospel, One Body, One World* is also a creative contribution to ecumenical theology as an apology for post-colonial mission.

Since these books are so interwoven in the ecumenical developments of this period, it is necessary to review in some detail the developments of a missionary ecclesiology in the IMC meetings.

#### 2.3.3.1. From Tambaram (1938) to Whitby (1947): Developments Toward A Missionary Church

If the church was to be understood as essentially missionary, it was critical that the fundamental dichotomy between a sending church in the Christian West and missionary work in the non-Christian non-western world be abandoned. An important step in this process at Tambaram was the abandonment of the dichotomy between the Christian West and non-Christian Third World—although it would take many decades before this insight would be widely grasped. A world war and the rise of totalitarian ideologies like National Socialism, Fascism, and Marxism had shattered any confidence in Europe as a Christian continent (Bosch 1991:370). The West now had to be viewed as a mission field. This loss of a supposed Christian cultural context had a profound effect on the relation of mission to church. The church could no longer see itself as the spiritual facet of a Christian West. It had to define itself in terms of its mission to the world. With the distinction between the Christian and non-Christian nations abandoned in principle, the way was paved for the development of a truly missionary ecclesiology for the church in every place. However, even with these insights Tambaram represented a church-centred mission. Mission was still primarily evangelistic and social work in the non-western world. This would continue on into Whitby.

The IMC Whitby conference was convened in 1947, in the wake of World War II, under the theme “Christian Witness in a Revolutionary World.” Even though the second world war had dismantled much of the colonial framework of mission, it was not yet clear to what extent a new paradigm for mission was needed. Colonial patterns of thought and practice lingered.

The stress on the centrality of the church at Tambaram continued at Whitby; in fact, the whole of Tamabaram’s understanding of mission was left intact. “The virtually untouched 1938 findings were still relevant in 1947”, Hogg comments, “and what emerged from Whitby was meant not to supplant but to supplement them in a changing world scene” (Hogg 1952:335). Many fruitful insights regarding a missionary church were gained, but perhaps the most important contribution of Whitby to a missionary ecclesiology is found in its most memorable phrase: “partnership in obedience.” This gave expression to the further dismantling of the distinction between the older and younger churches. The use of these familiar terms—older and younger—was recognized to be “obsolete” because “for the most part the tasks which face the churches in all parts of the world are the same. Each church, older and younger... is to be a worthy partner in the task of evangelism” (Ranson 1948:174).

These insights did not issue in a consistent missionary ecclesiology. A few statements to the contrary, mission continued to be conceived of primarily as an activity by the West in the non-West; partnership meant mission together in the so-called third world countries; and the West remained outside the vision of missionary concern. One reason a missionary ecclesiology did not ensue was that, while insights into a missionary church were emerging, there was no theological framework to bring them into fruitful relation to one another. An extremely important result of the Whitby conference was the recognition of the urgent need for further theological reflection on the missionary calling of the church (Bassham 1979:27). A year later, at the Oegstgeest (Netherlands) meeting of the IMC committee, the principal theme was chosen for the next conference in Willingen: the missionary obligation of the church (Goodall 1953:10).

#### 2.3.3.2. Willingen (1952): A Theological Framework for a Missionary Church

The third world consultation of world mission was convened in Willingen, Germany in 1952. Its task was to draft a new theological framework for mission. Under the directive of Whitby a major study on “The Missionary Obligation of the Church” had been undertaken. Important preparatory work was done by Walter Freytag, Johannes Hoekendijk, Max Warren, and others, as well as by two constituted study groups from the Netherlands and North America. This preparatory study remained incomplete and much disagreement was already in evidence as the conference was convened in July, 1952. Willingen was not envisaged to be a conference of consolidation of settled gains made in mission theology but an opportunity to grapple with new theological issues related to the mission of the church (Goodall 1953:13).

Newbigin notes that the Willingen meeting “was widely thought at the time to have failed in its major task. But subsequent history has shown that it was in fact one of the most significant in the series of world missionary conferences” (Fey 1970:178). Bassham explains both why the conference was thought to be a failure and why it proved to be so important. “The IMC meeting [in Willingen] marked a milestone in the development of mission theology in the ecumenical movement. Although its members could not agree on the basic theological issues raised in the interim report, several of

Willingen's themes represented new developments which became important points for subsequent reflection" (Bassham 1979:36). Its importance stems, then, from the fact that in its theological discussions on the missionary obligation of the church a number of themes emerged that would prove fruitful in the development of a missionary ecclesiology. In his introduction to the Willingen conference report, Goodall says: "It was... recognized that in the fields of Biblical and theological studies there had been taking place, for some years, movements that were proving deeply significant for all who sought a fuller apprehension of the Christian faith. At the same time, it was felt that these studies and movements of thought had not become related, with sufficient explicitness, to the missionary calling of the Church" (Goodall 1953:10f.).

The most important legacy of Willingen to missionary theology is the concept of the *missio Dei*.<sup>9</sup> This provided a framework for gathering and relating many other insights in a consistent missionary ecclesiology. The Willingen understanding of the *missio Dei* can be summarized as follows. Mission has its source in the Triune God Himself (Goodall 1953:189). Mission flows from the love of the Father who has sent his Son to reconcile all things to Himself (Goodall 1953:189, 241). Christ came to usher in the kingdom of God. This kingdom has already arrived but has not yet been fully consummated. This already/not yet time period is a time of mission (Goodall 1953:188f., 239). Salvation was accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the foundation of this accomplished work of Christ, God has sent forth the Spirit of Jesus to gather his church together. By virtue of being chosen by Christ, reconciled to God through Him, being made members of His body, sharing in His Spirit, and heirs to hope in His coming Kingdom, the church is committed to full participation in His redeeming mission (Goodall 1953:190). As Christ was sent by the Father the church is sent by Christ to continue His mission. "There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. 'As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you'" (Goodall 1953:190). The church's very existence is one of witness or mission. Mission is not one more task among others but defines its nature. "When God says to the Church: 'Go forth and be my witnesses,' He is not giving the Church a commission that is added to its other duties; but a commission that belongs to its royal charter (covenant) to be the Church" (Goodall 1953:241). Therefore, the church is "an organ of His cosmic redemptive purposes" (Goodall 1953:208) and "a redeemed fellowship and a channel of God's redeeming grace, in the place and country where it is" (Goodall 1953:195). Where there is a local congregation, there, by its very existence, is a witness to the gospel, however imperfectly its faithfulness (Goodall 1953:195). To be a Christian is to be a member of that body. Every Christian is called to total commitment to the church's whole missionary task (Goodall 1953:195).

This vision of the mission of God opened the way for many theological, missiological, and ecclesiological insights to find consistent and systematic expressions (cf. Bassham 1978:331-337). Many insights from the theological guild, such as the already-not yet nature of the Kingdom, the relationship between salvation history and world history, and the work of the Spirit were brought into a fruitful connection with mission; nevertheless, as Goodall points out, many questions remained (Goodall 1953:20-22). The mission-of-God concept also paved the way for many missiological

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<sup>9</sup>Willingen contributed the *concept* of the *missio Dei*, not the precise *term*, which goes back to Karl Hartenstein's reflection on the Willingen conference (Rosin 1972:6; Bassham 1978:332; Bosch 1991:390; Jongeneel 1997:59-60).

convictions that had been gaining strength in the missionary tradition to find a more consistent expression—convictions such as “unreal” (Goodall 1953:18) distinctions between older and younger churches, home base and mission field (Goodall 1953:190-191), domestic and foreign missions; the relationship between church and mission; the West as a mission field; the integral relationship between evangelism and social involvement (Goodall 1953:216, 220); and unity and mission (Goodall 1953:193f.). The consistent formulation of these convictions in a new framework played a major role in dealing a death blow to the colonial framework for mission. Finally, many ecclesiological insights, such as a pilgrim church (Goodall 1953:191; Bosch 1991:373), new, more flexible forms of ministry (Goodall 1953:197; Fey 1970:179), and the importance of the laity (Goodall 1953:107-116; Bosch 1991:502) could be placed more consistently in the context of a missionary church.

#### 2.3.3.3. Ghana (1958): A Call for Institutional Expression of Unity of Mission and Church

Willingen had provided a new framework for mission. The *missio Dei* had replaced the more obsolete Christendom understanding. Whenever a paradigm shift occurs, there are many issues and problems that must be addressed. Many questions were raised about the practice of mission in a world where colonial categories had collapsed. Not least of these issues was the institutional expression of the older paradigm. The separation of the IMC and WCC embodied the separation of church and mission. This was the chief matter on the agenda of the IMC meeting in Ghana in 1958. Newbigin expressed his support of that integration as a first step in dealing among many other issues that remained. When asked to serve as General Secretary of the IMC, Newbigin responded in a letter:

I have come to feel increasingly that there is a dangerous dichotomy at the present time between what we (in the missionary enterprise) are saying and what we are doing. This in two respects: (1) We are saying that our working picture is not the nineteenth-century one but one of a global fellowship facing a global task, with the missionary frontier running through every village. But we are not acting according to that picture.... (2) We are saying that we have recovered a radically missionary theology of the Church. But the actual structure of our Churches (younger as well as older) does not reflect that theology. On the contrary it continues placidly to reflect the static ‘Christendom’ theology of the eighteenth century. At Yale I said that I supported IMC-WCC integration simply as a preliminary step to the much more radical changes which I believed to be necessary in the whole structure and functioning of the missionary enterprise (1993h:147f.).

It is not necessary for our topic to deal with all the arguments pro and con integration. Nor is it necessary to detail the other issues at Ghana. For our purposes we call attention to one issue that presented itself urgently. This issue was one of two that were “of most significance for the understanding of our missionary obedience at this hour” (Orchard 1958:10). The question was asked: “Are we in danger of making the conception and practice of mission so broad and diffuse that it loses its distinctive character and cutting edge? Or are we in danger of limiting it in such a way that our practice fails to express the fullness of the Gospel or to meet the real needs of men today?” (Orchard 1958:10). If the colonial framework was inadequate and mission was in every continent, and if mission involved the witness of *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia* (as proposed by Hoekendijk; cf. Jongeneel 1995:19; 1997:307), then what was

mission? As Stephen Neill would put it later, “if everything is mission, nothing is mission” (quoted in Bosch 1991:511). Was there a danger of losing intentional missionary activities in some kind of “panmissionism”? (the word is Freytag’s; quoted in Bosch 1991:511). These questions highlight the struggle in which Ghana engaged in an attempt to relate the intentional mission that had characterized the colonial era to the new understanding of a missionary church which characterized the whole life of the church as mission. In his reflection on the role of the IMC, Erik Nielsen made a distinction between missionary dimension and missionary concentration that foreshadows Newbigin’s important distinction between missionary dimension and intention. Nielsen writes:

We have tried to indicate that the phrase “Mission belongs to the *esse* of the Church” has far-reaching consequences for the Church itself, for its whole conception of its own nature and calling.... Perhaps one may say that what is involved is *both* a widening of the missionary perspective or dimension *and* a concentration; a realization of the fact that Mission is not just a special type of activity which can be identified and circumscribed within a mission board or a special Division of Mission, but is something which has to do with the very existence of the Church, with its very *raison d’etre*, with its not being for itself but for the world, to the ends of the world and the end of time, that every element of the Church’s life and existence is part of this ‘sentness’ to proclaim the Cross and the Resurrection to and in the world, whether it has to do with the Christian witness in the sphere of politics, of social-economic questions, of health and education or anything else.... In every aspect of this existence there must be the missionary dimension and call. And yet at the same time as the perspective is widened there is need for concentration. We have not said that everything the Church does is Mission, but we have said that in the very existence of the Church, and therefore in everything the Church says and is and does, there must be a “missionary perspective” (Orchard 1958:224).

#### 2.3.3.4. Summary of Ecumenical Developments Toward a Missionary Church

The view of mission held at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prevented a genuinely missionary understanding of the church from emerging. Mission was separated from the church. Mission was a specialized agency organized in the West for missionary purposes in the non-western world. Western churches supported this cause and non-western churches became containers for the converts of the missionary endeavours. The world was divided into the Christian West and the non-Christian parts of the world. The Christian West was the home base for mission while the non-Christian third world was the mission field. The world church was divided into older churches in the West which took responsibility for the task of mission and the younger churches in the non-West that were subordinate helpers.

These assumptions gradually broke down throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the church moving to the centre of missiological discussion, the separation of church and mission was challenged. The growth of the third world church and the demise of the Christian “West” challenged the notion of a Christian West and a pagan non-West as well as the distinction between a home base and a mission field. Mission was partnership in obedience.

However, all these seminal insights remained unfruitful for a couple of reasons. First, there was no theological framework in which to relate these gains in a profitable way. Second, mission and ecclesial structures continued to embody these older distinctions. Willigen provided an initial answer to these problems. In terms of the first, the notion of the *missio Dei* brought together Christological, eschatological, and pneumatological insights from the theological guild in a way that allowed an authentically missionary

understanding of the church to emerge. A number of books followed this conference that summarized, consolidated, and formulated the gains made during this period. George Vicedom's *Missio Dei* (German edition 1959, English translation 1965) and Johannes Blauw's *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (1962) admirably expounded the consensus on the missionary nature of the church rooted in the mission of God. D. T. Niles firmly placed this mission theology in the context of a global fellowship in his book *Upon the Earth* (1962).<sup>10</sup> As to the second barrier to the emergence of a missionary church, namely the ecclesial and missional structures that embodied a separation between mission and church, the call for new structures was heard at Willingen, although this became a major issue only later.

The separation of the WCC from the IMC was one structure that betrayed the earlier separation of mission and church. The joining of these two bodies at New Delhi (1961) was the symbol and institutional expression of the insight that the church is mission.

Newbigin formulated his own understanding of the church within the context of the developing missionary ecclesiology in the ecumenical tradition. He was an active and creative participant in this tradition, contributing to the development while being shaped by it.

#### 2.3.4. Newbigin's Ecclesiological Publications

The two books *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d) and *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958b) are Newbigin's most clearly articulated ecclesiological formulations during this time period. In a remarkable way, both books summarize and interact with the ecclesiocentric developments in the ecumenical tradition. They also make a contribution in their ability to pull all the various threads together into one tapestry. In *Household of God* Newbigin attempted to establish a solid theological foundation for the missionary church with the Christological, eschatological, and pneumatological insights of 20<sup>th</sup>-century theology. His *One Body, One Gospel, One World* consolidated many of the gains of the missionary conferences, providing a theological foundation for them, forging them together in a cohesive unity, and applying them to problems faced by the global missionary community.

These books are not only the fruit of Newbigin's interaction with the ecumenical tradition; they are also shaped by Newbigin's two decades of missionary experience. Elements articulated above, that emerged from his ministry in India, are given systematic articulation in these books. This section will briefly summarize these two documents in their historical context.

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<sup>10</sup>See Niles 1962:21ff. for a brief history behind the writing of both his and Blauw's book. These books were commissioned to provide a systematic discussion of the issues of the Willingen Council in the context of a worldwide forum.

#### 2.3.4.1. *The Household of God: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*

As we have seen, the development in the missionary conferences that recovered a missionary understanding of the church was not matched by adequate theological reflection on the nature of the church. Newbigin notes this deficiency: “the Ecumenical movement was not being undergirded by an adequate doctrine of the Church” (1993h:128). The two doctrines of the church that dominated the ecumenical discussion during this time—most recently in evidence at Amsterdam—were the Protestant and Roman Catholic ecclesiologies shaped at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Alan Richardson saw the potential of the ecclesiological insights that Newbigin had developed in the struggle for reunion in South India. He challenged Newbigin to lift out the implicit ecclesiology that Newbigin had developed in his 1948 publication *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme* and to formulate it explicitly (1993h:128). Newbigin’s concern in this book had been to defend the South India scheme of reunion against its detractors especially in England. He faced the criticisms of the Free Church and the Anglo-Catholic traditions with extensive ecclesiological reflection. His Anglican antagonists critiqued the reunion scheme for failing to make supplemental ordination by a bishop integral. They based this on an ecclesiology that makes historical continuity and institutional visibility fundamental to the nature of the church. Free Church critics rejected precisely this dimension of ecclesiology and found their clue for ecclesiology in faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit. Ecclesiological statements pepper the pages of *Reunion of the Church* as Newbigin challenges the Protestant-Anglican/Catholic deadlock with affirmation and critique of both positions. This whole experience would place Newbigin in a strategic position to address the Protestant-Catholic problem in ecclesiology as it surfaced in Amsterdam in 1948.

Newbigin was invited to give the Kerr Lectures at Trinity College, Glasgow in 1952 and this gave him the opportunity to develop these insights into an ecumenical ecclesiology. The lectures were later published as *Household of God* (1953d).

The question that concerned Newbigin in the Kerr Lectures was the nature of the church. There was a growing interest in this issue in the ecumenical tradition. Three factors contributed to this resurgent interest. The first was the breakdown of the *corpus Christianum* (1953d:1-4). Christendom had been the background for all the Reformation ecclesiologies. These Christendom ecclesiologies formulated their understanding of the church over against one another rather than in the context of their calling in a non-Christian environment. The dissolution of Christendom had brought a crisis for all ecclesiologies framed on its assumptions. The second factor that compelled a rethinking of the nature of the church was Christian mission and the rise of non-western churches (1953d:5-9). The new setting of the pagan environments where new churches were flourishing required a reformulation of the ecclesiologies formed in a western setting. It is precisely this problem in India that forms the backdrop for Newbigin’s ecclesiological reflection in *The Reunion of the Church*. The third factor that placed ecclesiology at the centre of the theological agenda was the rise of the ecumenical movement (1953d:10-17). As churches came into contact with one another they recognized each other to be churches *in some sense*. But in what sense? The WCC struggled with that issue and it forced ecclesiological questions to the fore.

“We are all agreed,” Newbigin writes, “that the Church is constituted by God’s atoning acts in Christ Jesus.... But how are we of subsequent generations made

participants in that atonement? *What is the manner of our ingrafting into Christ?* That is the real question with which we have to deal" (1953d:24; emphasis his). This question sets the stage for Newbigin's ecclesiological investigations. He identifies three main answers that issue in three different ecclesiologies. The first two traditional answers have been embodied in two of the great Christian traditions of church history. The Protestant answer is that we are incorporated into Christ through faith in the gospel. The Catholic answer is that we are incorporated into the historically continuous, institutionally united and visible church by sacramental participation. The third answer to the question comes from a tradition of more recent vintage. Hesitating to name it at all, Newbigin finally uses the term Pentecostal. This tradition answers the question that we are incorporated into the church by receiving the Holy Spirit. Newbigin maintains that none of these traditions adequately answer the question because they have contrasted these three Biblical answers in mutually exclusive ways. Each of the answers dominate a particular tradition, and distortions arise as one of these answers is taken as the single fundamental clue to the nature of the church.

In the last two chapters of the book Newbigin attempts to integrate the insights of all three traditions in a discussion of the church as eschatological and missionary. This period of redemptive history is characterized by an overlapping of the ages. The victory of God's kingdom has been gained at the cross and demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ. This victory, however, must remain hidden so that there is room left for a free response to the gospel. The Spirit as an end-time gift is given as a foretaste and earnest of what is in store. This means that there is real possession of the life of the age to come but also the promise of the future fulfillment at the consummation. The blessings of the reign of God are known in this time period by faith, not by sight; in foretaste, not in full enjoyment; in signs that point to a great reality, not in complete manifestation (1953d:126f.). The church is that body that has begun to share in the reign of God. The church must be understood in this eschatological context.

How does this eschatological framework bear on the ecclesiological problem that Newbigin has articulated? The question of how one is incorporated into Christ is answered in three ways in the three above-mentioned traditions. All of the answers are true; yet, at the same time, "when any one of them [is] taken alone as decisive, error and distortion follow" (1953d:148). The problem is that each tradition looks at the church's *esse* in terms of what the church has and is. However, the church is a body that contradicts its own *esse*. The church must be defined in faith in terms of the eschaton for which we hope. "None of us can be said to possess the *esse* of the Church" (1953d:152) and therefore, we do not only ask what the church is now but what the church is becoming (:153). All three traditions of ecclesiology describe something important about the essence of the church. The problem is that no church can claim faithfulness to all the church is called to be (:123-152).

The concluding chapter describes the church as missionary. There is a fundamental connection between the eschatological and missionary nature of the church. While Newbigin mentions the eschatological and missionary dimensions of the church in *The Reunion of the Church*, he makes two important advances in *The Household of God*. First, while an awareness of the missionary nature of the church lurks below the surface of the entire book and comes to expression at times (1948d:165), this dimension finds a much more explicit and detailed elaboration in his latter book. Second, Newbigin does not explicitly connect the eschatological and missionary in *Reunion of the Church*; this explicit connection in the Kerr Lectures also represents an important step in the development Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. He opens the last chapter of *The*

*Household of God* with the following words:

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 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 (1953d:153-154).

The fundamental connection between eschatology and mission may be seen by looking at the Holy Spirit (1953d:161-162). The Spirit is an eschatological gift that brings the power of the coming age. He is given to the church as an earnest and witness. As firstfruits and earnest the Spirit brings the coming age into history. Since the church shares in the Spirit, it shares in the salvation of the kingdom and is constituted by that fact as a community that witnesses to what is coming.

This means that mission “belongs to the very core of its existence as a corporate body” (1953d:163) and “a Church which has ceased to be a mission has certainly lost the *esse*, and not merely the *bene esse* of the Church” (*ibid.*). The nature of the church can be summarized with three important words: sign, instrument, and foretaste. Each of these words implies that the church can be understood only in the context of the kingdom of God. However, in contrast to this radically eschatological and missionary nature of the church, the ecclesiological conception that dominates the western churches that are the fruit of western missions is “that of a fundamentally settled body existing for the sake of its own members rather than of a body of strangers and pilgrims” (1953d:166). The depth of Newbigin’s commitment to the missionary nature of the church can be gauged by the following words:

... the very general belief of Christians in most Churches that the Church can exist without being a mission involves a radical contradiction of the truth of the Church’s being.... no recovery of the wholeness of the Church’s nature is possible without a recovery of its radical missionary nature (1953d:170).

This brief sketch of Newbigin’s Kerr Lectures reveals that many of the insights of the theological community—Christological, eschatological, pneumatological—are brought together to formulate a radically missionary ecclesiology.

#### 2.3.4.2. One Body, One Gospel, One World: An Ecumenical Consensus

The short book *One Body, One Gospel, One World* consolidated, interpreted, and disseminated many of the missiological and ecclesiological gains that had been made in the period between Tambaram and Willingen. Bassham notes that the development of mission theology within the ecumenical movement needed interpretation for the worldwide church and that *One Body, One Gospel, One World* fulfilled that role. Explaining Newbigin’s unique qualification for this task, he writes: “His complete immersion in the ecumenical movement through the CSI gave him special insight for interpreting developments within mission theology” (Bassham 1979:44). The immediate issue that motivated Newbigin to write this booklet was his concern to restate the missionary calling of the church in such a way that it would be free from the stench of colonialism. The missionary movement had carried out its task in a political, psychological, and theological framework informed by colonialism. This colonial framework was being rejected and many were also rejecting the whole missionary

enterprise along with it. Newbiggin's concern was to restate the missionary calling in a fresh way that accounted for the insights of the ecclesiocentric period from Tambaram to Willingen yet preserved a role for the traditional task of missions.

Newbiggin carries out this project in three steps. First, he provides a Biblical foundation for mission. Second, he states three principles that flow from the foundation that must guide missionary thinking. Third, he applies these principles to the problems and issues challenging the missionary movement.

First, Newbiggin returned to the Scripture for "the unchanging basis" and sketched his vision of mission. He takes his starting point in the view of the *missio Dei* that had prevailed in Willingen. He begins: "The church's mission is none other than the carrying on of the mission of Christ Himself. 'As the Father has sent me even so send I you'" (1958b:17). He blends together the eschatological and pneumatological insights that had emerged at Willingen in relation to ecclesiology. This mission is "the continuing work of Christ Himself through the Holy Spirit" (1958b:18). The reception of the Holy Spirit relates the church to mission in three ways. First, the church is the place where the reign of God is experienced in foretaste (*koinonia*). Second, the power of the Spirit equips men and women to serve others in all their needs (*diakonia*). Third, it is the place where verbal witness is borne to Jesus Christ (*marturia*). *Koinonia*, the common life of the Spirit shared by the church, is the foundation from which spring deeds of service, *diakonia*, and words of witness, *marturia* (1958b:20).

In the ecumenical movement—the intended audience for this book—defining the mission of the church in such a broad manner threatened missions as an deliberate action of the church to take the gospel to where it was not known. In response to this problem Newbiggin introduced a distinction that has continued to play an important role in missionary theology (Bosch 1991:373). He distinguished between missionary dimension and missionary intention (1958b:21; 1993h:155). Since the whole life of the church is characterized by witness, a missionary dimension permeates everything it does. However, not all of its activities have a missionary intention—specific activities which have the intention of crossing the frontier between faith and unbelief have a missionary intention. Faithfulness to its missionary nature means that intentional missionary efforts to cross these frontiers of unbelief is essential to its life.

In this context two further comments are made about the missionary church. First, it will be a community that seeks to communicate the good news of the kingdom by word and deed. Words and deeds take their place together within the total mission of the church. They both have the character of witness as signs of the presence of the kingdom (1958b:22f.). Second, mission is both local and to the ends of the earth (:23). The first place of mission is our neighbourhood but since God's love embraces the whole world, there must be a universal expression of this love in mission to the ends of the earth.

From the standpoint of this Biblical foundation Newbiggin articulates three principles that consolidate the gains of the missionary conferences. These principles summarize a consensus of the ecumenical movement (Bosch 1991:370). First, the Church is mission. Mission has been separated from the church because during the times of the great non-Roman missionary movements much of the church was blind to its essential task of mission. Those who desired to express this obedience formed separate organizations to carry out the missionary task. However, this separation must be healed. Jesus formed one body and "that body was both the Church and the Mission—the place where men were being saved, and the agents of God's saving purpose for all around. The separation of these two things which God has joined together must be judged as one

of the great calamities of missionary history, and the healing of this division one of the greatest tasks of our time” (1958b:26). Mission belongs to the essence of the church.

Second, the home base is everywhere. The church’s mission is concerned with the ends of the earth. For years this meant that foreign missions was launched from Europe or America to the other parts of the earth. However, when the church becomes a global body, this view is invalidated. We have left the era of western missions behind and “we are required to look at the missionary enterprise from a completely new point of view—from the point of the view of the world-wide church” (1958b:28). The home base is each local congregation and mission is the intentional crossing of frontiers between faith and unbelief. However, in this missionary task a place for cross-cultural missions must be maintained.

The third principle is mission in partnership. The non-western church is not a receptacle for converts but an active participant in the missionary calling of the church. The non-western church is not an immature body dependent on the more mature western church. These anomalies must be removed and there must be a genuine sharing of the missionary task together.

In the remainder of the booklet Newbigin brings these principles to bear on the many and difficult issues that faced the church in its mission at that time. In the latter part of the sections of the book, Newbigin notes the colonial patterns of mission that continued to corrupt the church and mission agencies, the increasing hesitancy and opposition to mission born of the rejection of colonialism, the replacement of missions by ecumenism and inter-church aid, the difficulty in defining the role of the foreign missionary, the way the growth of the third world church was challenging older patterns and structures, and the disunity of the church. Newbigin tackled these problems from the foundational principles he articulated.

### *2.3.5. Summary*

Two factors shaped Newbigin’s developing ecclesiology during this period (1939-1959): his missionary experience and his participation in the missionary conferences of the IMC. They influenced his main publications in this period.

Newbigin’s early missionary experience in Kanchipuram and Madurai played a powerfully formative role in the development of his ecclesiology. A Christendom understanding of the church would not stand the fires of missionary work in India. His convictions concerning the centrality of mission both in his own life and in the life of the church deepened. The church is chosen for the purpose of bearing witness to the gospel. This witness to the kingdom continues what Jesus began in his ministry. A faithful witness to the gospel of the kingdom is to be given in both words and deeds. A missionary witness must incarnate itself deeply in the lives of the people especially among the poor. The Spirit is the primary witness. Therefore, a pneumatological and eschatological foundation for mission is essential to develop a missionary self-understanding. All barriers to this missionary consciousness and practice must be removed. In this light Newbigin struggled with the relation of western missions to the Indian church, issues of church leadership, and ecclesial unity. The church must understand itself as mission; forms of leadership that foster a missionary congregation must emerge; and a faithful witness must be a unified witness that does not allow division to compromise that witness. A new cultural environment forced Newbigin to struggle with the relationship of the gospel and church to the culture. Revolutionary times refreshed convictions about mission in the public square, the witness of the layman in the world, and the correlation of conversion and suffering. It is through

prayer that missionaries and mission churches must overcome weaknesses in the enormous task of witness. And finally, since mission is directed to the ends of the earth, a missionary congregation has to be committed to world evangelization. Many elements of a missionary church either emerged or were reinforced and deepened as a result of Newbigin's early cross-cultural experience.

Newbigin was also heavily involved in the missionary conferences of the IMC during this time. In the period from Tambaram (1938) to Ghana (1958) many assumptions that undergirded a Christendom ecclesiology were broken down, allowing a missionary ecclesiology to develop. Newbigin's participation and leadership in this development enabled him to further cultivate a missionary theology.

The fruit of this missionary and ecumenical experience were two main publications, *The Household of God* and *One Body, One Gospel, One World*. In these works a missionary ecclesiology is given clear expression and systematic articulation.

#### 2.4. CONCLUSION

In the first three decades of Newbigin's life (1909-1939) a number of important convictions emerge that later will shape his missionary ecclesiology. As evidenced by his first ecclesiological reflections in the decade of the 1940s, his ecclesiology is shaped in the traditional Christendom mould. The terminology of a missionary church briefly appears but is not developed consistently.

The first major ecclesiological shift in Newbigin's life was from a Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology. This shift was the result of two important factors. First, his missionary experience in India as a district missionary in Kanchipuram (1939-1947) and as a bishop in the newly formed Church of South India (1947-1959) challenged a Christendom understanding of the church that had been formed in Europe. Numerous elements of a missionary church emerged in the context of this missionary work. Second, Newbigin was heavily involved in the ecumenical movement during a time when a missionary ecclesiology was forming. During the twenty-five year period from Tambaram to Willingen, many missiological and theological tributaries flowed together to produce a missionary ecclesiology. In theology, the *missio Dei*, with both a fresh grasp of eschatology with a deepened understanding of its missiological significance and a rediscovery of the work of the Spirit, provided a new theological framework for mission. In *The Household of God* (1953) Newbigin draws these strands together to provide a theological basis for the mission church. The terminology of a missionary church becomes prominent and central to Newbigin's ecclesiology at this time. In mission studies, the reunion of church and mission, the breakdown of the distinction between home base and mission field with the recognition that the home base is everywhere, and the abandonment of the distinction between older and younger churches with a fresh understanding that mission is partnership all contributed to a missionary ecclesiology. In *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958) Newbigin summarized these developments with a clear statement that the church is mission.

Shaped by both his missionary experience in India and his involvement in the missiological reflection of the global missionary conferences of the IMC, the Christendom ecclesiology with which he had entered India gave way to a missionary understanding of the church.

### 3. FROM A CHRISTOCENTRIC TO A TRINITARIAN MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY: (1959-1998)

#### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces the historical development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology from the time he became the General Secretary of the International Missionary Council in 1959 until his death in 1998. Newbigin's 1958 publication *One Body, One Gospel, One World* marked a consensus in ecumenical thinking on the church and mission that had developed from the time of the IMC meeting in Tambaram in 1938. However, this agreement was already under attack. Within three years Newbigin himself would begin to see the inadequacy of his ecclesiology. A Christocentric ecclesiology must be replaced by a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. His first halting attempt to articulate this new ecclesiology is found in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g). Many other publications would follow in which the details of a Trinitarian ecclesiology would be expanded.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this chapter examines Newbigin's shift in six sections. The first section outlines his life from the time he joined the IMC in 1959 until his death in 1998. A second section briefly describes his shift from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. A third section examines the two primary factors that prompted this rethinking of ecclesiology—the revolutionary international context and the theological and missiological shifts within the ecumenical tradition. The remaining three sections sketch the development and application of this ecclesiology during his years in the IMC and WCC firstly, in his bishopric in Madras thereafter, and in his multifaceted ministry in Britain at the end of his life.

Newbigin did not use the terms 'Christocentric ecclesiology' or 'Trinitarian ecclesiology.' These terms are chosen to best characterize the shift that took place between 1957-1961. During the decade of the 1950s Newbigin's understanding of God's mission was focussed in the church. A lecture in Bossey in 1957 presented Newbigin with an occasion to reexamine his understanding. That lecture shows signs of a broader understanding of the work of the Triune God. However, the next year he would write *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958) that still remained in the older Christocentric paradigm. He moved to become general secretary of the IMC in 1959. By the New Delhi Assembly (1961) he was aware of the need to expand his understanding of God's mission to a Trinitarian perspective. His first attempt in writing to do this was *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963). Newbigin worked out his understanding of the church in the context of the mission of the Triune God for the remainder of his life.

#### 3.2. OVERVIEW OF NEWBIGIN'S LIFE (1961-1998)

The last forty-seven years of Newbigin's life fall into three main sections—six years as an administrator in the IMC and WCC (1959-1965), nine years as bishop of Madras (1965-1974), and twenty-four years of "retirement" in Britain where he taught missiology, pastored an inner city church, initiated the gospel and western culture movement worldwide, and wrote numerous books and articles (1974-1998).

For the first two years of this period of Newbigin's life (1959-1961), he occupied the position of General Secretary of the International Missionary Council. In keeping with the pattern of a pastoral bishop, Newbigin spent more than eighteen of those months travelling to various parts of the world—Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, North America, and Europe. He visited the national councils that made up the membership of the IMC to understand their needs. A second duty that occupied his time during these travels was the delivery of numerous speeches, public addresses, and academic lectures. His exposure to the church throughout the world and the topics that he addressed had a shaping effect on his ecclesiology.

At the 1961 New Delhi assembly the IMC was integrated into the WCC. This meant that Newbigin's job description changed from general secretary of the IMC to director of the Division (later Commission) on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches. During this time continued exposure to the world church, involvement in many of the different programmes of the World Council of Churches, editing the *International Review of Missions*, close association with Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, general secretary of the WCC, and active participation in the theological debates rising out of the secular decade all contributed to shaping Newbigin's convictions about the church.

In 1965 Newbigin returned to India as the bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. He was responsible for the pastoral oversight of one thousand congregations and over one hundred presbyters (pastors of local congregations) in a booming urban setting of over three million. The public square of Madras forced Newbigin to find concrete expressions for his convictions about a missionary church rooted in the work of the Triune God in history. His goal to enable those churches to be vivid signs of the kingdom led him into a deepened understanding of the nature and mission of the church and especially the social calling of the Christian community. During this time his involvement in the ecumenical tradition continued unabated and that tradition, including its conflict with the evangelical tradition, continued to shape his ecclesiological development.

Newbigin returned to Britain in 1974. He immediately took up a position teaching the theology of mission and ecumenical studies at Selly Oak Colleges (1974-1979). This gave him an opportunity to think and write more systematically on mission. Six years later he took responsibility for pastoring a small inner city church in Birmingham that was about to be closed by the Birmingham District Council of the United Reformed Church. He remained at that post for the next eight years (1980-1988). Throughout the last ten years of his life, he continued to write and lecture widely. Upon returning to Britain, he soon realized that the power of the modern scientific worldview and an accompanying religious pluralism had crippled the witness of the church in the West. He tackled this new mission field which he describes as "the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world" and "the one of which the Churches have been—on the whole—so little conscious" (1993h:235). In his lectures, writings, and efforts at

establishing a Gospel and Our Culture movement, he raised awareness of this “mission field” around the world. As to ecclesiology, this period is significant in that Newbigin weaves together all the various strands of his ecclesiology developed in his earlier years as an essential part of his call for a missionary engagement with western culture. A missionary understanding of the church is central to his mission in western culture project.

### 3.3. THE SHIFT TO A TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

The integration of the IMC and WCC was finalized at the WCC assembly in New Delhi in 1961. That event was the result of a process of theological reflection that had developed since the time of IMC meeting at Tambaram in 1938. This period was church-centric, and the union of the IMC and the WCC into one body was the institutional symbol and expression of the conviction that dominated this period: church and mission could not be separated. However, it was precisely at this assembly that there was evidence that the ecumenical consensus was beginning to break down. Stimulated by revolutionary events, new winds were blowing in the WCC that would expose the inadequacy of a church-centric basis for mission. It was during these debates in New Delhi that Newbigin himself recognized that his understanding of a missionary church as expressed in *One Body, One Gospel, One World* was inadequate. As he comments years later: “It was too exclusively church-centred in its understanding of mission. Only a fully Trinitarian doctrine would be adequate...” (1993h:187; cf.1993h:144).

The challenge to a Christocentric and ecclesiocentric understanding of mission and church was already evident in Willingen. The *missio Dei* had been formulated as a theological basis for the church’s mission. However, the meaning of God’s mission was hotly contested. The critical debates centred around two closely related issues. The first was the sufficiency of a Christological basis for mission. Many American participants believed that this was too narrow a basis and that a satisfactory one could only be established on a Trinitarian theology. Closely related to this was the second concern: the place of the church in God’s mission. Many believed that mission as merely the continuation through history of the community established by Jesus was too narrow. This church-centric conception of mission did not take into account the events of world history. Was God merely at work in the church or also in the events of world history? The Willingen conference never came to complete agreement on these issues.

These reflections were driven by the concern about the church’s solidarity with the world amidst its pain and sorrow. Though this theme found expression in the official documents, it did not command wide support. The momentum began to pick up, however, and by the next decade, it dominated the agenda of mission. Willingen articulated the concern as follows: “The Church’s words and works, its whole life of mission, are to be a witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do in Christ. But this word ‘witness’ cannot possibly mean that the Church stands over against the world, detached from it and regarding it from a position of superior righteousness or security” (Goodall 1953:191). Christians do not live in an enclave separate from the world but are to be God’s people in the world (*ibid.*). Therefore, the church is to identify itself deeply

with the world's distress, perplexity and sorrow. The interim report "The Theological Basis of the Missionary Obligation," which was not formally adopted by the council but received as a basis for further study, expands this solidarity with the world to include movements outside the church. This was a harbinger of things to come. "The Church in carrying out its mission is required to identify itself with the world, not only in its constant sin and tragedy, but also in the moments when the world acts in accordance with the grace of God more effectively than the churches themselves" (Goodall 1958:243). We can discern by faith ways that God is exercising His sovereignty in personal life, in the movements of political and social life where He both shows His judgement and confronts whole societies with new opportunities, and in processes of scientific discovery where he opens up new areas of creation with the promises of hope and also possibilities of disaster (Goodall 1958:240).

Newbigin relates that he could not understand what Hans Hoekendijk, Paul Lehmann and others were driving at during these debates. However, in the context of this growing emphasis Newbigin returned to the Scriptures. On the way to Bossey to give a lecture on the mission of the church in the contemporary world (1959a), Newbigin "spent the entire night on the plane from Bombay to Rome reading right through the New Testament and noting every reference to 'the world.'" This exercise was to have significant results.

The result of this was to set my mind moving in a new direction in which it was to travel for the next ten years. My thoughts for the past decade had been centred in the Church. This fresh exposure to the word of God set me thinking about the work of God in the world outside the Church (1993h:144).

In the lecture he gave at Bossey, Newbigin advanced the thesis that "what we are witnessing [in the revolutionary events of the time] is the process by which more and more of the human race is being gathered up into that history whose centre is the Cross and whose end is the final judgement and mercy of God" (1959a:82). However, he had not yet related this to a Trinitarian understanding and so Newbigin could write his Christocentric *One Body, One Gospel, One World* the next year. Not until three years later, as he sat in the New Delhi assembly in 1961, did he recognize his Christological basis for a missionary church to be too narrow. His missionary ecclesiology had been too exclusively Christocentric and ecclesiocentric. As for its Christocentricity, his understanding of the church and its mission was based on the work of Jesus and did not take into consideration sufficiently the work of the Father and the Spirit. As for its ecclesiocentric focus, world history was mere window-dressing for the real focus of God's work—the church. Now Newbigin wanted to put the mission of Christ and the church in the context of the work of the Triune God in the whole creation.

His close association with the IMC and WCC during this time served to deepen Newbigin's convictions concerning this Christocentric-Trinitarian and world-oriented<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This term must not be taken to mean that the church was marginalised and that the primary work of God is outside the ecclesial community. As will be elaborated later, for many the shift to a Trinitarian basis marginalised the centrality of Christ and the church. For Newbigin this did not happen. I have opted to speak of Newbigin's understanding as Christocentric-Trinitarian to indicate that there is no tension between Christocentrism and Trinitarianism. However, I have not employed any analogous compound term, like church-centric-world-oriented, to distinguish Newbigin's position from the antiecclesial position of

ecclesiology. When he returned to Madras as a bishop he looked back at his first missionary term.

The years on the WCC staff had accustomed me to thinking all the time about public issues and about the witness of the Church in the political and social order. No one could work for any length of time under the leadership of Wim Visser 't Hooft and then revert to a cosy ecclesiastical domesticity. Looking back in 1965 upon my earlier ministries in Kanchi and Madurai I felt I had been too narrowly ecclesiastical in my concerns, and I resolved that I would try to challenge the strong churches of Madras City to think less of their own growth and welfare and more of God's purpose for the whole of the vast and growing city (1993h:203).

The ecclesiology that developed over this time remained firmly in place to the end of his life. There were modifications as the contexts changed. He would later disassociate this Trinitarian basis from the secular context of the 1960s, for example. It is this understanding of the missionary church, however, that shaped his ministry in Madras and his call for a missionary encounter with western culture.

#### 3.4. CONTEXT FOR ECCLESIOLOGICAL SHIFT

This shift in Newbigin's understanding of mission and church cannot be understood apart from the global, ecumenical, theological, and missional context in which Newbigin found himself. Firsthand experience and involvement in these shifting times and in the ensuing debates that were spawned played a significant role in producing this change.

The 1960s were revolutionary times globally and this affected both missions and the ecumenical movement. During this time colonialism was collapsing and the countries of Asia and Africa gained their independence. It was a time of rapid social change and globalization, as western modernity seemed to engulf the entire globe. In the West the secular decade arrived with full force. All of these events—the collapse of colonialism, globalization, modernization, secularization—had their impact on the church, theology, missions, and the ecumenical movement. Missions, that had been based on the colonial framework, searched for a new paradigm. Secularism shaped the theology and missiology of the day. The centrality of the church was challenged and a new interest in the world replaced the church as the dominant concern. Interchurch aid responded to the urgencies of nation building and social need in the churches.

All of these events could not help but have an impact on Newbigin's concept of the church. Indeed the providential circumstances of his life put him at the centre of the turbulent times. As General Secretary of the IMC, he embarked on a worldwide jaunt to Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America, a tour that enabled him to view firsthand the impact of these revolutionary times on these areas. Located in Europe as an

ecumenical administrator and major player on the ecumenical scene, Newbigin was thrust into the midst of the theological, missiological, and ecumenical battles that would shape this stormy decade.

The paragraphs that follow briefly sketch the context for Newbigin's ecclesiological shift. The revolutionary events on the global stage will be outlined and the response of the ecumenical tradition elaborated, and Newbigin's own experience in this context will be noted.

### *3.4.1. The Worldwide Scene*

The period in which Newbigin carried out his ministry in the IMC and WCC was a time of profound change. During this time period C. E. Black wrote: "We are experiencing one of the great revolutionary transformations of mankind... The change in human affairs now taking place is of a scope and intensity that mankind has experienced on only two previous occasions, and its significance cannot be appreciated except in the context of the entire course of world history" (Black 1966:1). How can we characterize this period?

The most striking events of this decade were the decolonization of Asia and Africa. The end of the second world war saw a groundswell of national movements among the colonized countries. Declining resources left colonial powers with little will or ability to maintain colonial rule. A mighty movement of decolonization swept across the world. The first country to gain its independence was the Philippines, which acquired her freedom from the United States in 1946. Over the next eight years eight more countries in Asia, beginning with India in 1947, gained their independence from colonial rule. In 1956 France granted independence to its north African colonies, Morocco and Tunisia. The first sub-Saharan African country to declare its independence was Ghana in 1957. Over the next five years virtually every African country attained its independence from England, France, and Belgium.

But as Arend van Leeuwen, writing in 1964, reminds us, "it would be a very serious mistake therefore to suppose that the thing of primary significance about this age in which we are living is simply that the period of 'colonialism' is drawing to a close. No doubt the political emancipation of the African and Asian peoples is the most spectacular and apparently also the most dramatic aspects of the contemporary scene. What is of really crucial importance, however, is that though flying the colours of emancipation, they are joining the ever increasing ranks of those nations which follow the standard of western civilization" (van Leeuwen 1964:14). These countries entered the stream of a rapidly globalizing world—an interdependent global community achieved by the universalization of modern western culture. As no other civilization in history western civilization was imposing its institutions, technology, and spirit upon the other nations of the world. Modernization was the name given to this process of rapid social change within these non-western nations as they attempted to adjust to and master the political, economic, social, and technological developments of the westernized global community, so that they could become equal participants.

As these decolonized countries were swept into the new globalism, they found themselves at the bottom of a global hierarchy of wealth and power. At the pinnacle of this pyramid was the "First World," made up of Western European and North American

countries. The Soviet Union and the eastern European countries occupied the “Second World.” The newly decolonized countries were swept into the “Third World” made up of “less developed” and “least developed” countries. Their central goal became development and nation building. The United Nations termed the 1960s the “development decade.” Western nations (including all kinds of Christian organizations) undertook a multitude of development programs to enable Third World countries to raise their standard of living, master political, educational, and economic institutions, and develop the concomitant technology.

This whole revolutionary period had a notable effect on western culture: it launched Europe and North America into the “decade of the secular.” While two crippling world wars had temporarily undermined the faith of the western world in the modern vision, and while the “Barthian interlude” challenged the accommodation of the gospel to an optimistic modernity, these new development initiatives gave fresh impetus to these earlier optimistic convictions. A new confidence in progress based on science, technology, and social management swept western nations into a decade of resurgent secularism. The unbridled optimism that intoxicated western culture is expressed rather dramatically in the address that Emmanuel Mesthene gave to the 1966 Church and Society conference in Geneva.

We are the first... to have enough of that power actually at hand to create new possibilities almost at will. By massive physical changes deliberately induced, we can literally pry new alternatives from nature. The ancient tyranny of matter has been broken, and we know it.... We can change it [the physical world] and shape it to suit our purposes.... By creating new possibilities, we give ourselves more choices. With more choices, we have more opportunities. With more opportunities, we can have more freedom, and with more freedom we can be more human. That, I think, is what is new about our age.... We are recognizing that our technical prowess literally bursts with the promise of new freedom, enhanced human dignity, and unfettered aspiration (quoted in Bosch 1991:264f.).

The collapse of colonialism, global westernization, resurgent secularism, and a revolutionary optimism provided a volatile mix that made this time “volcanic” (Van Leeuwen 1964:13).

#### *3.4.2. Key Missiological and Ecclesiological Developments in the Ecumenical Tradition (1952-1968)*

These turbulent times could not but have a dramatic impact on the mission theology and ecclesiology of the ecumenical tradition with which Newbigin was intimately connected. A dramatic shift in mission theology emerged in Willingen (1952), came to mature expression in the WCC study on the missionary structure of the congregation (1967), and became the “received view” of the WCC at the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 (Bosch 1991:383). This understanding of mission and the church was the primary interlocutor for Newbigin throughout these years. It set the agenda that occupied Newbigin as he interacted with this growing understanding in both an appreciative and sharply critical way. Since Newbigin developed his ecclesiology in response to this emerging mission theology, it is necessary to devote some attention to it.

The new understanding of mission can be briefly described as follows. From

Tambaram until Willingen the primary focus of mission had been the work of God in the community that had its origin in and continued the work of Jesus Christ. The new period 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 laity now replaced the church as the bearer and primary agent of mission. The church was reduced to an instrumental role in God's mission as it restructured itself to enable the laity to carry out their calling in the political, social, and economic structures of the world. Thus mission was reduced to active political, social, and economic activity, while witness in the life of the church or in evangelism was minimized, if not eclipsed. The goal of mission was not a community that bore witness to the coming kingdom of God in its life but the humanization or *shalom* of society through efforts of Christians in cooperation with other social institutions that aimed at the transformation of oppressive political, social, and economic structures. The mode of mission was not proclamation of the gospel but the incarnational presence of God's people in healing ways in the midst of culture.

This understanding of mission had seeds in the IMC Willingen conference (1952) and bore its most mature fruit in the latter part of the 1960s. In papers preparing for the Willingen conference Johannes Hoekendijk and the North American study group raised objections to the Christocentric basis and ecclesiocentric agency of mission. By contrast they offered a Trinitarian basis with the world as the primary location of God's work. The North American study group believed that the direction of mission theology should move from "vigorous christ-centricity to thoroughgoing trinitarianism." The missionary obligation should be "grounded in the reconciling action of the Triune God" and mission should be "the sensitive and total response of the Church to what the Triune God was doing in the world" (NCCC 1952:6). Hoekendijk was even more sharp in his attack on the church-centric mission theology. Missionary theology was "bound to go astray because it revolv[ed] around an illegitimate centre"; the world, not the church, is the scene for the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom (Hoekendijk 1952:332f.).

The church is simply an instrument of God's redemptive action, a means in God's hands to establish *shalom* in the world (Hoekendijk 1950:170). Put differently, "the nature of the church can be sufficiently defined by its function" (Hoekendijk 1952:334). Therefore, the present "immobile, self-centred, and introverted" (Hoekendijk 1961:81; cf. Hutchison 1987:185) church structures must be overhauled and become more flexible so that they are capable of direct action in society. Hoekendijk envisaged the church as a "little group, living in a concrete situation, and serving each other and their environment by reforming the structure of a segment of society" (Hoekendijk 1950:175).

The theology of Hoekendijk and the American study group did not carry the day at Willingen. The statement "The Missionary Calling of the Church", which was largely the work of Newbigin (Willingen 1952: Minute 40, p.19; cf. Bassham 1978:331), was finally adopted by the conference. The primary focus of this statement was God's mission through the church, while the relation of God to the world was given less attention. The seeds planted by Hoekendijk and the American study group, however, would bear fruit in the following decade. The "anti-ecclesiocentric thrust" of Hoekendijk (Jongeneel 1997:90) became the orthodoxy of much of the ecumenical tradition in the 1960s and was officially adopted by the Uppsala Assembly 1968 (Bosch 1991:383). Not until the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1975 did

this powerful current to “debunk the church as completely irrelevant, [and] to erase every difference between the church and its agenda on the one hand and the world and its agenda on the other” begin to decline (Bosch 1991:388).

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Teaching Conference at Strasbourg in 1960 proved to be the hinge that opened the door into that new decade. The original intention of some of the planners like D. T. Niles and Philippe Maury was to pass along the consensus that had been reached in the ecumenical movement in the previous twenty-five years on the missionary nature of the church.

Yet at the conference, leaders such as Niles, Newbiggin, Visser 't Hooft and Karl Barth did not seem able to speak to or for the students. Hans Hoekendijk was received with more enthusiasm than any other speaker when he called for “full identification with man in the modern world,” which required the church to move out of ecclesiastical structures to open, mobile groups; to “desacralize the church; and to “dereligionize” Christianity (Bassham 1979:47; cf. Hoekendijk’s speech, Hoekendijk 1961).

Bassham goes on to spell out the implications of this conference. “Strasbourg was a harbinger of things to come. No longer would the church be in the center of the picture as the bearer of salvation. Rather the focus would be the world. This decisive change of focus helped to point the way for the emerging theology of mission which would dominate ecumenical thinking in the 1960s” (Bassham 1979:47).

This emphasis emerged first at the WCC assembly at New Delhi in 1961. Kathleen Bliss noted that one of the three distinctive things about New Delhi was “that along with an emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ there had been more sensitivity to God’s working in the world” (New Delhi 1962:40). This shift from church to world meant a renewed interest in the laity as the primary bearer of mission. In an address that “evoked an unusually wide and alert attention,” Masao Takenaka of Japan argued that “secular engagement and participation in the worldly affairs in the light of the Christian faith” is essential to Christ’s ministry and ought to be an indispensable mark of the Church. Consequently he strongly accented the role of the laity in “their ordinary secular life” and rejoiced in the “growing reaffirmation of the ministry of the laity in the world... as one of the most gratifying developments of the Church today” (:13). Klaus von Bismarck insisted “that the Church can make its rightful impact on society only as it ceases to be preoccupied with a cloistered life of its own and becomes actively concerned with people’s working lives in the world.” Unfortunately, he noted, a sacred/secular dichotomy, a lack of understanding of God’s work outside the church and the inability of the professional leadership of the church to equip the laity for their callings in society impeded this impact (:18). The function of a local church is to be a base for supplying the laity who are “soldiers in the field” argued one of the three lay speakers invited to address the assembly (:19). The report on witness called for a reshaping of the ecclesial structures of the witnessing community to assist the laity in their evangelistic task (:85-90). The most important action of this assembly for a theology of mission was to authorize the Department on Studies in Evangelism to carry out a comprehensive study on “the missionary structure of the congregation” (:189-190).

The meeting of the CWME in Mexico in 1963 continued to develop the same line, emphasizing God’s work in the world through the laity. The message affirmed that Christians must “discover a shape of Christian obedience being written for them by what God is already actively doing in the structures of the city’s life outside the

Church” (Orchard 1964:174). This new emphasis led to the debate that dominated Mexico—“the relationship between God’s action in and through the Church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community” or in other words, the relationship between “God’s providential action and God’s redeeming action” (Orchard 1964:157)—a problem that would continue to plague the ecumenical tradition throughout this time period (Bassham 1979:78). The role of the laity continued to be emphasized and explored (Orchard 1964:175), as well as ecclesiastical structures as an “intractable frontier” (Orchard 1964:164). A debate between M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof in a discussion on the witness of Christians to men in the secular world pointed to the growing differences between the older and newer understandings of mission. Thomas argued that the task of mission was to discern where Christ is present in the quest for humanization and nation-building and identify oneself with that struggle through full participation in what was truly human. Berkhof believed that taking our clue to understanding God’s will for humankind from the events of history rather than what God has done in Jesus Christ could lead to serious misunderstanding (1993h:195; cf. Loffler 1968). In any case, there was agreement that the structures of the congregation must be reformed and Mexico endorsed the study project on the missionary structure of the congregation as the means to discover “the forms of missionary obedience to which Christ is calling us” (Orchard 1964:158).

Another ecumenical gathering was significant for the development of this new view of mission. The Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 “strengthened considerably the emphasis on the world as the arena for mission which had become the major thrust of ecumenical mission theology” (Bassham 1979:76) when it stated:

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.... (Geneva 1966:179f. quoted in Bassham *ibid.*)

The Geneva Conference analyzed more deeply the political, economic, international, and social issues that were dominating the day, directing all Christians to be involved in movements, even revolutions, for social change. Again, the life of the church and evangelism receded from view as mission was swallowed up by social activity.

This theology of mission was most fully expressed in a document published in 1967 entitled *The Church for Others and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (WCC 1967). This document was the result of the study project on “the Missionary Structure of the Congregation” authorized by the Third Assembly at New Delhi 1961. The project was intended to find patterns and structures that would best serve the missionary calling of the church. Of course, everything hinges on one’s understanding of mission and church. A sea change in the understanding of both mission and church was underway. While many, including Newbigin (1993h:156-157; 194-195), saw this as an opportunity to find new patterns of ministry and structures for institutional church life that would enable the missionary nature of the church to emerge, the whole project was swept into the powerful currents of the emerging missiology and ecclesiology inspired by Hoekendijk. A new understanding of mission refashioned the whole project and the church was eclipsed. As one reads *The Church*

for Others, the dominant shadow of Hoekendijk casts itself on almost every page.

At the foundation of this study was the notion of the *missio Dei* (WCC 1967:14, 19, 75 etc.). Two interpretations of this phrase had appeared at Willingen. The first, inspired by the North American report *Why Missions?* and found in the interim report of Willingen, interpreted this phrase to mean God's action in the world independent of the church. The other, firmly planted in the ecumenical tradition of the past 25 years that emphasized the church, pointed to God's work through the witness of the church. The latter notion was endorsed by Willingen but it was the former understanding that now influenced "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" study (Bassham 1979:69).

This new understanding of the *missio Dei* was possible because of the fundamental theological insight that we "cannot confine the divine activity to ecclesiastical activity" but must recognize Christ's work outside the church in the world (WCC 1967:11). The world must be considered in dynamic terms as historical transformation (:12). In understanding the historical transformation of the day, the process of secularization and the coming of the kingdom initiated by Christ's work are virtually identified (:12f.). In the emancipation of blacks, humanization of industrial relations, rural development, quest for ethics in business, and urban renewal one could see God in His transforming kingdom work (:15). The calling of the church is to participate in God's mission as his partner by discerning signs of God's action in the world (:13, 15, 78). The goal of mission is *shalom*, according to the European working group (:15) and humanization, according to the North American working group (:78). Specifically the church's mission in seeking *shalom* is to proclaim what God is doing, participate in developments toward *shalom*, and pioneer in areas where secular agencies have been neglectful (:15). A traditional understanding of evangelism that called for repentance and that gathered folk into the church by means of baptism was eclipsed—in fact, this was termed objectionable "proselytism" (:75)—and mission was wholly understood in an instrumental way as participation in various social, economic, and political programs such as community development, civil rights, and urban renewal.

This emerging understanding of God's mission changed the conception of the relationship of God's redemptive activity in the world. Traditionally, God's salvific relation to the world was understood via the church. The traditional pattern or sequence God-church-world should be changed to God-world-church to reflect the insight that God's primary relationship is to the world (:16, 69f.). The church is merely a "postscript" that is "added to the world for the purpose of pointing to and celebrating both Christ's presence and God's ultimate redemption of the whole world" (:70). This means that the church must take an "ex-centric position" and turn itself inside out as "a church for the world" (:17-19).

The structures of the church, then, must be tested by the criteria of whether or not they impede or enable the church to participate in the *missio Dei*. Existing parish forms of congregational life, including the parish system, leadership, buildings, and worship, were castigated for their "morphological fundamentalism," a rigid and inflexible attitude toward traditional structures of congregational life (:19). Indeed, the report speaks of "heretical structures" (:19) and "heretical buildings" (:28). Since "the world provides the agenda" (:20, 70), flexible structures called "go-structures" (:19) were needed. These go-structures stood opposed to the "come-structures" of traditional "waiting churches" to which people were expected to come. Go-structures would enable a

congregation that was sensitive to human need around it to respond with timely help to victims of racism, oppression, injustice, poverty, and loneliness.

Although the study was to focus on structures for missionary congregations, in the end the report “had precious little to say about” this topic (Bosch 1991:382). Little in the way of a creative contribution was made. Some helpful suggestions were made, such as zonal structures that envisaged the forming of congregations in the midst of various spheres of differentiated modern culture,<sup>2</sup> but this was not worked out. Instead, a strong emphasis on the laity in their individual callings as “the bearer of mission” in the social, political, and economic realms of public life dominated (:80ff.) and eclipsed the communal and institutional dimension of the church as mission.

The ecclesiology and missiology of *The Church for Others* illustrates what Bosch has said: “it had become fashionable to disparage the churches-as-they-exist-in-history. People lost confidence in the church.” But the attacks on the church during this time “are pertinent only insofar as they express a theological ideal raised to the level of prophetic judgement.” (Bosch 1991:385). An ingrown, self-occupied, antiquated, and inflexible church forced an extreme reaction. By the mid 1970s, however, these raging currents had dried up because “Christianity completely devoid of an institutional nature cannot offer any true alternative” (Ludwig Rutti quoted in Bosch 1991:384).

The world-centred understanding of mission and church found official endorsement in the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968. The line between the church as a community and the society in which they lived was almost entirely blurred as the objective of mission was an increasingly just and free society termed “the new humanity.” The cries clearly heard at Uppsala were the cries of victims of hunger, political oppression, and racial discrimination. Fundamental to the missionary calling of the church was a social engagement that would enable humankind to “see greater achievements of justice, freedom, and dignity as part of the true humanity in Christ” (Bassham 1979:82). Mission fields were replaced by points of mission: situations where the struggle for humanization takes place. To accomplish this, Uppsala emphasized flexible ecclesial structures for mission, the laity as the primary agent of mission, cooperation with political, economic, and social movements that pursued justice and freedom, and dialogue as the way each meets and challenges the other (Bassham 1979:80, 83). Bosch comments:

By and large, the Uppsala assembly endorsed this [*Church for Others*] theology. The Hoekendijk approach had become the “received view” in WCC circles. Mission became an umbrella term for health and welfare services, youth projects, activities of political interest groups, projects for economic and social development, the constructive application of violence, etc. Mission was “the comprehensive term for all conceivable ways in which people may cooperate with God in respect of this world....

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<sup>2</sup>Newbigin struggles with this idea of “zonal structures” over against the parish structure several times in his writings (e.g., 1960n:32; 1966b:113ff).

The distinction between church and world has, for all intents and purposes, been completely dropped (Bosch 1991:383).

This was not the only voice heard at Uppsala, however (Bassham 1979:83). The growing politicization of the gospel forced a reaction from a number of evangelical advocates (Donald McGavran, John Stott, and Arthur Glasser) who stressed evangelism, conversion, church growth, and the Christian community as God's agent in mission. McGavran asked the rhetorical question: "Will Uppsala betray the two billion" people who have never heard the gospel? (McGavran 1968:1 ). Glasser noted that evangelicals opposed the Uppsala Assembly because it "appalled them with its secularized gospel and reduction of the mission of the church to social and political activism" (Glasser 1972:33).

Newbigin attended Uppsala and found himself uncomfortably at odds with both emphases. He resisted the "deafening barrage" and "high-pressure propaganda" of the church growth advocates as well as the "shattering experience" that "reduced mission to nothing but a desperate struggle to solve insoluble problems". He closes his comments about Uppsala by saying that "the saddest thing was that we were not able seriously to listen to each other" (1993h:219). We will note later that Newbigin's ecclesiology developed partially in reaction to the evangelical and ecumenical reductionisms of this time.

It was the changes in missiology and ecclesiology of the ecumenical tradition, however, which would prove significant for the development of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology both as he recognized the insufficiency of his own formulations and as he reacted against the extremes of the day. Many themes developed in these pages representing the ecumenical thinking at this time are found in Newbigin's writings of this period.

### 3.5. NEWBIGIN'S TENURE IN THE IMC AND WCC AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR HIS ECCLESIOLOGY (1959-1965)

These revolutionary shifts, both on the international scene and within the missionary tradition of the ecumenical movement, had the power to shape any person's thinking about relevant issues even if that person were on the periphery of the action. In Newbigin's case he was at the centre and had firsthand experience of much that was happening. Perhaps few men were as strategically located during this period. This section examines how Newbigin's experience in the ecumenical institutions of the IMC and WCC shaped his ecclesiology. This involves a two-pronged approach. First we trace how his responsibilities and associations as an ecumenical leader demanded ecclesiological reflection. Second we identify fundamental ecclesiological themes which he developed during this time.

#### 3.5.1. *Ecumenical Leadership and Ecclesiological Development*

We can summarize how his experience in the IMC and WCC as an ecumenical leader shaped his ecclesiology in five areas. As the general secretary of the IMC and director of the CMWE of the WCC Newbigin was required to give leadership to the world

missionary enterprise, visit churches in many parts of the world, participate in numerous WCC programs and consultations, give theological and missiological leadership in a secular decade, and work closely with Wim Visser 't Hooft. All of these factors formatively influenced his developing ecclesiology.

#### 3.5.1.1. Leadership for World Mission

As General Secretary of the IMC Newbigin was expected to give leadership to missionary policy and planning. During this time, however, missions was in crisis. The colonial framework that had upheld missions for so many years was breaking down. Four facts—the reversal of tides of power, the emergence of a single world civilization, the renaissance of non-Christian world religions, and the rise of younger churches—were producing a change so profound that for many the whole missionary enterprise seemed to be an anachronism (1960j:6-7; 1994k:7-10). Compounding the problem was the fact that “mission was being absorbed into inter-church aid” (1993h:158). Projects of technical assistance from the West engulfed the former colonized countries as they pursued the task of nation building. Missions were in trouble. What was the way forward?

Newbigin struggled through the tangled issues in an attempt to bring theological and structural clarity to the issues. We will examine some of his reflection later. At this point it is important to note that this struggle had a formative effect on his ecclesiology. Giving leadership to missions during a time when it had seemed to lose direction forced Newbigin to return to “the unchanging basis” (1958b:17) or fundamental “convictions” (1993h:186) of Scripture regarding mission. What is the church? What is mission? What is the enduring task of cross-cultural missions? All of this forced deepening convictions about the missionary nature of the church. His conclusions reveal this commitment. Missions is always to be understood as one dimension of the mission of the church (1960g:60; 1960i; 1993h:185). Or in the words of another of Newbigin’s important distinctions, missionary intention must be understood in the context of the missionary dimension of the church (1993h:163, 185, 189).

#### 3.5.1.2. Exposure to the Global Church

As the General Secretary of the IMC Newbigin saw his ministry in similar terms to his calling as a bishop. As the churches needed to be visited, so did the national councils in various regions of the world. Immediately Newbigin planned long tours of the African and Latin American churches. Over the next five years Newbigin carried out an extended tour to Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, Australia, the Caribbean, parts of Asia, and much of Europe and North America. In his travels he was able to put his finger on the political, social and ecclesiastical pulse of these areas. In addition to his trips, he set himself the goal of compiling an annual survey of missionary developments around the globe. This meant reading a great quantity of material that flowed in from various parts of the world (1993h:185; 1963a; 1964e; 1965h; 1966c).

We can briefly note various impressions that his trips made on him with respect to

the church. Newbigin's trip to fifteen different countries in Africa forced reflection on the relationship of western missions to the African church and on ministerial training for missionary churches in Africa. His trip to the church in the Pacific brought him face to face with two entirely different kinds of missionary churches. While the Samoan church existed in the situation of a *corpus Christianum*, the church in New Guinea stood on the unevangelized frontiers of cannibalism. In Latin America Newbigin was confronted with the growing conflict between the ecumenical and evangelical traditions, the bitter hostility between the Roman Catholic and evangelical communions, the vital emerging Pentecostal churches, and the church's struggle with extreme poverty. His theological struggles on missions and church, church and culture, ecumenicity, social involvement (issues that will be investigated later) were deepened by his exposure to many different ecclesial and cultural contexts.

### 3.5.1.3. Involvement in the WCC Programs

Newbigin's work in the IMC and WCC confronted him with numerous projects that forced ecclesiological reflection. Two projects that were especially fruitful for his ecclesiology dealt with urban industrialization and healing. While traditional missions had operated in a rural setting, the new globalization involved the spread of western multi-national companies and the growth of factories in various cities of the third world. Local pastors trained to work in rural settings were not equipped to deal with this urban situation. A program was developed to attempt to equip the pastor in this new setting. His attempt to meet this new frontier impelled him to reflect on the nature and structures of the church (e.g., 1966b:115ff.). This reflection would continue into Madras (1974b:100-104).

The project on healing was also significant. Healing had been integral to the modern missionary movement from its inception. There were hospitals the world over that had been established by western missions. In this time of globalization, governments were building up health facilities with the help of foreign funds. Underfunded mission hospitals could not compete. If the ministry of healing was integral to the witness of the gospel then what was the next step? Newbigin was challenged by a Nigerian doctor who said that "the basic unit of healing is not the hospital, it is the Christian congregation" (1993h:192). Subsequent reflection on this "new idea" led to a conference on healing and mission that was to begin "a profound revolution in the thinking of medical missions" (1993h:193). Newbigin's contribution to the published proceedings—a document that was rapidly in demand—framed the issue in terms of the missionary calling of the local congregation (1965b, 1965f).

It was not only the various tasks of his division that required thought on the doctrine of the church; it was also involvement in other departments of the WCC. In the colonial paradigm, mission was defined primarily in terms of geography. The residue of this understanding was manifested in the fact that all the various programs, projects, and consultations that were being carried out by other divisions of the WCC in the Third World were considered to be a part of the mission of the church. Therefore, Newbigin was invited to all of these meetings and was expected to be informed about what was happening in all the various countries where western missions had been long at work. While Newbigin notes that "it was simply impossible for me to be effectively involved

in all the vast range of programmes which were being developed all over the Third World” (1993h:185), it did put him in touch with many developments that would find expression in his ecclesiology.

During this time of rapid social change throughout the third world, there were a number of programs that dealt with the social calling of the church being developed by the division of interchurch aid, the department of church and society, and the department of the co-operation of men and women. Involvement in these programs deepened Newbigin’s substantial theological reflection carried on at this time on the church’s mission in society. As director of the division responsible for missions and evangelism it also forced further reflection on the importance of church’s task of proclaiming the gospel and its relation to these social projects.

Perhaps more important for Newbigin’s ecclesiological formation was his involvement with the department on the laity. Formed in 1955, the Department on the Laity increased its influence significantly so that at the New Delhi assembly of the WCC (1961) the laity was a central issue in all three sections—witness, service, and unity. Three laypersons addressed the assembly and the upshot was the decision that the Department of Evangelism—a department for which Newbigin was responsible—should undertake a study of the missionary structure of the congregation in co-operation with the Laity Department. This close association continued to nourish Newbigin’s long-standing conviction that the primary point of a missionary encounter was in the calling of God’s people in society.

#### 3.5.1.4. Participation in the Theological and Missiological Debates During the Secular Decade

The powerful forces of secularization were producing an earthquake in the theological world. Numerous authors were attempting to rearticulate the Christian faith in terms of the secular assumptions that dominated the western world (Robinson 1963, Munby 1963, Van Buren 1963, Van Leeuwen 1964, Cox 1966). While sympathetic to many of their concerns, Newbigin believed that much of this writing was an attack on the very heart of the Christian faith. He entered the debate with the contribution of the Firth Lectures in Nottingham University which were later published as *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966b). Newbigin believed that a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Christian faith and the process of secularization by many of these authors affected their solutions. According to Newbigin, secularization is not to be seen as contrary to the Christian faith; rather secularization is the fruit of the permeation of western culture with the gospel. These debates prompted Newbigin to reflect anew on the nature of the church. While the church was being marginalised in the secular, industrialized city, Newbigin affirms the centrality of the church to God’s redemptive program and asks what “the parish church might be in this new concrete city” (1966b:107). We have noted how the winds of secularism also affected much of the discussion of missiology. Newbigin’s primary contribution to this debate was his monograph *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (1963g).

#### 3.5.1.5. Influence of Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft

During Newbigin's five years in the IMC and the WCC, Willem A. Visser 't Hooft was the General Secretary of the World Council Churches. Visser 't Hooft greatly influenced Newbigin's ecclesiology, especially at two points.

The first area of influence was the broad vision Visser 't Hooft maintained on the issue of social witness. Newbigin remarks after returning to Madras in 1965: "The years on the WCC staff had accustomed me to thinking all the time about public issues and about the witness of the church in the political and social order. No one could work for any length of time under the leadership of Wim Visser 't Hooft and then revert back to a cosy ecclesiastical domesticity" (1993h:203). Indeed an examination of Visser 't Hooft's life and work in the WCC shows his commitment to the fact that "the Christian Church should re-affirm the sovereignty of its Lord over all of life" (Visser 't Hooft 1937:10). Visser 't Hooft's comments during his opening address to the Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966 echo his life-long concern for social obedience.

Our conference is about the full meaning and implications of a true turning to God, about the implications of conversion, about the fruits of repentance.... It is in our day to day decisions in our social life that the reality of our turning to God is constantly tested. We will never be able to convince the modern world of the truth of the Gospel unless we offer it in its fullness; that is with its radical critique of our social attitudes and our social structures confirmed by our personal and corporate obedience (Visser 't Hooft 1966:418).

Visser 't Hooft affected Newbigin's ecclesiology, secondly, in the area of his emphasis on syncretism in the West. For Visser 't Hooft the "western churches were hopelessly compromised by syncretism. They had allowed the Gospel to be confused with European culture" (1992e:78). Two of his most important books take up the theme of syncretism (Visser 't Hooft 1937, 1963). In his earlier book *None Other Gods* (1937) Visser 't Hooft castigates the church in the United States for their syncretistic alliance with democracy and the European church for their partnership with nationalism. Speaking to a western missionary society in the early years of the second world war he argued that missionaries must be liberated from the syncretism endemic to the national churches of Europe. This syncretism had led missionaries to be agents of western culture rather than witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (1992e:79). An analysis of western culture reveals the fusion of Christianity, scientific rationalism, and neo-pagan vitalism (Visser 't Hooft 1977:355). While European Christianity was compromised by scientific rationalism throughout much of its life, in these latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-pagan vitalism appeared to emerge as a leading cultural force. This syncretism could be corrected only on the basis of dialogue with other local theologies under the absolute supremacy of the Bible as norm by which all forms of Christianity and theologies could be tested. This emphasis on syncretism would play an important role in shaping Newbigin's thinking about the mission of the church in the West in the later decades.

### *3.5.2. Development of Ecclesiological Themes During Ecumenical Leadership*

In addition to a Trinitarian theology, Newbigin developed a number of themes that are central to his missionary ecclesiology. While all of these issues are treated in later

chapters of this book in a more systematic way, it is important to draw attention at this point to the way in which the historical context demanded further reflection. Eleven of these ecclesiological issues are briefly surveyed here.

### 3.5.2.1. Biblical Authority and the Church's Missionary Calling

The developments during this time were dramatic and radical. How would Newbigin chart a course through all these changes? Newbigin was convinced that the only way to chart a course for mission through the turbulent waters of the time was by the compass of Scripture. Indeed he believed this theological and exegetical work “to be absolutely central to any kind of leadership in world mission” (1993h:188).

Newbigin expressed commitment to the authority of Scripture for mission in the context of attacks that undermined the Biblical Theology movement—a tradition that shaped both the ecumenical movement since the second world war (Cartwright 1991:454) and Newbigin himself (1982i:7). Blauw expressed a general consensus that had developed since the second world war about the Biblical foundation for mission (Blauw 1962). Under the attack of the Biblical scholars James Barr (Barr 1961, 1963, 1966, cf. 1973), Ernst Kasemann (1964) and others (cf. Childs 1970:61-87), and under the pressure of the secularizing decade, the Biblical theology that had provided a foundation for mission crumbled. The new winds blowing brought down the “Biblical Theology” structure like a house of cards (Childs 1970:71f.).

In the context of weakened Biblical authority, where would Newbigin end up? Already in 1957 when Newbigin began to sense the new currents of a “secular interpretation of the gospel,” he turned anew to Scripture. Asked to give a lecture in Bossey on the mission of the church in the contemporary world, he spent the entire night on the plane reading through the New Testament noting every reference to ‘the world.’ It was this “fresh exposure to the word of God” that challenged his thinking about the church (1993h:144).

As he struggled with an issue that was to occupy much of his attention during this period, that of the place of missions, he articulated a fundamental conviction that would characterize his approach to these changing times. “If missions were to recover a sense of direction, if in the circumstances of integration we were to discern the distinctive missionary focus within the total life of the worldwide Church, then the only way was to open ourselves afresh to the biblical perspectives” (1993h:163). Scripture, not the changing times, would set the agenda. But, of course, this was a study of Scripture with a deep awareness of the context. He states:

If the Church is going to meet and master the forces which are shaping the secular world of our time, she needs to put a far greater proportion of her strength behind the work of the theologians; she needs a theology which is not the mere product of changing moods and fashions but deeply based on Scripture, stated in terms in which the world lives, relevant to the forces which are actually shaping the lives of men. It is not sufficient for the Church to attend to tactics: she must attend first to truth (1960c:129).

Elsewhere Newbigin uses a marine analogy in another place to make the same point.

We are not intended to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the

renewing of our minds. God uses the changes and chances of history to shake His people from time to time out of their conformity with the world; but when that happens our job surely is not just to push over the tiller and sail before the winds of change, but to look afresh to our chart and compass and to ask how we now use the new winds and the new tides to carry out our sailing orders. Every new situation is a summons to bring all our traditions afresh “under the Word of God” (1962a:2).

In these changing times Newbigin consistently and resolutely proceeded from this starting point in Scripture. In speech after speech he makes the comment that Scripture must form our starting point (e.g., 1962b:22). He exegetes a text and struggles with the current situation in its light (e.g., 1960b). In his trips to Africa (1993h:167), the Pacific (1993h:172), and Latin America (1993h:175) his normal pattern was “to do Bible study together and to reflect upon the local situations in the light of this study” (1993h:175). Newbigin’s commitment to the primacy of Scripture in interpreting the church’s mission was deepened during these years.

### 3.5.2.2. Salvation History and World History

Underlying many of the debates during this secular decade was the foundational theological issue of the relationship between salvation history and world history. The Bible narrates a salvation history that is in the form of universal history with the church as the bearer of a cosmic salvation. Modern western culture was in the grip of another interpretation of universal history in which the bearer of cosmic salvation was the global march of western science, technology, and institutions. The dominant missionary theology of the 1950s placed its emphasis on salvation history. The community formed by Jesus as the bearer of salvation was placed firmly in the centre. However, the relationship of that community to world history was not sufficiently probed. According to Goodall, the leading question arising out of the Willingen meeting of the IMC (1952) was: “What is the relation between ‘history’ and ‘salvation history’, between God’s activity in creation and His grace in redemption?” (Goodall 1953:20).

It was precisely this question that the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) found it hardest to find agreement (1963g:23). As the decade of the 1960s progressed the emphasis gradually shifted to world history where God was providentially and redemptively at work. It was the task of the church to go out and find where He was at work and cooperate with Him. This relationship of salvation and world history was central to the debates at the CWME meeting at Mexico (1963).

Debate returned again and again to the relationship between God’s action in and through the Church and everything God is doing in the world apparently independently of the Christian community. Can a distinction be drawn between God’s providential action and God’s redeeming action? If the restoration and reconciliation of human life is being achieved by the action of God through secular agencies, what is the place and significance of faith? If the Church is to be wholly involved in the world and its history, what is the true nature of its separateness (Orchard 1964:157; Latham 1964:49f.)?

An outstanding contribution to this debate was the book *Christianity in World History* by Arend van Leeuwen (1964). The inspiration for this book came from the

speech Newbigin delivered at Bossey (1993h:144; Van Leeuwen 1964:17).<sup>3</sup> Van Leeuwen interpreted world history in terms of the dynamic produced in ontocratic societies when the gospel is introduced. The movement of secularization in the 1960s was the contemporary expression of this process. In van Leeuwen's interpretation, salvation history and world history are merged. "The technological revolution is the evident and inescapable form in which the whole world is now confronted with the most recent phase of Christian history. In and through this form Christian history becomes world history" (van Leeuwen 1964:408).

One of Newbigin's more creative contributions during this period arose in response to this theological struggle. Newbigin attempted to understand what God is doing in these revolutionary times through the interpretive lens of Mark 13. God is drawing the whole world into the current of a single world history. This single world history looks toward the goal of sharing all the benefits of a common scientific and technical civilization. The origin of this conception is the West. As more and more cultures of the world are drawn into this current, they face rapid social change as they attempt to build their nations on the western patterns. When western colonial powers withdraw, these newly independent nations strive to integrate the modern worldview into their older way of life. The clue to understanding this world historical process is a right eschatology. The force that has been drawing all nations into a single history is a secularized Christian eschatology. The linear pattern of history that has been revealed in Scripture has shaped western culture and from there has been disseminated throughout the world. Once nations have been shaped by this linear pattern, a return to their former cyclical pattern of viewing the world is impossible. They are forced to make choices about ultimate issues: Who or what will enable western society to move toward this common human destiny? All nations are brought to the point of accepting Jesus as Lord or rejecting him. The church is set in the world among the nations to witness to what He is doing and to Who will bring history to its consummation (1960o:21-24; 1960j:12f.; 1962i:3-5; )

It is at this point that Newbigin draws on his exegesis of Mark 13 (e.g., 1960j:10-12; 1963g:38-51). The teaching of Jesus summons us to understand the events of world history in the light of his mission. Newbigin points to five characteristics. First, in this time between the times people expect and get messiahs. They are presented with an end to history and are forced to seek the means to achieve that end. Second, the sign of these times is tumult and suffering for the world. These sufferings are the birth pangs of the kingdom. Third, the church is called to witness in the midst of suffering. The end of

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<sup>3</sup>This is a clear example of Newbigin's ability to stimulate others to do the scholarly work that his own schedule prohibited him from doing. He planted seed-ideas that were brought to scholarly maturity by academics who devoted themselves to the research and documentation of these suggestions.

history has been “delayed in order that all men may have the opportunity to recognize Him, and to accept in Him their own true destiny” (1960j:10). Fourth, this witness is primarily the witness of the Holy Spirit and only secondarily a witness of the church. Fifth, this history will move through suffering and witness to the ultimate issue. False messiahs and saviours will be exposed and the true Saviour and Messiah will come in power. History is not a continuous, gradual ascent toward a perfect human future but a story of conflict in which the final issues are more sharply defined.

This interpretation is full of significance for an understanding of the missionary church that Newbigin developed at this time. The task of witness to the world is set within the context of world history. World history is not mere background for the development of the church. Rather the church is to witness to the true end of history and its life is to be a clue to that fulfillment (1960j:12). The life of the church is woven into the fabric of world history as a witness to the end to which that world history is moving.

### 3.5.2.3. Evangelism and Social Concern

Willingen adopted a comprehensive understanding of mission, written by Newbigin, that emphasized evangelism and social action as equally important elements of the witness of a missionary church. However, the political, economic, and social changes taking place all over the world were already making many at Willingen acutely aware of new dimensions of the social task of the church. Thus the adopted report states that the church is to “identify itself with the world, not only in its perplexity and distress, its guilt and its sorrow, but also in its real acts of love and justice” (Goodall 1953:191). This emphasis on the social task that was evident in the previous IMC conferences from Jerusalem on took on an added urgency in light of the rapid social change. The social task of the church became one of the dominant issues on the agendas of the WCC and CWME from Willingen on. The growing confidence in science, technology, and western institutions embodied in numerous aid programs from the West captured the churches of the ecumenical tradition.

This led to three fundamental problems. First, social programs and technical assistance eclipsed the evangelistic task of the church. Second, the optimism of the development decade moved the church to a triumphalist understanding of social action. Third, this overemphasis of the social calling of the church led to a reaction on the part of the evangelical tradition; the evangelical tradition emphasized evangelism over against social involvement. Against these three distortions Newbigin threw his weight seeking to bring the light of Scripture to the mission of the church.

Newbigin comments a number of times that in the ecumenical tradition “there was much less enthusiasm for the direct preaching of the Gospel and the building up of the Church than for technical assistance and political action” (1993h:194).

To feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to give help to the victims of disaster and technical assistance to those who need it—all this is an essential part of our discipleship, and it is of God's goodness that the churches are learning to do it together. But there is a need to beware lest the churches give the impression that they are not equally concerned to share the supreme riches of the grace of God in Jesus Christ (1963a:7).

Or as he puts it in another place: “... while very many of the participants [of the New

Delhi Assembly] visiting India for the first time were moved by the sight of so many people without bread, not many were apparently moved by the sight of so many without the gospel.... Half of this world is hungry, and we are learning to share our bread.... We have now also to learn... how to share that living bread with all who will receive him” (1962j:90, 94).

He observed the irony of all of this. While secularization and modernization are sweeping the world, the fact that western science and technology are rooted in the gospel is an embarrassment (1965a:420). Unfortunately the church had followed this general pattern, believing that technical assistance was “more humble, more realistic, more relevant” than “the presumption of trying to convert other people to one’s own religion” (1965a:419). It is the duty of a faithful church, Newbigin believed, to “denounce sharply” this tendency (1965a:418). He tenaciously clung to his deep conviction that the “preaching of the Gospel and the services of men’s needs are equally authentic and essential parts of the Church’s responsibility” (1965a:422). He recorded six convictions that he jotted down in 1962 when his commitment was being challenged. These convictions would “keep him on course during this difficult period” (1993h:186). The first conviction was: “That it matters supremely to bring more people to know Jesus as Saviour.” The second: “That our responsibility in the political order arises out of the love command” (1993h:186). These are both aspects of the church’s mission and neither can be substituted for the other. No amount of service can substitute for explicit testimony to Christ and “no human deed can of itself take the place of the one deed by which the world is redeemed and to which we must direct men’s eyes” (1965a:422). But equally, an escapist preaching of Christ, which refuses social involvement and which was characteristic of the evangelical tradition, is empty and no true witness to the kingdom. The church is both a reporter and a sign of the resurrection.

These “difficult times” drove Newbigin to a more nuanced discussion of these two aspects of the church’s mission which examined the integral relation of word and deed and which opposed a triumphalist notion of the church’s social task.

#### 3.5.2.4. Pilgrim, Alien and Servant Images of the Church

In response to the growing emphasis on the social task of the church two images begin to appear in Newbigin’s writings to depict the church. The church is an alien or pilgrim community, and it is a servant community (1960b:104; 1960e:5; 1963d:1; 1963hL11; 1966b:100ff.). Both of these images are meant to affirm the responsibility of the church to serve her society and culture selflessly. At the same time, they both are meant to oppose the triumphalist notion of social involvement.

#### 3.5.2.5. The Mission of the Laity in Society

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a growing interest in the laity. At New Delhi the laity became a central issue in all three sections. The assembly decided to mandate the Department on Evangelism to carry out a study on the missionary structure of the congregation that would suggest ways in which the laity could carry out their calling. As the report put it: “If this penetration of the world by the lay witness is an essential part of God’s plan for his Church, we must examine the conventional structures of our churches in order to see whether they assist or hinder the work of evangelism.” It went on to draw a conclusion that would challenge traditional ecclesiology:

We must not think of the 'Church' as primarily a building or as an enterprise run by ministers to which people come or are scolded for not coming. We must ask whether we do not too easily fall into the habit of thinking of the Church as the Sunday congregation rather than as the laity scattered abroad in every department of life (New Delhi 1962:88-89).

With the growing emphasis on God's work in the world during the radical secularization of the 1960s, the calling of believers in society moved to centre stage as the bearer of mission (Hoekendijk 1966:85-90; New Delhi 1962:87; WCC 1967:80).

Newbigin was deeply involved in the ecumenical tradition during this time. He attended and participated in all the WCC and CWME meetings as this theme developed. The Department of Evangelism for which Newbigin was responsible, co-operated with the Department of the Laity in organizing the study on the missionary structure of the congregation. And so references to the laity and to ecumenical studies carried out in this area became increasingly commonplace in Newbigin's writings during this time (1963b:371; 1963f:95; 1965b:42). These new pressures of secularization and the response of the ecumenical tradition led Newbigin to his most detailed and sophisticated reflection on the place of the laity during this period of his life.

### 3.5.2.6. Missions

The emphasis on the social task of the church not only threatened evangelism, it also threatened a missionary advance into unevangelized areas. Missions was being absorbed into many kinds of development projects. Newbigin articulates his struggle during this time as follows:

The dilemma with which I constantly wrestled was how to achieve a permeation of all the activities of the Council with a missionary concern, and at the same time to preserve and sharpen a specific concern for missions as enterprises explicitly intended to cross the frontier between faith and no-faith (1993h:189).

It was this dilemma that forced Newbigin to make more careful distinctions between *mission* and *missions* that would inform his ecclesiology.

### 3.5.2.7. Emphasis on the Local Congregation

It was not until the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) that formulations of unity focussed on the local congregation as the basic unit of the church (Hoedemaker 1991:626). Likewise discussions of the missionary church were not focussed on the local congregation until the early 1960s. The New Delhi report stated: "Every Christian congregation is part of that mission, with a responsibility to bear witness to Christ in its own neighbourhood and to share in the bearing of that witness to the ends of the earth" (New Delhi 1962:249). This revealed a growing interest in the local congregation in the ecumenical tradition. Newbigin comments on this trend.

Talk about the Church as a missionary community has become rather common. But most of it has left untouched the centre of the Church's life. It is only within very recent years that the light of a missionary doctrine of the Church has been turned steadily upon the local congregation (1966b:105).

As was often the case in the relationship between Newbigin and the ecumenical

tradition, he both shaped and was shaped by the currents within the WCC. The statement on unity adopted at New Delhi that emphasized the local congregation was the fruit of the work of Newbigin. The emphasis on the local congregation in the CWME report stated above was also the work of Newbigin. His missionary experience in India had led him to a growing appreciation of the importance of the local congregation. However, the growing momentum within the WCC also led Newbigin to emphasize this aspect of church life more frequently during this period.

#### 3.5.2.8. Congregational Structures

The church-centric missiology of the 1950s that stressed the missionary nature of the church inevitably raised questions about the structural forms of church life. If one took seriously the statement that the church is mission, then it became painfully obvious that existing congregations were not structured for mission. The emphasis on the local congregation contributed to this growing dissatisfaction with congregational structures that reflected the assumptions of the Christendom era. Hoekendijk's challenge to overhaul these obsolete structures (Hoekendijk 1950:175) gained momentum throughout the 1950s. The question of the missionary structure of congregations was officially formulated at the end of the 1950s and was probed in a number of studies and articles throughout the 1960s. At New Delhi, the Report of the Department of Evangelism stated: "The Committee is convinced that one of the main hindrances in the pursuit of the evangelistic calling of the Church lies in the traditional structure of the local congregation" (New Delhi 1962:189). Newbigin's own question echoed this concern: "Does the very structure of our congregations contradict the missionary calling of the church?" (1963a:9). This question occupied Newbigin during his time in London and Geneva. The revolutionary times and new winds blowing in the WCC led many to conclude that the church was irrelevant to modern secular life. With this judgement Newbigin agreed; the structures of the established churches did not mobilize the Christian community for mission.

Newbigin believed that bold experiments in forms of congregational life were urgent, if churches were to be directed more to mission than to mere maintenance (1960o:30-33; 1993h:194). While Newbigin made some suggestive and stimulating contributions to this discussion (these are elaborated in later sections) his proposals remained only brief hints. He had hoped that the study of the Evangelism Department of the WCC entitled "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" would make a thorough investigation of the matter. This was not to be, however; the study and report were swept up in the tides of secularism and the church was pushed aside as an institution of peripheral interest. Newbigin considered the failure of this project to be one of the major disappointments of his life (1993h:194).

#### 3.5.2.9. Ministerial Leadership

The rise of the secular decade meant that "the world provides the agenda" (WCC 1968:20) and so for many Christians "both Church and ministry were irrelevancies" (1993h:195). The belief of many was that clericalism was best overcome by rejecting altogether the ordained ministry and downplaying its role in the church (Bosch 1991:474). During this time Newbigin records that "one of the most frustrating assignments" he received was a section on ministry at the Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963. This task was frustrating "because the reigning ideology which

located God (if anywhere) firmly outside the walls of the Church made it almost impossible to discuss the role of the ordained ministry at all” (1993h:197). Newbigin’s long-held conviction that “nothing is more important in the long run for the life of the church than the quality of its ministry” (1962h:5) led him to grapple with this issue several times throughout his time in Europe.

“The question that has to be asked—and repeatedly asked—is whether the traditional forms of ministry which have been inherited from the ‘Christendom’ period are fully compatible with the faith that the Church is called to be a missionary community” (1963a:8). He believed that the answer to this question was negative and so he stressed that forms of ministry must be one of the four bold experiments that were urgent at this time (1960o:30-33).

### 3.5.2.10. Unity

Newbigin’s deep convictions about the unity of the missionary church that had developed during his student days and deepened during his early missionary years found a new context in the secular decade. There were two new issues that required further reflection on the unity of the church.

First, modernization, westernization, and globalization brought about a new concern that occupied the ecumenical movement—the unity of humankind. John Deschner notes that the phrase “‘the unity of humankind’ appears to have become an explicit theme in ecumenical discussions in the early 1960s” (Deschner 1991:1046). Prodded by Vatican II’s description of the church as a sacrament or sign of the unity of mankind, the Uppsala Assembly gave expression to the conviction that ecclesial unity is rightly considered in the context of a concern for the unity of humankind. The question at issue was how divisions in the global human community are problems for church unity and how, conversely, the church could be a sign of unity for the world. The context for discussions of unity before this period was denominational division. Hereafter the discussion took on the added dimension of the unity of humankind. This discussion would gain momentum until in 1971 Faith and Order launched a study on “The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind” with a mandate “to view our historic theme of church unity in a new context, specifically in the context of human not simply denominational divisions” (Deschner 1991:1046).

Newbigin entered this debate early. In 1954 in a lecture at the University of Chicago he argues that the unity of humankind can only be found around Jesus Christ and the historical community he established and not in a Hindu syncretism (1955). Three years later he delivered the William Belden Noble Lectures at Harvard University. In these lectures, later published as *A Faith for This One World?* (1961c), he challenged Harvard’s William Ernest Hocking who had offered a Hinduized version of Christianity as the foundation for a world civilization in his *The Coming World Civilization* (Hocking 1958).

This new context led to fresh ecclesiological insight as he demonstrated the centrality of the church in world history (1955:6). During this revolutionary age in which humanity was being gathered together into one stream, one of Newbigin’s primary concerns was to interpret this process of world history in the light of the gospel and to place the mission of the church in that context. He elaborates afresh his burning passion for unity and its close relation to the mission of the church (1960j; 1961c; 1961e). This new angle of vision arising from a new context would bring fresh insight to the issue of unity and its underlying ecclesiology.

A second issue arose that provided opportunity for fresh reflection on the unity of the church. The discussions of the nature of unity in the WCC from Toronto (1950) to New Delhi (1961) led to a description of this unity as a fully committed fellowship in each place that was also recognizable as one body throughout the world and throughout the centuries. This notion of organic unity was sidelined, however, by developments in the Roman Catholic Church. In preparation for the meetings of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church invited observers from the various world alliances and federations that were formed by confessional traditions—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and so forth. During subsequent years bilateral theological conversations developed between the RCC and these confessional bodies, attracting increasing public attention. Organic unity of “all in each place” receded from view. A notion of unity that provided for the amicable co-existence and co-operation of various churches, who maintained their distinct identity, replaced the organic model formulated at New Delhi. This new development was also fed by an increasing concern for pluralism from the broader society. This model of unity provided for the maintenance of the various traditions. Newbigin believed this kind of unity removed the cost and repentance that was necessary for true ecclesial unity. His struggle to defend the organic model led to continued reflection on ecclesiology that he believed was at the basis of any understanding of unity.

#### 3.5.2.11. Prayer and Worship at the Centre of Congregational Life

The secular trends of the time threatened the worshipping, fellowshiping, praying life of the church in two ways. First, the powerful voice of Hoekendijk had caused many to question the legitimacy of the institutional church and thus of its communal prayer life. Second, the equally powerful voice of J. A. T. Robinson had placed a large question mark over the devotional life of the Christian community—prayer, in particular. It is significant to note, that at a time when prayer and the gathered church was in retreat in theology, Newbigin increased his affirmation of the importance of a church gathered in worship and prayer (1960b:119f.; 1960e:1,5; 1962a:8f.; 1962j:90f.; 1963a:14; 1963e:22; 1963f:85). A vigorous missionary encounter cannot be sustained without a healthy spirituality and prayer life.

The emphasis during this secular decade on the social calling of the church and the importance of the laity in their various capacities in society were the context of Newbigin’s reflection on the praying, worshipping, nourishing, fellowshiping congregation. The challenge of Hoekendijk and Robinson motivated Newbigin to new reflection in this area that would inform his missionary ecclesiology.

#### 3.5.2.12. The Church’s Relationship to Its Context

A missionary setting in India had led to fruitful reflection on the relationship of the church to its environment. During this period of Newbigin’s life a new context brought further understanding. This change in context was made up of at least three factors. First, a shift in focus from church to world as the sphere of God’s activity brought a deepening awareness of the religio-cultural environment that constitutes the world. Second, the growing sense of the fact that mission is the responsibility of every church in all six continents prompted analysis of the various cultural contexts in which the church finds itself. Third, the modernization and globalization sweeping the world was bringing about a renaissance of religions. Newbigin’s first-hand experience of the

church throughout the world caused him to recognize these factors as urgent issues for the missionary church.

The secular worldview was the most obvious cultural context of the church's mission. However, that secularism was not merely a religiously neutral context. Newbigin's wrestlings with church and cultural context indicate an initial awareness of the fact that western culture is also pagan and idolatrous. Although his attitude toward secularism is ambiguous, his struggles on this topic would help him shape an understanding of a missionary church in western culture. The reflection of this time becomes the foundation for more profound analysis after his retirement to Britain.

While Newbigin recognized the renaissance of the world religions in the non-western cultures (1960j:4) and believed that bold experiments in the church's relation to them were urgent (1960o:30-33), he gave no sustained analysis of these cultural contexts dominated by the great non-Christian religions. This would become the centre of his thinking in a later period of his life when the reality of pluralism was more ascendent in his mind.

The secularization of a rapidly globalizing modern culture was urgent at this point in Newbigin's writings. This religio-cultural environment formed the background and context for the mission church in his writings throughout this time. It was his analysis of Denys Munby's book *The Idea of a Secular Society* that had the most enduring effect on Newbigin's thought about the missionary church in a secular context (1966b:126-133).

### 3.5.2.13. Summary

The mission paradigm in the ecumenical tradition shifted radically during Newbigin's Geneva years. The emphasis was on participating in what God was doing in the world. Thus the social and political dimensions of the church's task took centre stage. The laity was the primary agent of mission and the church must be restructured to equip the laity for its task. With much of this Newbigin was sympathetic. The church had become a self-centred institution concerned primarily with maintenance and badly in need of reform. Thus Newbigin affirmed the image of the church as a servant that selflessly involved itself in the social and political life of the world. Since the laity was central to the missionary task of the church, there was an urgent need for a structural reformation of the institutional church that would equip the laity for their missionary encounter in society. There was a burning necessity to tackle issues of unity in an emerging global society. And so these elements of the changing ecumenical paradigm—the social task of the church, the mission of the laity, the need for flexible missionary structures, and the unity of the church in a global world—found an important place in Newbigin's ecclesiological discussion.

The reigning paradigm also threatened many dimensions of the church's mission that Newbigin believed were foundational. The gospel, and not the world, set the agenda for Newbigin's reflection on mission. When this new paradigm threatened Biblical elements of a missionary church, Newbigin opposed these currents. The growing emphasis on the social task of the church threatened evangelism and missions; Newbigin affirmed the centrality of both in a missionary church. The new insight of God's work in the world eclipsed the importance of the church as a community; Newbigin continued to affirm the church as a community where the powers of the coming age were primarily at work. Thus ministerial leadership, ecclesial unity, and the prayer and worship life of the congregation must not be minimized.

Newbigin's Trinitarian ecclesiology developed in a revolutionary global context and in critical dialogue with a changing paradigm of mission in the ecumenical tradition. The result was a missionary ecclesiology that continued to affirm the emphases of an earlier period, but placed these ecclesiological formulations in a wider context—the context of a Triune missionary God.

### 3.6. NEWBIGIN'S ECCLESIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT DURING HIS MADRAS BISHOPRIC (1965-1974)

On 1 October 1965 Newbigin left his post as director of the CMWE and returned to India as bishop of Madras in the Church of South India. Newbigin's ecclesiological development during this time stands in deep continuity with the preceding six years. The context described earlier—the collapse of colonialism, global westernization, resurgent secularism, a Trinitarian context, the world as location of mission, witness as social involvement, the importance of the laity and new ecclesial structures for missionary engagement with the world, and a functional ecclesiology—still remained the dominant background for Newbigin's work. Many of the concerns and emphases of his writings in the early 1960s continue to appear throughout this time. In a sense, we can interpret this era of Newbigin's life as an attempt to put into practice what he had learned in his years with the IMC and WCC. And the Madras diocese provided an opportunity for such an endeavour. Tracing Newbigin's ecclesiological development, therefore, will require us to examine the Madras setting in which Newbigin worked as bishop. However, there is another setting that is important if we are to understand the issues which shaped Newbigin's ecclesiology during this time. That setting is the polemically charged atmosphere in the global missionary community between the evangelical and ecumenical approaches to mission. Specifically three aspects of this context will be treated: the divide that appeared between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions, the new emphases on salvation and conversion, and the arrival of the Church Growth school on the missiological scene. The following two sections will treat the ecumenical and Indian contexts.

#### 3.6.1. *The Diocese of Madras*

Madras was a rapidly growing urban area that bore all the marks of a developing and modernizing third world city—burgeoning population, industry, slums, and state policies shaped by commitment to nation building. At this time Madras was a city of three million people, adding 100,000 to its population every year (1993h:207; 1974b:9). About half of this annual increase came from the villages around the city, mostly young people who attained an elementary education in their village and now came to the urban sprawl in search of work. Most of them became part of the great company of slum dwellers who lived in impermanent dwellings without sanitation, electricity, or water. These immigrants were drawn into the exploding industry in Madras that accounted for a substantial part of India's total industrial output. A great belt of factories surrounded Madras extending to a radius of twenty-five miles. The new spirits in control of this developing urban life were material progress and a chauvinistic nationalism (1993h:204).

The Madras diocese was a much bigger, more established and powerful diocese than what Newbigin had known in Madurai. There were about one thousand congregations

and over a hundred full-time ministers. The churches in Madras were part of a long and well developed tradition, several churches dating back one hundred and fifty years. Madras had had an Anglican bishop since 1835 who played a role in public affairs. Many members of the CSI held leading positions in business, politics, industry, and professional life.

In summary, the social, political, and economic needs of Madras were great and the CSI, if it could take a missionary posture, was positioned to play a significant role in addressing those needs. Newbigin's sermon at his installation service, preached in Tamil and fully covered by the press, proclaimed that "Christ is not just the Lord of Christians; he is Lord of all, absolutely and without qualification." The "Church is the Church *for* the nation" and must play its part in the social, economic, political, and cultural development of the city as a sign and instrument. "The entire membership of the Church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of Christ's lordship in every area of public life" and as their bishop he would help them to carry out this responsibility. He comments: "I was to spend much of my time in the next nine years helping them to shoulder these responsibilities" (1993h:203).

### *3.6.2. The Global Missionary Context*

During his time in India Newbigin remained deeply involved in the ecumenical movement. At least three new dimensions entered his ecclesiology at this time as a result of this continuing connection with the WCC. First, the developments within the ecumenical tradition produced an evangelical reaction. A growing divide between the ecumenical and evangelical traditions became increasingly evident during his time in India. Newbigin's attempt to find a Biblical solution to this scandalous division affected his ecclesiological writing. Second, a number of themes emerging in the WCC discussion made their way into Newbigin's writing during this time. Newbigin's discussion of these themes—salvation and conversion—had ecclesiological implications. Third, the Church Growth school became a dominant voice in missiology. From this point on the writings of this school became an important interlocutor for Newbigin.

#### *3.6.2.1. The Ecumenical-Evangelical Divide*

Newbigin's tenure as bishop in Madras coincided with the time that the "ecumenical-evangelical relations hardened into something like a confrontation" (Stott 1975:65). However, the roots of this confrontation go back to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the split between revivalism and the social gospel. The evangelical unity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was shattered. Richard Lovelace comments: "The broad river of classical evangelicalism divided into a delta, with shallower streams emphasizing ecumenism and social renewal on the left and confessional orthodoxy and evangelism on the right" (Lovelace 1981:298). Gerald Anderson has analyzed the shift that took place in the ecumenical tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1915 four new emphases were evident: the world's major religions were valued more highly; mission was more transformational activity and less evangelism; salvation was this-worldly in manifestation and source; and society was emphasized more than the individual (Anderson 1988:104). Timothy Smith describes the development in the evangelical tradition over this same time period as the "great reversal" (Moberg 1972:11, 28-45). Motivated by a growing premillennialism, an individualistic interpretation of sin and

salvation, and a reaction to the excesses of the ecumenical tradition, evangelical mission theology became narrow, reductionistic, and imbalanced.

While mutual suspicion and hostility grew apace during this time, open conflict did not erupt until the 1960s. Bosch describes the period between 1966 and 1973 as a “period of confrontation” (Bosch 1988:462). There were two reasons that this open clash took place at this time. First, the evangelical community was connected to the broader global Christian community through the IMC. However, with the entry of the IMC into the WCC these links were severed. Twenty years after New Delhi, Newbigin confided that he had feared all along that the necessary joining of the IMC and WCC would alienate evangelicals (1981a).

The second reason that conflict flared up at this time was the shift in mission taking place within the ecumenical tradition. Within the World Council of Churches trends such as a growing secularization, the world setting the agenda for the church, mission absorbed into socio-political involvement, mission as presence and dialogue, a religionless Christianity, and the presence of God in other religions prompted many evangelicals to regard the WCC as apostate.

Criticisms of the horizontalism and politicization of the gospel in the WCC spawned the 1966 Wheaton Congress on Worldwide Mission sponsored by the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association and the International Foreign Missions Association. Attending the Wheaton Congress as an ecumenical observer, Eugene Smith commented that “the distrust of the ecumenical movement within this group has to be experienced to be believed” (Smith 1966:480). He detailed the items that produced this overwhelming distrust. “The most frequent charges against us were theological liberalism, loss of evangelical conviction, universalism in theology, substitution of social action for evangelism, and the search for unity at the expense of biblical truth” (Smith 1966:481). Six months after Wheaton, a World Congress on Evangelism sponsored by the Billy Graham Association and the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* was held in Berlin. While the tone was more constructive than Wheaton, “a militant and self-conscious evangelicalism” permeated the published reports (Bosch 1988:463).

The fourth assembly of the WCC in Uppsala in 1968 served to exacerbate the growing tensions. The growing horizontalism of mission drew criticism from Donald McGavran, John Stott, Peter Beyerhaus, and Arthur Glasser. This assembly “heralds the beginning of the era of serious encounter of evangelicals with the WCC in the assembly halls of the latter” (Bosch 1988:463). Newbigin pointed to a “futile polarisation in which one side was unable to hear the other” (1973f:49). The second meeting of the CMWE at Bangkok in 1973 did little to dissolve the battle lines. The preparatory documents on the theme “Salvation Today” led Beyerhaus to denounce the “pan-religious and humanistic-ideological interpretation of salvation” (quoted in Bosch 1988:463). Arthur Glasser, at the invitation of the WCC, delivered an irenic yet strongly critical speech of the ecumenical understanding of salvation (Glasser 1973:103-108).

The confrontation between these two traditions touched on almost every area of mission theology. Even a brief sketch of all the issues cannot be attempted here. However, there were at least four themes that Newbigin addressed over this time period. First, the ecumenical tradition stressed social involvement to the point where many in their own ranks decried the loss of evangelism. In response, evangelicals committed themselves to the primacy of evangelism and tended to downplay social involvement. Second, much ecumenical discussion of salvation stressed the social, present, and this-worldly dimensions. Over against this evangelicals stressed an individual, future, and

otherworldly salvation. Third, on the topic of conversion, evangelicals emphasized a highly personal crisis experience in contrast to the social and gradualistic emphases they perceived in the WCC. Fourth, if the encounter between the gospel involves the two poles of the gospel and the cultural context, then the ecumenical tradition highlighted context—a sympathetic concern with the struggles of people—with the danger of absorption, while the evangelical tradition underscored faithfulness to the gospel, with the threat of swerving toward sectarian withdrawal. It was at these four points that Newbigin entered the debates between the traditions.

### 3.6.2.2. Emerging Themes in the Ecumenical Tradition

There is a deep continuity in the development of ecumenical ecclesiology and missiology from New Delhi 1961 until Bangkok 1973. It would not be until the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975 that a world-oriented mission theology would run its course. Many of the issues and concerns of the preceding period of Newbigin's life find continued expression during his tenure in Madras. He continued to interact with the Hoekendijkian instrumentalist ecclesiology describing the church as a sign, firstfruits, and instrument of the kingdom. In fact, this formulation is employed with increasing frequency during this time. The preoccupation with ecclesial structures that would equip the laity for mission in the world continues to find frequent expression in Newbigin's writings. Interaction with the missiological strategy of presence and missiological goal of humanization continue to be a backdrop against which Newbigin formulates his own understanding. In short, the same issues we have encountered in the previous section continue to be important for Newbigin's ecclesiology during this period.

There are at least two further closely related ecumenical developments that need to be noted if we are to put Newbigin's ecclesiological reflections in context. These two new themes become prominent in ecumenical discussions at this time and challenge Newbigin's thinking on missionary ecclesiology. Those themes are conversion and salvation.

The topic of conversion emerged in the WCC as a central point of discussion during the latter part of the 1960s. Conversion had been an important theme in Protestant mission and upon the integration of the IMC and WCC the topic was placed on the agenda. A growing number of publications on conversion both reflected and fostered interest in the subject. In an influential address entitled *Conversion and Social Transformation* Emilio Castro elaborated the societal implications of conversion (Castro 1966:348-366). A number of concerns lay behind the emerging interest. The pietistic and evangelical traditions emphasized the conversion of individuals to God. The ecumenical tradition was concerned with the social dimensions of conversion. Conversion meant the changing of social structures in alignment with the will of God. The Eastern Orthodox tradition found both of these unacceptable because individual and societal conversion eclipsed the church. In response to these questions, the WCC proposed a study of conversion that was carried out and published in preparation for the Uppsala assembly in 1968. The *Ecumenical Review* devoted a whole issue (July 1967) to the topic as contributors from diverse traditions attempted to gain consensus. However, the split between evangelicals and ecumenicals could not be avoided. The debate in Uppsala fostered a growing estrangement (Loffler 1991:230). Newbigin's contribution to the debate was significant. Indeed, Loffler quotes Newbigin's definition as one that moves beyond conversion as individual decision, entry into the church, or social transformation by rooting conversion in the kingdom of God (Loffler 1991:229).

Since one of the components of his understanding of conversion was the importance of a visible community, his discussion of this topic is important for the subject of ecclesiology.

The latter half of the 1960s also saw a renewed interest in the topic of salvation. Again it was the growing interest in God's action in the world that raised awareness of new dimensions of salvation. A traditional understanding of salvation was primarily individualistic, exclusively future, and otherworldly. The sea change in the ecumenical movement challenged this notion of salvation, emphasizing the social, present, and this-worldly dimensions of salvation. At the Geneva Conference of Church and Society in 1966 two competing views of salvation—secularist and liberationist—were advocated, both building on Hoekendijk's concern to focus on this world as the main area of God's salvific work (Bosch 1991:396). Both defined salvation in social and this-worldly terms: salvation by technological development or salvation as liberation from oppressive structures. Uppsala failed to reconcile these two positions and so the topic "Salvation Today" was chosen for the CWME meeting in Bangkok in 1973. Salvation at this conference continued to be defined exclusively in "this-worldly" terms. Salvation can be seen at four points: in economic justice against exploitation; in human dignity against political oppression; in solidarity against alienation; in hope against despair in personal life (Bangkok 1973:89). Again the ecumenical-evangelical tension can be observed on this topic. As the ecumenical tradition increasingly defined salvation in social, present, and this-worldly terms, the evangelical tradition emphasized the individual, future, and otherworldly dimensions. Newbigin's attempts to bridge these differences during this time had clear implications for his ecclesiology.

Newbigin addressed each of these themes a number of times throughout this period. However, it was a debate with M. M. Thomas that emerged out of discussions on salvation and conversion that bore the most ecclesiological fruit.<sup>4</sup> The exchange was the fruit of conversations that each had carried on separately (Hunsberger 1998:176). At Mexico in 1963 M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof had begun a debate on the nature of salvation in a secular world. At the prompting of Loffler, they had carried forward this discussion in print (Loffler 1968). Newbigin responded to this exchange in an article published in a *Festschrift* for Bengt Sundkler (1969a). Thomas entered the debate with a discussion of salvation. Newbigin's entry into the debate came as a result of a discussion of conversion in which he critiqued Kaj Baago (Baago 1966). Thomas published a book in 1971 entitled *Salvation and Humanisation* in which he took issue with Newbigin's critique at a number of points. Newbigin reviewed his book critically and through a published exchange of letters the debate was carried forward (Hunsberger 1998:177).

Two issues were discussed which are important for the topic of this book. First, Thomas and Newbigin disagreed on the relationship of evangelism to humanization. Thomas followed the Uppsala Assembly in speaking of 'points of mission' where the gospel is relevant for that time. For Thomas the struggle for humanization was that point of mission where the gospel "comes alive." Thomas emphasized context over the content of the gospel and stood in danger of allowing the gospel and evangelism to be swallowed up by efforts of humanization. Newbigin responded with a critique which highlighted the content and universal validity of the gospel. Newbigin was not prepared to allow evangelism to be swept away (Loffler 1968:14-33; 1969a:260f.).

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<sup>4</sup>For an extended discussion on this debate see Hunsberger 1998 pp.176-189. The bibliographic materials of this debate are found on pp. 280-282 of the same book.

The second point of disagreement between Thomas and Newbigin is the extent of the new humanity. Are the boundaries of the church and the new humanity co-extensive? If not, how can that new humanity be seen outside the boundaries of the church? Thomas enlarged the notion of the new humanity to such an extent that the importance of the church as a visible institution was threatened. While Newbigin agreed that God's salvific work spilled over beyond the bounds of the church, he was not willing to diminish the importance of that body as a visible community. The debates within the ecumenical tradition around salvation and conversion led to discussions between Thomas and Newbigin that sharpened the latter's thinking on the issue of the church and its evangelistic task (1971c:72ff.).

### 3.6.2.3. The Church Growth Tradition

During the latter part of the 1960s and the 1970s the Church Growth school became an influential movement in missiology. While it arose out of the evangelical tradition and has influenced primarily groups associated with that tradition, Church Growth has made an impact on the whole church (Bassham 1979:189). The reports of Uppsala and Bangkok reflect the emphases of Church Growth advocates. As many proponents of Church Growth confronted the WCC, their views became well-known to Newbigin. Donald McGavran and the Church Growth school became one of the primary interlocutors of Newbigin throughout the remainder of his life (see, for example, 1978e:121-159). For this reason it is important to note the leading elements of their thought.

In his book *The Bridges of God* (1955) McGavran rejected the mission station approach of cross-cultural missions that had been practiced for one hundred and fifty years. In its place he advocated a people movements strategy "in which groups of people become Christians and form indigenous churches and are then encouraged to use their natural cultural links to bring other responsive people to Christ" (Bassham 1979:189). As a result of his experience in India, McGavran observed that some churches were growing while many remained stagnant. The lack of growth in the majority of the churches was the direct result of a faulty methodology—the mission station approach. Converts were detached from their natural communal contexts and brought under the umbrella of a western missionary compound. Separated from their natural ties, converts could not evangelize their neighbours. Missionaries spent enormous resources on bringing converts into the compound and into conformity with western cultural standards. The people movement strategy preserves the cultural, linguistic, and social contexts and utilizes them for evangelistic purposes because "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers" (McGavran 1970:163). Churches that were growing in India took this approach.

McGavran was deeply concerned for the evangelization of the world. Recognizing that large numbers of people had never heard the gospel, he was concerned to facilitate this evangelistic encounter. He believed that proper methods would lead to enormous growth of the church worldwide.

Thus church growth was the primary goal of his missionary strategy. McGavran's dominating concern with growth led to a number of conclusions. First, evangelism is the main task of the church. McGavran distinguished between discipling and perfecting. The discipling stage is marked by the transition from a non-Christian way to a Christian way of life. The perfecting stage which follows, aims at "an increasing achievement of

a thoroughly Christian way of life for the community as a whole” (McGavran 1955:13-16). Missionary work, according to McGavran, must focus on discipling as its primary goal. Second, the responsive and winnable people of the world must be identified and the majority of missionary resources deployed to reach those peoples. Third, social scientific research is an indispensable tool for locating these winnable peoples and in understanding the “natural cultural links” that will facilitate further church growth. Fourth, the cultures of the peoples must be accepted and utilized for winning more people. Churches that are adapted to the cultural, racial, linguistic, and class contexts in which people live will be most successful in transmitting the gospel. This is the so-called ‘homogenous unit principle.’

While Newbigin shared a number of common concerns with McGavran, he was led to criticize the Church Growth school for their exclusive focus on church growth, their uncritical acceptance of culture, and their reductionistic view of conversion.

### *3.6.3. Ecclesiological Emphases in Madras*

Newbigin’s ministry as a bishop in Madras and his continuing involvement in the ecumenical tradition led to continued ecclesiological reflection. While there is continuity between his time in Geneva and Madras, it is important to highlight the themes that received new attention during this time. Fresh opportunities to put into practice the ecclesiology that developed in Europe, as well as new debates and discussions, combined to lead to fresh ecclesiological thought.

#### 3.6.3.1. The Social Witness of the Church

No other issue appears more often in both Newbigin’s ministry and his writings during this time than the topic of the social responsibility of the church. There are a number of reasons for this. The social task of the church was the burning issue of the day (1971h:264). The global climate—the collapse of colonialism, the spread of nationalism, the obvious economic discrepancies between first and third world countries—forced the issue on the growing ecumenical church. Newbigin found himself in an urban church in India in which the social problems of the day acquired a measure of urgency. This context impelled theological reflection on the social mission of the church. A growing rift between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions of the church on the issue of social responsibility and evangelism dominated the missiological discussions of the day. While Newbigin had been committed to the social task of the church from the beginning, this time period forced him to reflect more deeply on issues of justice and mercy. After relating a particularly discouraging episode in his life in which he was confronted by the injustice of the slums, he notes that “it caused me to think very hard about the Christian approach to social justice” (1993h:211). This statement may be seen as an inscription over Newbigin’s ministry during this period.

Newbigin’s extensive reflection on the social task of the church is deeply rooted in his missionary praxis. During a time of rapid development and growing nationalism, the needs of Madras were great. The church carried a degree of power and influence. In this setting, Newbigin sought to enable the strong Madras church to take responsibility in the social realm. Slums appeared as the result of the migration of one hundred thousand people to the city each year in search of a better life (1974b:9). The government was unable to provide water, sanitation, lighting, roads, schools, health services and transportation to this many people on an overtaxed budget. Newbigin’s response to this



and it is this that must be addressed by the gospel (1974b:100-105). Industry was the formation of a great new “nation” that needed to be disciplined. The standard model for industrial mission was London’s Sheffield Mission of Bishop Wickham. This approach treated industry as an unevangelized mission field into which the missionary must enter with a relevant message. Newbiggin believed that this model was not the correct one for Madras, however, because an estimated 10% of the managers and workers in industry were already Christians. The problem was that these workers had “misunderstood their baptism.” They had thought that their Christian life “had nothing to do with their work on the shop floor or in the office, that it was a personal matter concerning their personal and private salvation and not a commitment to be part of God’s mission to industry” (1974b:102). The task Newbiggin set for himself and other church leaders was to help them understand “that they *are* the industrial mission” (*ibid.*). This was carried out by arranging frontier meetings in which workers and managers could discuss the problems of bearing witness to Christ in the public realm. The Community Service Centre also arranged day conferences in which people from various callings in industry met together to gain insight into the inner workings of industry in the light of the gospel and struggle with the ethical dilemmas of their daily work (1993h:214).

This brief overview gives an idea of Newbiggin’s deep involvement in the social issues of his time and his struggle to equip the church for her social calling. It was out of this experience that Newbiggin reflected on the nature of Christian social activity. His discussion of this topic during this time is both more extensive and much deeper than previous periods in his life.

### 3.6.3.2. The Calling of the Laity in Society

One of the primary ways the church carries out its social task is through the witness of the various members in their daily lives in public arena. Since the church in Madras had many members in “leading positions in government, the professions and the business world” (1993h:202) Newbiggin’s conviction that this is the primary witness of the church only strengthened during this time (1972a:127).

As a bishop, Newbiggin’s task in addressing this issue was threefold. First, a Community Service Centre that operated on behalf of all the churches in Madras was established to provide both “training for service to society and an opportunity for men and women in many sectors of public life to equip themselves for Christian witness and service in the common life” (1974b:11). More specifically, day-long conferences were arranged for people who were engaged in the same calling to struggle together, sometimes through role-play, with issues that faced them in the work place (1993h:214). There were also conferences that dealt with the big public issues facing the nation (1993h:215). The second way in which Newbiggin tackled this problem was by exhorting pastors to give high priority to training people in their congregations for their callings. Newbiggin met monthly with the ministers of the Madras churches for breakfast and communion. He would give a brief sermon to open up some issue in the ministry. Those sermons have been collected in *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today’s World* (1974b). We find in these sermons frequent reference to the calling of the minister to train the members of their churches for their tasks in the world. Thirdly, Newbiggin suggested different structures, both within the local congregation and more ecumenically, whereby the laity can be equipped for their witness in society.

### 3.6.3.3. Evangelism

The issue of social justice dominated the ecumenical agenda during this period. This resulted in the diminishment of evangelism in the church's ministry. While Newbigin's commitment to social justice was central during his ministry in Madras, it was without minimizing evangelism (1968f:4; 1994k:34). He writes:

I was also eager to find effective ways of evangelism for this bustling city, but it seemed to me essential that the Church which preached the Gospel should be recognizable as a body which cared for its neighbours (1993h:209).

Newbigin identified three large areas within the diocese in which there was no Christian presence. He mobilized funds and workers to go to these areas. The result was flourishing congregations in each area (1993h:213).

We find renewed assertions of the indispensability of evangelism in the church's mission in at least three contexts. First, evangelism must not be eclipsed by works of justice and mercy. Second, mission as presence is not sufficient if it minimizes evangelism. Third, the goal of humanization in mission may not eclipse the essential task of evangelism.

#### 3.6.3.4. The Local Congregation

In Newbigin's reflection on the social task of the church another issue emerges that would become increasingly important in his writings about social action. This social concern must be seen to flow from the local congregation. The danger during the 1960s was that numerous organizations, both ecclesiastical and political, were formed to care for social needs. This had the potential of creating at least two problems for the mission of the church. First, the local congregation loses its self-understanding as a missionary body and reverts to being an introverted community concerned only with its own members. After all, our offerings go to finance organizations created to show mercy and pursue justice on our behalf. Second, to the unbeliever who is the beneficiary of the mercy and justice of this organization, it is not clear that these acts flow from a local community that embodies the new reality of the kingdom of God.

Both in his addresses and in his ministry in Madras Newbigin sought to address this situation and uphold the local congregation as the primary centre for mission. We have noted the plan that Newbigin had for dealing with the problem of the slums—a plan that remained paradigmatic for Newbigin throughout the rest of his life. When he divided the six hundred or more slums among the two hundred local congregations, and exhorted them to take responsibility for the allocated slum, he did not centralize the project, which might have been more efficient both in terms of finances and expertise. His fundamental concern was that “a Christian congregation must be seen as a community which cares for its neighbours” (1993h:208).

#### 3.6.3.5. Ecclesial Structures

Ecclesial structures continued to be a dominant item on the ecumenical agenda. It was noted in the previous section that Newbigin anticipated the study of the structure of the missionary congregation to suggest new structures that would be more appropriate to the missionary calling of the church. Deeply disappointed in the outcome of this study, he took up the task himself and addressed the issue numerous times.

One of the issues that motivated him to consider the reformation of ecclesial structures as one of utmost urgency was the seeming obsolescence of the church. For many, especially the young, the church seemed to be irrelevant to God's mission, precisely because of the church's dated, self-centred structures. Newbigin believed that "so long as the existing congregations are clubs for the self-centred enjoyment of the benefits of the Christian religion, it will be natural for many ardent spirits to conclude that the real business of God's mission is to be done outside of them." This must be challenged, he believed: "For all who are concerned for God's mission, the highest priority must be given to bringing about those changes in the structures of the church... which are necessary to make it recognisable as a missionary body" (1969a:263).

Newbigin noted a number of different structures that needed to be reformed in his diocese if the church was to be missionary: parochial and diocesan organization, deployment of men and money, patterns of ministry, including deacons and lay leadership, and forms of assembly (*ibid*). His most extensive reflection is found in a paper he delivered to an ecumenical group in Madras (1973c). However, the theme is strewn throughout his writing during this time.

#### 3.6.3.6. Ministerial Leadership

During Newbigin's Madras bishopric a number of factors brought the issue of ministerial leadership to the centre of his attention. First, Newbigin believed that one of his fundamental tasks as a bishop was to sustain the ministers and other leaders through Bible study and prayer (1993h:215). Over fifty presbyters would meet in Madras for a monthly meeting during which time Newbigin would speak on some subject of ministerial leadership. Some of these sermons have been collected and published as *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Ministry in Today's World* (1974b). Reading these talks opens a window into Newbigin's heartfelt concern that these men be leaders of missionary congregations. Second, Newbigin was appointed to be convenor of the Synod Ministerial Committee. One of the primary responsibilities of this committee was to launch a new seminary at Arasaradi. The committee involved the churches in the planning of the curriculum and structure of the seminary. The result was "a kind of ministerial training which was more truly appropriate to a missionary Church than anything I have known before or since" (1993h:216). Third, Newbigin believed that the patterns of ministerial leadership were the primary structures that needed to be reformed. The patterns that had developed in the West were built on three axioms—the ministry is a paid full-time profession, ministers are highly educated, ministers should be supported by the gifts and donations of people—none of which were derived from the New Testament (1994k:24). There was a need for lay leaders and for a rethinking of the role of the deacon. All of this urged Newbigin to reflection and action.

All three of these factors led Newbigin to continue his reflection on the nature, role, and structure of ministerial leadership in the missionary congregation.

#### 3.6.3.7. Unity

Newbigin's involvement in discussions on unity and reunion continued during this period. He participated in the discussions about reunion between the CSI and the Lutheran church in India (1993h:217; 1969b); he convened the NCC's Committee on Faith and Order in India that arranged discussions between the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mar Thoma, and Protestant churches and culminated in a conference in 1972

(1993h:218); he commented on the proposed scheme of union between the Methodist and Anglican churches (1968a); he authored the report on conciliarity—a scheme of unity he personally disagreed with because it would sideline the more difficult organic union—at Louvain in 1971 (1993h:220f.); he addressed the need for unity in the context of the trend of secularization and the estrangement of the evangelicals from the ecumenical tradition (1969a); he continued in the Faith and Order discussions attempting to resolve tangled problems that had arisen from the New Delhi statement about local and global unity (1969e; 1970b:73f.); he addressed the issue of the form and structure of visible unity in the light of the new trends of dissatisfaction with and sociological analysis of ecclesial structures (1973c).

In all of these discussions two issues are important for the topic of his missionary ecclesiology. First, Newbigin addressed the problem that many Christians believe a concern for visible unity to be archaic. Evangelicals were impatient because they were passionately concerned to evangelize the world; they ranked evangelism above a concern for church unity. Ecumenicals were impatient because they were passionately concerned to meet the social needs of the world; they “set social action against ‘ecclesiastical joinery’” (1972c:434). Both parties agreed that visible unity is outdated. Speaking to this issue, Newbigin argued that both evangelism and social concern must flow from a proper understanding of the church in eschatological context (1973c). Second, again and again Newbigin addressed the need for new structures that would express the visible unity of the church. This concern led him to consider the nature of the church (1969a; 1970b:73f.).

#### 3.6.3.8. The Worship Life of the Congregation

In a secular time when social activism undermined the life of prayer and worship Newbigin continued to emphasize this dimension of the church’s life. A deepened life of prayer and worship is a “necessary corollary of a secular society” (1968d:79). A second factor that forced this issue into prominence was the dramatic growth of the Pentecostal church. Folk from the CSI had left to go the Pentecostal church because they found the CSI worship dull and boring. This was the context in which he addressed the subject of worship. He was concerned for three things: liturgical renewal, worship contextualized in India, and worship connected to the mission of the church (1972i:143; 1974b:32-37).

#### 3.6.3.9. Missionary Encounter with Religio-Cultural Context

Although Newbigin had always paid careful attention to understanding the cultural context in which the church must bear witness to the good news of the kingdom, conscious reflection on that relationship in writing came only in his later years. It is during this time that we find a more nuanced treatment of this subject.

There are a couple of historical factors that made this issue more prominent. First, a church that becomes socially involved in the task of nation building will be forced to ask the question of the relationship of the life of the kingdom to the life of the nation. Newbigin addressed this issue several times. He treated the relationship between salvation, the new humanity, and cultural-communal solidarity in Bangalore Theological Forum (1973e). He struggled with the relationship between the gospel and the goals of Indian public education (1972h). He entitled his paper on the subject the apostolic-secular dilemma. By the time he wrote his earlier article the word

contextualization had emerged and he used it to express his concerns. Second, the ecumenical-evangelical divide forced further reflection on the proper understanding of contextualization which is both relevant and faithful. The evangelical tradition was concerned for faithfulness to the gospel that moved it in a sectarian direction. The ecumenical tradition was concerned for relevance that moved it in the direction of “apostasy” (1967a, III:12). In this context he treated the relationship between the gospel and culture in more detail.

### 3.6.3.10. The Finality of Christ and World Religions

Perhaps surprisingly, Newbigin never addressed the subject of the gospel and other religions in a sustained way until the Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1966, even though Newbigin ministered in India where the issue of religious syncretism is paramount. He had spent time with the Hindu monks studying their religion, he had studied all the missionary conference material beginning with Edinburgh where the issue is a frequent topic of discussion (1973f:52), he had been deeply shaped by Kraemer, and he had engaged in the task of nation building in cooperation with Hindus and Muslims. Yet it is not until this time period that we see the fruit of this in print. In an article written in 1971 he identified five reasons that brought this topic to centre stage on the ecumenical agenda. “(1) the growing intermingling of people of all races in a common secular culture; (2) wider diffusion of the comparative study of religions; (3) the idea propagated in the papal Encyclical *Suum Ecclesiam* of religions as concentric circles having the RC church at the centre and others at increasingly remote distances; (4) the acute bad conscience of western man, who wishes above all to avoid any claims to superiority.... and [fifthly, the fact that] the Hindu belief that all religions are differing roads to one reality is becoming increasingly the unchallenged axiom of modern educated people” (1971a:620).

Newbigin tackles the issue in the Beecher Lectures later published as *The Finality of Christ* (1969c). The immediate concern that led Newbigin to choose the topic of the finality of Christ for the Beecher Lectures was a “confused kind of ecumenism” that included the unity of religions as part of the ecumenical agenda. Newbigin writes: “I believed that the whole integrity of the Ecumenical Movement depended upon the acceptance of the centrality and the finality of Christ, and that to move from this was not a legitimate extension of the Ecumenical Movement but a reversal” (1993h:218).

In these lectures Newbigin struggled with the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in relating the gospel to other religions that had been framed by the Kraemer-Hogg debates at Tambaram. Arguing for the finality of Christ as the clue to world history, he was able to embrace both continuity and discontinuity. Newbigin’s consideration of the relationship of the gospel and religions would increase dramatically in the coming decades.

### 3.6.3.11. Pentecostalism: Baptism and the Spirit

During Newbigin’s time in Madras the Pentecostal church had emerged on the Indian scene in a dramatic way.<sup>6</sup> Until this time Newbigin had very little contact with the

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<sup>6</sup>Newbigin responded humorously to a rather confused article in the *Bangalore Theological Forum* by a writer who accused Newbigin of being the door by which the charismatic movement had entered India. The writer, F. J. Balasundaram, observed: “It was during Newbigin’s [sic] bishopric that the charismatic

Pentecostal tradition. In fact, he “regarded them with the distaste of a well-educated university graduate” (1993h:129). When he wrote *The Household of God* (1953) he termed the third facet of ecclesiology ‘Pentecostal.’ This usage, however, was the result of Biblical evidence and theological reflection that attempted to resolve the impasse of the twofold scheme of the Protestant and Catholic traditions. He chose the term ‘Pentecostal’, not because of the Pentecostal church, but because the feast of Pentecost is the occasion of the Spirit’s coming (1990f:62). Newbigin has commented that this would “open the doors in later years to personal friendship with some Pentecostal leaders and to the enrichment of my own life through the charismatic movement much later, and it was to have considerable consequences for future thinking about the Church” (1993h:129).

While in the service of the IMC, during the latter part of 1961, Newbigin travelled to Latin America and there observed the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism (1993h:175). He preached in the one of the largest of their churches. He assessed Pentecostalism at that time with critical appreciation. No doubt the Holy Spirit was at work, but he queried whether or not other spirits were also at work. He concludes: “While I could not fail to recognize the dynamic character of these movements, I found them also willing to recognize the need to learn from older theological traditions” (*ibid.*).

In Madras Newbigin again encountered the “powerful witness” of the Pentecostal church. It touted tongues and the baptism of the Spirit as signs of a true spirituality, over against the dead liberalism of the CSI. Since the most sensitive members of the CSI were shaken by this barrage, Newbigin spent much time in various congregations having one-day teach-ins that examined the meaning of baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit (1993h:217). Much of the writing we have from Newbigin on baptism and the church is the result of this interaction. His reflection on the relationship of the Spirit to the church also continued because of this encounter.

### 3.6.3.12. Summary

The context of the Madras diocese gave Newbigin an opportunity to give concrete expression to his developing Trinitarian ecclesiology. The church was a servant that had to become deeply involved in the social and political life of the nation in which it is placed. In a time of nation building in India, the social and political task of the church was Newbigin’s dominant concern. He struggled with the nature of a faithful social witness both in his work as a bishop and in his ecclesiological reflection. This led him to accent the calling of the laity, the importance of flexible structures, the equipping task of ministerial leadership, and the nourishing role of worship and prayer for a socially active congregation. However, this social witness must not eclipse evangelism or become so centralized that the connection between the acts of mercy and justice and the local congregation is blurred.

Other factors stimulated further ecclesiological reflection: the ecumenical-evangelical divide, a growing religious pluralism, the growth of the Pentecostal church, continuing ecumenical involvement, and the daily tasks of a bishop that struggled to equip local congregations to be signs of the kingdom.

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movement entered India and the CSI,” to which Newbigin replied: “It was also during this period that the USA invaded Vietnam but I was in no way responsible for either” (1990f:63).

### 3.7. NEWBIGIN'S YEARS IN BRITAIN AS INSTRUCTOR, PASTOR, LECTURER, AND AUTHOR (1974-1998)

Newbigin retired from his Madras Bishopric at the age of sixty-five and returned to Britain via a long and slow trip through the Asian and European continents. He immediately took up a post lecturing on missiology and ecumenics at Selly Oak College for the next five years (1974-1979). From there he was called to pastor a small inner city congregation in Birmingham where he served for eight years (1980-1988). For the last ten years of his life Newbigin was officially retired first in Birmingham and then in London where he remained active in giving leadership to the British-based Gospel and Our Culture movement, by lecturing and writing. This was an exceedingly fruitful time. Well over half of his life's literary output was produced during these twenty-four years. He was in constant demand as a lecturer. Numerous opportunities for ecclesiastical and missional leadership at a local and global level opened up enabling him to bring his experience to bear on many issues.

As to ecclesiology, this period was similarly fruitful. On the one hand, he consolidated and gave clear articulation to the gains of a lifetime. Every ecclesiological theme that we have sketched in these historical chapters is articulated during this period. On the other hand, the new setting opened up an opportunity for new explorations. Continuous with his earlier development, the new western context provided an occasion for more nuanced reflection in a number of areas—most notably in the areas of gospel and culture, missionary encounter with western culture, religious pluralism, unity, ministerial leadership, and Biblical authority. Reflection in each of these areas had significant ecclesiological implications.

In this section we will sketch these ecclesiological developments putting them in the context of the dominant cultural and ecclesiastical setting as well as the context of Newbigin's ministry.

#### 3.7.1. *Collegiate Instructor, Inner City Pastor, Active in Gospel and Our Culture*

Following his return from India, he took a position as lecturer at Selly Oak Colleges for five years until his seventieth birthday. The next eight years of his life were spent in a tough inner city area where he pastored a small United Reformed Church (URC). During his "retirement" years he remained active in the Gospel and Our Culture movement, lecturing throughout the world, and authoring a cataract of books and articles. Newbigin died on 30 January 1998.

One primary concern shaped these years. Newbigin was first and foremost a missionary who had spent his life commending the gospel to others. When he returned to Britain he was struck by the timidity and lack of confidence in the gospel that characterized British Christianity. He writes:

As time went on I began to receive invitations to take part in conferences of ministers and lay people. I began to feel very uncomfortable with much that I heard. There seemed to be so much timidity in commending the Gospel to the unconverted people of Britain (1993h:230).

Newbigin devoted the remaining years of his life to instill in Christians the

confidence needed to dispel the prevailing timidity. Thus he laboured to equip the British church to embody and proclaim the gospel as public truth in a pluralist society.

### 3.7.1.1. Instructor at Selly Oak Colleges (1974-1979)

Newbigin joined the faculty of Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham in September of 1974. His task was to teach theology of mission and ecumenical studies to men and women who were preparing for overseas missionary service. Relieved from the punishing schedule of an Indian bishop, Newbigin had the time, occasion, and resources to read widely<sup>7</sup> and to articulate systematically the missiological reflection of almost forty years of experience. He wrote significant articles on interfaith dialogue (1976d), the relationship between Christ and cultures (1978a), and theological education (1978i). He compiled and edited the talks he had given to the CSI clergy in Madras (1974b). As to a missionary ecclesiology, the most important contribution during this period was his *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (1978e). He wrote this book because of the lack of a suitable text for his theology of mission class. When it came out, Gerald Anderson called this work Newbigin's most important book to date on mission theology. The Lutheran missiologist James Scherer commented: "*The Open Secret* sums up Newbigin's mature missiological reflections from a lifetime of preaching, teaching, episcopal administration, and life as an ecumenical journeyman" (Scherer 1980:89).

The importance of this book for our topic can be seen in Newbigin's initial motivation for writing: "I wanted.... something that would help these people to understand why the Church has to be missionary" (1993h:229). Speaking to students who were preparing for overseas missions, Newbigin wanted to ground that foreign missionary enterprise in the broader missionary character of the church that confesses, in the words of the Willingen conference, "there is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world" (1978e:1). His concern was to communicate the "new recognition that mission belongs to the very being of the church" and challenge notions of mission as "enterprises that belonged to the exterior of church life... carried on somewhere else" (*ibid.*). So while mission was not a new word, it was being used in a new way to describe, not simply certain enterprises carried on by the church, but the very central reason that the church exists. With this Biblical foundation the missionary task in western culture was included. Newbigin ends his brief introduction to the book with these words:

The present discussion is written in the hope of placing the debate in a broad biblical perspective and in the hope that to do so will release new energies for the contemporary mission of the church, not only in its global dimensions but also in its application to the tough new paganism of the contemporary western world (:2).

*The Open Secret* is a systematic development of an earlier booklet. In the weeks following the New Delhi assembly Newbigin had attempted to articulate his growing conviction that the mission of the church must be set in the context a fully Trinitarian doctrine (1963g). Now, seventeen years later, Newbigin was able to develop that paper into a full-length book (1993h:188).

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<sup>7</sup>The number of book reviews that Newbigin contributes to journals increases during this period.

### 3.7.1.2. Pastor of Inner City Congregation in Birmingham (1980-1988)

When, at the age of seventy, Newbiggin terminated his salaried position at Selly Oak, he received an unexpected call to a pastoral position of a small United Reformed church in the inner city of Birmingham—a position he was to hold for the next eight years. While Newbiggin presided over a meeting of the Birmingham District Council of the URC in 1979, one of the items on the docket was a recommendation to close a congregation that worshipped in a tough area of the city near Winson Green prison. Newbiggin commented on this recommendation:

I could not reconcile it with my conscience to preside over such a decision. I suggested to the Council that if the Church abandoned such areas in order to settle in the relatively easy circumstances of the suburbs it would forfeit the claim to be a missionary church (1993h:235).

High unemployment, a high proportion of single-parent families, and a rich ethnic mix characterized this area of the city. The majority of the residents were from India or the Caribbean, with a small number of Anglo-Saxons. In Britain it would be considered an area of severe deprivation. There was a famine of hope among the residents (1987b:3).

Installed as pastor early in 1980, Newbiggin quickly realized that his ministry in Winson Green was “much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition” (1993d:235). This forced him to conclude that the West was “the most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world.... one of which the Churches have been—on the whole—so little conscious” (*ibid.*). While he had believed in the 1960s that England was a secular society, this experience compelled the conviction that “England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church” (1993h:236).

The eight years in Winson Green gave Newbiggin opportunity to put into practice his understanding of a missionary church. We have a window into this process in an article entitled “Evangelism in the City” (1987b). The occasion was Newbiggin’s response to a friendly review of his book *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Rodd 1986:66) by the editor who “challenged [him] to say how [he] would apply the rather abstract reasoning of the book to the concrete business of an ordinary inner-city parish” (1987b:3). Newbiggin took up the challenge.

In the British context where there was a radical contradiction between the gospel and the assumptions of western culture, the question was how the strange story of the crucified and risen God-made-flesh could become credible. Newbiggin points to six items. It would become credible where there was a worshipping community that nourished the new life in Christ, where there was a congregation challenged to be a contrast community different from their neighbours, where the congregation was deeply involved in the secular concerns of the neighbourhood, manifesting the Lordship of Christ over all, where the church engaged in selfless service, where there was a radically other-worldly hope, and where the community was involved in evangelism. Elsewhere Newbiggin pointed to another factor: the visible unity of the church. Together with the clergy of three other churches, Newbiggin met, prayed, and planned together with the clergy of three other churches in Winson Green as to how they could express their unity in that place (1985b:65).

Newbigin did not claim any success for his work in Winson Green. The little church that had eighteen members when Newbigin became pastor had twenty-seven members when he left the church in the hands of an Indian successor (Thorogood 1989:72). This concrete parish experience at the most challenging missionary frontier of our day deepened his insight into what was needed for a church to become a missionary congregation in the West.

### 3.7.1.3. Active in Gospel and Our Culture: Catalyst, Lecturer, and Author (1988-1998)

Turning over the responsibility of pastoral care of his tiny flock to a younger pastor who had joined Newbigin from the Church of North India in 1982, Newbigin “retired” for the third time in 1988. He remained in Birmingham for four years working in the Gospel and Our Culture program as an organizer, lecturer, and author. In 1992 he moved to London, where he remained until his death early in 1998. Three primary activities occupied his “retirement” years. First, he gave active leadership to the Gospel and Our Culture movement, which had been gaining momentum in Britain since 1984. He wrote the lead article in its newsletter from 1988 until the Swanwick Conference in 1992. This gave him more and more opportunity to lecture and speak around the world; this was the second activity that occupied his time. Thirdly, his literary output continued unabated. Most often his speeches were published in journals or collected in books.

### 3.7.2. *Dominant Ecclesiological Issues*

Over half of his published work appeared after 1974. Every ecclesiological theme that has been alluded to in this and the preceding chapter appeared in this time. Therefore only selected ecclesiological issues will be noted here. These divide up into three sections. First, there are four themes which Newbigin developed significantly beyond his earlier thought: gospel and culture, mission in western culture, Christianity and world religions, and Biblical authority. Second, there are several themes in which Newbigin pushed beyond his earlier formulations because of the specific context: ecclesial unity and ministerial leadership. Third, there are themes in which he returned to well-rehearsed articulations. They are included briefly because the references to these themes are so numerous and so central to his primary concern during this time period, namely to call the church to a missionary encounter with western culture. The themes are the witness of the Spirit, eschatology, ecclesial structures, mission of the laity, the relationship between evangelism and social justice, and weakness and suffering in mission.

#### 3.7.2.1. Gospel, Church, and Culture

In 1972 the term ‘contextualization’ was coined in the circles of the Theological Education Fund, replacing the terms indigenisation, adaptation, and accommodation. This terminological shift signalled a growing interest in the relationship between the gospel and the various cultures of the world. Prior to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the gospel was associated with one culture—western culture—which was considered to be the dominant and superior culture. In the West civilization was used in the singular and all cultures were positioned on a ladder, with western culture perched at the top. The gospel was limited to its western form, and western forms of theology, confessions, liturgy, and social ethics were transported throughout the world by the missionary movement.

Missionaries were not unaware of cultural differences. There was the practice of indigenisation, accommodation, or adaptation. A western form of the gospel or liturgy was adapted or accommodated to the non-western cultures. A number of factors challenged this state of affairs in the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the unravelling of colonialism, the acute guilty conscience of the West, non-western resentment, the devastating effects of science and technology, the moral demise of the West, a growing recognition of subjective factors in knowing, and especially the growth of the third world church. The combination of these influences shattered western ethnocentrism and opened the way for fresh study of the relationship of the gospel to the various cultures of the world. Perhaps Nairobi (1975) was the first WCC assembly in which cultural diversity was manifestly evident. Nairobi affirmed that “no culture is closer to Jesus Christ than any other culture. Jesus Christ restores what is truly human in any culture and frees us to be open to other cultures.” Therefore, “the Church is called to relate itself to any culture, critically, creatively, redemptively” (Paton 1976:79). The burning questions that continue to exercise the most able Christian minds are: How can we be *faithful* to the gospel and *relevant* to the various cultures of the world? How can we be faithful to *one* gospel (without falling into ethnocentrism) and yet embrace *plural* expressions (without falling into relativism)? This has continued to be one of the most pressing items on the agenda of the world church for the past three decades.

While this theme had appeared in earlier writings, it was not until 1977 that Newbigin treated this theme systematically. In a paper presented to the Conference of the Society for the Study of Theology in that year, drawing on his extensive missionary experience to address the burning issues of the day, he offered a profound treatment of the relationship between gospel and culture (1978a). This paper formed the foundation for frequent, continuing reflection on the topic. However, his most pressing concern was to deal with a specific case of contextualization—the gospel and western culture.

### 3.7.2.2. Missionary Encounter with Western Culture

As noted earlier, Newbigin found British Christians timid about the gospel. He points to two sources for this anxiety.

One was the feeling that ‘the modern scientific world-view’ had made it impossible to believe much of the traditional Christian teaching. One had therefore to tailor the Gospel to the alleged requirements of ‘modern thought.’ This was, of course, an old problem, but it seemed to be much more pervasive than before. The other and newer aspect of the problem was the result of the presence of substantial numbers of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in big cities.... Sensitive Christians felt deeply... that respect for these minority communities precluded any kind of evangelism (1993h:230f.).

These two mission frontiers—the modern scientific worldview and religious pluralism—were the primary subjects that occupied Newbigin’s attention for the remaining years of his life.

It was through the eyes of two Christians from outside the West that Newbigin began to see the scope of the syncretism of the gospel with western culture. While visiting Selly Oak Colleges, the Latin American Orlando Costas asked why capitalism wasn’t included along with Marxism as an ideology in the new syllabus for the public schools of Birmingham. The answer given was that capitalism was not an ideology. To this Costas responded in contemptuous laughter. The next year a Nicaraguan Jesuit economist named Xavier Gorostiaga gave a lecture at Selly Oak that indicted the British

churches for failure to bring the gospel to bear on the economic, social, and political life of their nation.

For the next few years a troublesome question continued to haunt Newbigin: ‘How can one find a perspective on one’s own culture?’ (1993h:250). The reading of Paul Hazard’s *The European Mind: 1680 to 1715* (1953) enabled Newbigin to see that European society had gone through a collective conversion at the time of the Enlightenment (1985f:7). Further reading on this Enlightenment period provided the contours of a Christian critique of western culture.

Newbigin’s thinking continued to develop along these lines with his participation in the British Council of Churches. In 1982 the general secretary of the BCC, Philip Morgan, convened a gathering to brainstorm about the problem of the gospel and public life. Newbigin was the catalyst in setting into motion a process that would have international effects. Following the example of the J. H. Oldham he proposed a three-step program. First, a pamphlet was written raising the fundamental issues for discussion. Second, a three-year period was devoted to studying these issues. Third, a large conference would be convened to discuss the substance of the three-year study. Newbigin was appointed to write the initial pamphlet which was published as *The Other Side of 1984: Questions to the Churches*.

The study process gave birth to the ‘The Gospel and Our Culture’ (GOC) movement that would culminate in a 1992 conference in Swanwick. Newbigin’s book—that sold 20,000 copies very quickly—and the GOC newsletters rapidly drew international attention. Numerous invitations to speak about the topic were extended from around the world. Invitations to Princeton to give the Warfield Lectures (1986e), to the Divinity Faculty in Glasgow University to teach a course on the gospel and western culture (1989e), and to Western Theological Seminary to deliver the Oosterhaven Lectures (1991h) resulted in three books that continued to carry the conversation forward—*Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture* (1986e), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989e), and *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991h).

There were two correlative goals in Newbigin’s gospel and western culture project. The first was to examine and analyze the underlying religious assumptions of western culture through the lens of the gospel. The western church has been co-opted by these assumptions, making it timid in proclaiming the gospel as truth. It is also these assumptions that shape the different sectors of public life in which Christians must bear witness. A faithful missionary church demands that these foundational beliefs be exposed to critical examination. The second prong is the need to clarify the nature of the authority of the gospel. The nature of Scriptural authority is a central concern as is a proper confidence in the gospel. One way of expressing both of these concerns is to spell out the implications of affirming the truth of the gospel.

To rightly understand this GOC movement it is necessary to gain the proper standpoint. In response to a misunderstanding that perceived GOC as primarily a cultural critique, Newbigin articulates the driving motive of the whole movement.

GOC has never understood itself as primarily a critique of our culture, but as an effort to clarify the issues involved in communicating the Gospel to this particular culture.... GOC... is only in a secondary sense a critique of contemporary culture. It is about the truth of the Gospel, about trying to unmask the illusions which obscure that truth, about helping churches to be more articulate and credible witnesses to the Gospel (1992d:6, 9).

Newbigin analyzed and critiqued the underlying assumptions of western culture in order to unmask foundational cultural beliefs that cripple the church's witness to the truth of the gospel. He did not move from missionary to cultural critic or apologist. A faithful missionary church remained central to his endeavours. This can be seen by observing that *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* all climax in an articulation of the implications for the church. *The Other Side of 1984* poses three questions to the churches. *Foolishness to the Greeks* closes with the chapter 'What Must We Be? The Call to the Church.' *The Gospel and a Pluralist Society* book closes with chapters on the 'The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel'—the chapter to which reviewers most frequently make reference—and 'Ministerial Leadership for a Missionary Congregation.' To miss this missionary perspective is to skew Newbigin's purpose in entering this discussion.

### 3.7.2.3. Religious Pluralism and Mission

We have noted that Newbigin identified the two primary mission frontiers in western culture as the modern scientific worldview and religious pluralism. The issue of religious pluralism has dominated the agenda of the world church for decades. In 1960 Hendrik Kraemer's Stone Lectures were published under the title *World Cultures and World Religions: The Coming Dialogue*, a title that captures the two dominant items on the agenda of the world church (the relationship of the gospel to cultural and religious pluralism) and the prevailing missiological strategy that would be employed in the future encounter (dialogue). Of religious pluralism David Bosch has said:

It would probably be correct to say that we have reached the point where there can be little doubt that the two largest unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relationship (1) to worldviews which offer this-worldly salvation, and (2) to other faiths (Bosch 1991:476f.).

A combination of factors have made religious pluralism an essential topic for the world church. The collapse of colonialism leaves questions about the basis of an exclusive claim for the gospel. The resurgent vitality in all of the world's religions fostered by nationalism and, in large part, in reaction to the modern western missionary movement (Kraemer 1960:82-98) undermines confident claims for the truth of the gospel. Geographical isolation of religions is a thing of the past. The ecological and economic threats that face the human race pose a desperate need for global unity. Moreover, a "rampant radical relativism" (Anderson 1993:201) is sweeping the globe, calling into question the truth claim of the gospel. The numerical dominance of the third world church living as minorities in a religiously plural situation make the question of 'the gospel and religions' a matter of life and death.

In this growing religious and cultural pluralistic context, the concept of dialogue emerged as one of the primary ways of relating to peoples of other faiths. New Delhi encouraged dialogue as a way to witness to the gospel (New Delhi 1961:81-84). The CMWE meeting in Mexico City explored the nature of true dialogue (Mexico 1964:146f.). Dialogue was given institutional status when in 1968 Stanley Samartha was appointed as director of the "Living Faiths" study in the WCC. In 1971 a new sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies was created, with Samartha as its director. From this point on, the issue of dialogue has dominated the agenda of the ecumenical movement. While most would affirm the need for dialogue, the basis and purpose of this dialogue remain debated issues.

Newbigin's experience with this issue was wide-ranging. His forty years of missionary service were spent in a country where religious pluralism is the unquestioned environment. Newbigin spent much time in dialogue with Hindu scholars. He read widely on the topic, including all the documents of the world missionary conferences, where this topic was discussed frequently. His first systematic discussion of the issue was the 1966 Beecher Lectures given at Yale Divinity School and published under the title *The Finality of Christ*. However, it is somewhat surprising that this remained his only substantial contribution until after retirement.

Upon his return to Britain, numerous experiences forced Newbigin to deal with this burning issue. The religiously plural situation of Britain had led to a timidity about commending the truth of the gospel to those of other faiths and this drew him "into further thinking and talking about the proper Christian response to the new religious pluralism of our cities" (1993h:244). Newbigin was involved in the fiftieth anniversary of Tambaram in which he saw himself fighting the same battle as Kraemer had fought. He replaced John Hick on the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education that was appointed by the Birmingham City Council to deal with the new syllabus for religious education in the public schools. He was also a member of the committee of the URC on 'Mission and Other Faiths.' All of these settings challenged Newbigin to deal with the urgent problem of religious pluralism. He responded with a number of insightful papers that have been the subject of much study (1976d, 1977b, 1983b, 1988c, 1989j, 1990j, 1993g; cf. Thomas 1996). In 1963, speaking about the ghettoized situation in which the Asian churches found themselves in the context of religious pluralism, Newbigin had commented: "There is little temptation to go back to the kind of thinking which called for Kraemer's famous and decisive proclamation of the uniqueness and otherness of the Gospel.... The mere assertion of discontinuity, true as it is, necessary as it is in certain contexts, is not the word which is required at this moment" (1963g:28). Apparently, the new context of relativism moved Newbigin to believe that this assertion was necessary once again. He commented that he was increasingly compelled to stand with Hendrik Kraemer (1988j:82; cf. 1983b:205).

#### 3.7.2.4. Biblical Authority and Mission to Western Culture

Soon after his return to Britain Newbigin became firmly convinced that a genuine missionary encounter with western culture demanded "the recovery of a credible doctrine of biblical authority" (1993h:248; cf. 1989e:95). According to Newbigin, the Bible had functioned in three ways for western people. First, it operated as a myth or model by which the whole world was understood. Second, the Bible was the source of guidelines that determined rules for conduct. Finally, it was a source of faith to nourish the inner life. He believed that the first role—Scripture as life-shaping myth—had been taken over by the modern scientific worldview. The Bible's use to provide norms for conduct had disappeared after the days of Biblical theology. Biblical theology, in which Newbigin had been nurtured, had been shattered by James Barr and Ernst Kasemann. The Bible had been taken from the church to the academy, and critical analysis had effectively neutered its message. Newbigin observed that the BCC's attempt to address public issues contained no substantial reference to the Scriptures (1993h:248). Though Scripture still served to nourish the inner life, even this reduced role is being questioned by British Biblical scholars (1982i:6f.).

Newbigin's response to this situation was twofold. First, he sought to stir up a discussion on the issue among Biblical scholars. When he approached George Caird,

the University of Ireland's Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, Newbigin was told: "You are asking for a total revolution in the way biblical scholars see their job" (1993h:249). A list of twenty prominent younger Biblical scholars was obtained by Newbigin and a group named 'Scripture, Theology, and Society' began to meet to articulate a Biblical perspective on social issues. Newbigin commented that this project was significant because it was of "great importance that the gulf between biblical scholarship and the practical needs of the Church for guidance in its ethical and political decisions should be bridged" (*ibid.*).

Newbigin's second response to the situation was to write a number of papers himself, challenging the unrecognized faith assumptions that shaped critical Biblical scholarship (e.g., 1982i, 1984b, 1985k, 1991a). He also challenged the liberal/fundamentalist split over the authority of Scripture, arguing that this was one more manifestation of the fact/value dichotomy that plagued western culture. To counteract the higher criticism of Biblical scholars, the subjectivism of the liberal wing of the church, and the objectivism of the fundamentalist wing, Newbigin appealed to the recent studies of Hans Frei (1974) and George Lindbeck (1984) who advocated a narrative approach to Scripture.

In the following chapters we will have occasion to see how important Newbigin's understanding of Biblical authority is for his understanding of the missionary church.

#### 3.7.2.5. Ecclesial Unity

The New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) affirmed organic union locally expressed and globally recognized to be the goal of the WCC. Numerous reunion schemes were pursued at the national level. Multilateral discussions were held and in fifty years sixty united churches came into existence. However, according to Newbigin, the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic church changed the situation. When observers from the 'separated brethren' were invited to attend the council, the decision was made to invite delegates from world-wide confessional bodies. This had two implications: first, multilateral discussions at a national level were jettisoned in favour of bilateral discussions on a transnational level; second, the conciliar model of unity was seized and further elaborated as 'reconciled diversity.' Newbigin had been the original author of the conciliar model of unity at the Faith and Order meeting at Louvain in 1971. At the time he feared that this might be used to discard organic union and his fears were soon realized. At 1973 in a Faith and Order meeting at Salamanca it was affirmed that conciliar unity did not replace but further elaborated organic unity. However, the meeting of the Christian World Communions (CWCs) at Geneva in 1974 could not endorse the Salamanca statement. They developed the concept of reconciled diversity with the guiding principle that denominational and confessional diversity is valid and can make a valuable contribution to the ecumenical church. Cardinal Willebrands proposed a similar model that preserved confessional identities and types. The result of these developments was that pursuit of organic unity was abandoned and replaced by much less costly models of unity that affirmed confessional identities.

Newbigin believed that other issues were making visible unity increasingly unpopular. The Nairobi meeting of the WCC in 1975 faced four large challenges. Was unity compatible with a commitment to the pursuit of justice? Could a commitment to unity include sufficient diversity that respected cultural and racial identities? Did unity entail large institutional bodies that eclipsed personal authenticity and spiritual integrity? Could the pursuit of unity preserve the gains of the historic confessional

traditions?

In 1984 after talks for unity between the Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, and Moravian churches failed, Newbigin remarked that “that event marks the end of the movement which was launched by the famous appeal to all Christian people of the Lambeth Conference of 1920” (1984a:1). Ecumenical enthusiasm was a matter of past history and that chapter was closed. Newbigin pointed to four reasons for this collapse in ecumenical concern: the inertia of denominational traditions with the inbuilt commitment of large organizations to preserve themselves; the growth of fundamentalism that is uninterested in old ecclesiastical structures and proliferates new forms; action for justice and peace that appears to be more urgent; and a wider ecumenism that displaces ecclesial ecumenism (1984a:2-3).

By 1995 Newbigin believed that ecclesial unity was in even greater danger. The intransigence of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the decline of the Anglican and Protestant mainline churches with their loss of confidence in the gospel, and the hostility of evangelicals, Pentecostals, and parachurch organizations to institutional and visible unity made the future of ecumenism appear bleak (1995e:8-9).

In this context Newbigin maintained his commitment to organic unity. He continued to insist that a proper understanding of unity is based on a correct ecclesiology. He also continued to assert that unity and mission are inseparable. He patiently answered the criticisms in his writings and lectures but admitted that for someone who had given the majority of his life to ecumenical endeavours the situation was worrisome (1995e:9).

#### 3.7.2.6. Ministerial Leadership

A number of diverse experiences pushed Newbigin to think more deeply about ministerial leadership in the church. First, during the period of negotiations between the URC and the Churches of Christ in the late 1970s, one of the issues that arose was the place of non-stipendiary ministers. Newbigin was the convenor of the Church’s Ministerial Training Committee. He used that position to expound and defend the idea of non-stipendiary ministry.

Second, the meeting of a bilateral dialogue between the Anglican and Reformed communions presented another occasion for further reflection on church leadership. In preparation for the meeting, he read through the entire New Testament, noting all references to the ministry. He concluded that the issues formulated in the two traditions were significantly different from the way the New Testament deals with ministerial leadership and that it would be difficult for either tradition to base their claims on Scripture. The discrepancy between the traditions and the New Testament had arisen because “the New Testament assumes a missionary situation in which the Church is a small evangelizing movement in a pagan society, while both of our traditions have been formed in the ‘Christendom’ era, in a society presumed to be Christian” (1983c:1). The paper that followed presented some of Newbigin’s most mature and detailed reflection on church leadership (1983c).

A third situation that became the occasion for an extension of his thinking on leadership was the formation of the WCC’s Program for Theological Education (PTE) in 1977. The Theological Education Fund (TEF) had been formed in Ghana in 1958 to develop quality (intellectually rigorous, spiritually sensitive), authentic (contextual), and creative (new, missional) theological education in the third world (Pobee 1991:350). The task was accomplished and by the end of the 1970s it was becoming evident that a new action was now needed. The need of the hour was a forum for the exchange of

experience among all the churches on the six continents. The initiative could no longer be the West's with its standards and expertise, but had to be shared by a worldwide church that shouldered the task together. In this context Newbigin was asked to make a contribution to the discussion. His paper opened up numerous issues of ministerial training in a missional context (1978i). Its numerous reprints demonstrates its value to ask the right questions.

All of these experiences led Newbigin to address the topic of ministerial leadership many times during this period. He probed the issue more deeply than in previous years.

### 3.7.2.7. Other Important Ecclesiological Themes

There are a number of issues important for Newbigin's ecclesiology that find frequent expression in the new missional context of western culture. The growth of the Pentecostal movement, deepening reflection on the Trinitarian context for the mission of the church, and the influence of Harry Boer's book (1961) led Newbigin to stress the work of the Spirit more forcefully than at earlier points in his life.

Faced with the privatization of the future hope in the West, Newbigin stressed a Biblical eschatology repeatedly in his writings and lectures. The theme 'Your Kingdom Come', chosen for the Melbourne meeting of the CMWE, also gave Newbigin opportunity to again express the importance of the kingdom for a missionary church (1980f).

The stress on the local congregation as the primary unit of mission also grew stronger during this period. He commented in 1989: "I confess that I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation" (1989e:227). This emphasis led to his frequent characterization of the church as "the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel" (e.g., 1989e:222-241; 1990b:339).

Newbigin's emphasis on a missionary encounter with a highly differentiated western culture led him to put strong emphasis on the ministry of the laity in society. In his well-known seminal essay on mission in western culture—*Can the West Be Converted?*—he puts as the first item of importance "the declericalizing of theology," so that God's will might be done in the public sector. This continues as a fundamental pillar in his mission in western culture program.

The continuing split between ecumenical and evangelical traditions of the church over the issue of evangelism and mission on the one hand, and justice, peace, and social involvement on the other, led Newbigin to address this issue frequently.

Finally, reference to the powerlessness and weakness of the Christ and the church in mission, and to suffering as a mode of mission permeated the pages of Newbigin's writing in this latter part of his life.

### 3.7.3. Summary

The mature shape of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology emerged clearly in the last twenty-four years of his life. Every significant theme is treated with more clarity and often with more detail than in his earlier years. A number of issues received a more comprehensive, systematic treatment in this new setting. Especially significant are his struggles with a missionary encounter with western culture and religious pluralism. These ecclesiological reflections continued to be fed by a wide and diverse experience as a university instructor, pastor of a local congregation, participation in local and

global ecumenical projects, and contact with numerous confessional and cultural traditions of Christianity.

### 3.8. CONCLUSION

Early in the 1960s a second major ecclesiological shift in Newbigin's theological development took place from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. The missionary nature of the church that had formed his thinking prior to this time was not jettisoned. Rather the fruitful insights of this earlier period were taken up and given expression in a more comprehensive Trinitarian framework.

The setting in which this initial awareness of the Trinitarian context for a missionary church took place was the dramatic events of the 1960s and the theological and missiological developments in the World Council of Churches. In critical interaction with this context Newbigin developed his missionary ecclesiology. His position as general secretary of the IMC and director of the CWME placed him at the heart of these debates. Visser 't Hooft also had an influence Newbigin's developing ecclesiology.

Four important contexts enabled Newbigin to give expression to this Trinitarian, missionary understanding of the church. The first was his bishopric in Madras. In the context of a developing third world city, Newbigin challenged the strong Madras church to take the form of a selfless servant. Selly Oak Colleges provided the second context: the life of a professor gave Newbigin opportunity to reflect more systematically on the church and commit his theology to writing. The third context was the difficult ministry of a pastorate in the inner city of Birmingham. He became aware that the culture of the West presented the most difficult missionary frontier in the world. He struggled for eight years to put into practice what he had learned from his vast missionary experience. The final context was a global setting. Newbigin's retirement years brought numerous opportunities to travel, lecture, and interact with a worldwide audience on issues raised in his writing.

Alan Neely comments that Newbigin's role in the missionary and ecumenical developments of the twentieth century has been "scarcely paralleled" (Neely 1986:106). Indeed, very few people had such a varied, rich, and full experience of ministry as Lesslie Newbigin. It is this experience that shaped and formed his understanding about the centrality of a missionary church. Newbigin's confession about the church after these many years of life experience can be summarized in the words of the significant IMC Willingen conference in 1952—words penned by Newbigin himself: "There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. 'As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you'" (Goodall 1953 :190).

## 4. THE *MISSIO DEI* AS CONTEXT FOR THE CHURCH'S MISSIONARY IDENTITY

### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

A systematic treatment of ecclesiology will attend to three relationships: the relation of the church to God, to its own mission, and to its religio-cultural context. The next two chapters present a systematic analysis of the relation of the church to God in Newbigin's thought. This chapter treats the mission of the Triune God as the context for the church's missionary identity. The *missio Dei* is elaborated in terms of the kingdom of the Father, the mission of the Son, and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Previous to 1959 Newbigin's understanding of the mission of God was Christocentric in a way that neglected the work of the Father and the Spirit. However, the challenge of new winds in the ecumenical tradition caused him to rethink his understanding of God's work. While he developed a fuller Trinitarian understanding of God's redemptive mission in the world, he never abandoned his Christocentrism; he believed that a Trinitarian context for the church's mission will always be an expansion and elaboration of the work of God centred in Jesus Christ. The work of Jesus Christ remained the starting point and controlling criterion for his thinking about God's redemptive work and the church's mission. The Triune work of God is the context for understanding Christ's mission. If the church is to continue the mission of Christ the redemptive deeds of the Triune God will form the context for the church's identity and mission. While Newbigin developed his understanding of the *Trinitarian* work of God, his Christocentric focus never opened up fully into a Trinitarian framework. The work of the Father and the Spirit remained underdeveloped. Nonetheless, Newbigin's understanding of the mission of God is clearly Trinitarian.

Newbigin's understanding of the mission of the Triune God is both Christocentric and eschatological. The good news announced by Jesus Christ concerned the reign of God. In Jesus Christ the end-time purpose of God was revealed and accomplished. This sets the tone for Newbigin's formulation of the *missio Dei*. The kingdom of the Father forms the context for the work of the Son. Jesus Christ reveals and accomplishes the kingdom. The Spirit witnesses to the presence of the kingdom in Jesus.

The term *missio Dei* was not used by Newbigin very often. He did speak of God's mission, Christ's mission, and the mission of the Triune God. But he preferred to use terms like the action or work of God and the witness of the Spirit. When he spoke of the Trinity, he would often speak of a Trinitarian framework or model or approach. Nevertheless Newbigin's understanding of the church is firmly rooted in an understanding of the redemptive work of the Triune God that is commonly referred to as the *missio Dei*.

### 4.2. THE MISSION OF THE TRIUNE GOD

"The mission of the Church is to be understood, can only be rightly understood, in terms of the trinitarian model" (1989e:118). These words of Newbigin provide an important

point of entry into his missionary ecclesiology. This section treats Newbigin's understanding of this trinitarian model as the context for understanding the missionary church.

#### *4.2.1. The Good News of Jesus Christ as Starting Point*

A faithful elaboration of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology must begin where he always began: with the good news of Jesus Christ. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God's purpose for His whole creation was revealed and accomplished. This good news has universal implications. It is an announcement of the end-time kingdom of God—about how the human and cosmic story will come to an end. And yet it was revealed by a Jewish male who lived in a certain part of the globe at a certain time. How will this good news be communicated to the ends of the earth? The intention of Jesus was made clear in the gospels. He called, chose, and prepared a community that would be the bearer of this good news. He sent them out with the words: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' and poured out His Spirit.

Within the first few centuries this missionary community found it necessary to deepen its understanding of the context of their mission. This was done by making explicit the context of Jesus' mission. This context was elaborated in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. The mission of Jesus and thus the community's mission must be understood in a Trinitarian context.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early Church was only the making explicit of that which is from the beginning the presupposition and the context, the source and the goal of the mission of Jesus. It is in Trinitarian terms that we have to understand the nature and authority of the mission in which we are called to share (1977d:214).

The verse that most exemplifies Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is John 20:21: As the Father has sent me I am sending you. The church is called to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus to the ends of the earth and the end of the age. This defines the nature of the church according to Newbigin. It is this missionary ecclesiology that must be elaborated. To properly develop Newbigin's missionary understanding of the church, it is necessary to place the mission of Jesus and the mission of His church in a Trinitarian context.

#### *4.2.2. The Historical Development of a Trinitarian Basis for Mission*

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have witnessed a shift toward an understanding of mission as primarily the mission of the triune God. During the height of the missionary movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anthropocentrism and optimism of the Enlightenment shaped the missionary enterprise. As Jan Jongeneel observes: "To understand this new development [of the *missio Dei*], it is necessary to go back to the age of the Enlightenment which, for the first time in history, did not regard mission as God's very own work but as a purely human endeavour. Thereafter, a very anthropocentric theology emerged, which intentionally severed the... strong link between mission... and the doctrine of the Trinity..." (Jongeneel 1997:60). Mission was

conceived in soteriological, ecclesiological, or cultural terms (Bosch 1991:389).

The International Missionary Conference held at Willingen (1952) was the first major international missionary conference to break with this pattern. According to Willingen's "Statement on the Missionary Calling of the Church" the church's mission is derived from the mission of the Triune God (Goodall 1953:188-192). There are two sides to this new emphasis. First, mission is first and foremost *God's* mission. The church does not have a mission of its own. Rather the primary emphasis is on what God is doing for the redemption of the world. Thereafter, consideration is given to how the church participates in God's redeeming mission. Second, God's mission is defined in terms of the *Triune* character and work of God. Wilhelm Andersen comments on Willingen: "If we wish to sum up, with systematic precision, Willingen's approach to a theology of the missionary enterprise, we must say that it is trinitarian in character. In the Willingen statements, the triune God Himself is declared to be the sole source of every missionary enterprise" (1955:47). H. H. Rosin concurred when he says that "the trinitarian foundation of mission is one of the most striking achievements of this [Willingen] conference" (Rosin 1972:10).

In the Willingen statements, mission has its source in the nature and action of the Triune God. God is a missionary God and mission is first of all His action. The missionary initiative flows from the love of God to reconcile His created yet alienated world. He trod a long road of redemption with Israel, until out of the depths of His love the Father sent the Son to reconcile all things to Himself. Jesus accomplished the mission for which He was sent by a complete atonement in His death and resurrection. On the basis of this accomplished work God poured out the Spirit of Jesus to gather His people together into one body as a first fruit and an earnest of Christ's redemption. That same Spirit of Jesus equips and empowers His people to continue His mission as witnesses to God's redeeming love and work. Thus the church is caught up in God's redeeming action. Participation in Christ's redeeming work means participation in His mission to the world (Goodall 1954:189f.). It is clear in this summary statement that the mission of the church is derived from the redeeming action of God that flows from His love for the world. The Father sends the Son to accomplish His redemptive work; the Father and Son send the Spirit to incorporate his people into that redemption; the Son sends the church to continue his mission and to participate in the reconciling work of the Spirit. The mission is God's but He includes the church; the mission of the church is participation in the sending of God.

This statement, however, concealed profound differences about the nature of this Trinitarian basis. While it was clear that the mission of God was primary and the mission of the church was derivative, it was not clear how the *missio Dei* was greater than the *missio ecclesiae*. In the years following Willingen this discrepancy surfaced. We might label the two divergent views as Christocentric-Trinitarian and Cosmocentric-Trinitarian. This distinction points to the starting point and motivation for the development of a Trinitarian basis for mission. For the first, the Trinitarian perspective is an enlargement and development of the Christocentric mission theology that dominated the former decades. In this view, the centrality and indispensability of the church in God's mission is maintained. The second term points to a motivation to formulate a Trinitarian perspective that opens the way to acknowledge the providential work of the Father through the Spirit in culture and world history apart from Christ and

the church (Bosch 1991:391; Rosin 1972:25). In this view the church's role in God's mission is marginalised (Jongeneel 1997:92).

While Newbigin was present at Willingen, playing an important role, the theological and missiological insights did not radically alter his understanding of mission and the church. It would not be until the next decade that Newbigin would appropriate the insights of the *missio Dei*.

We can summarize Newbigin's understanding during the 1950s in the following way. Jesus made explicit provision for the extension of His presence and saving power to the whole world by creating a community that he called, trained, endowed and sent forth (1953d:50). Thus the church receives its existence in the commission of Jesus "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (1948d:22). The church exists to continue the mission of Jesus Christ in the world. When Christ bestowed this commission on the church He empowered it to continue His mission by giving the Holy Spirit. "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (1953d:104).

A Trinitarian perspective is not entirely absent. It is the Father who sends the Son and it is the Spirit sent by the Son who equips the church for its mission. Compared to his later understanding, these formulations reveal three deficiencies. First, the work of the Father receives very little emphasis. Other than quoting John 20:21, the ministry of Jesus is not placed in the context of the Father's work. It seems that God's mission begins with the sending of Jesus. The Father's work in redemptive history and in world history as a context for the mission of the Son and the church is not developed. Second, Newbigin's understanding of the Spirit as the primary agent of mission remains underdeveloped. Before Willingen, for Newbigin, mission is primarily an activity of the church with the Holy Spirit empowering the church for that task. The church does not participate in the mission of the Spirit but the Spirit equips the church for its mission. By the late 1950s Newbigin is beginning to emphasize the Spirit as the primary agent of mission. This will bear more fruit in the next decade when a Trinitarian understanding of the *missio Dei* provides the ultimate foundation for the missionary church. Third, no discussion is given to the work of the Father or the Spirit outside the boundaries of the elect community.

All of these themes appeared—at least in seminal form—at Willingen. However, Newbigin confessed that at that time his Christocentric and ecclesiocentric theology prevented him from understanding the concerns of Hoekendijk, Lehmann, and others who were advancing some of these ideas (1993h:144). Discussions in ecumenical circles in the rest of the decade brought to Newbigin a growing recognition of the inadequacy of his understanding. Beginning with an address at Bossey in 1957, which motivated him to look at the Scriptures afresh, and culminating in the debates at New Delhi in 1961, it became painfully obvious to him that his Christocentric ecclesiology had to be expanded and developed into a Trinitarian understanding that could account for the work of God in the world and its history. He says: "A true doctrine of missions must make a large place for the work of the Holy Spirit; but it is equally true that a true doctrine of missions will have much to say of God the Father. The opinion may be ventured that recent ecumenical thinking about the mission and unity of the church has been defective at both of these points" (1963g:31). The emergence of the Trinitarian *missio Dei* in Newbigin's thought advanced his understanding, enabling him to gather together and relate systematically many of his ecclesiological insights. He first

articulated this broader understanding in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g). He later elaborated this Trinitarian doctrine more fully in *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (1978e). This Trinitarian model remained firmly in place for the remainder of his life, shaping his missionary ecclesiology. In his most important work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, a Trinitarian understanding is foundational for his discussion (1989e:118-119, 134-135).

Newbigin's understanding of the basis for mission is Christocentric-Trinitarian. The model that influenced his Trinitarian formulations is found in the account given by Charles Norris Cochrane of the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the missionary setting of the early church (1940). Newbigin confessed that "in my own theological training the doctrine of the Trinity played a very minor part. Of course it was not denied or questioned, but it had no central place." He went on to say that "in my own experience, trinitarian doctrine came alive when I read classical scholar Charles N. Cochrane's book *Christianity and Classical Culture*" (1997d:2). Newbigin's assimilation of Cochrane is both Christocentric and missionary.

The starting point for the development of the Trinity was the preaching of Jesus Christ in the classical world where the gospel was threatened by various dualisms. The problem that faced the early Christians in the pagan setting of Rome was how to answer the question 'Who is Jesus?' These early Christians developed a way of responding that gave rise to a new style of literature we now call the 'gospels.' Mark is the earliest exemplar of this genre of literature and in the opening verses of that gospel we are introduced to Jesus as "the one who announces the coming reign of God, the one who is acknowledged as the Son of God and is anointed by the Spirit of God" (1978e:21). The first answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' is answered in the context of the Trinity. "He is the Son, sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit to be the bearer of God's kingdom to the nations" (1978e:24). The doctrine of the Trinity, however, was not yet fully developed in Mark's gospel. This happened as the announcement of the gospel confronted the fundamental assumptions of the classical world. The gospel raised horror and contempt in people shaped by the dualisms of classical culture—the intelligible and sensible worlds on the one hand, and virtue and fortune in history on the other. It was the work of the theologians of the first three centuries, especially Athanasius, that developed the implicit Trinitarian doctrine contained in the gospel into an explicit formulation that proclaimed ultimate truth as the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit. On this new Trinitarian basis, the dichotomies between the sensible and intelligible and between virtue and fortune were healed (1978e:26). This found expression especially in the work of Augustine who provided a new framework for understanding that would govern the history of Europe for the next thousand years.

This sketch demonstrates that Newbigin's Trinitarian understanding is both Christocentric and missionary. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an alternative to be set over against a Christocentric orientation but rather an elaboration and explication of it. When Newbigin wrote *The Relevance of the Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* he made it clear that his new Trinitarian formulations did not jettison the gains made in the Christocentric, churchcentric period from Tambaram until Willingen. There is an "ecumenical consensus," he writes, that "the Church is itself something sent into the world, the continuation of Christ's mission from the Father, something which is not so much an institution as an expedition sent to the ends of the earth in Christ's name."

Newbigin continues: “This understanding is assumed as the starting point for the present discussion” (1963g:12). The Christocentric point of reference articulated in classical ecumenical theology is now being expanded and deepened by a Trinitarian formulation.

This Trinitarian development can be illustrated by attending to the way Newbigin answers the question: ‘By what authority does the church preach the gospel?’ In 1948 Newbigin answers the question this way: “The duty and authority of the Church to preach the Gospel derive from Christ, and from no other source. If we are asked ‘by what authority?’ we can only answer—in the last analysis—‘In the Name of Jesus’” (1948b:20). Thirty years later he answers the question again: “The only possible answer is ‘In the name of Jesus.’” However, he continues: “... ‘In the name of Jesus’ had to be expanded into the formula ‘In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’” (1978e:15). The Christocentric basis remains but is now elaborated in a Trinitarian context.

Newbigin’s understanding of the Trinity is also missionary. The doctrine of the Trinity developed in the context of the Christian witness to the pagan Roman world. “These trinitarian struggles were indeed an essential part of the battle to master the pagan world view at the height of its power and self-confidence” (1963g:32). By contrast, when the church was no longer in a missionary situation but in the context of Christendom, the doctrine of the Trinity receded. However, when the church moved outside the Christendom situation during the missionary movement to bring the gospel to non-Christians living in a pagan environment, the Trinity again becomes the starting point for preaching. The Trinity is “the *arche*, the presupposition without which the preaching of the Gospel in a pagan world cannot begin.” Newbigin believes that “a fresh articulation of the missionary task in terms of the pluralistic, polytheistic, pagan society of our time may require us likewise to acknowledge the necessity of a trinitarian starting point” (1963g:32-34).

It is important to take note of the historical context and defining issues in which Newbigin formulated his Trinitarian framework for mission. Cochrane showed how the classical formulation of the Trinity was forged during the first three centuries of the church’s life in an encounter with classical culture. Later elaborations of a Trinitarian doctrine—while never rejecting those days—must be reformulated in an engagement with the issues of the day. The following statement by Newbigin is a guiding principle at each point where he discusses the Trinity.

The church can never go back on what was then decided. But it is also true that it is not enough for the church to go on repeating in different cultural situations the same words and phrases. New ways have to be found of stating the essential Trinitarian faith, and for this the church in each new cultural situation has to go back to the original biblical sources of this faith in order to lay hold on it afresh and to state it afresh in contemporary terms (1978e:27).

When Newbigin wrote *The Relevance of a Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* the burning question of the day was: How can we understand what God is doing in the events of our time? (1963g:23). Or more precisely “What is the relation between what God has done once for all in Christ and is continuing to do through the witness of the Church, and the events of world history as a whole?” (1963g:35). This context leads Newbigin to place emphasis on the Father’s providential rule over history and the witness of the Spirit in Christ and in the church to what He is doing and where history

is going.

Twenty-five years later, when he returns to the topic in *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, the context has changed. The earlier optimism of the development and expansion of Western science and technology has vanished. There are two primary concerns that he addresses in this writing. First, this is a textbook on mission theology for men and women who will be engaged in cross-cultural missions. With the breakdown of the colonial scaffolding which held the missionary enterprise firmly in place for over a century, there was a need to articulate a new foundation. That new foundation is the mission of the Triune God. Cross-cultural missions is one element of the church's mission which is a participation in God's mission. Second, there was a crippling division between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions as each offered a different understanding of the church's mission. Newbigin believed that rooting the mission of the church in the mission of the Triune God would move beyond this unfruitful dilemma. In *The Open Secret* the Father's sovereign rule in salvation history narrated in the Biblical story is the point of departure. The Kingdom of the Father is the primary setting for the mission of the Son and the church. The Spirit is the foretaste of the Kingdom.

The concluding sentences of the last paragraph highlight something essential to Newbigin's understanding of the mission of the Triune God: it is fundamentally eschatological. The gospel is the announcement of the entrance into history of the end-time kingdom of God in Jesus Christ. Newbigin understands the *missio Dei* in terms of a movement in history toward a goal. Everything must be understood in terms of the *telos* of history. The good news is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the end has been revealed in the middle. The Spirit is an end-time gift that witnesses to the kingdom revealed and accomplished in Jesus. Thus the main headings of the following sections on the mission of the Triune God all direct attention to the close link between the *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God: Jesus reveals and accomplishes the kingdom of the Father in His mission in the power of the end-time Spirit.

#### 4.2.3. *The Scriptural Witness to the Mission of God*

The mission of the church is to participate in the *missio Dei* by continuing the mission of Jesus throughout the world until the end of history. The mission of Jesus and the church, however, can—and has been—translated in many different ways. Therefore, a proper understanding of the mission of Jesus continued in the church requires a treatment of the ultimate story in which this mission can be rightly understood. That story is the redemptive work of God narrated in Scripture. To understand the *missio Dei* demands a discussion of Newbigin's understanding of Scripture.

##### 4.2.3.1. From Biblical Theology to Narrative Theology

Newbigin was a product of the era of Biblical theology (1982i:7). Brevard Childs points to three major elements of consensus among adherents of Biblical theology. The first was the rediscovery of the theological dimension. G. Ernest Wright wrote a book characteristic of this movement entitled *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (1952) emphasizing that the Bible is a story whose main character is God acting in history. Against a previous generation of critical scholars who interpreted the Bible

exclusively in terms of human religious experience and processes, advocates of Biblical theology placed emphasis on God as the primary actor in the Biblical drama. The second feature of this consensus was the unity of the Bible. Biblical scholarship had fragmented the Bible into historical-critical bits. Biblical Theology was concerned to understand the Scripture as one unfolding story in the context of which all books and events find their meaning. A third feature Childs mentions is the revelation of God in history. "Few tenets lay closer to the heart of the Biblical Theology Movement than the conviction that revelation was mediated through history" (Childs 1970:39). The Bible is not a collection of eternal truths, a deposit of right doctrine or the process of Israel's religious discovery. Revelation is divine self-disclosure in an encounter with the mighty acts of God in history. The Bible is a record of that revelation.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a sustained attack was mounted on the fundamental tenets of the Biblical Theological movement. Langdon Gilkey (1961) and James Barr (1963) probed inconsistencies and ambiguities in notions of historicity held by adherents of Biblical Theology. The fundamental unity of the Old Testament advanced by Biblical scholars such as Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard Von Rad was attacked by the Biblical scholars as an "illegitimate form of precritical harmonization" that employed systematic categories not drawn from the Biblical material itself (Childs 1970:66). The unity of the New Testament articulated by Oscar Cullman was shattered by the tendency in New Testament studies shaped by Bultmannian scholars to recover the individual and particular redactional stamp of each New Testament author (Childs 1970:69). Ernst Kasemann (1964, 1969) went a step further arguing that the contradictory material of the New Testament was the fruit of the polemical attack of one writer on another (Childs 1970:70). The theological focus of the Bible was eclipsed, as a wedge was driven between objective history and subjective theology (:79-80). By the middle of the 1960s the consensus of Biblical Theology had collapsed.

The impact of the demise of Biblical Theology was felt in the ecumenical movement. The early years of the ecumenical movement was formed in the mould of Biblical theology. The thematic unity of the Old and New Testaments provided an important foundation for ecumenical theology. The report of the Faith and Order Conference at Oxford in 1949 represented this commitment to Biblical Theology (Flesseman-van Leer 1980:1). However, during the 1960s things changed. The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (1963) represented a turning point. Ernst Kasemann addressed the conference arguing for radical, even contradictory, diversity within the New Testament. An extensive study program on hermeneutics was initiated after Montreal. The fruits of this study were summarized in the report presented to the Faith and Order commission meeting at Bristol in 1967 entitled "The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement." This report distanced itself from the thematic unity of Scripture and the hermeneutical rules of Biblical Theology (Flesseman-van Leer 1980:5f.). In his Faith and Order report, Erich Dinkler, chairman of ecumenical commission to study the relationship between Scriptural hermeneutics, concluded:

When the World Council of Churches was founded, there was a strong hope, confirmed by facts, that in the different churches and theological schools the Bible would be read more and more along the same lines, provided by the development of the so-called "biblical theology" of that period.... Now, two decades later, attention is

increasingly drawn to the diversity amongst or even contradiction between biblical writers.... As a consequence the hope that the churches would find themselves to have in the near future the basis of a common understanding of the one biblical message has been fading, even to such an extent that in the eyes of some the new exegetical developments seem to undermine the *raison d'être* of the ecumenical movement (Dinkler 1967; quoted in Childs 1970:81f.).

Even though Newbigin does not address the issue of Scriptural authority with any depth during his time in India or in Geneva, the convictions of Biblical theology are clearly evident in his writing. A clear articulation of Biblical authority becomes one of the prominent subjects of his writing after his return to Britain in 1974. His primary concern was that the Biblical story was being read in terms of a different set of faith commitments provided by the culture. This resulted in a number of mistaken approaches to Scripture: a higher criticism that issued from the faith commitments of the modern scientific worldview; the fundamentalist/liberal split as an expression of the familiar fact/value dichotomy that shaped Western culture; the Bible as a source for timeless principles under the influence of modernity; the Bible as a collection of local stories under the influence of postmodernity.

Newbigin sees each of these ways of dealing with Scripture as a direct threat to the missionary calling of the church. Newbigin regretted the collapse of Biblical Theology and mounted a defence against James Barr's broadside (1982i; 1989e:74-76). However, in the last couple of decades of his life he seized upon the narrative theology of Hans Frei (1974) and the cultural-linguistic model of George Lindbeck (1984) as having potential to elaborate a credible understanding of Biblical authority for a missionary church in the West. In them he found promise to address the syncretistic compromises and move beyond the sterile debates on Biblical authority that plagued the West (1986e:59; 1994h:73). Newbigin appropriated Frei and Lindbeck to recover the theological, historical, and unified nature of the Bible that had been lost with the demise of Biblical theology.

#### 4.2.3.2. The Nature of the Biblical Story

Newbigin was often impatient with discussions of Biblical authority (e.g., 1985k:3). Yet, to grasp his missionary ecclesiology, it is critical to understand his foundational commitment to a particular understanding of the nature of Scripture, because it is in the Scriptural story that he locates the ultimate context of the church's mission in the mighty acts of God. This section will give a brief sketch of Newbigin's understanding of the Bible and its importance for a missionary ecclesiology.

The starting point for Newbigin is not some formal concept of authority but the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus emerged in world history proclaiming that the kingdom of God was present in Him. This was a public news announcement for all people and all were called to repentance. His death and resurrection revealed and accomplished the salvation of the world. Since this was a message for all people, the question arises: What was Jesus' intention for the future of the gospel?

Newbigin's threefold answer is summarized in the following statement: "Jesus did not write a book. He chose, called and prepared a company of people, he entrusted to them his teaching, and he promised them the gift of the Spirit of God to guide them in matters which were beyond their present horizons" (1994h:70). First, "it is of the

essence of the matter” (1978a:18) and “a fact of inexhaustible significance” (1953d:20) that Jesus was not concerned to leave as the fruit of his ministry a precise verbatim account of his teaching and works, but was concerned to create a community that would witness faithfully to the gospel among all the peoples of the world (1978a:18). This is a common and important affirmation in Newbigin’s writings. Jesus formed a community and bound that community closely to Himself. Jesus’ intention was that the gospel be communicated, not through a book written by his hand, but by a community that would continue his life in this world. Second, he entrusted his teaching to them. The culture in which Jesus called his disciples was an oral culture that did not rely on the written word but knew how to tenaciously treasure, preserve, and hand on the teaching of Jesus (1996d:29). Third, Jesus promised to give them the Holy Spirit to lead them into a fuller understanding of the truth of the gospel in the context of new situations and cultures (1994h:71).

The New Testament Scriptures were the fruit of the struggle of the early community gathered by Jesus to interpret the significance of the gospel for their contemporary situation. A follower of Jesus, therefore, must attend to these early authoritative records to understand the meaning of Christ event. It is only as one comes to an understanding of the gospel transmitted through these records that one can form an understanding of the Scriptures.

Newbigin articulates at least five characteristics of Scripture that flowed from his understanding of the gospel. First, the Scriptures are a record of the mighty acts of God in history. The events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are real occurrences that took place on the plains of history at an ascertainable date and place in the past. In fact, “the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings” (1989e:66). But the Christ event does not stand alone; it is part of a long history in which God revealed his purposes in the events with one nation—Israel. To dismiss the history of the Old Testament as simply “confessional language” is to fall prey to the illusion that “one way of interpreted history—namely without reference to divine action—is simply objective truth, whereas another way, which incorporates the idea of divine action, is not objective truth but part of a confessional stance” (1989e:93). All history is interpreted history; the question is simply from which confessional stance will we interpret the events of the past. This historicity was threatened, not only by critical scholars who made authoritative pronouncements on the factuality of events in Scripture from within their modernist confession, but also from Hindus (1969c:50) and pietists who slight the “happenedness” of the events of Scripture (1989e:67).

Second, these historical events form a narrative unity. The gospel does not stand alone as a disconnected message but is part of a long history of God’s redemptive work in Israel. Newbigin says: “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” (1991e:3). The narrative unity of Scripture increasingly occupies Newbigin’s attention in the latter decades of his life. There are two sides to this affirmation. On the one hand, Scriptural truth is found in a story and not in timeless propositions or principles (1995h:72). He makes frequent

reference to John Millbank (1990) who has shown that there was a shift in our culture, prompted by the modern scientific way of seeing things, from seeing truth located in a narrative to finding it in timeless, law-like statements (1992d:6). The form of truth is historical narrative. On the other hand, this commitment is to the unity of the Scriptures. The Bible tells a story in which our lives find meaning. “The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part?” (1989e:15).

The third feature of Biblical authority that flows from Newbigin’s commitment to the gospel is that the Bible is in the form of universal history (1978e:31). The Bible does not present the fact of Christ as an event with significance only for the Jewish people. Jesus Christ has revealed and accomplished God’s purposes for the whole cosmos (1994k:110). In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin entitles his chapter on Scriptural authority ‘The Bible as Universal History’ (1989e:89-102). He opens with relating a conversation that made a deep impression on him during his time in India. The issues raised in this statement takes us to the heart of Newbigin’s concern in the area of Biblical authority. Badrinath, a learned Hindu scholar and friend of Newbigin, accused Christians of misrepresenting the Bible. Christians represent the Bible as another book of religion but it is something unique in the religious literature of the world. “As I read the Bible I find in it a quite unique interpretation of universal history and, therefore, a unique understanding of the human person as a responsible actor in history” (1989e:89). The Bible is an interpretation of history that incorporates the whole creation in its scope.

The Bible... sets out to speak of human life in the context of a vision of universal, cosmic history.... It sets before us a vision of cosmic history from the creation of the world to its consummation, of the nations which make up the one human family, and—of course—of one nation chosen to be the bearer of the meaning of history for the sake of all, and of one man called to be the bearer of that meaning for that nation. The Bible *is* universal history (*ibid.*).

There is a fundamental correlation that flows from this conclusion: this interpretation of universal history also gives a unique understanding of the human person as a responsible actor in history.

Fourth, the Bible reveals the character and purpose of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not first of all doctrine, ideas, or “religious” truth. “Revelation is not the communication of a body of timeless truths which one has only to receive in order to know the whole mind of God. Revelation is rather the disclosure of the direction in which God is leading the world and his family. The stuff of the Bible is promise and fulfillment” (1974b:117). It is a revelation of who God is, and that can be known by what He is doing with the world. Newbigin speaks of the character of the Bible in the following way. “... I would want to speak of the Bible as that body of literature which—primarily but not only in narrative form—renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (1986e:59). He appeals to the notion of “realistic narrative” employed by Frei to speak of the Bible as a story in which the character of God is rendered through his actions and in relation to his people. In Scripture we meet the living God who encounters us revealing His will and purposes for the creation as He deals with a community that He has chosen to be the bearer of that purpose in history. The character and purpose of God are most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. This revelation of the purpose of God is fundamentally eschatological. That is, it is a

revelation of the *end* of history in Jesus Christ (1989f:8). The true meaning of the human story has been disclosed in Jesus Christ (1989e:125). “Normally we do not see the point of a story until the end. But we are not in a position to see the end of the cosmic story. The Christian faith is the faith that the point of the story has been disclosed: the ‘end’ has been revealed in the middle” (1994k:110).

The fifth feature of Biblical authority for Newbigin is that the Bible is Christocentric. Under the rule of God, the whole of human history moves toward its appointed end. That end has been revealed in Jesus Christ in the middle of history. Understanding the Bible, therefore, involves a twofold movement: “we have to understand Jesus in the context of the whole story, and we have to understand the whole story in the light of Jesus” (1995h:88). In the first place, the Biblical story can only be understood in the light of Christ. There can only be a universal history if the story that is unfolding has a point. The problem is that you cannot be sure what the point of the story is until you have reached the end. “If it [the story] has any coherent purpose, if the story of which we are part has any real point and is leading to any worthwhile end, then there is no alternative way of knowing it other than that its author should let us into the secret” (1989e:92). This is the whole point of the gospel, the fact of Christ. In Christ the end has been revealed in the middle of history. We can know the point of the story by attending to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the life of Jesus—his words and deeds—the salvation of the end is revealed. In his death and resurrection we see the future goal of the creation; sin will be put to death and the creation will rise to new life. Yet it is more than revelation; in Christ the purpose of God for the end of history has been accomplished. In the second place, the whole fact of Christ can only be understood in the context of the whole story. Jesus has been interpreted in many ways—as a failed revolutionary, as a political liberator, as a Hindu *jeevanmuktos*<sup>1</sup> among many others. It depends on the context in which Jesus is interpreted. It is the unfolding story of redemption that finds its focus in the mighty acts of God in history as recorded in Scripture that provides the proper context from which to interpret the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This model of Biblical authority was shaped by Newbigin’s understanding of the gospel as God’s mighty redemptive-historical acts in Jesus Christ to reveal and accomplish the end-time kingdom of God. Newbigin remains consistent with this Christological starting point. His understanding of the church and mission will be shaped by this view of Scriptural authority.

#### 4.2.3.3. Implications of Scriptural Story for the Missionary Church

There are at least two closely related ecclesiological implications important for Newbigin’s understanding of the missionary church: the *role* the church plays and the *place* the church occupies in the Biblical story.

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<sup>1</sup>A holy man in the Hindu religion who has attained the full realization of the divine in this life.

First, the church's missionary identity is defined by the *role* the church plays in the Biblical story. That role can be best highlighted by pointing to the important place that election plays in the thought of Newbigin. Newbigin's earliest summary of the Biblical story is found in the speech he gave at the Amsterdam Assembly of the WCC in 1948. He asks 'What is the gospel?' and answers that it can only be understood in the context of the whole Biblical narrative. He elaborates that narrative under five headings: creation, fall, election, redemption, and consummation (1948b:24-35). To Christians who are used to summarizing the Biblical story in terms of creation, fall, redemption/consummation, the appearance of election as a fundamental category is initially quite startling. In Newbigin's understanding, however, election is a central Biblical theme.<sup>2</sup> Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament are chosen to be bearers of God's purpose for the whole creation. God has revealed his purpose to a people chosen to make that purpose known. This purpose is most clearly revealed in Jesus Christ. The church is the community chosen, called, and set apart to be bearers of that good news. This "scandal of particularity" remains central to Newbigin's ecclesiology. The role of the church is to be God's chosen bearers of the ultimate purpose of God.

There are two phrases that Newbigin often uses to express this role: mission as "the clue to the real meaning of world history" (1961e:31) and the "logic of mission" (1989e:116-127). God has revealed the true end of history, the purpose of history, the end of history in Jesus Christ. The church has been chosen to witness to all mankind of what God is doing and will do. The gospel is "the revealing of the meaning of human history, of the origin and destiny of mankind" and the church is the clue to the goal of history as it witnesses to its revelation, accomplishment, and future realization in Jesus Christ. The logic of mission is that "the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally" (1989e:125). And the church is that body that has been chosen to make known the gospel.

The second implication of Newbigin's understanding of the Bible for his ecclesiology is that the church's missionary identity is shaped by the *place* it occupies in the Biblical story. The whole Old Testament looks forward to the completion of God's redemptive work in the future that He began in Israel. That work will be consummated with the coming of the Messiah equipped by the Spirit to usher in the age to come. Jesus comes and makes the startling claim to be that Messiah. He announces that the kingdom of God is at hand. Yet the end does not come as promised. Even John the Baptist is confused as he asks whether or not he should be looking for someone else.

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<sup>2</sup>For a full treatment of Newbigin's understanding of election see Hunsberger 1998. Chapter two treats the historical development of Newbigin's understanding of election while chapter three deals with Newbigin's unique perspective. I will return to election again in my next chapter (5.2.1.).

Later the New Testament authors would interpret the coming of the kingdom as hidden. However, for the original disciples and faithful Jews, the coming of the kingdom would be the end of history. When it does not come, the question is raised ‘Why?’ Newbigin usually highlights this tension is by pointing to the question asked in Acts 1:6. “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” In light of the Old Testament expectation Newbigin refers to this as “the obvious question.” “Do we not see the kingdom in actual operation? Surely it does not remain a secret any more? Surely now we can expect that it will be made clear for all the world to see that the old promise is fulfilled, that Yahweh is indeed king and lord of all. It is the obvious question” (1987a:15; cf. 1978b:5).

If the kingdom does not come in fullness, then what is the purpose of this delay? Newbigin’s answer, repeated many times, is: “It is so that there may be time for the mission to all the nations and for the calling of all peoples to repentance and faith. The extending of the Day into an age is the work of God’s mercy. He holds back the final unveiling in order that there may be time for repentance” (1989e:110f.). The implications of this already/not yet era must be stated “with the utmost possible emphasis”: “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” (1952d:153).

This time between the times opens up the opportunity for repentance and reception of a foretaste of the promised salvation of the kingdom. And it is the calling of the church to bear that good news to the ends of the earth. The answer to the question of the disciples in Acts 1:6 about the coming of the kingdom is that they will be witnesses to the ends of the earth. They will receive the end-time Spirit that will enable them to share in the salvation of the end and thus witness to its presence and future reality. Understanding that the church has been called out as the first fruits of the new humankind during this already/not yet time period defines the identity of the church as missionary. This place in redemptive history—the time between the incarnation and *parousia* of Jesus—defines the church’s nature.

#### 4.3. THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHER

The “beginning of the gospel” is the announcement of good news by Jesus that the kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:14-15). To understand the mission of Jesus, it necessary to put this announcement in the context of the Father’s reign over history. However, the Father’s rule over history has been variously understood with enormous implications for mission. The fundamental theological issue at stake is the relation between God’s rule in salvation history and in world history.

The World Student Christian Federation conference at Strasbourg on the Life and Mission of the Church in 1960 can serve as a useful entry point into the discussion. This meeting was planned by D. T. Niles and Philippe Maury. These men were products of a missionary theology that had been shaped over the past twenty-five years in the crucible of Biblical theology—a missionary theology admirably expounded in Johannes Blauw’s *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (1962). It was this missionary theology that they desired to communicate to the next generation of Christian leaders. In earlier

chapters attention was drawn to the Christocentric and churchcentric nature of this theology. Here it is important to elaborate another dimension. Maury and Niles, shaped by Biblical theology, took their starting point in the rule of God narrated in the redemptive-historical events of Scripture. The *missio Dei* was defined in terms of God's mighty acts in Israel, Christ, and the church moving toward a consummation. The mission of Jesus and the mission of the church must be defined by this redemptive-historical line. The expectation of the planners was to transmit this understanding of mission to the students at Strasbourg.

The students at Strasbourg were not ready to accept what had been planned for them. They did not question the notion of the *missio Dei*; what they did attack was an interpretation of God's redemptive work along the exclusive channel of Israel, Christ, and the church. Hans Hoekendijk was able to express this heartfelt concern of the students. This shift had large theological repercussions: a Christocentric interpretation of the church's mission gave way to a cosmocentric-Trinitarian one; the world, and not the church, was celebrated as the primary domain of God's saving work in the present; world history—especially as interpreted by the progress doctrine of the West—replaced the Biblical narrative as the primary story in which the church's mission was carried out; the context of the church's mission became the redemptive work of the Father in world history apart from Israel, Christ, and the church; the work of the Spirit in social and cultural renewal eclipsed the Spirit's operation in the church.

Newbigin himself was one of those chosen by Maury and Niles to communicate the ecumenical consensus in missionary theology that had developed from Tambaram to Willingen. He too had been shaped by the Biblical theological tradition. The mission of the church was to continue the mission of Jesus. This mission was carried out primarily in the context of the work of the Father in redemptive history narrated in Scripture. One year later he would recognize that this missionary theology had to be expanded to place the mission of Jesus and the church in the context of the work of the Father and the Spirit.

Newbigin admits that the missionary theology from Tambaram to Willingen, of which he was an exponent, was defective in the attention it gave to the work of the Father (1963g:31). This was one of the deficiencies he set out to correct in the decade of the 1960s. During this secular decade this meant that Newbigin stressed God's rule over the events of world history. He placed the witness of the church in the midst of God's rule over world history. However, for Newbigin this did not mean replacing the Biblical story with the Western progress story. The Biblical story remained the ultimate context in which the events of world history were to be understood. It must be admitted that sometimes in his writings during this time, the Biblical story as ultimate context is not explicitly expounded and does receive short shrift. Nevertheless, the universal history of Scripture remained the ultimate context of Newbigin's interpretation of the *missio Dei* and the *missio ecclesiae*.

After his return to Britain there was a shift in emphasis. Newbigin became more explicit in starting with the Father's rule revealed in his mighty acts of redemption. He began with the salvation history of the Biblical story as universal history and interpreted the current events of world history in the context of the Biblical story. It is also at this time that he articulated a view of Scripture that had provided the foundation for his missionary theology for most of his life. Early in his treatment of the kingdom of the

Father he writes: “The first announcement of the good news that the reign of God is at hand can be understood only in the context of this biblical sketch of universal history.... the Bible is in form a universal history...” (1978e:31).

We can summarize Newbigin’s understanding of the Kingdom of the Father in the following way. God reigns over history and guides it to its appointed end. The meaning of history has been revealed in the mighty acts of God narrated in Scripture in Israel, culminating in Jesus Christ, and continuing in the church’s mission. God’s rule cannot be imprisoned within the church, however. His rule extends over the whole earth and over all of history. History is a unity and so all events can be interpreted in light of the Biblical story. The gospel gives us a clue to the understanding of the events of world history. This basic understanding remained important for his missionary ecclesiology. However, within this framework the emphasis changed. These differing emphases are elaborated in the sections that follow. The implication of this understanding of the Kingdom of the Father for the mission of the church is also noted.

#### *4.3.1. The Father As Lord of Creation and World History*

Newbigin’s first attempt to place the mission of the church in an explicitly Trinitarian context is in his book *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission* (1963g). The occasion for writing this book was to “provide a post-integration sequel to *One Body*—a manifesto, in fact, for the new Division of World Mission and Evangelism” (1993h:187f.). The changing world context fostered a hesitancy about the missionary task of the church. Newbigin interpreted this hesitancy in terms of perplexity about the what God was doing in the events of world history of that time. “We cannot commit ourselves, or ask others to commit themselves, wholly and finally to the missionary task unless we are able to see in some way how that task fits into the whole of what God is doing in the secular history of the world” (1963g:20). Earlier missionaries believed they were moving with the forces of world history toward a more just, human and peaceful world order. Yet the idea of universal progress had broken down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the missionary movement faced numerous setbacks, most notably in China. An understanding of the events of world history was urgent for “a doctrine of missions which has not doctrine of secular history breaks down” (1963g:22).

The missionary conferences from Tambaram (1938) to Willingen (1952) placed God’s work in the church at the centre of its theological reflection. However, in Willingen this church-centric view of mission was challenged and the question posed about the relation of God’s work in His church and His work in world history. This question was posed with new urgency at New Delhi (1961) but there was no agreement. There were two answers: On the one side, there were those who stressed that God was at work in the events of the day and mission meant discerning his work and engaging the world in dialogue and not monologue. On the other side, there were those who believed this would lead to a syncretism in which the distinctive claims of the gospel were compromised. The question as to whether and how God was at work in world history was an urgent one for the mission of the church.

Newbigin affirms that God is at work in world history. The Bible is not merely concerned with one strand of cultural history but offers a story of universal history—the beginning and end of all things—and therefore provides a clue to the

meaning of all that happens. Therefore, there cannot be a separation between world history and redemptive history. In the Old Testament the whole history of the pagan nations are in the hands of God. Israel's role is to witness to where history is going; Israel knows God's purpose and the nations do not. The New Testament carries on the same teaching. Christ does not attempt and the church is not called to take control of history but to witness to what the sovereign God is doing in history. They are called to recognize the signs of the times and interpret them as the necessary part of the birth of the new order (1963g:24-26). The whole of world history presses an ultimate choice—acceptance or rejection of God's purpose for history revealed in Jesus Christ.

While we must affirm that God is at work in world history, the opposite error is also to be avoided: "to identify the dynamic movements of secular history with the work of God that one judges the 'relevance' of the work of the Church by the measure in which it relates itself to these movements" (1963g:26). In this way lies sheer paganism. Indeed, God is at work in history *in some sense* in movements of national liberation, of scientific discovery, of cultural renaissance, and reform in non-Christian religions. But it is essential to press further in what sense God is at work in these movements. Newbigin's dilemma was how to affirm the uniqueness of Christ without denying God's work in the world, to probe the relation between what God has done in Christ and what God is doing in the life of humankind as a whole. Only a proper understanding of this relationship will "enable Christians to communicate the Gospel in words and patterns of living which are in accordance with what God is doing" (1963g:28).

Newbigin believes that this issue can only be addressed by a fully Trinitarian understanding of God: "... the question of the relations between what God is doing in the mission of the Church and what he is doing in the secular events of history [will not be] rightly answered, except within the framework of a fully explicitly trinitarian doctrine of God" (1963g:31). A true understanding of missions will make a large place for the work of the Father and the Spirit. The church-centric tradition has been defective at both of these points.

Newbigin's starting point remains the mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus is revealed in the gospels and the New Testament as the beloved Son who lives in love and obedience to the Father. If the mission of the church is a continuation of the mission of the Son, it is important to observe how Jesus carried out his mission in relation to the Father.

God's Fatherly rule over all things is at the heart of Jesus' missionary consciousness. God created all things; He sustains all things; He rules over history and is directing all events according to His purpose. God in his mercy holds off the end, sustaining and maintaining the world, so that there may be time for repentance. As the obedient Son, Jesus submits Himself wholly to the Father's ordering of events. He does not seek to take control of the reins of history. "From first to last he accepts the Father's ordering of events as the form in which his mission, and that of his followers, is to be fulfilled" (1963g:36). Nevertheless in Jesus, God's Kingdom has come. It remains hidden so that there may be a time for all peoples to repent and believe the good news. Therefore, the coming of Jesus is the decisive event in history because by His coming the salvation and judgement of the world has been revealed and all peoples are called to respond to the proclamation and presence of the kingdom in Jesus. The issue of the total salvation of the world is raised, and the witness of Jesus forces a decision: Christ or antichrist (1960j:15). By their acceptance or rejection of Him is everyone judged. Jesus, and those who have followed Him, are sent into the world, not as agents of, but as witnesses to the Father's rule.

This understanding of the Father's work shapes the mission of the church. The

church likewise is to accept the Father's disposition of the events of world history as the context of their mission. The followers of Jesus are not called to direct the events of world history to their end nor take the reins of control. Rather the church is called to be an obedient and suffering witness of the end that will come in the Father's time. By living, acting, and speaking in the Name of Jesus, the church calls the world to attend to final and ultimate issues: judgement and salvation. So the church is a community situated in the midst of human history bearing witness to what God is doing and where history is going.

In the context of the revolutionary events of the 1960s Newbigin believed that the church is called to witness to what God is doing in the dramatic events of the time. Western culture is driven by a variety of secularized forms of biblical hope of the kingdom of God. As the whole world is drawn into this single history that is driven by faith in a new order, ultimate questions are raised. False messiahs appear as the question is pressed: Who or what will bring history to its final goal? The revolutionary character of the 1960s arose from the fact that most peoples had lived for years without any expectation that human life could be radically changed. Now their cyclical patterns of existence are disrupted by new linear conceptions of time. All things converge inexorably toward the single issue of Christ or antichrist (1963d:2). Newbigin draws on the prophet Isaiah (1963d:1f.) to make this point. The whole context of the witness of the suffering servant is the international affairs of the times—the rise and fall of empires, the pride and humiliation of civilizations. Israel is not called to undertake a world-wide campaign on behalf of God or to change the course of world history. Rather she is called to obey, suffer, and witness (1963d:1, 4f.). The nations are “flimsy nothings” before God and he can blow them away as dust. Israel's task is to simply point to what God is doing. “The phrase ‘you are my witnesses’ refers to the interpretation of the events of secular history” (1963d:1; 1963h:14). It is the repeated reminder that Israel ought to be able to understand and interpret these events that are in the Father's sovereign hands. “Israel's mission, then, is not something separate from, or over against, the events of secular history. It is the place at which the true meaning of these events is known, and at which, therefore, witness is borne to God's purpose in them” (1963h:14). When one turns to the New Testament the same picture emerges. In Mark 13 we see a picture where the preaching of the gospel presents to the nations a revelation of the end of history. As they look for the means to achieve that end, they expect and get messiahs. The church is placed in the midst of this history to be a witness to its true end and True Messiah. God will guide history through conflict and suffering to its ultimate issues. False messiahs will be exposed and the true Messiah will come in power. (1960j:10-12; 1963g:38-51; 1963h:16-18).

This broader context of the Father's rule over history opens up a deeper understanding of the church's mission. God is not concerned simply with what is going on in the historical community that arose in the ministry of Jesus. God's rule is over all and He is sovereign Lord of history. The events of world history are not mere props for a play in which the church is the only actor. The church's mission, following Jesus, is to witness to the rule of God. This means testifying to His rule over world history—its meaning and its end as revealed in Jesus.

The church then is not an agent that seeks to extend the Father's rule in a triumphalist manner but rather acts as a suffering witness.

They are not the *means* by which God establishes his Kingdom. They are witnesses to its present reality. The Church is not required (as speakers sometimes suggest) to try to control or overcome the revolutionary movements of our time. These movements are themselves inexplicable apart from the impact of ideas and ways of life derived

from the Bible upon the peoples of the world. The Church is rather called to be present everywhere within these movements as the witnessing, suffering servant of God, believing in his sovereign rule and becoming the place where that rule is made manifest, the place, therefore, where men are called upon to decide for or against God (1963g:43f.).

This is a healthy corrective to the Christocentric and church-centric period that left the Trinitarian context of Jesus' kingdom mission underdeveloped and that overvalued the role of the church in God's mission. While Newbigin has expanded his Christocentric basis to a more Trinitarian one, a number of issues remain unclear. He rightfully stresses that the fundamental question that must be asked is: In what sense is God at work in history? This never receives an adequate answer. Newbigin correctly points out that the Bible never answers our questions in the exact form in which we put them (1963g:47). Nevertheless the form of the church's mission requires some kind of answer to the question of the relation of the redemptive history and world history. Newbigin observes that all movements in world history powered by a secularized hope are "potentially bearers both of good and of evil." They can be the means of liberation from injustice and bondage, bearers of new intellectual and spiritual life, instruments of awakening to truth and as such are God's gifts. Yet they can also be bearers of evil more fearful than former ones (1963g:40). Unfortunately, Newbigin does not enlarge this point and provide direction for understanding how the good and evil can be discerned.

#### 4.3.2. *The Biblical Story of the Father's Redemption*

In *The Open Secret* (1978), Newbigin again roots his discussion in the mission of the Son within the context of the Father's reign:

The announcement concerns the reign of God—God who is the creator, upholder, and consummator of all that is. We are not talking about one sector of human affairs, one strand out of the whole fabric of world history; we are talking about the reign and the sovereignty of God over all that is, and therefore we are talking about the origin, meaning, and end of the universe and of all human history within the history of the universe. We are not dealing with a local and temporary disturbance in the current of cosmic happenings, but with the source and goal of the cosmos (1978e:30).

Newbigin's point of departure for a discussion of the Father's rule now changes, however, and this leads to a subtle shift in emphasis. It is not the dramatic events of world history but the Bible as the history of the cosmos which frames the discussion. It is only after he has unfolded the Biblical story, placing the announcement of the reign of God in that context, that he returns to speak of an interpretation of world history in the light of Scripture (1978e:38).

The Scriptures tell a story that has a universal perspective; yet God's cosmic purposes are accomplished by the process of election. Tellingly, when Newbigin begins to narrate the Biblical story, he does not begin with creation. Rather the backdrop of Abraham's election is the nations who exist by God's primal blessing (Genesis 10). Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah are all chosen to be bearers of a universal blessing for all peoples. The focus narrows to Jesus who becomes the bearer of the whole purpose of cosmic salvation in his own person. The salvation which restores the reign of God is made known and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yet the end is not fully revealed. It remains hidden and is entrusted as a secret—the secret of universal and cosmic history—to be made known to all nations. The history of this mission propelled by the message of Jesus is not a smooth story but one of a fierce

struggle in which there is suffering, false messiahs, and wars. But it is also the occasion of the Spirit's witness through the church to all nations (1978e:31-39).

Newbigin raises the question again of the relationship between redemptive history and world history. He expands his discussion to a full chapter but the context has changed. It is no longer the revolutionary events of the 1960s. Newbigin's focus is the relationship of Biblical history to the *scientific discipline* of world history as practiced in the modern university. As such Newbigin is much more aware of the post-positivist sensitivity toward history as a discipline which selects, organizes, and interprets events according to some understanding of the meaning of the human story. Newbigin's primary emphasis is that the Christian believes that in Jesus the whole meaning of the story is disclosed. That credal affirmation enables the church to discern the pattern of the whole even though the weaving of history is not yet finished (1978e:88). Newbigin addresses a number of questions in this regard but his final comments are important for our purposes:

Since the Christian faith is a faith regarding the meaning and end of the human story as a whole, this faith cannot be confessed except in the context of the actual secular history of the present hour. To be specific, this must mean a provisional interpretation of the meaning of contemporary secular events (discerning the signs of the times) and concrete action in the various sectors of secular life directed toward the true end for which God has created humanity and the world (Christian obedience in common life). In other words, the question of the relation of the biblical story to the whole story of humankind is a question that has to be answered in action (1978e:90).

Again when we look for a further elaboration as to how we can discern and participate in God's action in history we are disappointed. Newbigin does not offer concrete criteria in this pursuit.

#### 4.3.3. *The Work of the Father as the Context for Mission*

We can now draw this together and summarize the work of the Father as an essential foundation for the work of the Son. The Father sent the Son to make visible the kingdom. This kingdom mission of Jesus was unfolded in communion with the Father. His life was that of an obedient and loving Son. The work of the Father was the pervasive atmosphere for the mission of the Son. If the church is to continue the mission of Jesus, it must also be in the dynamic of the Father's work.

In Newbigin's understanding, that work can be described in two ways. First, the Father is the Creator and Upholder of all things (1978e:30). The announcement of the good news produced the question, 'Who is Jesus?' To provide the proper introduction to Jesus, the gospel writers were forced further and further back: Mark to John's baptism, Matthew to Abraham, Luke to Adam, and finally John "is compelled to press still further back and to introduce Jesus as the one who was with God and was God from the beginning, the Word through whom all things were made" (*ibid.*). The world into which Jesus came was not foreign territory but the creation of the Father through him. Thus the "world outside the church" is not an "atheistical patch in the universe" (1963g:27).

God has never abandoned the work of His hands; He continues to uphold all things in his good and kind providence. He is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the lives of all human beings whether they acknowledge Him or not (1989e:135). He has not left Himself without a witness to the heart, conscience and reason of any person (1989e:118). The mission of Jesus was grounded in this reality of the Father's continuing love and care for the creation and continuing work in the world of human culture. A lack of understanding the world—understood here primarily as the world of

culture—as God’s creation has often caused missions to take “a wholly unbiblical view of the world” (1963g:25). It narrows God’s interest, and therefore the church’s missionary engagement, to so-called “religious questions.” He draws out the implication.

Thereby we have repelled from the Gospel the artist and the scientist and the lover of men, because we appeared to be insensitive to the beauty, the truth and the goodness that they found everywhere about them; because it appeared that we tried to assert the uniqueness of Christ by denying the splendour of God’s work in creation and in the spirit of men. We have made it appear that we have regarded the man who gives himself to the service of God and men in politics or social service or research as having a less central part in God’s purpose than the man who gives full-time service to the church. In the operations of missions we have made it appear that we regard a doctor in a mission hospital as doing ‘God’s work’ in a sense in which a doctor in a government hospital was not (1963g:26).

The second fundamental way Newbigin describes the work of the Father is as the Lord of history. This is Newbigin’s most oft-repeated theme with respect to the work of the Father. There are three closely related yet distinct motifs within this emphasis.

First, the Father is the ruler of world history. Salvation history is not distinct or shielded from the events on the global stage. During the dramatic and revolutionary days of the 1960s, Newbigin emphasizes these revolutionary and global events. The globalization, nation-building, modernization, social movements did not threaten the mission of the church. The mission of Jesus was carried out with the consciousness that the Father is the Lord over all of history. He is graciously guiding history toward its true end. Since no events fall outside his sovereign will, they provided opportunities to witness to what God was doing if one could read the signs of the times. The church was called to follow Jesus with that consciousness of the Father’s all-embracing rule.

Second, the Father is the one who has chosen a people to be the bearer of his universal purposes. The Bible tells a story that is in the structure of a history of the whole cosmos. “It claims to show us the shape, the structure, the origin, and the goal not merely of human history, but of cosmic history” (1978e:30-31). The history of the nations and the history of nature can only be understood in the larger framework of God’s history narrated in Scripture. This redemptive history proceeds by way of election, issues from the love of the Father, and has as its central theme the kingdom of God. While it is in the form of cosmic and universal history the story proceeds by a process of narrowing. God chooses a people to be the bearers of the true end of history for the sake of all (1978e:34). Universal blessing is never out of God’s purview; his election of a people is the means by which this blessing can be effective for all humanity. This election for the redemption of the world flows from the love of God; the gracious purpose of the Father has its source in the love of the Father (1978e:31). Finally, the central theme in this story is the reign of God over all things. The Bible narrates a story which portrays the Father as ruling and guiding all things to their appointed end. His elective purposes are integral in moving history to its conclusion.

Third, the Father sends the Son. God’s redemptive activity or the *missio Dei* does not begin with Jesus. Rather the Bible tells a story that finds its unity in the mighty acts of God that culminate in the sending of Jesus Christ. God’s love for the world is demonstrated in the long road of redemption that he walks with Israel. Jesus is conscious of being the one sent to complete and make known the purposes of the Father. The rule of the Father narrows the focus down to One who will bear the whole purpose of the whole creation in His own person. He is the beloved Son sent by the Father to

make known and accomplish the purposes of God for universal history.

This understanding of the Father's work forms the context for the mission of Jesus. He is sent to a world created and loved by the Father, a world upheld by God in which no one is ultimately a stranger to God, and a world in which all the events of history are under the sovereign control of the Father. He looks up to God and calls him Father, carrying out his mission while trusting Him and submitting Himself to the Father's ordering of events. This continues to be the context of the mission of the church.

While Newbigin recognizes that a much fuller Trinitarian understanding must undergird the church's mission and has taken significant steps in that direction, his understanding of the Father's work remains seriously underdeveloped. Various authors have noted this problem. Rodney Peterson comments that in *The Open Secret*, there is the need for a much richer development of Newbigin's Trinitarian basis for mission that reaches beyond a Christocentric foundation (1979:192). He points to Johannes Verkuyl, who in following the work of Johan H. Bavinck, Johannes Blauw, and Hans Werner Gensichen, provides a much fuller Trinitarian basis for mission. Not only is Newbigin's book weak at the point of foundation, he does not explicate the significance of the Trinity for many current missiological problems (:193). Bert Hoedemaker points to the same problem. According to Hoedemaker there are two lines of thought discernable in Newbigin's *The Open Secret*—Christocentric and Trinitarian. The central and unique Christ event provides the most fundamental beliefs whereby the church interprets and understands the world. However, a consistent Trinitarian approach allows the church to move about in the world as a learning community. Newbigin leans on Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* to insist that the "exploration of the world and continual re-thinking of our fundamental beliefs go hand in hand" (Hoedemaker 1979:456). However, Hoedemaker raises the question as to how serious Newbigin is in applying the "Polanyi-principle." Newbigin's Christocentric convictions make it difficult to speak specifically of how the Triune God is active in world history (*ibid*).

#### 4.4. THE MISSION OF THE SON: REVEALING AND ACCOMPLISHING THE KINGDOM

'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' These commissioning words of Jesus to the embryonic church demonstrate that ecclesiology is dependent on Christology (1983a:3). This mandate gives the church its missional identity and nature; the content of that missional identity and nature is defined by the way the mission of Jesus is understood. Compared with the scarcity of material on the work of the Father, Newbigin's treatment of the mission of Jesus is profuse. Hoedemaker identifies two clear lines of thought, discernable in *The Open Secret*, that "are characteristic of Newbigin's position" and are "no surprise to those who know Newbigin's work" (Hoedemaker 1979:455f.). The first line of emphasis is the centrality and unique significance of the Christ event. The second is the consistent Trinitarian approach to history and salvation.<sup>3</sup> The consistent Christocentrism that characterizes Newbigin's work yields abundant fruit in the area of Christ's mission, providing a solid Christological foundation for ecclesiology.

In the synoptic gospels the kingdom or reign of God is the central theme in Jesus' ministry (1980f:17). The opening words of Jesus' ministry are: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). His

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<sup>3</sup>In addition to these two emphases, Hoedemaker identifies a third: the indispensability of the concept of election in a Christian understanding of history.

response to the Galilean people who try to keep him in their region is: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, *because that is why I was sent*” (Luke 4:43). It is the kingdom of God that gives birth to and shapes the church. This eschatological context is essential to Newbigin’s understanding of the missionary church.

#### 4.4.1. *The Concept of the Kingdom of God in Historical Development*

The fundamental problematic that shaped Newbigin’s understanding of the kingdom of God announced by Jesus was the relation of the present and future stages of the kingdom of God. Newbigin’s understanding of the kingdom of God was developed in interaction with four different interlocutors: New Testament scholarship debates over the eschatological message of Jesus; the Western doctrine of progress; the ahistorical teaching of Hinduism; and the split between an otherworldly eschatology of the revivalist tradition and the immanent, evolutionary, and ethical understanding of the kingdom in more liberal circles. His earliest writings on eschatology—four lectures given in Bangalore in 1941—interact with each of these four positions.

The relationship of the kingdom of God to history was *the* theological issue that exercised Newbigin in his earliest years as a theological student and as a young missionary. In an encounter with the Western doctrine of progress and the assimilation of the gospel to this progress doctrine in liberal circles, he attempted to formulate a Biblical understanding of history rooted in the kingdom of God. In an encounter with the ahistorical teaching of Hinduism and revivalism he endeavoured to emphasize the Biblical teaching that the kingdom of God comes in history. An invitation from the United Theological College in Bangalore gave him the opportunity to develop his eschatological views in four lectures on the topic of the relationship of the kingdom of God to the idea of progress—an idea that gripped Western culture and was infiltrating India (1941). Many of the conclusions he came to at that time continued to shape his views of the kingdom for the rest of his life.

He frames his discussion with two views of the kingdom that he rejects. Both views result from the power of the modern doctrine of progress in Christian thinking. One view simply identifies the kingdom with progress; the second divorces the kingdom from this historical progress. The first was a social gospel, which Newbigin believes was simply a Christianized version of the secular idea of progress (1941, 2:3). The Biblical teaching on the future consummation of the kingdom and the clear evidences of the power of sin led Newbigin to reject a view of gradual social progress (1941, 2:3-6). The second view was an individualistic understanding of personal immortality in another world. Newbigin rejects this understanding of the kingdom for three reasons: the Biblical view of salvation is corporate and restorative; a purely individualistic understanding of the kingdom robs history of its meaning; this view of the kingdom gives no direction to people in the vast majority of their life (1941, 2:6-9). The first view identifies the kingdom with history; the second separates the two. The first is entirely this-worldly; the second is escapist and otherworldly. The first is optimistic as it places its confidence in the Western progress engine; the second is pessimistic as it sees the power of sin. The first is an exclusively realized eschatology; the second is entirely future.

It is this dilemma that shapes Newbigin’s views. How can we formulate a view of the kingdom that is both social and individual, present and future, this-worldly and otherworldly, does justice to the power of sin and yet trusts in the redemptive power of God, is related to history and yet not identified with it? Newbigin’s answer to this

question in the 1941 Bangalore lectures can be summarized in four points. First, the kingdom of God is present and future. In Christ the powers of the new age are at work and those who come to Jesus are within the sphere of the operations of the power of the kingdom (1941, 2:11). The New Testament teaches both a realized and a futurist eschatology. In spite of what Dodd says, a futurist eschatology is not escapist but central to the New Testament. Second, the future advent of the kingdom of God is characterized by cosmic renewal and restoration. It is neither an otherworldly heaven nor an improvement on earth but an act of God to restore the entire creation (1941, 2:13). To use the language of Wolters, salvation is both restorative in nature and cosmic in scope (Wolters 1985:57). Third, the full restoration of the kingdom is preceded by God's judgement. Fourth, the relation between our life in the present and our life on the new earth must be understood in terms of death and resurrection (1941, 2:14). Our future life is not simply an extension of this life, corrupted as it is by sin. This life is not fit for the kingdom of God and therefore is under the sentence of death. All human achievements will be buried beneath the rubble of history. Our entry into the renewed life of the kingdom comes by resurrection.

Newbigin draws out the implications of this eschatology for the social mission of the church. First, the kingdom of God will not be established as a direct result of our efforts. Since the kingdom of God does not lie on this side of death we cannot build the kingdom of God by our own efforts. There is not a straight line of development from the present to the coming kingdom of God. While all human efforts will be swept away and forgotten in history, they will be found and purified in the kingdom of God. There is, therefore, both continuity and discontinuity between the present and future life (1941, 4:1-3). Second, this does not lead to passivity. Newbigin believes that the right approach lies in Schweitzer's oft-repeated phrase: "Christian action is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom." The church will not establish a blue-print for a perfect society and then set out to achieve it. Rather, the believer will seek to struggle against existing evils in a concrete way with the future kingdom as his or her goal and criterion (1941, 4:6-11).

Newbigin's views of the kingdom in these lectures have been elaborated in some detail—and often in his own words—for good reasons. The lectures are unpublished and are therefore unavailable. Moreover, they show that much of his eschatology was developed ten years before many of these struggles began in the ecumenical movement. Finally, those familiar with Newbigin's thought will recognize that his eschatological views, developed at Westminster College and in the first years of his missionary experience in India, remained throughout his life. Newbigin's views developed further during the 1950s, but as an elaboration of his Bangalore lectures.

Developments in New Testament scholarship as they entered the ecumenical discussions provided another opportunity for Newbigin to deepen his reflection on eschatology. The eschatological message of the New Testament had reasserted itself in a powerful way early in the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century liberalism had effectively eclipsed the eschatological dimension from the mission of Jesus by interpreting the kingdom as a worldly and ethical order. The kingdom was a "universal moral community which could be achieved by men working together in neighbourly love" (Kung 1976:72). The books *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* by Johannes Weiss (1892) and *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* by Albert Schweitzer (1901) marked the first signs of a dramatic shift that led New Testament scholarship to interpret Jesus in terms of the apocalyptic kingdom of God (Willis 1987:1). New attention was focussed on the eschatological message of the New Testament. Not until several decades later was the liberal notion of the kingdom finally shattered by the trauma of two world wars.

During the first five decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, debates raged over Jesus' message of the kingdom (Cullman 1967:32-40; Ladd 1964:3-38). The "consistent eschatology" of Albert Schweitzer portrayed Jesus as expecting an entirely future kingdom. The futurist eschatology of Schweitzer and others was countered by a realized (Charles H. Dodd), inaugurated (George Florovsky), actualized (Paul Altuaus), or proleptic (John A. T. Robinson) eschatology that stressed the presence of the kingdom. Others scholars emerged offering a mediating position that stressed both present and future (Oscar Cullman, Werner G. Kummel).

David Bosch describes four eschatological schools that emerged from this debate in European Protestantism that shaped missiological thinking: the dialectical eschatology of Karl Barth, the existential eschatology of Rudolf Bultmann, the actualized eschatology of Althaus and Dodd, and the salvation-historical eschatology of Oscar Cullman (Bosch 1991:502-503). Following Wiedenmann, Bosch judges the first three models to be ahistorical eschatologies, while the fourth is the only one to take history seriously (Bosch 1991:503). Newbigin's eschatology stands firmly in the salvation-historical eschatology.

Hans Jochen Margull has shown that eschatology made its entrance into ecumenical discussions in the early 1950s and was followed shortly thereafter by the development of an eschatological foundation for mission (Margull 1962:13-37). A group of twenty-five theologians<sup>4</sup> was appointed to prepare for the Evanston Assembly of the WCC held in 1954 with the mandate to "clarify the nature of our hope for human history as distinct both from the nineteenth-century idea of progress and the popular religious idea of personal immortality" (1993h:124). Newbigin was appointed chairman of this group. There was a tension between the European and American delegation on the relationship between a future hope in the consummation and the present experience of the powers of the coming age. The European churches were more futurist in their eschatological orientation while the American stressed a realized eschatology. It is this fundamental problem that shapes Newbigin's reflections in four papers (one of which was a major plenary address delivered at Willingen) that he wrote on the topic during this time (1952b, 1953c, 1954c, 1959a).

Continuous with his Bangalore lectures Newbigin occupied a position between the Europeans and Americans (1993h:124), stressing both the present and future dimensions of the kingdom. Newbigin refined his views as he wrestled with the relationship between the present and future stages of the kingdom. He tries to put full weight on both the present and future stage of the kingdom. This is how he reacted to the debates prompted by the first report released by the commission:

The debate suggests that we are compelled to choose between present realisation and future hope; that too much future hope means too little present realisation, and vice versa.... I cannot think that the Christian faith is this sort of "balance of power" between the present and the future. It is surely absurd that one group of Christians should be afraid of too much hope for the future, and another group afraid of too much manifestation of the power of Christ in the present! (1952b:282)

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<sup>4</sup>Newbigin protested that the label "twenty-five odd theologians" given to this group was unfair because there were twenty-nine members and because not all of them were theologians!

In the life of Jesus the power of the future flowed into the present; by His death and resurrection the victory over sin was accomplished and demonstrated; the outpouring of the Spirit enables the people of God to enjoy a foretaste of the power of the coming age. Newbigin's typical formulation of the relation of the present to the future is found in the words 'hidden' and 'visible' victory. The victory over sin has been accomplished on the cross; that victory will be fully manifest in the future at his return; since it is a victory of love it will remain a hidden victory until that time (1953c:113; 1954c:118-123). Newbigin formulates this Christologically: Christ has come; Christ is with us; Christ will come. Christ has come and taken on himself the full measure of evil and defeated it; Christ is with us as the present and living Lord who sustains our hope even when sin and death appear to be as victorious as ever; Christ will return and his victory over all powers will be unveiled to all men everywhere. This means that the mission of the church remains—in the way of Jesus—mission under the cross. Since the victory of Christ remains hidden until his return, our mission is not one of a triumphalistic march. Rather the church, which already shares in that victory, confidently points to that hope in life, word, and deed.

One further emphasis that is important for our purpose appears in Newbigin's writings at this time: the purpose for which the victory remains hidden is the church's mission.

The very reason for which the full unveiling of His victory is delayed is that He wills to give time to all men everywhere to acknowledge Him and accept freely His rule. The time that is given to us is a time in which His victory is to be proclaimed and acknowledged in every corner of the earth and in every sphere of human life. And we are to carry out that task in complete confidence and eager hope, because we know that the final issue is not at all in doubt (1954c:120f.; cf.1953d:127, 153-154).

The eschatological position that Newbigin developed during his Westminster days, in his Bangalore lectures, in the midst of debates in New Testament scholarship, and in the context of the ecumenical recovery of eschatology remained firmly in place for the remainder of his life. Its powerful shaping effect for his ecclesiology is best seen by noting its central place in *The Household of God* (1953d:123-152).

In the latter part of the 1960s Newbigin focussed more sharply his understanding of the relationship between the present and the future. He believed that the recovery of the eschatological element in Jesus' teaching in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a positive development. Its weakness, however, was that while the church had much to say about the ultimate hope, it had comparatively little to say about penultimate concerns. Referring to his participation in the Preparatory Commission of the Evanston Assembly he observes that the commission had much to say about the 'Great Hope' but were almost silent on the 'lesser hopes' (1974c:24). This challenged Newbigin to examine again the New Testament's teaching on the continuity and discontinuity between the last things and next-to-last things. Until the late 1960s, death and resurrection provided the fundamental metaphor for his understanding of continuity and discontinuity. In Bible studies given in 1967 he develops three further Biblical images to illustrate more exactly the continuity and the discontinuity between this life and the age to come: the travail of childbirth in Romans 8:19-25, the germination of a seed in I Corinthians 15:35-57, and the refiner's fire of I Corinthians 3:10-15 (1968c:181-184). In the germination of a seed there is discontinuity as the seed falls to the ground and dies but continuity in the new and more glorious harvest that comes precisely from the seed. The continuity between what is now and what will be is also indicated by the image of a new world struggling to be born. Finally, the fires of judgement will purge all human endeavours and only what is fit for the kingdom of God will find a place in the new order. Understanding this

continuity summons the church to participation in cultural, social, and political endeavours. These illustrations became stock-in-trade for Newbigin from this time on.

In his later years Newbigin returned to the theme of the kingdom of God. In light of the ongoing discussions about the kingdom of God in Biblical scholarship Newbigin articulated three Biblical tensions important for the mission of the church. First, Jesus speaks of the kingdom as already present but also as future. Second, Jesus speaks of the kingdom as imminent but he also implies that there will be a considerable period of time before the coming of the kingdom. Third, the coming of the kingdom will be preceded by recognizable signs but the time of that coming is unknown (1993d:6f.). Holding these tensions will keep the church from misunderstanding the relation of present history to its future goal.

#### *4.4.2. The Kingdom of God and the Mission of Jesus in History*

We can summarize Newbigin's understanding of the relation God's kingdom to history by noting five consistent themes in his writing.

First, Jesus announces the arrival and presence of the kingdom of God in history (1989e:105). It is an announcement that God's reign is confronting all people as a present reality. There is an insistence in Newbigin's writings on the fact that this is an announcement of an event. There are two senses, however, in which he speaks of this event. At times Newbigin presents this event as an announcement of God's reign (a common Old Testament theme) historically present in the person of Jesus. The newness of the event is simply the presence of God's rule in the person of Jesus (e.g., 1987a:1f.; 1980g:24f.). At other times, Newbigin elaborates the newness in terms of the redemptive power of the coming age present in history (e.g., 1989e:119ff.). The kingdom is "among you" (Luke 17:21); the power of that reign is at work in the midst of history. "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Of course person and power cannot be separated. However, there are times when the person is emphasized so that the power is minimized. One then gets the sense that it is the same rule of God over history present in the Old Testament that is now present in Jesus rather than the entry into the world of the redemptive power of the coming age representing something radically new in history.

Second, the presence of the kingdom is hidden and not obvious to all people. If God was to reveal fully the end-time kingdom of God then history would have reached its end. Since the kingdom has not been fully manifested, many cannot see the kingdom of God because they are facing the wrong way. The call is to repent, make a U-turn, be converted in order to believe the good news that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus. The relationship of the present to the future is that of a hidden reality that will be fully manifest in the future. The kingdom remains veiled during this era but will be completely revealed when Christ returns in glory (1989e:105).

Third, the presence of the power of the kingdom creates crisis and conflict. The parable of the tares makes clear that the presence of the kingdom of God precipitates an encounter with the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). "The powers that be, both in their outward forms as the established religious and cultural and political structures, and in their inward reality as the principalities and powers of this age, are challenged and fight back" (1989e:105). This brings suffering. The antithetical encounter intensifies until it reaches its climax on the cross. Thus the cross casts its shadow over this entire historical time period. The kingdom is not a smooth, continuous movement of progress toward a final realization of God's purposes. History "between the times" is characterized by

conflict, struggle, and suffering. Newbigin uses the image of the birth pangs necessary for the new creation to be born.

Fourthly, the relation of the kingdom to history is not one of total continuity or discontinuity. The kingdom is not a future state unrelated to present history nor is it something that will arrive by way of a smooth historical transition. All of creation and human history is polluted by sin and therefore must be subjected to death and the fire of judgement. However, that which has been accomplished in the way of God's kingdom will be purified by that fire and find its place in the new creation. All that is done in human history must die; yet that which is in keeping with the kingdom of God will be raised to the renewed life of the age to come (1989e:114).

Finally, the meaning of this transitional time between the times can be precisely designated with the word mission. "There is a precise meaning to this gap which opens up between the coming of the kingdom veiled in the vulnerable and powerless Jesus, and the coming of the kingdom in manifest power. That meaning is to be found in the mission of the church to the nations" (1989e:106). The mercy of God holds back the final revelation of his power so that all nations may be given opportunity to repent. 'The gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come' (Matthew 24:14). In this time there will be signs of the kingdom that show that God's healing power is present. The mission of Jesus and the church will be carried out in the context of the clash between the powers of the coming age in Jesus and the Spirit and the powers of darkness. Therefore, suffering will be the normal mode of the kingdom mission of Jesus and the church.

Newbigin's eschatological position incorporates the present and future dimensions of the kingdom of God. His understanding of the kingdom challenges any evolutionary, progress-oriented understanding of the kingdom or any privatization of the Christian faith. Contempt for this world or an immanentist view that does not see beyond history is equally ruled out by this eschatology. The emphasis on the antithesis prohibits triumphalism yet the presence of the kingdom enables the church erect signs to its coming. Newbigin's eschatology forms the firm basis for his missionary ecclesiology.

#### *4.4.3. Elements of the Kingdom Mission of Jesus During His Public Ministry*

"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" (1953d:153-154) This is because "the meaning and purpose of this present time, between Christ's coming and His coming again, is that in it the Church is to prosecute its apostolic mission of witness to the world" (1953d:157). The mission of the church is governed by the mission of Jesus. That which Jesus began to do must go on in the life of the church. Precisely what are the elements of Jesus' mission? Newbigin highlights five aspects of the mission of Jesus.

First, the mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was a gift promised by the prophets for the last days (1972e:4). The intertestamental period was a long period of waiting and hoping when the Spirit was not yet given. John appeared in this context of expectation announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. This announcement was accompanied by a vivid and expressive prophetic action—baptism. Baptism in water was a sign of the coming of the kingdom and its gifts—cleansing and the coming of the Holy Spirit. John's testimony was: "I am baptising you with water. This is only a sign. There is one to come who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit—not just a sign, but the real thing" (1972e:5-6). Jesus identified himself with the crowd who came as sinners to receive the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. When he was baptized in water, he was also baptized in the Spirit. The sign

and that which it signified merged. The coming of the Spirit came with a vision of a dove and an interpretive word. “In this vision and this word we learn the character of the Spirit given to Jesus: he is the Spirit of sacrifice, the Spirit of humble service, the Spirit who will lead Jesus by the way of the Cross to be the Saviour of the world” (1972e:7). While the Spirit was given in the Old Testament, the Spirit is now given to Jesus permanently (John 1:33) and thus a new chapter opens in the work of the Spirit. It is no longer a temporary gift but is given forever to Jesus to be given to those who follow him.

The Spirit immediately led him into the desert to be tempted. This temptation has important significance for our topic. The “tremendous question” that arises at this point in the gospels is: “How will the mission of Jesus by the power of the Spirit be carried out?” (1972e:8; 1972g:52). Satan’s temptations aim to move Jesus down the wrong path.

Will it be by miracles which dazzle men and compel their allegiance by the sheer sense of marvel? Will it be by meeting all their physical needs? Will it be by creating a great political movement and becoming the kind of Messiah that many of the Jews dreamed of?... These are the questions that the tempter puts to Jesus as he wrestles alone with his tremendous calling in the solitude of the desert. The three temptations described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke express in a vivid form the answers to these questions which Jesus rejected (1972e:8).

Jesus emerged from the desert unarmed, stripped of what people call power and wisdom. How would he fulfill the role of Messiah? How would he carry out his kingdom mission? “Quite simply, by being the son of his Father, by doing the works of his Father. His deeds and words are the deeds and words of God” (1972g:52).

The writings of Luke confirm this. Luke places at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry his manifesto (Luke 4:18). The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus to enable him to do deeds of love and justice and speak a message of hope. “These words of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, standing at the very outset of his ministry, constitute one of the fundamental statements of what it means to be filled by the Spirit” (1972e:9). This is also expressed in Acts 10:38: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.... he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil.”

As for the second aspect of Jesus’ ministry common in Newbigin’s work, we have already broached it. Jesus made the kingdom of God known in his *life*, *words*, and *deeds* (1972g:56). He embodied the life of the kingdom in his whole existence; he displayed the power of the kingdom with his deeds; he announced the presence of the kingdom with his words. Newbigin’s frequent analysis of the church in terms of her mission in word and deed rooted in the corporate life of the Spirit finds its source here in the mission of Jesus.

The kingdom of God is made known in Jesus’ *life*. Central to this life of the Spirit was Jesus’ unique sense of Sonship (1972g:43). Of all the names for God in the Old Testament ‘Abba’ was the one that Jesus took upon his lips. Jesus displayed an intimacy with God that no Jew dared to assume before his time as evidenced in the prayerbooks and liturgies before the days of Jesus. Another “very striking” (1972g:40) feature of Jesus’ life was his love for the marginalized. At numerous points Newbigin stands against a Marxist-liberationist interpretation of this dimension of Jesus’ mission. The scandalous dimension of Jesus’ ministry was the fact that he ignored all the lines that society drew to separate the good from the bad. He freely accepted into his company all those on the wrong side of the line. He met everyone with the same unconditional demand for repentance and conversion (1980f:31). Newbigin further frequently points

to the love, justice, and joy of Jesus that exhibited the life of the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is made known in the Jesus' *words*. The gospel records open with Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. The proclamation of the kingdom was constitutive to Jesus' mission (1987a:1). This announcement was urgent; the kingdom of God was a pressing and immediate reality that called for decisive action immediately, leaving no room for procrastination or indecision (1978e:44). The good news offered the blessings of the kingdom—righteousness, peace with God, reconciliation, life (1958b:19) forgiveness, sonship, freedom, and hope (1972g:75)—along with the demands of the kingdom including a participation in the kingdom mission of Jesus. The urgent invitation to repent, be converted, and enter the kingdom accompanied this announcement. Jesus also made known the kingdom of God with his parables. In his brief treatments of the parables (e.g., 1987a:3, 4), Newbigin stresses their ambiguous nature: they are riddles, strange sayings that are nonsensical, scandalous, hard to understand even for the disciples. He points to Jesus' answer to the disciples question (Mark 4:10-12) taken from Isaiah 6:9f. that highlight the blinding nature of the parables as well as their explanatory power. Unfortunately, he does not stress or elaborate how the parables explained the nature of the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is made known in Jesus' *deeds*. Joined to the announcement of and teaching about the kingdom were the deeds or mighty works of Jesus as signs of the presence of the kingdom. Jesus' response to the question of John the Baptizer is to recite his mighty works as signs of the kingdom (Luke 7:22): the blind see, the lame walk, the leper is cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, good news is preached to the poor (1987a:4; 1978e:41). These signs are not unambiguous; the kingdom is revealed but also remains hidden and so these signs can be the occasion of blessing or stumbling (1978e:42). Therefore, these signs can be misinterpreted as works of the devil and as the satisfaction of people's needs as well as signs of the redemptive power of the kingdom (1987a:4-5). Over against the tendency to separate words from deeds that he confronted throughout his life Newbigin continually insisted that the words and deeds of Jesus belonged together. The words explained the deeds; the deeds authenticated the words.

Based on this threefold witness to the kingdom in the life, words, and deeds of Jesus, Newbigin draws the conclusion for the mission of the church:

We can describe that mission in a three-fold way. Jesus embodied the presence of the kingdom in his own life and death; the Church is called in the power of the Spirit to do the same. Jesus did mighty works of healing and deliverance; the Church, in the power of the Spirit is to do the same. Jesus announced the kingdom and taught people its ways; the Church must preach and teach because even the best of good works and good examples do not explain themselves. We have to point to the source from which they come (1990:6).

The third element of Jesus' kingdom mission highlighted by Newbigin is the life of prayer that undergirds his words and deeds. This feature of the ministry of Jesus is not highlighted as often as the life, words, and deeds of Jesus. However, the prayer life of the church in its mission is built squarely on Newbigin's understanding of prayer as central to the life of Jesus.

When Jesus launched his disciples into the world to continue his mission, he did not give them a hand-book of instructions. He did not write a book. He gathered a company 'to be with him and to be sent out' (Mk.3:14). The essential thing was to be with him, to hear his words, watch his deeds, learn from him to pray (1990u:18).

It is unfortunate that Newbigin did not develop this line of thought. The importance he

attached to prayer for the whole mission of Jesus and the church, as it follows Jesus faithfully, is captured in the following quote.

His cross, his final offering up of his life to the Father, is the focus and climax of his whole ministry. But Jesus did not go directly from his baptism to the cross. The cross is indeed the completion of his baptism. But in between them there are those crowded months and years of his ministry in which he labored, agonized, and prayed that his people might recognize the presence of the Kingdom of God in their midst, and might accept their vocations to be its agents and messengers (1972g:121).

The ambiguity of words and deeds as a witness to the kingdom demanded a working of the Spirit to make them effectual for blessing. Jesus prayed that this might happen and taught those who were to continue his mission to do likewise.

Fourth, Jesus' kingdom mission was carried on in weakness and suffering. The Old Testament pictured the Messiah with a number of images: military hero, wise ruler, son of David. But it also pictured the Messiah with the mysterious image of a suffering servant (1972g:47-51). Newbigin stresses the image of a suffering servant. Perhaps this is the most characteristic feature of Newbigin's Christology. Jesus ushers in the kingdom by way of the cross. That is, he does not overpower the forces that oppose the kingdom with brute force but by absorbing their full force in his being. Suffering is not a by-product of faithful mission but the very mode of Jesus' mission:

In what way has the coming of Jesus brought the reign of God near? What is the relation of Jesus to the reign? Is it that he now, as God's anointed, takes control of world events and shapes them to God's will? Does he become the master and manager of the world's affairs on behalf of God? Certainly the "powers of the kingdom" are manifest in him. He does mighty works, which to the eyes of faith are signs of the presence of the reign of God (Luke 11:14-22). Yet, paradoxically, his calling is to the way of suffering, rejection, and death—to the way of the cross. He bears witness to the presence and reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil, but by taking their full weight upon himself. Yet it is in that seeming defeat that victory is won.... The reign of God is present under the form not of power, but of weakness (1978e:34f.).

It is precisely because the kingdom is present in weakness that the characteristic way the kingdom is made known is by parables and works that have a two-edged character. They can be the occasion of stumbling or faith. Since the kingdom is not revealed in power, people are not overwhelmed by the force of the miracles. They are signs of the kingdom to faith. People, similarly, are not forced to recognize the kingdom by the force of the argument of the parable. Both the word and work can be rejected and misunderstood, which leads to suffering for Jesus and judgement for the hearer. These words and works can also be the occasion of faith.

One final important feature of Jesus' kingdom mission, in Newbigin's view, was the formation of a people to embody the life of the kingdom. This aspect of Jesus' ministry has been widely questioned. Three lines of evidence have led many New Testament scholars to reject any intention on Jesus' part to form a people to carry on his mission: the scarcity of material in the gospels that refer to the church as a body to continue the mission of Jesus after His death; the questionable value of the material that does exist; and Jesus' expectation of an immediate advent of the kingdom—all this precludes His intention to form an ongoing institution. Yet Newbigin believed that the formation of a community to carry on the work Jesus had begun through history was essential to Jesus' kingdom mission. Newbigin responds to the criticisms with four lines of argument (1978e:44-49). First, although it is unquestionable that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was an immediate and pressing reality, the view that the existence of the church is a contradiction of this immediacy of the end is a failure to understand the

nature of last things: the immediacy of the kingdom does not mean it will arrive within a very short period of time; it means that the arrival of the kingdom in history is urgent, pressing and demands decisive action now. Second, the earliest documents of the New Testament already show a church existing with an ordered and continuous life. There is no hint that the “church is the result of an improvisation undertaken to repair the breach made by the collapse of the original expectation” (1978e:45). Third, Newbigin points to “one of the most ancient and impregnable elements of the tradition of his [Jesus’] words and deeds”, namely the constitution of the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-26). These words show Jesus looking forward to the future of the community of disciples. They will share in this common meal and thereby continually renew their participation in the death and risen life of Jesus. The long discourses of John 13-16 fill out Jesus’ intention (1978e:46-47). This community will be launched into the life of the world as a continuance of his mission to make the presence of the kingdom known. “These Johannine discourses are the fullest exposition we have of Jesus’ intention regarding the future of the cause he entrusted to his disciples and for which he prepared and consecrated them.... This is an exposition of the meaning of the supper, and it is upon the institution of the supper itself that we can most surely ground our certainty about Jesus’ intention for the future of his cause” (1978e:47). Fourth, the words of Jesus in John 20:21 launch the church on its mission. Again these words indicate the intention of Jesus with respect to the future of his kingdom mission. “The disciples are now taken up into that saving mission for which Jesus was anointed and sent in the power of the Spirit.... It is sent, therefore, not only to proclaim the kingdom but to bear in its own life the presence of the kingdom” (1978e:48-49).

Mission in Christ’s way for the church will mean the presence of all these dimensions: the power of the Spirit, word, deeds, and a life that points to the kingdom, prayer, weakness and suffering, and contribution to the formation of a community that embodies the kingdom.

#### *4.4.4. The Kingdom Revealed and Accomplished in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus*

On the one hand, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the culmination of Jesus’ kingdom mission. On the other hand, the kingdom mission of the church cannot begin until Jesus has defeated the powers that oppose the reign of God. Together, the death and resurrection of Jesus stand at the centre of redemptive history.

Brief consideration of a curious paradox surrounding Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement may be a helpful way into this topic. On the one side, Newbigin speaks of the cross as the centre of the Christian faith. His conversion cemented in his mind that the cross must be the fundamental clue to understanding the world (1993d:11f.). A few years later, the study of Romans initiated another turning point in his theological journey. Upon reading James Denney’s commentary (1976), he ended his study of Romans “with a strong conviction about ‘the finished work of Christ’, about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary” (1993d:29). He developed his ideas on the atonement further during the same period in an Old Testament paper and a paper given to the College Theological Society (*ibid*). Throughout his life Newbigin attempted to make the atonement central to his life and thought, criticizing any Christian tradition that did not treat the atonement with sufficient seriousness (e.g., 1996b:9). An anonymous reviewer of *Unfinished Agenda* says of Newbigin’s life: “From first to last the cross is central” (“Presbuteros” 1985:32) and then quotes from the paragraph that closes Newbigin’s original autobiography:

But for now I return to the beginning, to the vision which was given me during that stressing night in the miners' camp in South Wales. I can still see the cross of Jesus as the one place in all the history of human culture where there is a final dealing with the ultimate mysteries of sin and forgiveness, of bondage and freedom, of conflict and peace, of death and life. Although there is so much that is puzzling, so much that I simply do not understand and so much that is unpredictable, I find here—as I have again and again found during the past fifty years—a point from which one can take one's bearings and a light in which one can walk, however, stumblingly. I know that that guiding star will remain and that that light will shine till death and in the end. And that is enough (1993h:241).

And yet there is another side. Perhaps surprisingly, some assert that Newbigin's development of the doctrine of atonement is inadequate. In a review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Peter Forster comments: "What I missed at this point was an adequate—or, indeed, any—discussion of the atonement, and without this I found Newbigin's assertions about the importance of the historical event in the story of Christ less than fully convincing, and needing further development" (Forster 1991:35). How can two such contradictory understandings exist?

Consideration of John Driver's book *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, provides a helpful perspective for struggling with this question. Driver has analyzed the atonement in the light of the missionary context of the New Testament (1986:29-35). He believes that Constantinian presuppositions have dominated classical theories of the atonement. The missionary context of the New Testament has been eclipsed and the Biblical understanding of the atonement distorted. He helpfully articulates ten principal images employed by authors of the New Testament to unfold the significance of the cross: the conflict-victory-liberation motif; the vicarious suffering motif; archetypal images; the martyr motif; the sacrifice motif; expiation and the wrath of God; the redemption-purchase motif; the reconciliation image; the justification image; and adoption-family images.

Driver argues that a number of distortions to this Biblical understanding have taken place as a result of the impact of Christendom on theology. Two of his critiques are important for grasping Newbigin's understanding of the atonement. First, the atonement has been individualized. While the New Testament understanding of the atonement was an event that created a new people, under the influence of a Roman understanding of law, the cross has been reduced to the propitiation of individual guilt in classical theories of the atonement. J. Denny Weaver has stated this well: "The satisfaction or substitutionary theory of Anselm defines the problem of the sinner in inherently individual terms.... The social component... is logically an afterthought, something to consider *after* one has dealt with the prior, fundamental and individualistic problem of personal guilt and penalty" (Weaver 1990:315). Second, the atonement has lost the New Testament emphasis on its transforming power (Driver 1987:30f.). Classical theories place the emphasis on the removal of legal guilt: the product of the cross is a justified individual rather than a transformed community. In his preface to Driver's book, Rene Padilla summarizes this criticism as follows:

At the very center of the Christian faith is Jesus, a crucified Messiah. All the wisdom and the power of God have been revealed in him. Apart from such wisdom and power no genuine Christian experience is possible. Unfortunately, Western Christianity has been so conditioned by Constantinian presuppositions that it has failed to take into account the centrality of the crucified Messiah.... It has concentrated on the salvation of the individual soul but has frequently disregarded God's purpose to create a new humanity by sacrificial love and justice for the poor.... In classical theories of the atonement, the work of Christ was unrelated to God's intention to create a new humanity. Driver here demonstrates that the covenanted community of God's people is the essential context for understanding the atonement.... Driver's book is an

invitation to look at the cross, not merely as the source for individual salvation, but as the place wherein begins the renewal of the creation—the new heavens and the new earth that God has promised and that the messianic community anticipates (Padilla, in Driver 1986:9-10).

Nestled in the language of Padilla above is a third way that a Constantinian interpretation has reshaped the Biblical doctrine of the atonement. Noting this distortion is important for understanding Newbigin. Padilla refers to the cross as the place where the new creation begins: the cross must be understood in its eschatological significance. In a Christendom interpretation, the atonement has been taken out of its eschatological context.

This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of Driver's thesis. Even if one believes that there may be some false contrasts, it would appear that he is pointing to some real distortions that have taken place in classical theories of the atonement. Perhaps the above paradox is the result of a natural inclination of Newbigin's critics to look for elements of a classical theory of the atonement and not ask how his missionary experience challenged him to formulate his understanding with different emphases. While Newbigin's critics look for an understanding shaped by Christendom, Newbigin offers a view of the atonement shaped by his missionary experience.

How does Newbigin formulate his understanding of the atonement? Negatively, the atonement is an historical event that sets the direction of history but cannot be fully captured by any particular theory. "We are speaking about a *happening*, an event that can never be fully grasped by our intellectual powers and translated into a theory or doctrine. We are in the presence of a reality full of mystery, which challenges but exceeds our grasp" (1978e:49, his emphasis). There have been many images that have been used to explain this event but none of them is able to fathom the depth of mystery bound up in the cross.

Down the centuries, from the first witness until today, the church has sought and used innumerable symbols to express the inexpressible mystery of the event that is the center, the crisis of all cosmic history, the hinge upon which all happenings turn. Christ the sacrifice offered for our sin, Christ the substitute standing in our place, Christ the ransom paid for our redemption, Christ the conqueror casting out the prince of the world—these and other symbols have been used to point to the heart of the mystery. None can fully express it. It is that happening in which the reign of God is present (1978e:50).

About twenty years into his missionary experience, Newbigin opens up a number of these images in the fullest treatment he gives of the atonement (1956c:56-90). He divides his theological reflection into two categories: first, the teaching of Jesus about his death and second, Biblical images that express the significance of his crucifixion. In the first section he articulates eight themes that expose Jesus' own understanding about his death: his death is necessary; his death is the will of the Father; his death arises from the identification of Himself with sinners; his death is God's judgement of the world; his death is a ransom; his death is a sacrifice; his death is the means of life to the world; his death is not to be an isolated event, but others are to follow it and share it (1956c:62-70). In the second section Newbigin elaborates five images of Christ's death: the death of Jesus is a revelation of God's love, a judgement, a ransom, a sacrifice, and a victory (1956c:70-90).<sup>5</sup> In the next chapter two conclusions follow that Newbigin attributes to his missionary experience. First, the cross is an event that creates

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<sup>5</sup>These five images remain foundational to Newbigin's understanding of the atonement for the remainder of his life. See 1990r:4 where these five images are expressed again in a series he calls "My nearest approach to a 'Dogmatics'".

a people. Second, the cross has transformed these people so that they now share Christ's life. "When we look at the record, what strikes us is that the story of Jesus has reached us through a group of men and women who were so closely bound to Him that their life could almost be spoken of as an extension of His life" (1956c:92). This community shares in the accomplishment of this event. Others can share in this event when they "become part of this society, this fellowship, He left behind Him to be the continuation of His life on earth" (1956c:93).

In this treatment of the atonement in 1956, the classical theories that he embraced in 1936 are given expression but also given a new twist as the corporate and transformative effect of the cross is drawn out. In other words, the fruit of the atonement is not first a justified individual but a transformed community that shares in the life of the kingdom. Newbigin would not contrast these two things, of course, as his following discussion of justification shows. The justification of the individual is one the benefits of the life of the kingdom that the transformed community shares. Newbigin attributes to his missionary experience this stress on the church as a community created by the transforming power of the cross (1993d:137f.; 1956c:8f.). This community is "left behind" to continue Christ's life in the midst of the world.

The missionary and corporate understanding of the atonement remains foundational for Newbigin's understanding of the church and mission throughout the remainder of his life. However, the eschatological context of the atonement becomes stronger (e.g., 1970a:207f.). Indeed, in the last three decades of Newbigin's life it is the eschatological context that dominates his understanding of the atonement.

The understanding of the atonement that undergirds Newbigin's theology can be outlined in three points. First, Newbigin stresses over and over again the historicity, the "happenedness" of the crucifixion. Indeed, "the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings" (1989e:66). This statement stands at the beginning of a chapter entitled 'Revelation in History' where Newbigin begins to develop a missionary theology for a pluralist society. The Hindu, Pietist, or higher critic who undervalues the historical nature of the Christ event have misunderstood the nature of the gospel completely.

Second, these events are decisive and central to the whole of cosmic history (1968c:73). Newbigin uses many different images to picture the decisive and final nature of these historical events. He refers to the cross as "an unrepeatable event which we believe gives the irreversible movement of history its meaning and direction" (1970a:198). It is an "act of obedience by which the whole cosmic course of things is given its direction" (1970a:201). The atonement is 'the event that is the centre, the crisis of cosmic history', 'the hinge upon which all happenings turn' and 'the turning point in history (1978e:50; 1967a:11; 1990:4). He constantly emphasizes that "our faith is that this historic event is decisive for all history.... At the centre of history, which is both the history of man and the history of nature, stands the pivotal, critical, once-for-all event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By this event the human situation is irreversibly changed" (1968c:9f.). In short, as he puts it elsewhere, the cross is "the decisive event by which all things were changed" (1978e:50).

Third, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has acted to reveal and accomplish his end-time purposes for all of history. Both of those words are important—reveal and accomplish. In the cross and resurrection God has revealed the end of history. God has made his purposes known in some, not all, events. The Christ event is the central place where his purposes for history have been revealed. In the death of Christ, God's judgement on sin has been made known. Death is the only fitting way to deal with that which sin has corrupted. Since sin has infested the entire creation,

death is the fitting end for this sin-polluted world. God's judgement must fall on sin, burying all traces of sin's contamination. The wages of sin are death. The resurrection reveals God's loving purposes for the creation. God will give life to the new creation. While Christ's death reveals God's judgement on the entire sinful creation, Christ's resurrection reveals God's love and intention to renew the entire creation. However, these events are more than simply a revelation of judgement and renewal; they accomplish what they reveal. Jesus has taken on himself the sin of the world and God's final judgement of death on that sin at the cross and has actualized and initiated the end in that event. Likewise his resurrection is not simply an individual affair but embodies the renewal of the creation that will take place in the end. It is precisely the fact that Jesus has accomplished the end in his death and resurrection that paved the way for the outpouring of the Spirit as an eschatological gift.

Scattered throughout Newbigin's writings are references to various images of the atonement (e.g., 1990r:4). Using Driver's categories, there are two images that are most prominent in Newbigin. Perhaps the most prominent is Driver's third image, which is, in fact, a cluster of Biblical images that he refers to as 'archetypal images.' Driver groups together the images of representative man, pioneer, forerunner, and firstborn. He notes that these have not been related to the atonement in recent theological discourse. However, they did play a significant role in the early church's understanding of the Christ's saving work on the cross (Driver 1986:101). Behind the vision of Christ as the representative man or the last Adam is the Hebrew concept of the corporate personality. Christ is the bearer of the destiny of all humankind. He represents all humanity in his death and resurrection. The Christ event creates a new humanity that participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We participate in Christ's death as he receives God's judgement on our old humanity. In our participation in the death of Jesus our old humanity is put to death. We participate in Christ's resurrection as we are conformed to the image of the new humanity realized in the resurrection. The images of pioneer, forerunner, and firstborn point to the same reality. Christ is the representative and bearer of the destiny of the whole creation.

Newbigin articulates this theme in two ways. First, this theme is clearly evident in the way he structures four Bible studies he gave in 1967 (1968c) and 1970 (1970a). In 1967, his first study examines the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The three studies that follow are entitled 'The Dying and Rising of the Christian', 'The Dying and Rising of the Church', and 'The Dying and Rising of the World.' The Christian, the church, and the world all participate in the events of Christ's death and resurrection. "The cross is the end not only of that road but of every road" (1968c:73). (We might add that the resurrection is the new beginning not only of Christ's life but of all who are in Christ.) In 1970 the first study centres on the dying and rising of Jesus. Since "everything in the church is determined by the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus Christ" this pattern of death and resurrection is brought to bear on the life of the church, on the church's action in the world, and on the lives of believers in three subsequent studies.<sup>6</sup> In both series of Bible studies the argument is that the cross and resurrection are decisive for human history because God has revealed and accomplished his final judgement and salvation for the whole cosmos in the cross. "The pattern of the cross and resurrection is projected in the Bible, not only on to the personal life, and not only

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<sup>6</sup>Note the change in 1970 from the order in 1968. In 1968 the order of the four studies is Christ, the individual believer, the church, and the world. In 1970 the order his four Bible studies more consistently places the community first: Christ, the church, the world, the individual believer. He writes: "The theme of these studies is the pattern of cross and resurrection, the pattern of dying and rising, in the life of our Lord himself, of the Church, of the world, and of the believer" (1970a:203).

on to the life of the Church, but also on to the life of the cosmos" (1970a:215). The end comes in three stages: Christ's death and resurrection are the first fruits of the end. "His dying and rising constitute the point from which the new creation begins." The second stage is the church's share in that renewal. The third "involves nothing less than the re-ordering of the whole cosmos" in which there is the judgement of the cross and the renewal of the resurrection (1970a:224). This understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus is eschatological through and through. The church and eventually the whole cosmos participates in the pioneering accomplishments of this representative man at the cross.

Closely tied to this is Newbigin's frequent reference to the cross as the ultimate act of identification or solidarity with the world and at the same time the ultimate act of rejection of or separation from the world (1970a:202).

One could go into a whole theology of the atonement if one were to develop this, but obviously Christ on his cross is in one sense totally identified with the world, but in another sense totally separated from the world. The cross is the total identification of Jesus with the world in all its sin, but in that identification the cross is the judgement of the world, that which shows the gulf between God and his world (1994k:54).

This identification and separation at the cross actually accomplishes the redemption of the world because at the cross Jesus exposes and destroys the world's sin (1974b:98). The cross reveals God's rejection of the world as corrupted and polluted by sin; but the cross is also an act that accomplishes God's judgement on sin. The cross reveals God's solidarity and identification with the world as good creation; but the cross is also an act that accomplishes its redemption.

A second image that is common in Newbigin's writings is that of victory. Driver refers to this as the conflict-victory-liberation motif (Driver 1986:71-86; cf. Weaver 1990) and notes that this image is the oldest theory of the atonement developed in the Christian church (Driver 1986:39; Weaver 1990:307). Driver's label highlights not only the victory but the conflict that precedes it and the liberation that follows. This is exactly what we find in Newbigin. "It is there, on Calvary, that the kingdom, the kingly rule of God, won its decisive victory over all the powers that contradict it... For the cross is not a defeat reversed by the resurrection; it is a victory proclaimed (to chosen witnesses) by the resurrection. And so the risen Lord gathers together his defeated and despairing disciples and sends them out to be the witnesses of the victory of the kingdom, to embody and proclaim the rule of God" (1987a:6). Later he writes: "The cross... is the price paid for a victorious challenge to the powers of evil" (:25; cf. 1978e:36; 1989). The cross is the place where Christ met and mastered the powers of evil. There is, however, one strong strain in Newbigin's understanding of the cross as victory that is not present in Driver. Newbigin's constantly stresses that the victory is a *hidden* victory gained by suffering, weakness, and seeming defeat (1987a:5f.). Before the resurrection the cross was perceived by the disciples to be a meaningless disaster. After the resurrection their understanding changed: the power of God is revealed in weakness; the wisdom of God is revealed in foolishness; the victory of the cross is revealed in defeat; the glory of God is revealed in humiliation; the purpose of God is revealed in a meaningless execution (1974b:64f.). The victory is gained not by a show of force but by taking the full force of the power of evil on Himself, bearing it for the sake of the world. "From the record it is clear that what happened on Calvary was this: the one and only man who has ever lived in total fellowship, trust, and obedience towards God, met the concentrated power of human sin, and in committing everything totally and simply into his Father's hands, bore it all to the end... (1972g:55). In the cross the victory of the kingdom is revealed. "Yet, paradoxically, his calling is to the

way of suffering, rejection, and death—to the way of the cross. He bears witness to the presence of the reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil, but by taking their full weight upon himself. Yet it is in that seeming defeat that victory is won” (1978e:35). The liberation that flows from this victory cannot be interpreted in a triumphalist way. The liberated community remains under the cross; their mission is also a victorious challenge to evil that results in suffering, seeming defeat, and sometimes death (1974b:89, 99). The kingdom of God, therefore, is both hidden and revealed in the cross of Christ. It is revealed because that is where the victory over evil was accomplished; it is hidden because that victory has not been publicly demonstrated (1978e:52).

It must be stressed that this understanding of the atonement is not something that is expressed in just a few places and has been gathered together in this section for systematic purposes. This understanding of the cross permeates and undergirds every part of Newbigin’s work. Indeed, without this understanding of the cross much of his theology, missiology, and ecclesiology is simply incomprehensible.

If this is true, why have some readers missed the centrality of the atonement in Newbigin’s theology? To begin, when one compares Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement with classical theories it is clear that he has moved some of the familiar landmarks that make recognition immediately clear. An individual notion has been replaced by a corporate and cosmic understanding; a legal framework has been replaced by an eschatological and historical setting; the cross is the starting point for discussion and not simply a part of a larger system. Moreover, as Driver points out, the “archetypal images” of the Bible have not been related to the atonement in recent theology. Complicating this problem is the fact that Newbigin rarely uses the Biblical images of first Adam, representative man, pioneer, forerunner, or firstborn (but see 1972g:55). If one looks for a familiar theory of the atonement or familiar terminology, that person will miss Newbigin’s understanding of the cross. Newbigin’s understanding of the centrality of the cross for universal history is a theory of the atonement but is unfamiliar and therefore is not recognized. As well, there is indeed no extended systematic treatment of the atonement in some of Newbigin’s major works—especially books on mission in western culture that are most familiar to many readers. Perhaps this is unfortunate; however, it is quite typical of Newbigin. His theological work—including his systematic missiological works—are *ad hoc* and contextual in nature. He is constantly assuming a theological foundation and bringing that to bear on the issues with which he is dealing. One often has to dig below the surface to expose this theological foundation on which Newbigin builds his missiology. When one is alerted to the centrality of the atonement understood as the revelation and accomplishment of God’s purposes for universal history, its foundational importance will be quite unmistakable. Finally, theories of the atonement are typically touchstones for orthodoxy. Newbigin’s ecumenical sensitivities often led him to frame controversial theological issues in terms that would challenge familiar divergences between traditions. For example, the importance of the Lord’s Supper and baptism in Newbigin’s life and thought is beyond doubt. Yet one will search in vain for Newbigin’s advocacy of a particular theory within the familiar debates.<sup>7</sup> Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement deals with much that is important to both liberal and evangelical traditions in their understanding of the cross. Perhaps this is part of his broad appeal—for better or for worse.

We have already entered into Newbigin’s understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. Here the picture is much clearer. Newbigin points to the significance of the resurrection

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<sup>7</sup>A good example of this is Newbigin’s treatment of the sacraments and ministry in an address given to the Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1983c).

with two images. First, the resurrection is the manifestation of the victory gained on the cross. “The resurrection is not the reversal of a defeat but the manifestation of a victory” (1978e:36; 1987a:6). While the cross was a public event for all to see, the risen Christ appeared only to those who were chosen to be witnesses to the hidden victory of the cross (*ibid*). The resurrection is the standpoint from which the cross can be truly understood. Second, the resurrection was the firstfruits of the harvest that is still to come. This is the consistent teaching of the gospels and the epistles about the resurrection of Christ (1978e:36).

#### 4.5. THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM IN JESUS

In his fine book *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* Hendrikus Berkhof (1964) departs from the normal practice of “official theology” in the way that the doctrine of the Spirit is treated. The first chapter is on ‘The Spirit and Christ.’ The usual order of dogmatics would follow with a second chapter on ‘Word and Spirit’ or ‘The Spirit and the Individual’ in Protestant theologies or ‘The Spirit and the Church’ in Roman Catholic ones (Berkhof 1964:30). Instead, Berkhof’s second chapter is on ‘The Spirit and the Mission.’ He defends his approach by saying that Christ’s mission precedes the church or the salvation of the individual. The creative missionary action of the Spirit flows from the sending action of Christ. The church is the result of this mission of the Spirit (Berkhof 1964:30-31). He complains that the treatment of the Holy Spirit has suffered from the theological neglect of mission (Berkhof 1964:32-34). In fact, the detrimental consequences of neglecting mission in theology is “most keenly felt in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit” (Berkhof 1964:33). In Roman Catholic theology the Spirit is imprisoned in the institutional church while in Protestant theology His work is reduced to the spiritual life of the individual. “And both of these opposite approaches are conceived in a common pattern of an introverted and static pneumatology. The Spirit in this way is the builder of the church and the edifier of the faithful, but not the great mover and driving power on the way from the One to the many, from Christ to the world” (*ibid*). Today, however, we are beginning to understand “that mission belongs to the very essence of the church and that a theology which would speak about God’s revelation, apart from the fact that this revelation is a movement of sendings, would not speak about biblical revelation” (Berkhof 1964:32). The result is a deepening understanding of the Spirit’s missionary work witnessed to in Scripture (cf. Jongeneel 1997:77-81).

Two dimensions of this fresh articulation of pneumatology are helpful for illuminating Newbigin’s thought. First, the Spirit must be understood in a Christological-eschatological context. Christ is the inaugurator and first fruits of the eschaton. He has poured out His Spirit at Pentecost and with that action the last days have dawned. Those last days will not be complete until the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations. The Spirit “forms the unity of the christological and the eschatological pole of God’s saving work” (Berkhof 1964:35). Second, mission does not belong first to the church but to the Spirit; mission is first of all a work of the Spirit and the church is taken up into that work. Put another way, mission is not a mere instrument by which the mighty acts of God in the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection are transmitted by the church through time and space. Rather mission itself is a mighty act of the Spirit and all of God’s acts in Christ would not be known without this one last mighty act. And we are witnesses to this mighty act.

This brief reference to Berkhof summarizes succinctly three important elements that

we find in Newbigin's missionary pneumatology. First, it was Newbigin's missionary experience that moved him to place a much higher priority on the work of the Spirit. In his initial pneumatological reflections, he gives a very paltry place to the work of the Spirit and he fails to place the Spirit in a missionary context. The Spirit is the power that brings the gifts of freedom, good works, and fellowship to individual believers (1942:15-18). This changes rather dramatically over the next decade. He testified in 1960 that it was his missionary experience that moved him to place the Spirit at the centre of his missiology (1994k:22-23). An indication of the growing importance of pneumatology for Newbigin can be seen in the important place given to the Spirit in both *The Reunion of the Church* (1948d:98-103) and *Household of God* (1953d). In the latter book, he devotes an entire chapter to 'The Community of the Spirit.'

Second, the Christological-eschatological context is the fundamental way that Newbigin approaches pneumatology. This means that the kingdom mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Spirit. It means also that the Spirit is a gift for the last days, the powers of the coming age flowing into the present (1948d:98f.). From the outset of the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus in his words and works are directly connected with the power of the Spirit. He is anointed by the Spirit at His baptism to carry out his kingdom mission (Luke 4:18). It is by the Spirit that the powers of the end-time kingdom are in evidence in the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 12:28; Acts 10:38). However, the Spirit is not yet given to the disciples. That awaited the completion of Jesus' baptism at the cross when he would take upon Himself the sin of the world. Just before Pentecost the disciples expected that the full baptism of the Spirit would occur. "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). Then the consummation of the kingdom would have arrived in fullness. Jesus promised the gift of the Spirit as a foretaste, pledge, or first fruit of the kingdom. These three images point to the already-not yet nature of the kingdom. The Spirit is the real presence of the kingdom *and* the promise of more in the future (1978e:57-58).

Third, the Spirit is the fundamental witness and the church's witness is derivative. Mission first of all belongs to the Spirit who is sent by Jesus and the church is taken up into that work. A threefold historical development can be observed in Newbigin's thought concerning the relation of the Spirit to mission. At the first stage, the Spirit was not connected to the mission of the church at all. The Spirit brings certain benefits to individual believers. At the next stage the Spirit was connected to the mission of the church. However, during this Christocentric stage the Spirit equips and empowers the church in its mission. Mission flows in the following way: the Father sends the Son; the Son sends the Church and equips it with the Spirit to enable it to carry out its mission. In the final stage Newbigin stresses the work of the Spirit as the primary witness. God does not cease to participate in the missionary enterprise with the sending of Jesus. He does not initiate mission with the sending of Jesus and then leave the missionary work to be carried on by a human institution that followed the pattern of Christ with the help of the Spirit. Rather it belongs to "the very central teaching of the New Testament, that properly speaking the mission is the mission of the Holy Spirit.... The witness of man is secondary to the witness of the Holy Spirit.... Over and over again we find that it is taken for granted that witness is essentially a witness borne to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and that the part that the Church plays is a secondary instrumental part" (1994k:21f.). Or as he put it later: "The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God. Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness..." (1978e:56; cf. 1989e:119). This insight emerges slowly throughout the 1950s. However, by the time of his retirement years it is one of the primary strains of his missionary theology and ecclesiology. Undoubtedly his

missionary experience contributed to this growing conviction; yet his involvement in the ecumenical tradition strengthened this conviction as well since a similar emphasis emerged in ecumenical theology at Willingen (Andersen 1955:47) and continued to be a central item of its agenda.

The focus on the witness of the Spirit as the primary witness opened the way for the insight to emerge that the Spirit's work cannot be confined within the limits of the church: "The Spirit who thus bears witness in the life of the Church to the purpose of the Father is not confined within the limits of the Church" (1963g:53). Fifteen years earlier he could state emphatically that the "sphere of the Spirit's working is the Church" (1948d:99; cf. 123). Now in the decade when the redemptive work of God flowing outside of the church has become a primary theme in mission theology, Newbigin affirms that the Spirit's work moves beyond the church to the world. In contrast to much mission theology of the time that stressed the work of the Spirit beyond the church to the point of underplaying the role of the church, Newbigin makes clear his understanding of the Spirit's work in the world: "But—because the Spirit and the Father are one—this work of the Spirit is not in any sense an alternative way to God apart from the church; it is the preparation for the coming of the Church which means that the Church must be ever ready to follow where the Spirit leads" (1963g:53-54).

In *The Open Secret*, Newbigin expands this fundamental conviction. While the Spirit indwells the church he insists that the Spirit is not the property of the church and is not domesticated within it (1978e:56). This would present a caricature of mission as the self-propagation of its own institutional power. Mission then resembles more of a sales campaign or military operation. Rather, "the active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God" (*ibid*). Mission is first of all the work of the Spirit who changes both the world and the church and who goes ahead of the church as it continues on its missionary journey. It is this stress on the fundamental primacy of the witness of the Spirit and His prevenient work ahead of the church that characterizes Newbigin's discussion of the Spirit's work outside the church.

In sober truth the Spirit is himself the witness who goes before the church in its missionary journey. The church's witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads (1978e:61).

Newbigin's characteristic Biblical paradigm for this work of the Spirit is that of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. This story shows that the Spirit works outside the church in sovereign freedom and this work will have a transforming effect on the church. However, it also shows that the work of the Spirit outside the church cannot be separated from the church: there would be no story of conversion if Peter had not gone to Cornelius' home and proclaimed the gospel (1978e:59)!

While the insights that Newbigin develops along this line are significant, the promise of a fuller pneumatology that opens up the work of the Spirit outside the church never materializes. As with the work of the Father, it remains significantly underdeveloped. If one feels dissatisfied with the separation of the work of the Spirit from Christ and the church in the prevailing mission theologies of the 1960s, one feels a similar dissatisfaction with Newbigin's understanding of the work of the Spirit beyond the confines of the church.

It is was precisely this dissatisfaction that led M. M. Thomas to critique Newbigin. For Thomas *koinonia* in the New Testament does not refer primarily to the work of the Spirit in the church but is a manifestation of the reality of the kingdom at work in the world of men in world history (1971c:72). Nowhere in Newbigin's writings does

Thomas find him addressing the question of the work of the Spirit or the evidence of the new humanity in Christ outside the church (1974c:113). Thomas believed that Newbigin is forced to recognize the work of God outside the church in forming a new humanity that is wider than and transcending the work of the Spirit in the church; however, Newbigin never takes this wider work seriously in his theology (*ibid*).

Newbigin countered Thomas' claim that the word *koinonia* can refer to the new reality of the kingdom outside the life of the church. Never does Newbigin find the word so used in the New Testament. However, this does not mean that Newbigin does not acknowledge God's work outside the church, as Thomas alleges. In answer to the question of where God is at work outside the church in human history, Newbigin says:

Wherever the Christian sees men being set free for responsible sonship of God; wherever he sees the growth of mutual responsibility of man for man and of people for people; wherever he sees evidence of the character of Jesus Christ being reflected in the lives of men; there he will conclude that God is at work and that he is summoned to be God's fellow worker, even when the Name of Christ is not acknowledged (1969c:83f.).

While one may find M. M. Thomas' position unsatisfactory and Newbigin's critique convincing, Thomas has put his finger on a weakness in Newbigin's pneumatology—indeed, his whole understanding of the a Trinitarian context for mission. While Newbigin's intention is to develop his Christocentric understanding of the missionary church into a more Trinitarian form, the promise remains unfulfilled. While much valuable insight accrues, the work of the Spirit—as we have seen in the work of the Father—remains underdeveloped. As long as Newbigin and other advocates of a Christocentric-Trinitarian position do not develop the work of the Father and the Spirit in relation to the pressing issues of the day—non-Christian religions, the ecological crisis, growing poverty—their position will not command assent.

#### 4.6. DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS OF THE *MISSIO DEI*: CONTRASTING NEWBIGIN AND RAISER

There are is an abiding tension between two differing ecclesiologies in the ecumenical tradition (Bosch 1991:368-389). The tension between these two competing ecclesiologies is the result of differing understandings of the *missio Dei*. The term *missio Dei* was initially intended to move beyond an ecclesiocentric basis for mission by placing the church's calling within the context of the mission of the Triune God. Originally the *missio Dei* was interpreted Christologically: the Father sends the Son who in turn sends the church in the power of the Spirit. The church participates in the mission of God by continuing the mission of Christ. However, after Willingen the *missio Dei* concept gradually underwent modification (Rosin 1972; Bosch 1991:391-392). The *missio Dei* is God's work that embraces both the church and the world. The focus of the *missio Dei* moved from Christ to the Spirit: "this wider understanding of mission is expounded *pneumatologically* rather than christologically" (Bosch 1991:391). In this understanding, the church participates in God's mission by participating in what God is doing through the Spirit in the world. These different understandings of the *missio Dei* continue to inform the contrasting ecclesiologies of the ecumenical tradition.

Reference to a debate between Newbigin and Konrad Raiser on the pages of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* is helpful in clarifying Newbigin's understanding of the *missio Dei*. In 1991 Raiser's book *Ecumenism in Transition: A*

*Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* appeared in English. In that book Raiser discerns a decisive change taking place within the ecumenical movement. Raiser believes that the “Christocentric-universalist” paradigm that shaped the ecumenical movement from its inception until the Uppsala Assembly (1968) is in trouble. Today a second paradigm is emerging that more faithfully reflects the current situation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newbigin offered a rather harsh review of Raiser’s book (1994c). Raiser responded to Newbigin’s review and, in turn, Newbigin responded to Raiser (Raiser 1994a; 1994f).

One of the many issues upon which Raiser and Newbigin differed was the notion of the mission of God. Raiser charges that Newbigin advocates a Christocentrism that is characteristic of the classical ecumenical paradigm: “Newbigin wants to maintain ‘Christo-centric universalism’ as a valid model for understanding the ecumenical movement.... his entire critical reflection is based on the conviction of the nonnegotiable truth of the earlier paradigm” (Raiser 1994a:50). Newbigin’s response demonstrates his commitment to a Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei*: “I do not regard the ‘classical’ paradigm as nonnegotiable.... But I do regard as nonnegotiable the affirmation that in Jesus the Word was made flesh; there can be no relativizing of this, the central and decisive event of universal history” (1994f:51). Raiser believes that such a Christocentrism is insufficient to meet the demands of the contemporary world. Religious pluralism, injustice and oppression, and the ecological threat all demand that the church shift attention from the work of God through Christ and in the church to the work of God by the Spirit in the *oikoumene*. God’s mission is to be perceived primarily in terms of the Spirit’s work in the world enabling men and women to become what they were meant to be in God’s purpose. Raiser formulates this in terms of a shift from Christocentrism to Trinitarianism.

It may be asked whether or not this is an accurate way to describe the shift. Hendrikus Berkhof has contrasted the two ecclesiologies in a way that better captures their difference. There are two factors that distinguish a missionary ecclesiology: first, the church finds its identity and purpose through participation in the mission of the Triune God; second, the church does not exist for itself but is oriented toward the world. Both ecclesiologies find their source in the work of the Trinity and both find their end in service to the world. Berkhof describes this with the metaphor of a bridge; the church is a bridge between two shores—the covenant-keeping God and the world. Berkhof contrasts the two ecclesiologies in terms of their starting point for theoretical formulation. One starts with the work of God in Jesus Christ and finds in Christ the clue for its mission in the world. The other starts with the work of the Spirit in the world and finds in the needs of the world its clue for the church’s mission. Like Newbigin, Berkhof represents the classical paradigm; he argues for the first option. The church cannot be a bridge between God and the world unless it keeps a firm footing on the first shore. The church’s “first relationship” is to the Lord and it is this relationship which gives the “content as well as the standard for her directedness to the world” (Berkhof 1979:414). He calls attention to one of the dangers that emerges when ecclesiological reflection begins with the world.

If the reflection on the church starts from her mission to the world, the danger is that all these things are more or less taken for granted as self-evident postulates and as such are not really taken into account; while if the reflection starts from the other end and takes its inception in God, Christ, and the covenant, we cannot stop there but are inexorably sent on to the world (1979:414).

This was the precise point of disagreement between Hendrikus Berkhof and M. M. Thomas in their debate at the Mexico meeting of the CWME (1963). Thomas believed

that the task of mission was to discern, to bear witness to, and to participate in God's work of humanization and nation-building. Berkhof believed that taking our clue from the events of history rather than what God has done in Jesus Christ could lead to serious misunderstanding (Loffler 1968; 1993h:195).

A similar disagreement exists between Raiser and Newbigin. The issues have changed; for Raiser it is no longer humanization and nation-building but the *oikoumene* as one household of life in view of pluralism, violence, oppression, and the ecological threat. Raiser's ecclesiological starting point remains the work of the Spirit in the *oikoumene* as one household of life while Newbigin orients the church's mission to Jesus Christ (Raiser 1991a:84-91; 1997:19-26). Both are Trinitarian; and both are oriented to the world. Raiser is cosmocentric as he takes his clue from needs in the world; Newbigin is Christocentric as he takes his clue from the mission of Christ.

Raiser charges that the Christocentricity of the classical paradigm faces two problems. First, Christocentrism tends toward Christomonism; it does not open up into a full Trinitarian vision (1991a:91). Second, a Christocentric position eclipses meaningful dialogue with neighbours from other faiths and inhibits the church from participating in and contributing to the one household of life which is facing grave dangers (1991a:58). The first question that Raiser poses is relevant to the content of this chapter: Does Newbigin's Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei* tend toward Christomonism? Does it open up into a full Trinitarian formulation?

A response to this critique can be expressed in three points. First, Newbigin did develop his earlier Christocentric position into a much more fully Trinitarian understanding of the mission of God. Second, Newbigin's commitment to Christocentrism is in keeping with his Christological starting point. To depart from the centrality of Christ issues in problems in the church's mission. Third, Newbigin's Trinitarian formulations remain inadequate; there is a need for a much fuller development of the work of the Father and Spirit.

Newbigin developed and expanded his Christocentric position into a more comprehensive Trinitarian framework as a result of the stress on God's work in the world and the corresponding Trinitarian development characteristic of the middle of the century. This chapter has analyzed Newbigin's shift from a Christocentric to a Trinitarian ecclesiology. Like Gerrit C. Berkouwer, Newbigin was convinced that the taking account of the emphasis on the work of the Father and the Spirit in the world, so prevalent during the 1960s, did not mean moving away from a Christocentric approach.<sup>8</sup> In response to Raiser he summarizes his position in these words: "a Trinitarian perspective can be only an enlargement and development of a Christo-centric one and not an alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history" (1994c:2; cf. 1977d:214). During the secular decade he recognized that both the work of the Father and the Spirit had received little emphasis in his thought.

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<sup>8</sup>G. C. Berkouwer comments on the misconception involved in understanding the *missio Dei* in the history of missions as a shift from a Christocentrism to a Trinitarianism: "... the characterization 'from rigorous Christo-centricity to thoroughgoing trinitarianism' as 'the direction of missionary theology' is meaningful only starting from a wrongly understood Christocentrism" (Berkouwer 1976:395). For Berkouwer, like Newbigin, Trinitarian thought is always Christocentric.

Further, the work of Father and Spirit *outside the bounds of the church* had not been given sufficient attention. In subsequent writings we see him trying to correct this deficiency. Newbigin always believed, however, that the explication of the work of the Father and the Spirit is making explicit the Trinitarian context of the mission of Jesus. Jesus' mission and the gospel remain at the centre and continue as the starting point for any Trinitarian development. This is the pattern of the early church. The development of a Trinitarian framework is, for Newbigin, both missionary and Christocentric.

This commitment to Christ is not to be judged unfortunate. Rather it is in keeping with his understanding that in Christ God has revealed and accomplished the end of history. If this is true, then Christocentrism is faithfulness to Scripture. Further, when the development of Trinitarian doctrine is not Christocentric problems emerge. First, if Jesus Christ is not the centre of the one household of life then another centre must be proposed. Responding to Raiser, Newbigin writes: "This is precisely the issue now to be faced: Do we look for the ultimate unity of the human family as the fruit of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, or do we have some other center to propose?" (1994f:52). Newbigin does not dispute the need for global unity; he recognizes clearly all the problems to which Raiser points. However, Newbigin believes God has revealed the gospel of Jesus Christ as the one place where that unity can be found. While Raiser finds this Christocentrism too confining, it is clear he has indeed proposed a centre for global unity: a life-centred vision (1991a:84-91; 1997:19-21). Raiser believes that a life-centred spirituality and ethic is needed to which all the various cultural and religious traditions can contribute (1997:19). Newbigin does not dispute the need for a life-centredness which requires us "to learn a relationship of caring for all living beings and for all processes which sustain life" (*ibid*). The question is how such life can be achieved. For Newbigin, God has set the cross in the middle of human history as the place where human sin, pride, and selfishness can be forgiven and defeated; this is the prerequisite for life. Newbigin observes that in *Ecumenism in Transition* "Raiser speaks often about the incarnation but not about the atonement" (1994c:3); the same observation can be made about his second book, *To Be the Church* (Raiser 1997). Newbigin poses questions to other pluralist authors that remain relevant here. Does a formal concept such as 'life' have the power to unite the human race? When 'life' is proposed as the centre, the question arises "whose life?" How can such an abstract concept break down the pride, selfish ambition, and imperialisms that have wracked the human race? Newbigin proposes the cross as the one place where human sin has been judged and forgiven.

Second, a Trinitarianism which is not Christocentric poses problems for the mission of the church. The work of the Father and the Spirit is separated from the work of Christ. Newbigin argues on the basis of Scripture's witness that Jesus is the fullest revelation of the Father's character and purposes and that the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus given to lead humanity to Christ. To separate the work of the Father and Spirit from Christ is to fundamentally misunderstand the Father's and the Spirit's work. This leads to a serious problem for the mission of the church: when the work of the Spirit and the Father is cut loose from the mission of Jesus there are no criteria to assess and evaluate where God is at work. To put it another way: the cosmocentric-Trinitarian position provides no standard for understanding the signs of the times. Bosch points to numerous times when the current movements have simply been identified with the work of God: western colonialism; apartheid; National Socialism in Germany; secularism in the 1960s; political developments in the Soviet Union; revolutions in South and Central America (1991:428-430). There is a tendency to sacralize "the sociological forces of history that are dominant at any particular time, regarding them as inexorable works of providence and even of redemption" (Knapp 1977:161, quoted in Bosch 1991:429).

Newbiggin makes a similar point in response to Raiser: "... there are many spirits abroad, and when they are invoked, we are handed over to other powers. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, is known by the confession that Jesus alone is Lord" (1994f:52).

These problems challenge a Trinitarian theology that is not fully Christocentric. By contrast, Newbiggin has maintained the Christocentricity of the classical paradigm, but has expanded and deepened it into a Trinitarian theology.

Raiser is aware that the classical paradigm is Trinitarian:

Formal acknowledgment of belief in the Trinity has, of course, never been a problem in the ecumenical movement, particularly since the basis was expanded at the New Delhi assembly to include the Trinity. But the Trinitarian doxology does not yet necessarily progress beyond an understanding of the Trinity as a formal principle of salvation history, which remains none the less unchanged in its Christocentric orientation (1991a:91).

In this statement Raiser associates Christocentrism with a doctrine of the Trinity that is simply a formal principle of salvation history. It is precisely this problem that Newbiggin addresses in the years following 1961. He remains Christocentric but expands his understanding of the Trinity to be more than a "formal principle of salvation history." Newbiggin argues that the mission of Jesus and, likewise, the mission of the church are to be carried out in the context of the work of the Father and the Spirit beyond the bounds of the church. Newbiggin opens a way for the church to participate vigorously in the Spirit's work in the world and at the same time to engage in dialogue with adherents of other faiths, a way that remains Christocentric.

Yet Newbiggin's own theological reflection on the work of the Father and the Spirit remains underdeveloped. We have noted the critiques of various authors who observe that Newbiggin's Christocentric orientation has not allowed a full Trinitarian theology to develop (Petersen 1979:192; Hoedemaker 1979:456). Raiser believes that Newbiggin "can state his basic Christological and ecclesiological affirmations almost without any reference to the pneumatological dimension" (1994a:50). While some of these critiques proceed from an inadequate doctrine of the Trinity that is not Christocentric, it remains true that Newbiggin does not work out his insights on the activity of the Father and the Spirit in the world with enough detail to enable us to "speak more specifically of the way in which the Triune God is present and active in history" (Hoedemaker 1979:456).

Specifically this deficiency is revealed in Newbiggin's underdeveloped doctrine of creation and the work of God in world history. Raiser's books again highlight the weakness that remains in Newbiggin's Trinitarian reformulation of the *missio Dei*: it is in need of a much more adequate doctrine of creation.<sup>9</sup> Raiser points to religious pluralism, an oppressive 'global system', and the ecological threat as indications that the classical ecumenical paradigm is inadequate (1991a:54-78; 1997:19-26). The Christocentrism, the emphasis on salvation-history and on the church in the classical paradigm do not provide an adequate basis for handling the numerous issues that have arisen within the world of culture. The problems in the world of culture and in the global intertwinement of cultures calls for a more adequate Biblical perspective on creation. In Raiser's reflection on the Biblical understanding of Jubilee, he insists that

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<sup>9</sup>The reference to a 'doctrine of creation' entails such themes as creation revelation, creation law and order, creation mandate and cultural development, and the goodness of creation (cf. Wolters 1985:12-43; Walsh and Middleton 1984; Schrotenboer et. al. 1995; Chaplin et. al. 1986:32-60; Spykman 1992:139-297; Goheen 1996). While there is much confusion and misunderstanding that surrounds this topic, it is essential for the mission of the church.

“an ecumenical jubilee would mean accepting a new form of life which reflects a deepened understanding of God’s creation and of humanity’s place within it” (1997:65). Indeed Newbigin’s understanding of the mission of the Triune God would benefit from this emphasis.

Theologians within the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions have developed the Bible’s teaching on creation without moving from a Christocentrism. Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology would be enriched by a fuller appropriation of the insights of these traditions on the doctrine of creation. This will not be worked out here; a brief reference to one issue will suffice. In 1996 Newbigin engaged in a three-day dialogue with twenty-five leading scholars within the Kuyperian tradition on the topic ‘A Christian Society? Witnessing to the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Public Life of Western Culture.’ Newbigin commented at the end of that colloquium 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 went on to express his “fervent wish” that this tradition “would become a powerful voice in the life of British Christianity” (Newbigin 1996e). Differences remained between Newbigin and others within the Reformational tradition (Newbigin 1996c). One difference the discussions brought to light was that, while the Reformational tradition stresses the doctrine of creation in its understanding of the social witness of the church, Newbigin emphasizes the cross and eschatology. The emphasis on creation in the Reformational tradition can diminish the eschatological thrust of Scripture. At the same time, the doctrine of creation has fostered the development of a more positive and defined agenda in politics, education, and other areas of public life (Goheen 1999:6-8). Similar observations could be made about the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>10</sup> If Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology is to address adequately the numerous cultural, economic, political, social, and ecological issues of the day, his thought needs to be developed within the framework of a more nuanced understanding of the work of the Triune God in creation.

The way beyond the abiding tension that exists between missionary ecclesiologies based on two different understandings of the *missio Dei* is to maintain a Christocentrism but to further elaborate Scripture’s teaching on the work of the Triune God in creation. Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology has pointed the way but there is more work to be done.

#### 4.7. CONCLUSION

For Newbigin, the very being of the church is constituted by Christ’s commission: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21). The church’s nature and identity is given in its role to continue the mission of Jesus. Newbigin unfolds Christ’s mission in terms of the Father’s reign, Jesus’ inauguration of this reign, and the Spirit’s

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<sup>10</sup>See the discussion between (primarily but not only) the Kuyperian and Roman Catholic traditions in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Cromartie 1997).

witness to its presence.

According to Newbigin, the mission of Jesus can only be understood in the context of the reign of the Father. The mission of Jesus does not stand alone; He is sent by the Father to announce and embody His rule over history. There are at least two sides to this. On the one hand, the mission of Jesus must be understood in the setting of the *Biblical story* that narrates God's reign over history. The Bible tells the story of God's mighty acts for the redemption of the cosmos that culminate in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, His mission must also be understood in the context of the rule of the Father over *world history*. The witness of the Son is set in the context of the Father's sovereign reign over all the nations.

Moreover, Newbigin believes that the mission of Jesus must be understood in its eschatological context. In Jesus, the end-time reign of God has flowed into history. It has been revealed and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, it has not come in fullness. While the redemptive power of God's reign is present in Jesus, it has not yet been consummated. It remains hidden, awaiting its full unveiling in the future. This opens up a time for humankind to repent and believe the good news; this is the precise meaning of the delay of God's final judgement. In this provisional time period Jesus has made known the kingdom by embodying it with his life, proclaiming it with his words, and demonstrating it with his deeds. He prayed for it and suffered as He encountered the powers of evil. He formed a kingdom community and prepared them to continue his kingdom mission. His kingdom mission culminated in his death and resurrection whereby the victory of the kingdom for the entire cosmos was revealed and accomplished.

Furthermore, Newbigin highlights the work of the Spirit; the mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was a gift for the end times; He brings the life of the kingdom of God. He was poured out on Jesus to equip Him for his mission. By the power of the Spirit Jesus witnessed to the kingdom in life, word, and deed.

This summary of Newbigin's position exhibits a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth. The strength of Newbigin's Trinitarian articulation is the Christocentric focus. Newbigin's Trinitarian position faithfully reflects the teaching of Scripture in maintaining a Christocentric and eschatological understanding of the *missio Dei*. This is most precisely formulated by stating that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has been revealed and accomplished. The revelation of God's purpose for history in Jesus gives the church its compass-direction; the actual accomplishment of this end-time reign enables the church to participate in the salvation that is now present in history. This provides a rich Christological basis for Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

Newbigin develops this Christocentric focus within the context of the work of the Triune God. Yet Newbigin's theological formulations do not issue in a robust Trinitarian doctrine; he does not fully account for the work of the Father and the Spirit. Historical developments within the World Council of Churches in the 1960s challenged Newbigin to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. During the decade of the 1950s the work of the Father received little emphasis, the primary witness of the Spirit was eclipsed, and the work of the Father and the Spirit outside the bounds of the church received no attention. In the 1960s we see all three of these issues emerge in Newbigin's writings; yet Newbigin's articulation of the work of the Father and Spirit remained underdeveloped.

The underdevelopment of a Trinitarian basis for the missionary church is evident in two areas. In the first place, Newbigin's theological reflection on the work of the Father remains in a rudimentary state. We do not find a sustained discussion of the Father's

creational and providential work and its significance for mission in Newbigin's writings. Our elaboration of the Father's work in Newbigin's understanding has had to collect more or less isolated references from various places in his writing. This weakness has consequences for various aspects of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology that will be elaborated in later chapters.

The second area in which Newbigin's Trinitarian foundation for mission remains incomplete is his discussion of the work of the Father and Spirit outside the bounds of the church. During the church-centric period of the ecumenical movement (1938-1952), discussion of the Father and Spirit limited their work to the church. After Willingen, a reaction within the ecumenical tradition accented the work of the Father and Spirit outside the church, identifying all dynamic movements in culture as the work of God. Newbigin attempted to move beyond the pre-Willingen church-centric position and at the same time avoid the radical position taken by Hoekendijk and others that limited the work of the Father and Spirit to the world. While Newbigin was able to avoid both extremes, he never developed his position in a satisfactory way. Numerous questions remain.

Newbigin's theology manifests both a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth. His Christocentric orientation allows him to remain faithful to Scripture and open up fresh into the context of the *missio Dei* for the church. At the same time it also restricts a full development of the work of the Father and Holy Spirit. Newbigin's missionary experience and work in the context of the ecumenical movement enabled him to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. However, there remains a need for a fuller Trinitarian development of the *missio Dei*, especially as regards the work of the Father and the Spirit in the world.

## 5. THE MISSIONARY CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter treats the missionary character of the church in Newbigin's thought. Newbigin employs varying terminology to speak of the inextricable connection of mission to church. He uses the terms 'missionary character of the church' and 'missionary nature of the church' although he prefers the first (e.g., 1963g:12; 1978e:1). He speaks of 'mission as essential to the church' and of mission as the *esse* of the church and not simply of the *bene esse* (e.g., 1953d:162-163). He often affirms that 'the church is mission' (e.g., 1958b:25). He frequently quotes Emil Brunner's phrase 'The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning' (e.g., 1953d:162). He refers to the missionary dimension of the church (e.g., 1958b:21). He characterizes the church in terms of 'participating in' or 'continuing' or 'carrying on' the mission of Christ (1958b:17). Newbigin's language of the 'missionary character of the church' is chosen for the title as a succinct statement of his theological understanding of the church's nature.

In Newbigin's writing, the missionary nature of the church is defined by its participation in the mission of the Triune God. The church's source and identity are rooted in the missionary action of God on behalf of the world. The church participates in the mission of God, it continues the mission of Christ, and bears the witness of the Spirit. The mission of God, the ministry of Christ, and the witness of the Holy Spirit are all understood in eschatological context. The end-time reign of God forms the context for Newbigin's understanding of the church. His most frequent terminology always refers to the eschatological context: the church is sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom of God.

In this chapter we elaborate Newbigin's understanding of the church's missionary character in four sections. First, the church's identity is described in terms of its participation in and witness to the kingdom of the Father. Second, the nature of the church is explained as a continuation of the kingdom mission of the Son. Third, the church's missional character is elaborated in terms of the bearer of the Spirit's witness to the kingdom. The final section deals with three important matters in Newbigin's treatment of the missionary church: its dual relation to God and to the world, factors that have crippled the church's missionary identity, and the close relation between mission and unity.

### 5.2. PARTICIPATING IN AND WITNESSING TO THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHER

Jesus announced the arrival of the reign of God. This announcement was accompanied by the call to repentance and faith. However, not everyone is able to respond; repentance and faith are gifts given to those chosen and called to participate in and witness to the arrival of the kingdom for the sake of all (1980f:25). Following the central redemptive events of the cross and resurrection, the Spirit was poured out enabling this small band of followers to participate provisionally in the healing power

of the kingdom of God so that they might bear witness to it. Pentecost was the mighty act of God that formed the church.

This brief sketch shows that the church can only be understood in terms of the kingdom of God. There are four ways that Newbigin opens up the relationship between kingdom and church. First, his reflection on the terminology of *ecclesia* leads him to define the church as an assembly that flows from the exercise of God's rule in choosing and calling out a people for the sake of the world. Second, his most common definition of the church as 'the provisional incorporation of humankind in Jesus Christ' highlights the connection between the church and the end-time kingdom. Third, his most common images of the church are that of sign, first fruits, and instrument of the kingdom of God. Finally, the church is a hermeneutic of the good news of the arrival of the kingdom of God.

### 5.2.1. *The Assembly of God: A Community Chosen and Called Out by the Father*

Newbigin treats the nature of the church from the standpoint of terminology that the early church chose to designate itself. The Greek phrase is the *ecclesia tou Theou*. While *ecclesia* is often translated 'church', it is best rendered 'public assembly.' Indeed the way in which 'church' is often understood is precisely what the word '*ecclesia*' was designed to counter: a religious community organized for the personal salvation of its members. Newbigin frequently draws on Karl Schmidt's analysis of this word in the Gerhard Kittel *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to bring out the full significance of this name choice (Schmidt 1965:501-536). Newbigin first follows Schmidt's discussion in his 1952 Kerr Lectures (1953d:20-23). He returns to this discussion often in his writing. The original meaning of the word was a public assembly to which all the citizens of the city were summoned. The town clerk was the one who issued the call and the public gathering of citizens discussed and settled affairs that were important for the city's life (1980f:46). In the New Testament *ecclesia* is either accompanied by the subjective genitive *tou Theou* or this is assumed. The significance of this modifier is that it is God, not the town clerk, who summons the citizens to a public assembly. God's authority is not confined to one city. God's kingdom is over all and therefore this summoning is "God's active putting forth of his kingly power" (1984a:7) exercised in every place. God is acting in Ephesus, Rome, Corinth, and throughout the world to gather the new humankind into community. This is an action of the Triune God: "The Church is the assembly of God, God drawing people by the power of the Spirit into the allegiance of Christ" (*ibid*). 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 *ecclesia* as a *thiasos* and a *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 name *ecclesia*, however, challenged this categorization. "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" (*ibid*). The church refused to accept the designation of

a private religious fraternity but saw itself as a people called into the end-time kingdom of God and launched into the public life of the world to challenge all competing allegiances, all *cultus publici* including the emperor cult and, much later, the modern scientific worldview of the West (1980f:46).

This discussion of the nature of the church is used by Newbigin to challenge the denominational model of the church and to challenge the timidity of the Western church that accepts the privatized role assigned to it by the modern scientific worldview. In both cases Newbigin digs to an ecclesiological foundation. The church cannot be understood in terms of its place within a certain society but must be defined by its relation to God. It is God who has called the church into being and it must be his purposes that define the church's nature. More specifically the church has been called by an exercise of God's kingly power to enter the end-time reign of God. The *ecclesia* is the first fruits of a much larger harvest that will be manifested in the last day. Thus it is God's calling and election, and God's kingdom that define the church's being.

The idea of a called-out or an elect community is scandalous to many; yet Newbigin believes that election is central to the Biblical story and essential for a proper understanding of the nature of the church. He comments that "no discussion of the nature of the Church can avoid dealing with the doctrine of election" (1953d:112). This is so because "the Church is the task-force picked for a particular job for His mission.... It is only in this way that we can make sense of what the Bible teaches about election which is in a sense the fundamental doctrine of the Bible" (1968f:3).

The importance of election in Newbigin's understanding of the mission of the church can be highlighted by two contrasts: in systematic theology with a traditional Calvinist view and in biblical theology with the redemptive-historical standpoint. The first contrast is between Newbigin's view of election and a more traditional, Reformed view. The difference between Newbigin's doctrine of election and a more traditional Calvinist view can be seen at four points. These four points share much in common with others, most notably the important work of Johannes Blauw (1962).

First, Newbigin views election corporately rather than individually. It is not the eternal salvation of the individual that is primarily in view when Newbigin speaks of election. It is a people chosen to bear witness to God's purposes.

Second, Newbigin views election as an historical act in Christ rather than an eternal decree. A traditional Reformed understanding of election is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). Chapter three is entitled "Of God's Eternal Decree." The first two paragraphs elaborate the eternal decree. In this context, paragraph three speaks of two decrees—the predestination of some men and angels to everlasting life and others to everlasting death. Paragraph four maintains that election unto life is unconditional. Then in paragraph five it states that "as God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto." The historical events of redemption in Christ and by the Spirit simply become means by which God's eternal decree is worked out. The Westminster Confession begins with the decree and moves to consider the work of Christ and the Spirit in that light. This contrasts with Newbigin who begins with the gospel and moves to consider election from that standpoint. Newbigin comments on the traditional view:

... there is a way in which the doctrine of election has been distorted by separating it from the doctrine of Christ. We surely go far astray if we begin from a doctrine of

divine decrees based on an abstract concept of divine omnipotence... We have to take as our starting point and as the controlling reality for all our thinking on this as on every theological topic, what God has actually done in Jesus Christ (1989e:86).

As is so often the case, Newbigin takes his starting point in the cross of Christ. The cross is the place where all human beings were exposed as enemies of God and accepted as beloved of God.<sup>1</sup> As this universal love of God is made known and accomplished at one point in history—at the cross—so it is made known to the world not in a universal spiritual illumination but by being communicated to a certain community who have been chosen beforehand for that role (*ibid*). While Newbigin does stress that election finds its source in the love of the Father before the foundation of the world, his emphasis is on the work of God in history to choose a people. Hunsberger comments:

In Newbigin's usage, the term does not designate God's eternal decree which fixes human destiny... Rather, it designates God's acting personally and particularly in history, selecting a people to be uniquely his own. Therefore, the focus of attention for Newbigin is not the "decree" of the Father (as for the Reformers), nor the "decision" in the Son (as for Barth), but the "selection" established by the historical converting action of the Spirit (Hunsberger 1998:86).

Third, election is for responsibility, not privilege. Newbigin believes that the doctrine of election has become unacceptable to many Christians because it views this doctrine as election to a privileged status before God. He refers to this as a "false belief" and, after quoting Amos 3:2 ("You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins"), says that in Scripture "it becomes clear that to be God's chosen people means not privilege but suffering, reproach, humiliation" (1989e:84). When the church begins to think of "election in terms of spiritual privilege rather than missionary responsibility, then she comes under His merciful judgement as Israel did" (1953d:149). Throughout his writings Newbigin consistently contrasts privilege with responsibility.

It would appear that Newbigin creates a false dilemma. Surely to have a foretaste of the salvation of the kingdom and to experience as first fruits the powers of the coming age is a tremendous privilege. Hunsberger does not believe that Newbigin here makes a false contrast. He argues that the two terms—privilege and responsibility—refer to the attitudes of God's people, not their experience of his grace. He notes that in many other

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<sup>1</sup>In these comments, Newbigin sounds like a universalist; and there are those who have carelessly made this charge. However, Newbigin believes that the Bible is clear in warning that there are those who will miss the final consummation. Yet his treatment of universalism and his dialectic of God's love and wrath are ultimately unsatisfactory.

places Newbigin speaks of the people of God as “bearers, not *exclusive* beneficiaries” (1978e:34). The qualifying word ‘exclusive’ marks the people of God as both bearers as well as instruments. In other words, the people of God share in the salvation they mediate to others. It is true that (in many ways not only with the distinction between bearers and exclusive beneficiaries) Newbigin highlights the fact that the church enjoys privilege and does not simply bear responsibility. Yet the strong contrast can be better explained by Newbigin’s strong reaction to the traditional doctrine of election.

Fourth, election must be understood in terms of missional responsibility. The contrast here between Newbigin’s view of election and a traditional Reformed doctrine is striking. The doctrine of election is a good example in traditional theology of a Biblical doctrine that has been taken out of its missionary context (as found in Scripture). It demonstrates how theology has been shaped in a Christendom setting over against the systems of other confessional families, rather than in reference to the task of the church in a non-Christian world. In the eight paragraphs of the Westminster Confession of Faith’s treatment of the divine decree, not a word is mentioned about the missional responsibility of the church. Yet for Newbigin this is fundamental to a Biblical understanding. He speaks of “the missionary character of the doctrine of election” (1953d:111). The following statement is typical of Newbigin’s connection between election and mission:

To be elect in Christ Jesus, and there is no other election, means to be incorporated into his mission to the world, to be the bearer of God’s saving purpose for his whole world, to be the sign and agent and the firstfruits of his blessed kingdom which is for all (1989e:27).

For Newbigin, election is God’s selection of a community in Christ for a missional responsibility—to bear witness to the salvation of the kingdom. This defines the role of church in the Biblical story.

Hunsberger has shown that one of the important factors that makes Newbigin’s understanding of election unique is the way in which he demonstrates the *necessity or inner logic* of election. To put it another way, in redemption God uses the channels he cut at creation. In a chapter entitled ‘The Logic of Election’ (possibly indebted to Hunsberger’s dissertation), Newbigin writes: “We can only understand the biblical teaching about election if we see it as part of the whole way of understanding the human situation which is characteristic of the Bible” (1989e:82). Articulating this logic of election, we can see even more clearly the important place of the community of God’s people for his redemptive work. Hunsberger points to three closely related areas that demonstrates the necessity or inner logic of election (1998:103): election is necessary because of the nature and destiny of humanity, because of the personal character of God, and because of the nature of salvation.

The Bible’s understanding of human life differs from both the Hindu and modern Western views that see the human person ultimately as an isolated individual. Here the relation of humanity to God is that of the relationship of the individual soul to the Eternal, of the alone to the Alone. In the Bible, God creates humankind to live in terms of relationships: in relation to each other, and as a community in relation to God. While a Hindu anthropology strips away every layer of history to get to the real self, the Bible understands humanity to exist in terms of his historical situation and manifold

relationships. “It follows that this mutual relatedness, this dependence of one on another, is not merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself” (1989e:82). In other words, the historical and social aspect of humankind is creational and of the very stuff of being human and, therefore, will be redeemed; thus, the election of a community to bear salvation is not a temporary means to get to the consummation or a channel of communication extrinsic to the communities’ life, but is already an expression of what that consummation will entail. If the church is to bear in its life the salvation of the kingdom and call others to participate in it, it must be embodied in a community that experiences God’s renewing work. There is no private salvation. Salvation is a matter of the restoration of the whole creation. This means that the channel by which salvation comes to us must be consistent with this end. In his own words:

In order to receive God’s saving revelation we have to open the door to the neighbor whom he sends as his appointed messenger, and—moreover—to receive that messenger not as a temporary teacher or guide whom we can dispense with when we ourselves have learned what is needed, but as one who will permanently share our home. There is no salvation except one in which we are saved together through the one whom God sends to be the bearer of his salvation (1989e:83).

We can state the logic of election succinctly in the following way. God created us to be social creatures that can know a personal God in the context of community and history. Since salvation is the restoration of creation, the consummation will involve a restored human family reconciled to each other and to God in the midst of history. If the call to this salvation is to be consistent with the nature of salvation itself, it must be made by a community already experiencing this reconciliation to God and to each other. Election is, therefore, necessary in that it is congruous with the Biblical understanding of the human situation in its relation to God.

The second contrast is between Newbigin’s view of the election of Israel and the church as bearer of God’s revelation, and the view of authors within the “redemptive-history” hermeneutic. The contrast here is instructive because Newbigin has much in common with their view of Scripture. George Hunsberger has made a helpful contrast between Newbigin on the one hand, and Harry Boer and Oscar Cullmann on the other. Hunsberger groups Boer and Cullmann under the rubric of authors who view God’s election of His people as a mere ‘instrumental mechanism’ for his work of salvation (Hunsberger 1998:97). Boer traces the redemptive line from Abraham to Christ with attention to their “special function of preserving in its integrity the messianic line culminating in the coming of Christ” (Boer 1961:68; quoted in Hunsberger *ibid*). Hunsberger concludes that Boer’s view “assigns Israel more a function as the machinery of history than a dynamic and living vocation as its ordained purpose” (Hunsberger 1998:98). Cullmann likewise displays the same general viewpoint. Instead of being concerned with “the preservation of a biological redemptive line” as Boer is, Cullmann displays the “historical line of events” which find their culmination and mid-point in Christ (*ibid*). In both cases, the election of a people “is not tied to a missional purpose but to a historical instrumentality as a part of the redemptive process” (*ibid*). The events or the biological line become conduits for the appearance of the Messiah who brings about redemption. Newbigin’s view is much more closely tied to mission. The elect community is a people who embody in their corporate life the purpose of God. God’s

work of redemption cannot be abstracted from the reality of their communal life that incarnates the renewal God is working.

### 5.2.2. *Provisional Incorporation of Humankind into Jesus Christ*

Throughout the last three decades of his life, Newbigin frequently refers to the church as ‘the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ.’ The first time he refers to the church in this way is in 1973 in a discussion paper prepared for an ecumenical group in Madras in which we find a profound discussion of the structures of the church. His most extended—and maybe his only—discussion of this definition is found here. He observes that “every discussion of the structures of the Church presupposes a doctrine of the Church—hidden or acknowledged” (1973c:110). He poses the question ‘What is the Church?’ and proceeds to offer his answer.

The New Testament uses many metaphors—body of Christ, Bride of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit, People of God, Followers of the Lamb and scores of others. But it is not proper to take simply one of these images and use it as the sole basis of defining the church. While there will always be relativity, Newbigin proceeds to offer his “working definition” of the church: ‘The church is the provisional incorporation of mankind into Jesus Christ.’ This definition is unfolded in four points.

First, the essential words are “into Jesus Christ.” Since Jesus is the representative man who has revealed and accomplished the end-time kingdom, participation in that kingdom means one must be incorporated into Jesus Christ. This refers to a threefold reality. It refers, in the first place, to the historical Jesus who lived, died and rose again. This Jesus lived at a point in history, in a known time and place, with a certain name. This historical person revealed and accomplished the end. The church exists in order that men may be related to that historical Jesus—continuing His life in the world and conforming itself to His death. In the second place, we are related to Jesus who is risen, alive, and present in midst of his church. The church cannot simply be explained by sociological factors because it is defined by the presence of the living Lord at work in its midst. The life of Jesus is not simply a pattern to be reproduced but the continuing presence of that life active and working in the midst of the community. Finally, being incorporated into Jesus Christ means being related to Jesus the Coming One. The church does not develop as any other institution—that is, responding to forces by reference to its past. Rather it is called forward to the future—a future in which it already participates and which is the true future of the human race and cosmos.

Second, the church is concerned with *humankind*. It is not a private organization for the benefit of those who adhere to that particular brand of religion. The church is not a *privatus cultus* but the first fruits of a harvest of the new humankind. She is *pars pro toto*, the part for the whole.

Third, the church is a *provisional* incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ. It is provisional in two senses. First, the church’s members only make up a small part of humankind and exist, not for themselves, but for the sake of all humankind. Second, the visible form of the church is provisional. It does not yet reflect the variety and richness of the life of all humankind.

Fourth and finally, it is a provisional *incorporation* of humankind into Christ. In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection God has accomplished the end. The church is that community that has been incorporated into the life of the kingdom as deposit, first fruit,

and sign. It enjoys communion with the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit—the blessing that will be fully known at the end. However, this enjoyment of the powers of the age to come must be understood in terms of the church's task to continue the sending of Jesus into the world. As he made known the kingdom in his life, deeds, and words under the sign of the cross, so the church must continue that mission. This can only happen as the church abides in Christ as branches abide in the vine. Only in communion with Christ can the life of Jesus become evident in the life of the church.

This definition highlights the close tie between the eschatological and the missionary nature of the church. As the church is incorporated into the reign of God in Jesus, it is constituted as a community called to continue that same kingdom mission.

### 5.2.3. *Sign, Foretaste, and Instrument of the Kingdom*

The triad sign, foretaste, and instrument<sup>2</sup> of the kingdom appeared as a designation of the church in *The Household of God* in the early 1950s<sup>3</sup>. From that time on it became the most common way Newbigin understood the church. Again the close connection between the kingdom and the church is evident in these images. A succinct summary of his understanding is found in a speech he gave near the end of his time in Madras.

The business of this 7 percent [Christians in Madras] is to be an effective sign, instrument, and firstfruit of God's purpose for the whole city. Each of those three words is important. They are to be a *sign*, pointing men to something that is beyond their present horizon but can give guidance and hope now; an *instrument* (not the only one) that God can use for his work of healing, liberating, and blessing; and a *firstfruit*—a place where men and women can have a real taste now of the joy and freedom God intends for all (1994k:33).

The church is first of all a foretaste or *arrabon*. This indicates that the church has both a real experience of the salvation of the kingdom in the present and a hope for full realization of that renewal. Newbigin believes that the Eastern Orthodox church has something to teach the western church on this score. The Orthodox criticize the West for embracing too functional a view of the church. The Orthodox stress that the church is first of all a communion in the life of the Triune God. It must be defined by what it

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<sup>2</sup>Newbigin uses other images to get at the same point. He will often speak of the church as agent instead of instrument and of the church as foretaste and deposit (*arrabon*) instead of first fruit.

<sup>3</sup>Already in 1948 Newbigin uses two of the terms to refer to the church: first fruits and instrument (1948d:28)

is, not simply by what it does—in ontological terms, not just in functional terms (1994k:60f.).

The church is also an instrument or agent in service of God's reign. The church can be the means by which God brings about justice, freedom, and peace in the world. The announcement of the good news of the kingdom of God must be accompanied by a people who pursue the justice, peace, and freedom of the kingdom. If the reality is not evident in the deeds of the church the words will not ring true. Words without deeds lack authority. But God does not only use the deeds of the church as instrument; He also uses the life of the community insofar as it is a faithful first fruit of the kingdom. However, we must recognize that the church is not the only instrument. God uses the state, for example, as an instrument of justice, peace, and freedom in society (1993k:61f.).

Finally, the church is a sign. A sign points to something "that is real but not yet visible" (1994k:63). The church is a 'pointing people' who witness to the fact that there is the reality of the kingdom of God that lies beyond history. The church does not offer solutions to all the world's problems. Rather by its life, words, and deeds it directs the hope of people to the coming kingdom of God. Newbigin frequently employs an engaging image to illustrate this reality.

When we have to go to a distant village in our pastoral duty we try to start very early in the morning, so that we do not have to walk in the heat of the day. And it sometimes happens that we have to set off in total darkness; perhaps we are going towards the west so that there is no light in the sky and everything is dark. But as we go, a party of people travelling the opposite way comes to meet us. There will be at least a faint light on their faces. If we stop and ask them: "Where does the light come from?" they will simply ask us to turn round (do a U-turn) and look towards the east. A new day is dawning, and the light we saw was just its faint reflection in the faces of those going that way. They did not possess the light; it was a light given to them. The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is given already the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness (1987a:21; cf. 1989e:120).

Newbigin's threefold description of the church as sign, instrument, and foretaste was forged in the crucible of an encounter with the ecclesiology of Johannes C. Hoekendijk. Newbigin's earliest discussion of these terms explicitly acknowledge the work of Hoekendijk (1953d:168). In two articles published in the *International Review of Mission*, Hoekendijk had brought the church-centric basis for mission in the ecumenical tradition under searching criticism (1950, 1952). Mission had gone astray because it revolved around an illegitimate centre—the church (Hoekendijk 1952:332). There was the need to rethink the nature of the church within the kingdom-gospel-apostolate-world framework (:333). The kingdom is destined for the world because it is the world that God loves and has reconciled. The gospel is the announcement about God's redemptive act that is directed toward the whole world. It is of the nature of the gospel that it be proclaimed; the gospel and apostolate belong together. Where in this context does the church stand? "Certainly not at the starting-point, nor at the end. The Church has no fixed place at all in this context, it *happens* in so far as it actually proclaims the kingdom to the world" (Hoekendijk 1952:334). Whatever else can be said of the church is of little relevance. "The *nature* of the Church can be sufficiently defined by its *function*, i.e. its participation in Christ's apostolic ministry" (*ibid*).

Newbigin protests this interpretation of the church. He recognizes what is right in Hoekendijk's thinking. Hoekendijk protests the church that has become ingrown and lost its missionary identity. He believes the church can only be understood in terms of mission. "The Church can exist only to the extent that it is the Mission.... To put it differently, it lives only in so far as it partakes in the 'economy of witness', which Christianity signifies in the New Testament" (Hoekendijk 1952:334-335). Newbigin agrees.

... the very general belief of Christians in most Churches that the Church can exist without being a mission involves a radical contradiction of the truth of the Church's being... [N]o recovery of the true wholeness of the Church's nature is possible without a recovery of its radically missionary character (1953d:170).

Newbigin is concerned, however, that Hoekendijk has exaggerated this insight and repudiated the idea of the church as end by insisting that the church must be understood solely in terms of its instrumental or functional role. To this distortion Newbigin responds with two affirmations. First, "the church is both a means and an end, because it is a foretaste" (1953d:168). It is precisely because the church now has a real foretaste of the life of the age to come that she can be a witness and instrument of the kingdom. Or as he phrases it: "It is precisely because she is not *merely* instrumental that she can be instrumental" (1953d:169). Second, "the means by which the good news of salvation is propagated must be congruous with the nature of the salvation itself" (*ibid*). If salvation is a making whole, a healing of all things in Christ, a reconciliation to God, then the church can only proclaim this reality if it is itself a living embodiment of this healing and reconciliation. So Newbigin concludes:

Just as we must insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so we must also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate. An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church (*ibid*).

The next twenty years witnessed a growing popularity of Hoekendijk's views in ecumenical circles. As this view permeated the popular ranks of the church Newbigin increasingly stressed what he believed was being neglected. A quote may suffice to illustrate what became a common theme for Newbigin throughout this time.

In what I have just said, it might appear that I am reducing the Church to a merely functional level—making it merely a means to an end. That must never be done. The Church is indeed functional: its function is to bring men to their Saviour. But it can only do that if it is more than a merely functional agency. It can only do that if it is itself the place where the Saviour's presence is known and enjoyed—if only in foretaste. People must be able to get some idea of what it means to be saved by looking at the life of the Church. At least they must see here a foretaste of what Jesus is offering to the world. Otherwise 'being saved' has no clear meaning ... It must be a community in which the love of God in Jesus is known and tasted and shared and made available to others (1972e:8).

His emphasis on the church as foretaste, first fruit, and deposit during this time led him to a more nuanced formulation. After again stressing that the church cannot be described merely in functional terms as a mere instrument for the fulfillment of a

purpose beyond itself, he notes that “membership in the Church involves communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.” This cannot be considered a means to the end but the true end itself. However, it is not the end since God desires all people to be brought into this communion. So the church is neither an end in itself nor a means to the end. It is the *arrabon* (deposit) and first fruit of God’s purpose in Christ. “Only *as such* is it also sign and instrument” (1973c:113; my emphasis). There is a natural priority in understanding the church as a deposit or first fruit. It is in having a foretaste of the kingdom, in being the deposit and first fruit of the life of the kingdom that is coming, that the church is sign and instrument. Put another way, Newbigin recognizes that there are other instruments of the kingdom. However, the way in which the church is an instrument in manifesting the kingdom is by first being a first fruit of that kingdom.

Newbigin continued to employ the images of the church as first fruits, sign, and instrument of the kingdom to highlight its missionary character. He sorrowfully noted the selfish introversion of the church and spoke of “our most urgent task” and our “greatest task” to help the church move from thinking of itself simply as a saved community to thinking of itself as a community which has been caught up into God’s saving action for all men. “I think our most urgent task is to discover those changes in the life of the church which will transform it from a self-regarding, self-seeking clique into an open fellowship of those who are committed to Christ’s saving work for all men” (1972e:7) This will not come by dissolving the church as many are suggesting but by seeing the church as a community which follows Jesus taking up his mission as instrument, sign, and foretaste of the kingdom (1972e:7-8).

#### 5.2.4. *The Church as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel*

Another designation of the church that became popular in the last two decades of Newbigin’s life was the church as a hermeneutic of the gospel (1980f:43; 1989e:222-233). The good news is that in Jesus the kingdom of God has arrived and is present in its healing power. And yet it appears as weak, foolish, and despised. The kingdom of God is hidden in the garb of weakness. How can a message of victory over sin and suffering, a message that claims to be the clue to the purpose of universal history, be made believable when it runs counter to typical understandings of power and victory?

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it (1989e:227).

The term was first employed to counter the danger of separating the church from the kingdom. In lectures given in preparation for the WCC meeting at Melbourne, Australia in 1980 on the theme ‘Your Kingdom Come’ Newbigin traced the theme of the kingdom in 20<sup>th</sup> century missionary theology. He observed two dangers with respect to the relation of the kingdom to the church. The first danger is that the kingdom is separated from the church. When this happens, mission degenerates into a mere program or ideology. Abstract nouns like social progress and civilization in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

or liberation, justice, freedom, and peace in the latter part of the century, replace Biblical language about the kingdom of God. Mission degenerates into a program or ideology in a legalistic pursuit of these ideals. The other danger is that kingdom is identified with the church. In this case the mission of the kingdom is reduced to the growth and prosperity of the church. Mission equates the success of its strategies with the growth of the kingdom. The energies of the church are focussed on the growth and welfare of the church (1980f:19, 41-42 ). The proper answer in relating the church to the kingdom is not to find a middle way between these two dangers. "It is by a firm grasp of the New Testament teaching about the Spirit that we shall come to a right understanding of the relation between the Church and Kingdom" (1980f:41). Newbigin finds this relation in Acts 1. The disciples ask a question about the kingdom: "Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They receive an answer about the Spirit: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You will be my witnesses..." The Spirit is the foretaste, the first fruit, the *arrabon* of the Kingdom. It is both the real presence now and future promise of the kingdom. Thus the church is the community that has begun to experience the presence of the kingdom. As such it is a hermeneutic of the gospel—the living reality of a community who has a foretaste of the kingdom and is a faithful preview of its future consummation. As a hermeneutic of the gospel it is privileged and called to seek justice, freedom, and peace, to share in the sufferings of an encounter with evil, to exhibit solidarity with the oppressed, and to share the assurance, hope, and joy of the victory of the kingdom. "Such a community will be the living hermeneutic of the message of the Kingdom which it preaches. There can be no other" (1980f:43).

### 5.3. CONTINUING THE MISSION OF THE SON

"The church can be rightly understood only in an eschatological perspective" (1953d:153). More precisely, the church can be rightly understood only in terms of the "overlap of the ages" in which the kingdom of God is already present and yet awaits a consummation. The precise meaning of this time between the incarnation and *parousia* of Jesus is mission—the mission of Jesus continued in the church (1953d:157). Thus, "the implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology that does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology" (1953d:153-154). The nature of the church is defined by its call to continue the mission of Jesus.

#### 5.3.1. *The Logic of Mission*

Unfortunately, there is a long tradition in missiology that roots the mission of the church, not in the gospel and the kingdom mission of Jesus, but in obedience to a command. To counter this understanding, Newbigin speaks of the 'logic of mission' (1989e:116). This phrase refers to an essential historical connection between the mission of the church and the good news of the kingdom revealed and accomplished in the mission of Jesus. Mission is essentially connected to and flows from the coming of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the meaning of universal history has been made known and

realized. The last day has arrived and the church now participates in the powers of the new age that are already at work (1989e:117). The call to repentance and baptism is a call to be incorporated into Jesus and “so to share his ongoing mission to the world. It is to be baptized into his mission” (*ibid*). This good news must be made known to all nations. “The logic of mission is this: the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally” (1989e:125). The universality of the church’s mission flows from the universal significance of the gospel as the revelation of the end of history.

A contrast with Konrad Raiser makes Newbigin’s position clear. Raiser is critical of the classical paradigm of the ecumenical movement for the triumphalism of universal mission (Raiser 1991a:91). He recognizes that the universal mission of the church is based on a certain Christology—what he calls a Christology “from above.” Since the church is formed by an historical and existential link to Jesus Christ, Christology will be all-determining in defining the church. Raiser points to two Christologies “from above” that are foundational for the classical paradigm. The first is an “incarnational” understanding of Christ that is characteristic of the Anglican and Orthodox traditions in which the ontological reality of Christ’s humanity and divinity is stressed. The second is a “cosmocrator” Christology advocated by the Reformation churches which accents the exaltation of Christ as Lord and Judge of the world (Raiser 1991a:43). Both are Christologies “from above”: the first highlights the divinity of Christ and the second his universal Lordship. If Christ is God and Lord, then the mission of the church is universal. Over against this Raiser calls for a “*concrete Christology*, which takes seriously the historical particularity of Jesus” (Raiser 1991a:59). In contrast to a Christology “from above” which stresses the divinity of Jesus and his universal significance, Raiser wants a Christology “from below” that emphasizes his loving and liberating care for all people. Raiser’s Christology “from below” takes seriously the ministry, suffering, rejection, service and ultimately the cross of Christ (Raiser 1991a:43). The atonement is interpreted simply as the price paid by Jesus for total devotion to God and the marginalized (*ibid*). This Christology would lead the church to give up its Christocentric and universal claims and carry out its mission in solidarity with the world.

For Newbigin Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of the character and purpose of God for the world. The incarnation, cross, and resurrection are events of universal significance and validity because Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of universal history. The exaltation demonstrates the universality of Christ’s work. If this is true, then the gospel must be proclaimed to all people and to the ends of the earth; universal mission is the logic of the gospel.

It would be a mistake to conclude from this that Newbigin can be interpreted in terms of a triumphalist Christology or ecclesiology “from above.” It can be conceded that Raiser has placed his finger on an important aspect of Christology that has been neglected in classical theology; indeed questions of ontology and emphasis on the reigning Christ have blurred the ministry of Christ in the flesh. Yet Newbigin’s Christology is not rooted in ontology nor on the reigning Christ; Newbigin does maintain a Christology that emphasizes the divinity and universal Lordship of Jesus

Christ—a Christology “from above.”<sup>4</sup> However, the mission of the church is rooted in the total fact of Christ that reveals and accomplishes the end of universal history. His ministry to the poor, his suffering, his rejection, service, and ultimately his cross all find a large place in Newbigin’s Christology. Veldhorst has shown that the distinction between a missiology “from above” and a missiology “from below” is a meaningless distinction in classifying Newbigin; he draws the emphases of both together in an integrated framework (Veldhorst 1989:63-68). A similar comment could be made about his Christology; our review of Newbigin’s understanding of Jesus has shown that both emphases—His historical mission and universal significance—find a place in God’s revelation and accomplishment of the end of history in Christ.

### 5.3.2. *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You*

Newbigin frequently points to two texts to highlight that the missionary church is defined by the mission of Jesus: Acts 1:1-11 and John 20:19-23. Acts 1 opens with the words: “In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach...” indicating that Acts continues the story of Jesus’ teaching and acting in the church. In John 20:21 we read the words that we have become accustomed to seeing in Newbigin’s work: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Newbigin comments on the Johannine commission in the light of his missionary experience in India:

And that [John 20:21] is the launching of the church. It is a movement launched into the public life of the world. It has no life except in this sending. I came to feel vividly the truth of this during my years in the Madurai diocese, when more than half of our congregations had no buildings of their own. I became accustomed to conducting all the services of the church in the open air, in the village street. I have in my mind’s eye now those hundreds of occasions when I have ministered the word and sacrament of the gospel with the Christian congregation sitting around and, beyond them, the wider circle of the whole village standing round, watching, listening, questioning. And how often it happened that, on my next visit, some of those who had been standing at the edge then asked for baptism, coming to join the group in the centre. That scene, repeated hundreds of times, etches in one’s mind a picture of the church not as a body drawn out of the world into a secure place, but as a body thrust out into the world to draw all people to Christ. The church’s being is in that sending (1987a:22-23).

The content of the church’s mission is also given in this sending. The word ‘as’ is important: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ This connection between the sending of Jesus and the sending of the church enables us to understand more concretely the shape of the church’s mission. Jesus carried out His kingdom mission in the power of the Spirit, made known the good news in his life, death, and resurrection, bathed His witness in prayer for the coming of the kingdom, carried out His calling in suffering and

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<sup>4</sup>Gordon Spykman argues that the false dilemma between a theology “from above” and a theology “from below” is a capitulation to a Kantian split. Both Schleiermacher and Barth are captive to this Kantian problematic: the one opting for the historical pole, the other for the suprahistorical pole (1992:44-48).

weakness, and finally formed and nourished a community to continue His work. This gives specific direction to the church in its kingdom mission.

### 5.3.3. *The Church: Mission in Christ's Way*

“[W]e are to understand the mission of the Church in the light of the fact that the history of the time between Christ’s ascension and his coming again, the time when his reign at the right hand of God is a hidden reality, the time in which signs are granted of that hidden reign but in which the full revelation of its power and glory is held back in order that all the nations—all the human communities—may have the opportunity to repent and believe in freedom” (1989e:128). Yet the mission of the church has been variously understood in the history of the church. What is mission? Newbigin answers: mission in Christ’s way. Newbigin opens his book *Mission in Christ's Way* with these words: “According to the fourth gospel, Jesus sent his disciples out on their mission with the words: ‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’ (John 20:21). This must determine the way we think about and carry out the mission; it must be founded and modelled upon his. We are not authorized to do it in any other way” (1987a:1). What is Christ’s way?

The first set of contrasts is found in the wake of the Willingen meeting of the IMC. In the last chapter of Wilhelm Andersen’s IMC. research pamphlet that studies the contribution of Willingen to a theology of mission—a chapter that is entitled ‘Problems Left Unsolved’—he draws on Karl Hartenstein’s analysis to show that there were two primary ways in which this question of mission in Christ’s way was answered at that conference (Andersen 1955:49ff.). In Hartenstein’s critical evaluation of Willingen, he pointed to a divergence of understanding the mission of Jesus as one that required a further profound study of Scripture. The two primary ways of understanding the church and mission in the way of Christ may be designated as follows.

The first we might refer to as the Lutheran answer. This answer was elaborated at the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Hanover a few weeks after Willingen. If Christ is the starting point for our thinking about the church, we must take into consideration with equal seriousness His incarnation, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. The kingdom mission of Jesus is defined by the Father in a threefold way. As the incarnate one God makes Himself known in Jesus; as the crucified one, God judges sin in the world; as the resurrected one, God ushers in the new Creation to break in on the old. “These three aspects together and equally constitute the essence of the mission of the Son, and the mission of the Holy Spirit follows upon them as their consequence. None of these aspects must be treated as though it were effective out of relationship to the others; but equally they must not be identified with one another” (Andersen 1955:50). In the end, however, the Lutheran view orients itself to the cross rather than equally emphasizing each (:51) and so the question Andersen poses to this tradition is whether or not they have taken seriously God’s affirmation of the creation in the incarnation and resurrection.

The above-mentioned second way of understanding the church and mission in Christ’s way is the Anglican answer. In this tradition, ecclesiological and missiological formulations are to a large extent determined by the incarnation. The missionary church is to be understood as an extension of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Andersen

questions whether or not emphasis on the incarnation is so excessive in this tradition that it is difficult to take with sufficient seriousness the cross and the resurrection.

Certainly witness to the Incarnation is part of the Christian testimony which can never be abandoned; but this is not to say that the whole mission of Christ can be considered only—or one-sidedly—in the light of the Incarnation alone. The Incarnation does not of itself constitute the whole work of Christ. The Cross and the Resurrection have, in relation to it, not merely demonstrative value; they have intrinsic value; and it is only when these three aspects are taken together that they constitute the witness of the triune God to Himself (Andersen 1955:50-51).

Newbigin's understanding of mission in Christ's way seems to manifest both of these tendencies at different times. The first and most common way Newbigin proceeds is to define the church's mission in terms of the four primary episodes of the Christ event—incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost (1987a). The church's mission is continuing the life ministry of Jesus, in the way of the cross, in the resurrection life of the age to come, and in the power of the end-time Spirit. In this way of understanding the continuance of the mission of Jesus, there are two basic time periods in the "time between the times." The first is the mission of Jesus made up of his life ministry, death, resurrection, and outpouring of the Spirit. The second is the mission of the church which continues what Jesus began in these events.

The second way Newbigin understands mission in Christ's way corresponds more closely with the Anglican tradition outlined above. Reference has been made to the way Newbigin was influenced by the Anglo-Catholic tradition when he read Michael Ramsey's book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*. Critical appreciation for the Catholic emphasis on the church as an extension of the incarnation is prevalent in both *The Reunion of the Church* (1948:55-83) and *The Household of God* (1953:61-93). On the one hand, Newbigin rejects the Catholic understanding of the church as an extension of the incarnation. He interacts with Yves Congar arguing that his notion of the extension of the incarnation removes the eschatological dimension of the church (1948:55-83). On the other hand, Newbigin is appreciative of their emphasis on the church as an historically continuous institution founded by Jesus to continue his mission. The church continues the ministry Jesus began in his life. Newbigin's emphasis is not so much on the historic succession as on the elements that made up the life ministry of Jesus. He writes, "The thing that Jesus began to do must go on. He is the Messiah, and God's rule is what is manifested in his life and deeds and words, the rule of the one who is really in charge" (1972g:56). If we characterize Newbigin's thought in this way then there are three basic time periods in the era "between the times." The first is the life and ministry of Jesus in the flesh making known the kingdom of God in life, word, and deed. The third is the continuation of that mission in the church by the Spirit. Between these two is the cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost as events necessary for the church's mission to begin. Before the church can make the life of the kingdom known in life and deed and proclaim its presence, it is necessary for Christ to defeat sin on the cross, to enter into the resurrection life of the age to come as a Pioneer, and pour out the Spirit that brings the life of the kingdom. The church must be incorporated into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

These two perspectives are not contradictory but complementary. Both stress the extension of Jesus' life ministry in the church. In the life and deeds of Jesus, the

presence of the kingdom was made known; in the corporate life of the church and in its deeds of mercy and justice, the presence of the kingdom is made known. In Jesus' words the arrival of the kingdom was announced; proclamation of that good news remains a part of the church's mission. Both stress that the church's mission is carried out under the cross: suffering is the normal badge of a faithful encounter with the powers of darkness. Both stress that the life of Jesus can only be carried out by the power of the Spirit who brings the life of the resurrection.

Bosch provides a taxonomy of different views of mission that are shaped by one or another of the aspects of the Christ event: incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and *parousia* (Bosch 1991:512-518). Different models are appropriate to different settings; yet all are important for a full and balanced understanding of mission in Christ's way. While there may be a tendency in Newbigin toward an emphasis on the cross, the two perspectives articulated above have enabled him to hold the various facets of the Christ event in balance.

Newbigin speaks of the mission of the church in terms of continuing what Jesus began in his life ministry (1972g:56; 1978e:44-49; 4.4.3.), being incorporated into his death and resurrection and thereby manifesting the resurrection life in the way of the cross (1987a:22-31; 1989e:117), and bearing the witness of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost (1978e:56-65; 1987a:15-21, 29). Thus the mission of Jesus provides both the empowerment and the content of the church's mission. As to content, the church is to do what Jesus did. In an earlier section we noted that Jesus carried out his mission in the power of the Spirit, announced the kingdom with his words, demonstrated the kingdom with his deeds, embodied the kingdom with his life, prayed for the coming kingdom, pursued the kingdom in weakness and suffering, and formed a community to embody the kingdom. All of these characteristics are to mark the mission of the church. As to the empowerment, the life of the kingdom is present in the church as it is incorporated into Christ and as it shares in the Spirit.

#### 5.4. BEARING THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Bible joins together the Spirit, the kingdom, and mission. James Dunn has rightly said that "it is not so much a case of where *Jesus* is there is the kingdom, as where the *Spirit* is there is the kingdom" (Dunn 1970:38). Similarly in Newbigin's thought, the Spirit brings the reality of the kingdom into the midst of the world. Thus He equips first Jesus, then the community of God's people to witness to the reality of the kingdom of God.

The church's identity is defined by the continuation of the mission of Jesus. In the New Testament the Spirit is poured out on Jesus to enable Him to carry out his mission to witness to the good news of the kingdom. "From the very beginning of the New Testament, the coming of Jesus, his words and works are connected directly with the power of the Spirit" (1978e:57). It is by the Spirit that Jesus is conceived, anointed at his baptism, and driven into the wilderness for his encounter with Satan. The Spirit's power enables Jesus to witness to the kingdom in his ministry in word and deed (*ibid*). Throughout his ministry, however, there is no evidence from the gospels that Jesus communicates the Spirit to the disciples. This awaits the completion of the ministry of

Jesus in His death and resurrection. When that is complete the way is opened for the outpouring of the Spirit on the community of disciples to continue what Jesus has begun. With the advent of the Spirit, according to Peter, the last days have dawned (Acts 2:17). The Spirit begins his work by gathering a community from all nations into the life of the kingdom. By the Spirit this people is constituted as a witnessing community: a society who share and witness to the life of the kingdom. Thus the Spirit is fundamentally a missionary Spirit—one sent to witness to the coming kingdom of God. He has taken the church up into His redeeming work giving it a fundamentally missionary identity. The church's nature is defined by its call to bear the witness of the Spirit.

Newbigin emphasizes two important features of the Spirit's work that began at Pentecost. First, the gift of the Holy Spirit is to a community and not to separate individuals (1972e:11). The Spirit creates a fellowship that shares the life of the kingdom (:14-15). While Acts does describe Barnabas and Paul as individuals filled with the Spirit, the dominant New Testament pattern is to speak of the sphere of the Spirit's work as communal (1972g:67). Second, the Holy Spirit is given to equip the church to fulfill its mission. "The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit. The effect of his coming upon the Church is that the believers are enabled to continue the work of Jesus... (1972e:13). The book of Acts becomes clearer if we understand that "the gift of the Spirit is always for mission, is always for the equipping of God's people for their witness to the world, exactly as the gift of the Spirit to Jesus at his baptism was his anointing for his mission as the Messiah" (1972g:68).

David Bosch notes that by the second century, the close Scriptural link between pneumatology and mission had been broken. The emphasis shifted to the work of the Spirit in sanctification or as guarantor of apostolicity. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century linked the Spirit with the interpretation of Scripture. He believes, however, that "in the twentieth century there has been a gradual recovery of the intrinsic missionary character of the Holy Spirit" (Bosch 1991:114-115). Newbigin shares this commitment to the "intrinsic missionary character of the Holy Spirit."

#### 5.4.1. *The Mission of the Spirit*

Mission is first of all a work of Spirit. Two factors engraved this truth on Newbigin's mind. The first was his missionary experience in India. In that missionary context, Roland Allen's emphasis on the work of the Spirit convinced him. He writes:

Over and over again we find that it is taken for granted [in the New Testament] that witness is essentially a witness borne to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and that the part that the Church plays is a secondary instrumental part.... I have come to this position not through pure theological reflection in a state of abstraction from the world, but rather by facing concrete and ordinary practical missionary experiences (1994k:22f.).

The second factor is the emergence of the concept of the *missio Dei* in the ecumenical tradition and in Newbigin's thought. The church-centric period of the IMC (1938-1952) stressed mission primarily as the church's responsibility. The Spirit empowered the church to carry out its mandate. Mission was first of all the church's duty; the Spirit was the equipping dynamic. However, involvement in the ecumenical tradition where the

*missio Dei* was increasingly the framework in which mission was understood, moved Newbigin to stress the fundamental and prevenient role of the Spirit in mission. He wrote: "It is not that the Church bears witness and that the Spirit helps the Church to do so. This kind of language completely misses the point. The point is that the Church is the place where the Spirit is present as witness. The witness is thus not an accomplishment of the Church but a promise to the Church" (1980f:38).

The book of Acts (which should be entitled 'The Acts of the Spirit') gives us a full exposition of the Spirit as the primary agent of mission. The Spirit is poured out at Pentecost and immediately the eschatological gathering of God's people begins. It is this action of the Spirit that launches the church on its mission: "It is thus by an action of the sovereign Spirit of God that the church is launched on its mission. And it remains the mission of the Spirit. He is central" (1978e:58). The Spirit continues to be the primary agent in mission. He brings Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), prepares Ananias to receive Saul as a brother (Acts 9), prepares Peter and Cornelius for their encounter (Acts 10), initiates the first mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13), and guides the apostles on their journeys (Acts 16:7) (1978e:58f.).

The Spirit continues to be present in the community in power, producing a corporate life and deeds that bring about a missionary encounter. The powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask questions. The missionary encounter between the early church and its pagan Roman environment did not come about as the unilateral initiative of the apostles but "in response to questions asked by others, questions prompted by the presence of something which calls for explanation" (1989e:119). It is for this reason that Paul's letters contain many exhortations to faithfulness but none to be engaged in mission! This theme of faithfulness tied to the sovereign working of the Spirit dominates Newbigin's understanding of the missionary church. The following quotes capture this concern.

What really needs to be said is that *where the Church is faithful* to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and the people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer (1989e:119; emphasis mine).

It is the presence of this new reality which (*when the Church is faithful*) prompts the questions to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer. The true missionary dialogue, in other words, is not initiated by the Church. In a secondary sense it is initiated by the outsider who is drawn to ask: What is the secret of this new reality... In the primary sense, however, it is initiated by the presence of the Spirit who is the *arrabon* of the kingdom, and whose presence leads people (perhaps without the prior knowledge of any missionary or evangelist) to make this inquiry (1989e:134; emphasis mine).

Understanding mission as first of all a work of the Spirit will keep the church from three distortions in its understanding of mission: legalistic, triumphalistic, and humanistic distortions. There is a legalistic distortion of mission that defines mission as obedience to a command. If mission is first of all of work of the Holy Spirit, then mission is an overflow of the gospel and not obedience to a law. Newbigin writes:

We have made the missionary imperative into a law, a heavy burden laid upon the conscience of Christians, whereas the New Testament sees it as a gracious gift, as—if I may use the phrase—a spin-off from Pentecost. This is why you cannot find in Paul's letters a single passage where he urges his readers to be more active in evangelism.

There is absolutely nothing in the New Testament corresponding to the almost frantic appeals for missionary activity which have been common in Protestant missionary practice. What you *do* find everywhere in Paul's letters, as in the whole New Testament, is the admonition to every Christian to stand fast against the power of the enemy... Where that condition is fulfilled, we can be utterly sure that the Spirit will bear his own witness in his own way and in his own time. *That* is not our problem (1978c:308).

Newbigin stresses the prevenient initiative of the Spirit with a series of similar images. In the foregoing quote, mission is a "spin-off from Pentecost." He speaks in other places of mission as the "overspill" (1977d:218), the "overflow" (1982b:148), or the "fallout" (1989e:116) from the Spirit given at Pentecost. All of these images point to mission as a "logical," spontaneous, and joyful response to the outpouring of the Spirit. The church is then delivered from an atmosphere of anxiety and guilt regarding its mission (1977d:218).

Understanding mission as the work of the Spirit will also exclude a triumphalist distortion of mission. Mission is not merely church extension in which the church as a powerful body puts forth its strength and wisdom to expand its numbers and influence. Mission changes not only the world but also the church.

It is the action of the Holy Spirit, who in his sovereign freedom both convicts the world... and leads the church toward the fullness of the truth it has not grasped. Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is, rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion (1978e:59-60).

Over against a triumphalist picture of mission two things can be said. First, mission changes not only the world but the church (1978e:59). Second, the witness of the Spirit is most evident when the church is weak and suffering (:62).

Mission as a work of the Spirit will also preclude a humanistic distortion that conceives of mission as an essentially human enterprise in which the church initiates and controls the strategy. Rather mission is God's work. The Spirit is sovereign in mission; He initiates and controls all that happens. The church is the attentive servant called to listen to and follow the Spirit's leading.

It is *not* appropriate for the Church to use in this connection the language which is natural for a commercial sales-drive or a military campaign. The true strategist is the Holy Spirit himself.... He will not allow himself to be programmed on our computers but will rather require us to follow where he leads.... If mission were *our* enterprise, if it were to be understood on the analogy of the sales-promotion of a commercial firm, then of course it would be a matter of driving, urging, persuading.... The kingdom is God's, not ours.... The agent of the Holy Spirit who is the living presence of the Kingdom in foretaste.... It cannot be too often repeated that it is He who is the witness; our witness is secondary. Our task is to believe, to obey, to follow the way of the cross, to join our humble witness to His who made the good confession before Pontius Pilate, to go forward with the light of the new creation on our faces... When that is how we believe and follow, we can be sure that the Spirit will make his own witness in his own way (1977d:217).

So it is clear that the Spirit cannot be domesticated by the church for its own designs. However, the concept of the *missio Dei* led to an opposite reaction during the middle

part of the twentieth century. Under the influence of Hoekendijk, the mission of the Spirit was separated from the church. The Spirit was at work in the liberating events of the time—the emancipation of blacks, the humanization of industrial relations, the quest for ethics in business, and urban renewal. Like any other instrument in God’s kingdom, the church could become involved in what the Spirit was doing. But there was no special connection between the work of the Spirit and the church. Newbigin believed this picture of the Spirit’s mission in relation to the church also contradicted the picture presented in Acts. Newbigin comments on this double danger:

The initiative is with the Spirit; the Church follows. On the one hand the Spirit is not domesticated within the Church but leads the Church in sovereign freedom. On the other hand the Spirit is not separated from the Church, for the Spirit’s work is to lead men and women to confess Jesus as Lord, and the Church is the place where that confession is made. On the one hand the Spirit (the *arrabon* of the Kingdom) is constantly creating and recreating the Church. On the other hand the Church, which is not the author or controller of the Spirit’s witness to the kingdom, is where that witness is given and acknowledged (1980f:39).

#### 5.4.2. *The Spirit as End-Time Gift: Deposit, First Fruits, and Foretaste*

The Spirit, kingdom, and mission are all closely intertwined in Newbigin’s thought. The Spirit ushers in the life of the kingdom and mission is witness to the kingdom. The significance of the close relation for his missionary ecclesiology can be observed in the way Newbigin characterizes the time period between Pentecost and the *parousia*. This period can be designated in three closely interrelated ways: as a time when the kingdom has already arrived but is not yet fully present; as a time of mission characterized by witness to the kingdom; and as the era of the Spirit. About the last he says: “He [the Spirit] spans, as it were, the gulf that yet yawns between the consummation for which we long and our actual life here” (1953d:161). The Spirit dwells in the church as an end-time gift and this identifies the church in terms of its witness to the kingdom.

The eschatological nature of the Spirit has been obscured for much of church history. In Christendom ecclesiologies, the Spirit is related primarily to either the institutional church in the Catholic tradition or the individual in the Protestant tradition. Writing about Protestant theologies, Geerhardus Vos observes that the reason for the eschatological neglect of the Spirit is that His work has been elaborated in terms of the application of the work of Christ to the individual (Vos 1912:159f.). The institutionalization of the Spirit in Catholicism and the individualization of the Spirit in Protestantism has eclipsed the fundamentally eschatological nature of the Spirit. During the twentieth century, under the influence of New Testament theology—especially in Pauline studies—the eschatological nature of the Spirit has been rediscovered. Hendrikus Berkhof quotes recent twentieth century Biblical scholars to document this trend (Berkhof 1964:104-105). In his book *The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit*, Geerhardus Vos says: “The Spirit’s proper sphere is... the world to come; from there he projects himself into the present, and becomes a prophecy of himself in his eschatological operation” (Vos 1912:228). Similarly Neill Hamilton writes: “The attempt will be made to show that the Spirit is related primarily to the future” (Hamilton 1957:17). Berkhof himself refers to the Spirit as “the gift for the last days” and the “first fruits of the future” (1964:105). Likewise Herman Ridderbos writes

that “the Spirit is pre-eminently the eschatological gift” (1975: 87).

Newbigin elaborates the eschatological nature of the Spirit with three words: first fruits, *arrabon*, and foretaste. We have noted earlier the designation of the church with these terms (5.2.4.). The church shares in the Spirit who is a gift of the kingdom. Since the Spirit is the first fruits, the deposit and the foretaste of the kingdom, so the church shares in that status. His discussion of the Spirit and the Kingdom is most often placed in the context of an exposition of Acts 1 (e.g. 1980f:33-43; 1987a:15-21). Here the disciples pose a question about the kingdom (Acts 1:6), and receive an answer about the Spirit (Acts 1:8). The question about the kingdom at this point in redemptive history is an obvious question (1987a:15). Jesus has spoken to them about the kingdom of God, promised the Spirit which is recognized by them as an eschatological gift, completed his work on the cross and entered the age to come by the resurrection of the body. Now is the time for the power of the kingdom to be made manifest in its glory; surely there is no need to keep it a secret any more. Yet Jesus warns them: it is not for them to know when the kingdom will be fully revealed. But he also gives a promise (not a command): the Holy Spirit will come and you will be my witnesses. How is the promise related to the question? Newbigin answers: “The question is about the Kingdom; the promise is about that which is the foretaste, the first-fruit, the *arrabon* of the Kingdom—namely the gift of the Spirit” (1980f:37). *Arrabon* is an economic term in Greek culture. It was used to denote the payment that is made in advance of the receipt of the goods as a pledge to pay the full amount at a later time. The *arrabon* is an earnest, a down-payment, real cash and not just a promissory note or an “I.O.U.” That money is real money and can be spent. This deposit is more, however, than simply cash. It also represents a promise of a much larger amount of cash to come. The deposit assures the vendor that when the product is delivered the rest of the price will be paid. The *arrabon* is *both* cash now and the promise of more to come in future (1987a:17). The Holy Spirit is the *arrabon* of the kingdom. It is not just a verbal promise of the kingdom, a promissory note or an “I.O.U.” It is a real gift and presence of the kingdom in the present. There is a real experience of the life of the kingdom *now*, in the present. However, it is more. The gift of the Spirit carries a promise of much more to come. It is a solid pledge and the assurance that the life of the kingdom will come in fullness at a future time. The Spirit is present as a witness to the coming kingdom by making that life a reality now. “And it is this that makes the church a witness to the kingdom” (*ibid*).

The words foretaste and first fruits point to the same double character. The church has a foretaste of the powers of the age to come, yet the full kingdom banquet awaits a later date (1948d:98; 1953d:157). There is a real foretaste, an enjoyment in tasting the food; it is not simply the aroma that promises the coming meal. However, it is only a taste that produces the longing for the whole meal. Bringing this image close to home: “The Holy Spirit is the aperitif for the messianic banquet. It is something you enjoy now... But the whole point of it is that it is a foretaste, that it assures you of a greater reality still to come” (1994k:61). There is both having and hoping (1989e:120); we have received the life of the kingdom but hope for its fulfillment. Likewise the first fruits of a crop is both the reality of the harvest and the promise of more to come. “Just as the first-fruit is more than just one handful of grain or one bunch of fruit, but has the character of a sign pointing us to the coming harvest and assuring us of its coming... so the presence of the Holy Spirit is more than just the present experience of life in the

fellowship of the Church, but is the assurance of something much richer and more glorious to come. It is in this sense that the presence of the Holy Spirit constitutes the Church a witness to the kingdom which it proclaims” (1978b:6).

#### 5.4.3. *A Threefold Relation of the Church to the Witness of the Spirit*

For Newbigin, Spirit, witness to the gospel of the kingdom, and church are joined together (1980f:40). The church is the place where the Spirit is present to witness to the kingdom. Newbigin relates the witnessing work of the Spirit to the mission of the church in three ways (1958b:19). First, the church is the place or locus of the Spirit’s witness (*ibid*). He believes that “it is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power” (1989e:119). In contrast to the church-centric period that stressed the church primarily as the agent of mission, Newbigin affirms that the church “is not so much the agent of mission as the locus of mission” (*ibid*). The Spirit acts in power to enable the church to have a foretaste of the inbreaking life of the kingdom. It is because the church is the locus of the Spirit’s mission that it is a witnessing community: the presence of the Holy Spirit “constitutes the Church a witness to the kingdom which it proclaims.... The disciples will be witnesses, not because of their own efforts, but because they will reflect in their own life the reality of the coming kingdom of which they will receive the foretaste in the gift of the Spirit” (1978b:7).

Second, the church is the place where the powers of the kingdom are available to enable the church to serve human beings in all their needs (1958b:19). The church is not only the locus of the work of the Spirit but also its agent. As such the church manifests the love of the kingdom, pursues its justice, and extends its mercy.

Third, the church is the community called to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ with words that point to the source of its new life (1958b:19-20). Where the powers of the kingdom are present, people will begin to ask questions. The gospel is the answer to these questions that have been prompted by the presence of something which calls for explanation (1989e:119).

The church is the locus of the Spirit’s witness to the gospel. Part of that which led Newbigin to this conclusion was his interviews with numerous people who were converted to Christ from other faiths or no faith. Three things were clear from these testimonies: there is no one way that people come to Christ; conversion is a result of a whole series of “apparently chance happenings” often over a long period of time that cannot be contrived by any human strategy; and “conversion is truly a work of God in which our words and deeds are given a place but of which the overall control is surely not in our hands” (1978c:306).

Three themes pervade Newbigin’s thought: the Spirit is the primary witness; the church is the locus and agent of the Spirit’s witness; and the witness of the Spirit cannot be separated from the church. His missionary experience among growing congregations in India led him to conclude that growth took place where “the local Christian congregation was fulfilling these four conditions”:

(1) It was a truly believing, worshipping and celebrating fellowship in which the Gospel was proclaimed in word and celebrated in sacrament and enjoyed in the life of a caring community.

(2) Its members were involved in the life of the society around them, not living for themselves but entering deeply into the sorrows and conflicts of their neighbours, being truly “the Church for others.

(3) Its members were ready, when appropriate, to give an account of the hope that was in them, with (as Peter says) gentleness and reverence.

(4) Its members were willing to respect and welcome, rather than to denigrate, the differing gifts of others. By this I mean that (for example) those with the gift of evangelism did not despise those whose gifts were in the direction of social service or political action, and *vice versa*, so that these differing forms of involvement did not cancel each other out but reinforced each other (1978c:308-309).

In situations where the church was faithful in these things, many people in the neighbourhood of the church were brought into contact with the congregations through “a multitude of relationships in word and act in the course of daily life” (1978c:309). Each personal contact made by word and deed led back to the fellowship of believers on Sunday morning. Newbigin concludes that “this is the work of the Spirit. The Church is but the place where this work of the Spirit is done” (*ibid*).

#### 5.4.4. *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*

At the end of the 1940s Newbigin believed that the exclusive sphere of the Spirit’s work was the church (1948d:99, 123). During the 1950s the theme of the Spirit’s work in the world came to the fore within the ecumenical movement. By the early 1960s Newbigin recognized that he had limited the working of God’s Spirit to the church and that a much greater place need to be given to His activity in the world (1963g:33; 1993h:187). The last chapter traced this development noting, on the one hand that Newbigin attempted to find a larger place for the work of the Spirit in the world, and on the other hand that his formulations remained underdeveloped. This weakness manifests itself in the mission of the church.

The relation of the work of the Spirit in the church to His activity in world history was a question that challenged the ecumenical gatherings at Willingen, New Delhi, and Mexico. There were two principal answers to that question. The first emphasized the classical ecumenical understanding that the Spirit was at work in the church. The discontinuity between the gospel and culture or world history was emphasized. In this view the separation between the church and its environment was highlighted; mission is concerned with the development of churches and world history becomes the backdrop against which God works out His salvation in His people. The second answer accented the work of the Spirit in world history and culture. Emphasis was placed on the continuity between the mission of the church and the historical development of human society. The task of discerning the work of the Spirit in history and participating in His work by forwarding and completing the general progress of human society defines the mission of the church.

Newbigin set out to find a way to formulate the Spirit’s work that would integrate the insights of both views. His starting point is the mission of Christ. Jesus carried out his mission in the context of the rule of the sovereign Father. The Father governs history directing all events according to His purpose. Jesus submits Himself to the Father’s ordering of events not as the agent of the kingdom but as witness to what the Father is doing. Nevertheless the coming of Jesus is decisive for all humankind and all history.

In Jesus is the salvation and judgement of the world; all people are judged by their acceptance or rejection of Him. “The coming of the Son is the event by which the Father has chosen to bring all things to the point of decision, to the issue of judgement and salvation” (1963g:36). In the mission of Jesus and the church the Father calls human history to its decisive moment through the work of the Spirit. There is a double process whereby all humanity is gathered or separated based on their response to Jesus. This witness of Jesus to ultimate issues in human history by the Spirit is extended in the mission of the church sent out after the resurrection. The mission of the church is “the continuation of that double process through history till its end” (1963g:48). Like Jesus the church goes through history “as the servant people, looking up to the Father who alone is the Lord of history, accepting his disposition of events as the context of their obedience, relying on His Spirit as their guide” (1963g:37). The continuing coming of Jesus to all humanity through the church is not simply an enterprise of the church. Rather “it is the work of the living Spirit of God, of him who is one with the Father and the Son. The Church is the outward form of the continuous work of the Spirit in re-enacting Christ’s coming among men” (1963g:49). The Spirit witnesses through the church to the meaning of the events in world history so that precisely *in relation to these events* all people are compelled to embrace or reject the salvation offered in Jesus Christ (1963g:37f.).

Mark 13 forms the lens through which Newbigin looks at world history. As the gospel spreads throughout the world, false messiahs arise offering salvation on other terms demanding a choice between Jesus and another way. The church is a *suffering* witness to the true meaning of the events of world history. In this context, the witness that the church offers is not a “work of the Church. It is the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the church” (1963g:44). Newbigin expresses this succinctly:

It is the Father’s purpose, revealed in Jesus, to lead all mankind to this ultimate decision. The presence of the Church in the midst of mankind is the means by which He does so. But the witness to his purpose which brings men to the point of decision is the witness of the Holy Spirit himself (1963g:45).

Newbigin’s Trinitarian formulations have moved beyond a churchcentric understanding of mission. The missionary church is not simply an institution that builds itself up; it stands in the midst of the world witnessing to the real meaning of the events of world history. However, the underdevelopment of Newbigin’s doctrine of the Spirit’s work in the world becomes evident here. Newbigin recognizes that the revolutionary events of the 1960s are means of liberation and bearers of evil (1963g:40). Yet how are we to identify what is a work of the Spirit and what is twisted by the evil one, what is liberating and what is oppressive? What form does the missionary church take to witness *credibly* in the midst of history? Newbigin does not answer these questions.

### 5.5. THE MISSIONARY IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

“As the Father 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” (1977a:242). Mission belongs to the *esse* of the church and not to its *bene*

*esse*. Without mission “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” (1953g:163). The following section will elaborate the missionary nature of the church in three sections. First, the church’s nature will be defined in terms of its relation to God and to the world. Second, three historical developments that have eclipsed the missionary nature of the church will be sketched. Third, the importance of unity for the missionary church will be articulated.

### 5.5.1. *Related to God and to the World*

There are two sides to the missionary nature of the church. On the one side, the church’s nature and purpose is defined in relation to God’s calling. On the other, it is defined in terms of its relation to the world. Newbigin believes that a “very elementary point... in the New Testament” is that “the Church is always and only designated by reference to two realities: one, God in Christ, and the other, the place where the Church is” (1994k:50-51). On the one hand, the church is the *ecclesia tou Theou*, but on the other hand, the church is designated in terms of its place—in Ephesus, in Thessalonika, and so on. The church is a human community that does not exist for itself: “It is the Church of God *for that place*, and that is because the Church does not exist for itself but for God and for the world that Jesus came to save” (1994k:53).

#### 5.5.1.1. The Church’s Role Defined by Reference to God

The church is designated by reference to God in Christ. This has been elaborated in the pages of this chapter. The church’s role defined by reference to God can be summarized in four intertwined themes: Biblical narrative, *missio Dei*, the *basileia tou Theou*, and election. Each of these themes is not separate or distinct. Rather they look at the same reality from differing vantage points. They are differing facets of the same diamond.

The church is defined by the role given to it in the Scriptural narrative. The Bible is 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 for the whole creation. In the Old Testament, the purpose of God moved toward its consummation in Christ. Christ arrived but the final consummation has been held off to a later time. God has opened up a space in redemptive history. This time has a specific meaning: the witness of the Spirit through the church to the end of history. Thus, the church’s role in this story is to be the bearer of the Spirit’s witness to the kingdom.

The church is defined by its participation in the *missio Dei*. God is a missionary God and mission is the activity of God to redeem the creation. The church exists because God has this mission to redeem the creation. The source of this mission is God’s love. His long path of reconciliation culminates in His sending Jesus. Jesus revealed and accomplished the kingdom and poured out the Spirit so that people might enter that kingdom. The mission of God has created the church: it is the locus of God’s mission. The *missio Dei* has also taken the church up into its work as an instrument. Through the life, words, and deeds the Spirit works to carrying out His renewing work. There is no participation in Christ’s redemption without participation in the His mission.

The nature of the church is further defined by its relation to the kingdom of God. History is moving toward its consummation in the kingdom of God. The church is that body which has already begun to enjoy a foretaste of the kingdom. It is called to be a preview of the kingdom in its life and deeds and to announce the arrival of the reign of God with its words.

Finally, the nature of the church is defined by its election: God chooses the church for a certain task. That task is continue the mission of Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

This brief summary points to the significant fact that the church can only be defined in terms of its purpose in the mission of God.

#### 5.5.1.2. For the Sake of the World

The church is also designated by reference to the place in the world in which it exists. 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” (1980f:45). 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” (1977g:119). The church exists for the place in which it is situated. This raises two questions: What is the significance of the word ‘for’? What is the meaning of the word ‘place’? Put in other words, the first question is about what it means for the church to be *for* a particular place. The second is about how to define place. The second question will be taken up in two later sections in the following chapter. Here the first question will be addressed.

The relation of the church to its place is shaped by the relation of Christ to the world. In other words, the *for* is defined in the way that Christ is *for* the world.

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 (1994k:53f.).

Newbigin describes this relation of Christ to the world in a threefold way (1977g:118f.). First, Christ is related to the world as Creator and Sustainer. This means that the church in each place is to love and cherish all of its created 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 scarred it. The cross stands as the salvation and judgement of each place. Therefore, the church in every situation must be wrestling with both sides of this reality: for and against the world. “The Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city, that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point” (1994k:54).

There are at least three 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. Newbigin points to two occasions where “the churches are essentially external to and irresponsible towards the

secular reality in which they are set” (1977g:118). On the one hand, the church fails to be for the place when its theology, ecclesial structures, and churchmanship is imported from another place, from a foreign culture. On the other hand, the church fails when its form is a survival from another time. In other words, the church fails to be the church *for* the place when it is seen as an alien body, whether that foreignness comes from cultural or temporal distance. The second way the church fails to be *for* the place where it is set is when it assumes the wrong relationship to culture. It is possible for the church to live in uncritical identification with the world around it, merely being conformed to the world. It is also possible to live in polemical confrontation with it. Both of these extremes hinder the church from taking the right posture to the place in which it is situated. Third, the church can fail with a conservative stance that does not account for change in a culture. The context is constantly changing, and if the church is to be for the place it must be a dynamic and not a static body “making constantly new and difficult decisions in a changing context” (*ibid*).

### 5.5.2. *The Church in History: Factors Crippling Missionary Consciousness*

Newbigin points to three factors that have crippled the missionary self-consciousness of the church. The first is the unity of church and state in Christendom; the second is the powerful vision of the Enlightenment; the third is the separation of mission and church in the modern missionary movement.

#### 5.5.2.1. Christendom

Newbigin’s historical interpretation of the church’s missionary existence can be divided into three eras: the pre-Constantinian church, Christendom, and the church in modern, post-Enlightenment culture (1966b:102-107; 1980d:5f.; 1980f:46-50; 1986e:99-102).

The pre-Constantinian church was a missionary community (1966b:104). As we noted earlier, it chose the name *ecclesia* (public assembly) rather than *thiasos* or *heranos* (private religious communities) to describe its identity. The latter were *cultus privati* which were given the protection of the state. They played a role in the private sector of the empire offering a future, personal salvation to its members. The church refused such a designation and adopted the identity of *ecclesia*—a public assembly of citizens.

In other words, the early Church did not see itself as a private religious society competing with others to offer personal salvation to its members; it saw itself as a movement launched into the public life of the world, challenging the *cultus publicus* of the Empire, claiming the allegiance of all without exception (1980f:46).

This universal claim put the Church on a collision course with the established powers. For the next three centuries the church paid the price for its audacious claim (1986e:100).

All this changed with the new sacral unity of church and state during the Constantinian period. This *corpus Christianum* ceased to be a missionary religion. Hemmed in by Islam to the south and to the east, Christianity became a folk religion for the European peoples (1966b:102). “To put it in one sentence, the Church had become the religious department of European society rather than the task force selected and

appointed for a world mission” (1966b:103). Mission ceased to have any meaning both within Europe and to the ends of the earth. Within Western culture “the whole community was baptized” while in terms of world mission “the great pagan world was out of reach and out of sight” (1966b:106). Christendom was a self-contained world and “the sense that the Church is a body sent into all 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” (1961c:110).

According to Newbiggin, the Christendom situation brought negative effects for the missionary understanding of the church. Five are mentioned here: ecclesiological reflection, patterns of churchmanship, relation to culture, disunity, and a loss of eschatology.

The *corpus Christianum* was the background for the self-understanding of the church and thus for all ecclesiological reflection. This can be clearly seen in all the Reformational theologies. The shared tacit assumption is that they are not in a missionary situation. Each of the ecclesiologies of the Reformation period is defined over against each other within the context of Christendom rather than over against the pagan world (1953d:1-2). In the confessional documents of the Reformational churches, the marks of the church are defined apart from any reference to the church’s missionary identity (1966b:104).

The Christendom context also shaped our 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 ends of the earth had ceased to exist as a practical reality in the minds of Christians, that the main patterns of churchmanship were formed” (1966b:102). Newbiggin points to a number of examples (1961:110f.; 1966b:102-105). Ministry is guardianship of the faithful rather than leadership in mission (1966b:102). He makes this critique specific in a paper given at the Anglican-Reformed International Commission in 1983. He contrasts ministry in the New Testament that assumes a missionary situation with ministry in the Reformed and Anglican traditions that “have been formed in the ‘Christendom’ era, in a society presumed to be Christian.” In the New Testament ministry is primarily leadership in mission while in the Christendom situation ministry is “primarily pastoral care of established communities” (1983c:1). The congregation is an inward-looking gathering place for the faithful to be edified and sanctified rather than a staging post for witness and service to the world outside (1961c:110f.; 1966b:102). The sacraments are reshaped by Christendom: baptism is no longer commitment to mission but a *rite de passage*, and the eucharist is no longer renewal to a missionary commitment but the feeding of the community with the bread of life (1983c:1). Theology is not formulated in the context of a struggle between the gospel and the non-Christian culture but shaped over against rival interpretations of the gospel (1961c:111; 1966b:102). 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 (1961c:111; 1966b:102f.). The structures of congregational life are patterned in a medieval undifferentiated society and are simply invalid for mission of the church in the West today. The structures we have inherited are *neither relevant* to the secular and differentiated life of the West *nor true* to the Biblical picture of the Church as a missionary community (1966b:107).

A third negative manifestation of the Christendom church is two faulty attitudes toward culture. The first is especially evident in the national church that falls within the Christendom trajectory. In this model, the church takes responsibility for the cultural development and social life of the community. However, the antithetical tension between the church and culture is slackened; the church loses sight of its calling to be a community separate from the world. Newbigin comments: “We are painfully aware of the consequences of that [Constantine’s] conversion; for centuries the Church was allied with the established power, sanctioned and even wielded the sword, lost its critical relation to the ruling authorities” (1980f:47). When the church loses its prophetic-critical stance in relationship to its culture, it accepts a role as the “protected and well decorated chaplaincy in the camp of the dominant power” (1983a:4). And when “the Church is the spiritual arm of the establishment, the critical role of the Church devolves upon separate bodies—the monks, the radical sectarian groups, the millenarian movements on the fringes of the Church” (1980f:48). This emphasis on the importance of antithetical tension for the missionary church and its eclipse in Christendom is indebted to Hendrik Kraemer. Newbigin’s view of the relation of church to culture is shaped by Kraemer’s subversive fulfillment.<sup>5</sup> Kraemer highlighted the importance of maintaining a healthy tension between church and culture: “The deeper the consciousness of the tension and the urge to take this yoke upon itself are felt, the healthier the Church is. The more oblivious of this tension the Church is, the more well established and at home in this world it feels, the more it is in deadly danger of being the salt that has lost its savour” (1956a:36). Kraemer believed that this tension was surrendered in the ‘symphonia’ of Christendom: “The symphonia, to use the official orthodox theological term, of faith and empire, of Church and State... when put in the light of the prophetic message of Biblical revelation, is a surrender of the tension, inherent and necessary in the relation of the Christian faith and world... (1956a:36, 43).<sup>6</sup>

The second faulty attitude is manifest in the churches that have reacted against the churches that have peacefully accommodated themselves to the culture. In these churches there is a concern to be different and distinct from the world. Yet these churches withdraw from the world washing their hands of all cultural and social responsibility (1953g:7-8).

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<sup>5</sup>This theme will be pursued in chapter 8.

<sup>6</sup>This theme has been fruitfully explored in the work of Wilbert Shenk (1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1999a). In *Write the Vision* Shenk argues that in Christendom the church has taken its place along side of the other powers within the culture and as a result has “surrendered the vital critical relationship to its culture that is indispensable to a sense of mission” (1995:34).

The missionary church stands in contrast to both of these models. The church in a missionary setting cannot afford to be either irrelevant or domesticated without fatal consequences. The church is both “separated from” and “set in” the ancient religious cultures of non-Christian lands (1953g:8).

A missionary Church in a pagan land can take neither of these attitudes. On the one hand it must be a distinct body, separate from the pagan world around it. But, on the other hand, it cannot divest itself of responsibility for those whom it has uprooted from their ancient soil and transplanted into a totally new soil, or for their children (*ibid*).

A fourth negative effect of Christendom that Newbigin points to is the disunity of the church. “Everything about such a missionary situation conspires to make Christian disunity an intolerable anomaly” (1953g:8). The churches of Christendom could ignore most aspects of cultural life since the supposed neutrality or Christian character of cultural life did not require an antithetical stance. Instead of standing together over against a pagan culture, the churches could concentrate on rival interpretations of the Christian faith. The difference between Lutherans and Calvinists, Protestants and Catholics, and so forth was of greater importance than the division between Christ and no-Christ. Thus churches were splintered as they defined themselves over against one another. When the church was thrust into a missionary situation at the end of Christendom, it became clear “that the division of the Church into rival and hostile bodies is something incompatible with the central verities of the Gospel.... When the Church faces out toward the world it knows that it only exists as the first-fruits and the instrument of that reconciling work of Christ, and that division within its own life is a violent contradiction of its own fundamental nature” (1953g:9). Within Christendom the church accepted its disunity as a matter of course, but within a missionary situation it found it to be an intolerable scandal.

Finally, in the Christendom context there has been a loss of eschatology. When the eschatological perspective is lost, evangelism becomes merely the rescue of individuals one by one from this present evil age. The church becomes a waiting room that attempts to preserve these individuals unharmed for the age to come. The church turns in on itself as pastoral care replaces missionary concern as the primary task of the church.

When this [a loss of eschatology] becomes dominant the Church thinks primarily of its duty to care for its own members, and its duty to those outside drops into second place. A conception of pastoral care is developed which seems to assume that the individual believer is primarily a passive recipient of the means of grace which it is the business of the Church to administer (1953g:166-167).

Newbigin does not only elaborate the *negative* consequences of Christendom; there is also a positive dimension. He believed that the church was right in taking responsibility for the cultural, social, and political life of early medieval Europe. He remarks:

Much has been written about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism, and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme. But could any other choice have been made? When the ancient classical world... ran out of spiritual fuel and turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together, should the church have refused the appeal and washed its hands of responsibility for the political order? It could not do so if it was to be faithful to its origins in Israel and the ministry of Jesus. It is easy to see with hindsight

how quickly the church fell into the temptations of worldly power. It is easy to point... to the glaring contradictions between the Jesus of the Gospels and his followers occupying the seats of power and wealth. And yet we have to ask, would God's purpose as it is revealed in Scripture have been better served, if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a "Christian" Europe, if all the churches for the past two thousand years had lived as persecuted minorities...? I find it hard to think so (1986e:100f.).

Newbigin describes the Constantinian settlement as "the first great attempt to translate the universal claim of Christ into political terms" (1980f:47). The result of this attempt was that "the Gospel wrought into the very stuff of [Western Europe's] social and personal life" (1953g:1). The whole of public and private life was shaped by Christian revelation (1986e:101). Newbigin's missionary experience in a culture dominated by a non-Christian worldview enabled him to see that western culture had been positively shaped by the gospel and "that we still live largely on the spiritual capital which it generated" (1980d:6). He writes: "It is, I think, difficult for those who have lived only in Western Europe to feel the enormous importance of the fact that the Church is surrounded by a culture which is the product of Christianity. One needs to have had experience both of this, and of the situation of a Church in a non-Christian culture, to feel the difference" (1953g:5).

A vivid illustration of the impact of Newbigin's experience can be found in his reflection on his return to Britain during his first furlough in 1946/47. He relates his first impression: "The first thing I saw when I landed was a queue. Perhaps it will seem ridiculous to say that it brought a lump to my throat, but I confess that it did. The queue system will not work in India, because it contradicts the fundamental basis of society—which is caste" (1947:9). He relates several other impressions: a moral climate where people are concerned for the starving and various kinds of free institutions that exist on the basis of a personal sense of responsibility. He recounts his initial response: "I will sum up the impression I have tried to convey by saying that it was the impression of a society deeply-rooted in the Christian belief that every man is precious in the sight of God and is responsible before God for his neighbour..." (1947:10). He points out that this is the capital of the past, and that if this precious legacy is to continue, there will need to be an intentional affirmation of the Christian faith.

While the Christendom model was carried over into the national churches of Europe, a number of factors were combining to break down the *corpus Christianum*: the missionary experience of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the rise of the Third World church, the dechristianization of the West, and the power of secularism. Thus, while there may have been some validity to Christendom at one time in history, it is no longer valid (1966b:106). Today theologians are questioning the whole traditional doctrine of the church from a missionary angle. The church has been set into a new relation to society that has forced new ecclesiological reflection and led to the "beginnings of a recovery of a biblical doctrine of the Church as a missionary community" (1966b:104). Conscious of the paganism in Europe the churches "are painfully struggling back to the truth that mission is the task of the Church, and that a Church which is not a mission is not a Church" (1948d:11). However, while there are many signs of this struggle toward a missionary relation between the church and its context, the ordinary congregation still does not regard itself as missionary nor is its churchmanship oriented toward its pagan environment.

This section reveals an ambivalence in Newbigin's thought toward Christendom. On the one hand, he is critical: the Christendom church does not correspond to the New Testament description of a missionary church. On the other hand, he is often much more appreciative: there are situations in which the Christendom arrangement is still valid. He remarks: "There are some places in the world—not many—where this pattern is still valid, in some of the South Pacific islands, for example, where church and society are coterminous, a single *corpus Christianum*" (1966b:106). In later chapters we will see this ambivalence; for example, in his call for a missionary encounter with western culture when he wants to highlight missional involvement in the public life of culture, Newbigin speaks very positively about the period shaped by Augustine's thought. Newbigin does not resolve this ambiguity but allows criticism to remain side by side with affirmation without a criteria evaluate the *corpus Christianum* experience.

#### 5.5.2.2. The Privatization of the Church in the Enlightenment

In the last three centuries the church has left the Christendom era behind and has moved into a new situation. A new public doctrine has replaced the Christendom vision as the *cultus publicus* of Western Europe. This new public doctrine is shaped by the Enlightenment. The term Enlightenment is a profoundly religious word. It points to the corporate conversion of Western culture. The light of scientific rationalism had dawned and the darkness of superstition was being banished. The public life of Western culture was now shaped by a new vision: human mastery of the creation by human science and technology to build a better world. The Christian understanding of the world could provide light for the private and domestic life but it had no business challenging the modern scientific vision that controlled the public life (1980f:48-49).

The impact of this historical shift on the church was devastating. It failed to challenge the new Enlightenment *cultus publicus*. It took the road which the early church had refused to take by retreating to the private sector and effectively becoming a *cultus privatus* (1980f:48). "The Church took on more and more the shape which the early Church had refused: it became a group of societies which were seen as offering spiritual consolation and the hope of personal salvation to those who chose to belong" (1980f:49). In this new situation the church is not a sign of the kingdom but a religious chaplain ministering to the private needs of society.

As Newbigin sees it, the situation today is to recover a shape of the missionary church as a sign of the kingdom that manifests Christ's rule over all of life, yet does not fall into the Christendom trap. We cannot go back to a pre-Constantinian innocence in which we treat all power as evil (1986e:102). 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 (1980f:50; cf. 1986e:102).

A later chapter will explore the privatization of the gospel in western culture in more depth. At this point it is important to note that Newbigin stresses the discontinuity

between the Christendom and post-Enlightenment church. Wilbert Shenk and Darrell Guder et. al. have rightfully called attention to the continuity that also exists between these two period (Shenk 1995; Guder et. al. 1998:47-60). The very reason the church takes a privatized role in western culture is because of its Christendom legacy. In Christendom the church found a place for itself within the constellation of powers within the culture; in the Enlightenment the place is much reduced but the mindset of establishment remains. This contributes to Newbigin's ambivalent interpretation of Christendom.

### 5.5.2.3. 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 most Christians, the words 'church' and 'mission' designate two different bodies. The church is a society devoted to worship and the nurture of its members. Mission is a society responsible for the propagation of the gospel. The converts of this activity are then passed on to the church for safekeeping (1953d:164).

Newbigin began to see the disastrous effects of this dichotomy early in his career as a missionary in Kanchipuram. "Madras is a field which has suffered tragically from a wrong policy with regard to the relations of Church and Mission." The result of this tragic dichotomy was "sterile introversion", "the absence of evangelistic outreach", and "congregations [that] are largely ineffective" who "repudiate any responsibility for or relation with the Mission" (1993h:66). Later as General Secretary of the IMC he observed the disastrous effects of this dichotomy on a wider scale. In his booklet *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958b) he pursued an understanding of mission that would move beyond the colonial framework yet preserve the missionary enterprise. At the top of the agenda was the healing of the dichotomy between mission and church. He believed that "the fundamental question is whether the church as such *is* mission" (1958b:18).

The separation of these two bodies is rooted in the origins of the Protestant missionary movement. In the Protestant churches of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the majority of people were blind— even hostile—to the missionary responsibility associated with their 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 in extra-ecclesiastical channels. They banded together to form separate bodies for mission.

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 (1948d:10).

This is the origin of the separation of mission and church. Few Christians today would question the validity of cross-cultural missions. Yet the dichotomy remains; the organ of mission remains bodies formed for this one purpose and separated from the church (1958b:25).

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 great tasks of our time” (1958b:26). 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 (1953d:164). 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” (*ibid*). In terms of the younger churches, mission exists alongside of the congregations as two parallel bodies. Mission is responsible for the propagation of the gospel while the churches become receptacles into which the converts of the missionary activity are placed (1958b:16) or “a sort of bowl into which the fish that were caught could be put for storage” (1978c:311). When this happens the congregation is bound “to draw the obvious conclusion, cease to concern itself with the rest of the village, and become a body concerned only with its own welfare” (1958b:32). In terms of the older churches, mission is considered to be the business of full-time specialists. While the church supports this worthy enterprise with giving and support, the real work of mission itself is carried out by full-time, paid professionals. Mission is no longer the *raison d’être* of congregation (1958b:16).

Over against this distortion, Newbigin places the Bible’s teaching and his own missionary experience. In the book of Acts we do not find two different organizations labelled ‘mission’ and ‘church.’ Such a dichotomy would have been unthinkable for the apostles. 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 separating d” (1958b:26). Newbigin’s own experience confirmed both the disaster of church and mission and the possibility of a congregation being a missionary body (1978c:311). In his missionary experience, when mission and church are separated, the church becomes an introverted body concerned with its own maintenance. When new converts are taught from the beginning that being a Christian means being involved in Christ’s mission to the world, they become the vanguard of the church’s evangelistic work (1958b:26). They take for granted that to be a Christian is being part of mission and the gospel is propagated. Newbigin’s own practice as a bishop was to say to the new converts on the day they were confirmed and took communion for the first time:

Now you are the Body of Christ in this village. You are God’s apostles here. Through you they are to be saved. I will be in touch with you. I will pray for you. I will visit you. If you want my help I will try to help you. But *you* are now the Mission (1958b:32).

Newbigin’s own experience confirmed that when the church took responsibility for mission in a place, the gospel was spread “by a multitude of anonymous non-professional Christians— merchants, travellers, soldiers, coolies, even beggars (1958b:27). This was the “normal way” in which God’s missionary purposes were fulfilled “when the whole membership of the Church, not a few professionals only... knows that by membership in the Church it is committed to a mission in the world” (*ibid*).

There were many difficult issues on the agenda of missions at this time. In every single case, Newbigin attacked the problem by challenging the dichotomy of church and

mission and affirming the missionary nature of the church. A clear example is the problem of the relation between mission and inter-church aid. The “deepest root” of perplexity on this matter was

... simply the fact that we have corrupted the word ‘Church’ (and distorted the life of the churches) by constantly using it in a non-missionary sense. If it was always clear, both in our speech, and in our ecclesiastical life, that the Church *is* the mission, that it is essentially something dynamic and not static, that (as Emil Brunner has said) the Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning, then inter-church aid would always be aid-for-mission and nothing else. Perhaps real clarity will only come when there has been a sufficiently deep process of self-examination in the life of the ordinary congregation so that the ordinary churchman understand that to be a member of the Church means to be part of a mission to the world (1958b:42).<sup>7</sup>

Note the italicized ‘is’ in the above statement ‘the Church *is* mission.’ We find this throughout the document as Newbigin tackles numerous problems of the missionary enterprise (1958b:16, 42, 46). “Mission belongs to the essence of the Church” and therefore, “you cannot have fellowship with Him without being committed to partnership in His mission to the world” (1958b:26-27).

### 5.5.3. *Mission and Unity*

The unity of the church was a long-standing concern for Newbigin. Perhaps there is no other subject that he addressed more often in his writings than this one. His early concern for unity was nourished by his involvement in the SCM at Cambridge and the SVMU at Glasgow. His earliest published address contains words that would echo down through the decades of his life.

In so far as the Church is not truly and deeply one the world over, demonstrating to the world a unity that can transcend all sectional aims, however lofty, it is not merely failing to take account of the plain facts of the world as it is today, it is also to that extent denying its own true nature and contradicting its own true witness (1933:98).

The last sentence highlights two things Newbigin believed about unity: it belongs to the true nature of the church and it is essential to the missionary witness of the church (cf. Jongeneel 1997:186-187; Saayman 1984).

Newbigin’s participation in issues surrounding church unity is vast and deep. The focal point in Newbigin’s long-standing involvement in issues of ecclesial unity is his statement on organic unity that was adopted and endorsed by the New Delhi Assembly (1961). This statement is, perhaps, his most important contribution to the ecumenical church. What needs to be clearly demonstrated is how this statement on organic unity

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<sup>7</sup>The oft-quoted statement from Brunner comes from *The Word and the World* (1931), p.108. Cf. Jongeneel 1997:88.

is closely tied to his understanding of the nature of the church as missionary. His missionary experience and involvement in reunion struggles in South India shaped his understanding of unity. After 1961, Newbiggin continued to defend this model of unity in the context of the globalization of the world and the widespread capitulation to denominationalism. The primary concern in developing, articulating, and defending this view of unity was that the church might remain true to its missionary nature.

#### 5.5.3.1. Missionary Experience and the Unity of the Church (1939-1948)

For Newbiggin the true nature of the church, when its life is shaped by the gospel, is that it is one and it is missionary; and there is the closest possible connection between the two. This truth, which shaped his broad participation on issues of church reunion and theological discussions of unity, was formed in the crucible of his missionary experience. In his early years in India he observed a dramatic difference between the attitudes toward unity in the younger churches<sup>8</sup> of the “mission field” and the older churches of “Christendom.” The western churches showed an astounding complacency toward disunity that “so plainly and ostentatiously flouts the declared will of the Church’s Lord” (1948b:9). On the other hand, the non-western churches found themselves drawn together emphasizing more what they had in common than what divided them as they faced ancient and powerful religious systems that controlled the public doctrine of their countries (*ibid*). Why was there this difference in attitude toward unity?

The answer often given in Western churches was that the enthusiasm for reunion in the younger churches issued from the different perspective and situation of the church as a minority movement. The younger churches stand as a minority community in the midst of ancient and powerful religious systems and this particular setting forces the church toward a pragmatic unity that ignores the real issues of division. Newbiggin believes this answer to be mistaken. The answer he offers to the question makes clear the close connection between the gospel, the church, unity, and mission.

The younger churches found their origin in the modern missionary movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One very important feature of the development of church life on the “mission field” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the principle of mission comity. Since the areas to be evangelized were so vast and the workers so few, it was generally agreed that competition and overlapping should be avoided. Comity was the “mutual division of

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<sup>8</sup>Newbiggin speaks of ‘younger churches’ and ‘older churches’ in 1948. Today these terms are no longer valid. See Jongeneel 1997:178-182 for ways western churches have referred to ‘missionary churches’ in the non-western world. Jongeneel opts for the term ‘independent churches.’

territory into spheres of occupation, on the one hand, and the non-interference in one another's affairs, on the other.... its purpose was to prevent wasteful duplication, competition, and presentation of variant forms of worship and polity which might confuse non-Christians and hinder communication of the gospel" (Beaver 1971:123).

This practice had a profound influence on the way the younger churches developed. Where this principle was practiced it meant that "there is *normally* but one Christian congregation, and upon this congregation rests the responsibility for the evangelization of the area allotted..." (1948d:12). This situation dictated an overriding concern for the evangelization of the area in which the church was placed.

... the effect of the principle of comity was to keep the Church constantly aware of its evangelistic task. Where there is only one Christian congregation in a town or village or district, its members can never forget the fact that the responsibility for making known the Gospel in that area rests upon them alone. If they do not do it, no one else will... where there is only one congregation it is impossible for its members to escape from the solemn recollection that on the day of judgement it is they and they alone who can be questioned about their neighbours who had never heard the good news (1948d:15).

It is this sense of obligation and understanding of their missionary nature that was pressed on the younger churches from the beginning of their existence. This also shaped the character of the churchmanship of those churches. They understood that "their life was dominated by the idea of mission" and that "evangelism was their lifeblood" (1948d:10). Or as he puts it a little later: "The life of the younger Churches is, on the one hand, much more influenced by the missionary impulse which produced them and by the enormous evangelistic task which confronts them" (1948d:11).

This is to be contrasted with the older churches of Christendom. In most of the West there is a multitude of competing congregations of every denominational stripe. When this happens it becomes more difficult to sense the full obligation for the evangelization of one's neighbours. It is inevitable that congregations who compete alongside of one another will finally be more concerned with the maintenance of their own distinctive traditions. They will define themselves over against other congregations rather than in light of the responsibility they have toward their neighbour and their cultural context.

[The] ordinary congregation in a Western city or village does not regard itself as a mission. It would, in fact, repudiate the appellation as an insult. The Church carries on missions at home and abroad. But its ordinary congregational life is not oriented towards its pagan environment or dominated by the missionary aim (1948d:11).

There is a contrast between the younger and older churches in that the life of the former are shaped by the missionary impulse as they face outward to the world. There is a second consequence of the principle of comity, however. Generally there is only one church in any given area. This means that Christians from every caste, class, and even denomination must find a home in that congregation. When the church must include within itself all varieties of people from different backgrounds determined by caste, education, wealth, class, and emotional types "then either it visibly disintegrates into warring factions, or else it stands before men as a society constituted by nothing

else than its relation to God through Christ, facing fallen humanity not as a series of particular associations but simply as humanity restored to itself in Christ" (1948d:17). Pointing to the Church in South India, Newbigin observes that they are committed to the conviction that to have Christ in common is enough. The typical Indian congregation consists of folk who have nothing in common save their lives centred in Jesus Christ and the gospel. They are forced to return to the gospel alone as the source of their life and to recognize that "the Church in its true nature is founded on the Gospel alone" (1948d:18).

Newbigin refers to this as the "process of simplification" (*ibid*). The South Indian church has been forced to strip away anything that is not of the essence of the gospel itself in order to find the true source of its life that will endure tremendous diversity. They have to recognize that "to add anything to the Gospel is to corrupt the sources of the Church's life and to reduce it to the level of a human association based on some identity of belief or practice" (*ibid*). Newbigin is not suggesting that theological reflection is unnecessary; in fact, he insists that it is crucial in its task of protecting the gospel (1948d:16, 18). Nor is he suggesting that matters that have divided churches be ignored, for "when this is attempted among Christians it is apt to produce a kind of tasteless slush devoid of any power to salt the earth. Differences of belief have to be faced with the fullest seriousness and realism" (1948d:17; cf. 105-106). And he is not suggesting that all traditions are equally faithful to Scripture. Rather the question is whether or not Christ as presented in the gospel is the sufficient centre for ecclesial unity.

This must be contrasted with the Western church that has existed as numerous confessional bodies. While Newbigin believes that confessional and theological statements are important for the purpose of protecting the gospel from the distortion of human thought, the danger is that these confessions can go beyond this legitimate task and become a series of additions to the gospel. When there are rival congregations, each group will accent their distinctiveness to justify their continued existence. The force of group egotism is to shape congregations that focus more on what they alone hold rather than on what they hold in common (1948d:16).

Thus the "position of the Church under the arrangement known as 'mission comity' has tended both to force the Church to face the question whether the common fact of redemption in Christ is by itself a sufficient basis of outward unity, and also to lay upon the Church a vivid sense of its evangelistic responsibility" (*ibid*). However, for Newbigin comity meant still more than this. It is not simply a matter of recovering one of the aspects of the church's ministry (mission) and distinguishing between primary and secondary matters for the sake of unity. It is nothing less than a return to the gospel that leads to a recovery of the true nature of the church itself. In the missionary situation under the comity agreements, it was much easier to recover the truth, which is so often eclipsed in the Christendom situation where there are many competing churches, "that the Church is not primarily an association constituted by the agreement of its members on a number of points of belief and practice, but simply humanity reconstituted by its redemption and regeneration in Christ" (*ibid*). The church is the new humankind that in its true nature is founded on the gospel alone. Adding anything to the gospel corrupts the church's life and its nature. Creeds and confessions protect the gospel that is the source of the church's life, and the community that identifies itself on the basis of their

own intellectual constructions and traditions of piety is a human association that is not spiritual but carnal (1948d:18). The situation of the younger churches under the comity agreement has driven the church away from these theological constructions and ecclesiological traditions back to the gospel. As they have been forced to live out of the gospel it has resulted in making the church true to its nature as one body and as a missionary body. As Newbigin puts it, the mission context of the younger churches has had the effect “both of making the Church more truly the Church, and of making it more truly a mission to the world. The connection between the movement for Christian reunion and the movement for world evangelization is of the deepest possible character. The two things are the two outward signs of a return to the heart of the gospel itself” (1948d:19).

Newbigin’s answer to the Western churches is clear. The enthusiasm for the reunion of the church on the former “mission fields” is not a pragmatic move in the face of an imposing religious system, but a return to the gospel which has enabled them to recover the true nature of the church as missionary and as one. The enthusiasm of the younger Churches for reunion is not merely the natural effect of the minority status of the younger churches on their perspective, it is “a very deep and significant movement of the Spirit in the life of the church” (*ibid*) and “the fruit of an act of obedience to the Gospel” (1948d:20). The church in the West, on the other hand, for the most part lacks an urgency for reunion because its lack of a missionary focus has allowed it to make central theological additions to the gospel and thus reshape the church as a human association based on human constructions. It is the attitude that each has toward mission that governs their attitude toward unity.

I believe that it is this attitude in character which accounts for the difference in attitude to the question of reunion. It is not possible to account for the contentment with the divisions of the Church except upon the basis of a loss of the conviction that the Church exists to bring all men to Christ. There is the closest possible connection between the acceptance of the missionary obligation and the acceptance of the obligation of unity. That which makes the Church one is what makes it a mission to the world (1948d:11).

His experience as a missionary in the Indian church that lived in the midst of a powerful Hindu society confirmed the close connection between mission and unity. He describes a typical situation in a Hindu village when he stood on the steps of the village church to proclaim the gospel with the Christian congregation sitting in the middle and a great circle of Hindus and Muslims standing round. As he proclaims Christ as the Saviour of all humankind with the following promise: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself”, he knew that the Hindu and Muslim listeners would only believe this promise if they could see evidence of this promise in a reconciled fellowship of believers centred in Jesus Christ.

If they can see in the congregation in the centre not a new clique, or a new caste, or a new party, but a family in which men and women of all cliques and castes and parties are being drawn in mutual forgiveness and reconciliation to live a life which is rooted in peace with God, then there is the possibility that they may believe. If, on the other hand, they see only a series of rival groups competing with one another for influence and membership, they are not likely to be impressed by the message of our Savior (1961g:4).

The importance of this experience for his missionary ecclesiology is seen in the words that follow. He calls this common village scene “a true parable of the position of the Church in the world” (*ibid*). The church stands as a sign, first fruit, and instrument of God’s purpose to draw all men to Himself in Christ. The disunity of the church is a contradiction or a public denial of the gospel. It weakens the proclamation of Jesus. “It is not possible to continue steadily testifying to men that the one thing that matters to them is their relation to Christ and at the same time steadily to maintain that many of the things on which Christians differ matter so much that even the common bond of redemption in Christ is not big enough to transcend them” (1948d:15). The urgency of the prayer of Jesus was impressed on him during his missionary years: “I pray... that all of them may be one... that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

In *The Household of God* Newbigin summarizes the “very close connection between the Church’s mission and the Church’s unity” (1953d:170) in two statements. First, mission is dependent on unity. Unity is needed so that the world may believe, as seen most clearly in the words of Jesus in John 17. The church’s unity is a sign of the salvation which Christ has accomplished. That salvation is the reconciliation of all things in Christ. If the church proclaims the good news of salvation but is disunited her life publicly contradicts the message of the gospel and the sufficiency of the atonement to accomplish reconciliation. Second, unity depends upon mission. When the church is faithful to her nature as missionary, her disunity is seen as the public scandal<sup>9</sup> that it is. In the missionary situation of the churches outside of old Christendom, the stark contrast between Christ and no-Christ forces the Christian community to the heart of the gospel which enables them to recover the whole nature and being of the church. “When Christians are engaged in the task of missionary obedience they are in the situation in which the Church is truly the Church. They are actual participators in Christ’s apostolate.... In that situation the disunity, which is easily taken for granted among Churches which are not in a missionary situation, becomes literally intolerable” (1953d:173). This interdependence of mission and unity leads Newbigin to conclude:

I do not think that a resolute dealing with our divisions will come except in the context of a quite new acceptance on the part of all the Churches of the obligation to bring the Gospel to every creature; nor do I think that the world will believe that Gospel until it sees more evidence of its power to make us one. These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with the other

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<sup>9</sup>Newbigin explains his use of the word scandal with a vivid illustration. Two rival temperance societies in the same town is unfortunate but not scandalous. But a temperance society whose members are habitually drunk is scandalous. This is because the nature of their life contradicts their central message (1948d:23f).

(1953d:174).

### 5.5.3.2. Reunion and the Church of South India (1942-1947)

In the context of this missionary concern for unity, Newbigin was drawn into discussions about the reunion of the church in the early 1940s (cf. Sundkler 1954). While many missionaries were weary of these discussions that had been carried on for over twenty years, Newbigin's commitment to the importance of unity for mission sustained his patient pursuit of reunion. He was elected as the convener of the Union Committee of the SIUC. For the next six years he helped to design the South India scheme of reunion and subsequently defended it in India and in Britain (1944a; 1944b; 1948d). The Church of South India was formed in 1947. During this process Newbigin produced a major book defending the South India scheme of reunion. The book is important for our purposes since he defends a certain view of unity and bases that squarely on the nature of the church.

The problem Newbigin addresses is the exact nature of the ecclesial unity. There were two different traditions of ecclesiology that came at the problem in different ways. Each of these traditions was shaped by a different ecclesiology, explained disunity differently, and offered a different understandings of the unity that should be sought in the CSI. Unfortunately, the South India scheme of reunion did not satisfy either of these traditions.

The first tradition was that of the Anglo-Catholics. According to them, the heart of the gospel is Jesus Christ in the flesh, who lived, died and rose again. That is, it is a concrete historical man at the core of the message. Jesus chose the apostles and formed a visible community and this was the beginning of the church. Anyone in subsequent generations who wants to be incorporated into Christ must become a member of this historically continuous, visible body. The visible and the institutional is not secondary or peripheral to the nature of the church but a essential to its nature. The church is one body that has developed historically from Christ. Visible unity and historical continuity are of the essence of the church. Therefore any plan for reunion must simply be a return of all those who have fallen out of the historically continuous body. This tradition represented the biggest threat to the South India scheme of reunion because it insisted the continuous historic order maintained by the bishop as successors of the apostles was essential to the church. They demanded supplemental ordination in which all ministers outside the Anglican fellowship be reordained by bishops.

The second tradition was that of Free Churches. According to them, people are incorporated into the body of Christ by faith in Christ and by the working of the Spirit. The church is not simply an historically continuous community or visible body. Rather it is an invisible temple not made with hands. The church is not an organization but a community of the Spirit constituted by faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, true unity is spiritual unity. Reunion for this type was simply an increase of cordiality. They were unconcerned with issues of historical and even organizational unity.

Newbigin believed that each of these ecclesiologies "does justice to one aspect of the New Testament teaching about the Church" but both fail "to do justice to the effect of sin in severing the two things that God has joined" (1948d:25). The remainder of the book is an attempt to articulate a Biblical ecclesiology that shows the strength of each of the positions and joins them together in a way that forwards the cause of reunion in

South India.

Newbigin addresses the Anglo-Catholic tradition first (1948d:27-43). His tactic is to show the place of the people of God in the Biblical story. The importance of the church in Newbigin's thought can be seen in the way that he connects God's redemptive work to a chosen people. God does not reveal ideas about himself in the Scripture so that humanity can be redeemed by having a correct understanding of God. Rather the Bible narrates a story in which God acts in history to form a people. This community is to be a bearer of His revelation and the means by which humankind can be reconciled to God. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is by the church that the gospel comes to humanity. God meets humankind through His people and invites them into the fellowship of the church. Reconciliation comes by fellowship with His reconciled people. There is no other way that the gospel comes to people except through a particular historical fellowship. "The Gospel comes to men not only as a set of ideas... It comes in the concrete actuality of an encounter with God's people" (1948d:28). In fact, it is "a false spirituality, divorced from the whole teaching of the Bible, which regards this visible and continuing Church as of subordinate importance for the life in Christ" (:29). God's purpose is a reconciled new humanity wrought in Christ; the church plays a pivotal role in God's redemptive work as the first fruits and instrument of that purpose. The church's unity is indispensable for the church's missionary calling because God's purpose is to redeem all humanity and draw them into one.

The question, then, must be posed: "What is the church?" (*ibid*). Newbigin answers this question by narrating the Biblical story in which God forms a people beginning with Abraham and culminating in the body of apostles gathered around Christ who receive the Spirit at Pentecost. The question that is critical is how one can be ingrafted into this historically continuous community? "The Church is faced at once with a question that affects decisively its whole nature and constitution: the question 'Upon what terms are Gentiles to be incorporated into the Church?'" The burden of the remainder of Newbigin's argument is that "faith has always been in fact—from the human side—the constitutive fact of Israel's existence as the people of God.... Not circumcision, but faith, is the human condition of membership in the Israel of God" (1948d:33-34). The weight of this Biblical evidence stands over against the Anglo-Catholic tradition that wants to define their ecclesiology primarily in horizontal terms as a historically continuous structure. The Bible stands opposed to any attempt to define the church simply in terms of ingrafting into an historical body; Paul's arguments in Romans and Galatians in the midst of the circumcision controversy are evidence of this. The church is not Israel after the flesh but after the Spirit and one is not ingrafted into Israel by circumcision but by faith. And so, to "insist on outward and institutional continuity with 'Israel after the flesh' is to contradict the Church's nature" (1948d:39). This does not mean that historical continuity and visible unity are insignificant. In fact, Romans 11 shows that this is at the centre of the apostle's concern. However, it is faith that is constitutive of incorporation into this historically continuous body.

Newbigin then turns to consider the ecclesiological claims of the Free Churches (1948d:44-54). While Galatians and Romans address people who are primarily concerned with an outward rite of incorporation into a visible and historically continuous community, the first epistle to the Corinthians addresses a group who emphasize the Spirit to the point of destroying the visible unity of the body. Paul refers

to this “spiritual” group as carnal—a word that must have shocked them. Newbigin details Paul’s argument against a false spirituality that glories in any ground of confidence other than the cross.

It has no ground of glorying save in the Cross of Jesus Christ. In so far as the Church permits any other ground of confidence to displace this, whether it be confidence in a great leader, in a great preacher, in some tradition of spirituality, of learning, or of order, it becomes simply a human association, not spiritual but carnal, not the nucleus of regenerate humanity, but an ordinary human society (1948d:49).

The common life of sharing in God’s redemptive work accomplished at the cross is the work of the Spirit. Paul tells us we were all baptized by the Spirit into one body. Therefore, “dependence upon the one Holy Spirit would have produced the visible unity of the one Body” (*ibid*). Thus the use of the phrase ‘spiritual unity’ to oppose a visible unity is totally irreconcilable with the New Testament. A visible unity is the proper expression of love that is the work of the Spirit. The one body of love is the normal counterpart of the one Spirit. “The unity of the Church is of its essence. That unity is a spiritual unity. It is also a corporeal unity” (1948d:51-54).

If both of these traditions have correctly defined one aspect of the church’s nature, then how is it that they stand in tension with one another? In other words, how can their emphases be affirmed and the stalemate transcended? Newbigin’s answer is twofold. First, the church must be understood in the context of the eschatological doctrine of justification wherein the church is both sinful and holy (1948d:84-103). Both views—the Anglo-Catholic and the Free Church—define the church from the standpoint of what it should be. And in this sense, the two views of the church are correlates: “The one Holy Spirit, and the one visible Church united through all the world and through all time from the Apostles to the present day, are necessarily and indissolubly correlates.” And yet, as Newbigin goes on to add, the fact of sin upsets this correlation. “While this is true in the sense that there is no rational ground upon which the two can be separated, yet in fact the irrational and absurd fact of sin *in the Church* always and everywhere upsets the correlation” (1948d:100). The second point follows naturally from the first.

If it is the remaining sinfulness of the church that obscures both the proper historical continuity and the unity of the Spirit by faith in Christ, then the only proper response is one of repentance and reunion (1948d:104-123). The division of the church must be compared to the separation of two divorced persons with the only solution being repentance and reunion.

But if, as we have argued, the Church is divided because of sin, there are required of us both a penitent return to Christ and His atoning work, and also acts of obedience to His will (1948d:104).

### 5.5.3.3. The Nature of the Unity We Seek: Organic Unity (1950-1961)

Newbigin’s understanding of the importance of unity for the true nature of the missionary church was given expression at an ecumenical level in 1961. His involvement in issues of ecclesial unity in the WCC began early. The formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 immediately raised the question of the nature of unity being sought by that body and its ecclesiological foundation. This question was

taken up by the central committee of the WCC meeting in Toronto in 1950. They declared that the WCC is not based on any particular ecclesiology and does not prejudice the ecclesiological problem. This neutrality meant that members of the WCC need not treat their ecclesiologies as relative and that membership in the WCC did not mean accepting a certain doctrine of church unity. There were at that time a number of competing models of unity available, all built on their distinctive ecclesiologies: re-integration into the original mother church, organic union along the lines of Lambeth Quadrilateral, a federal relationship between confessional fellowships, and spiritual unity. A number of significant figures in the WCC were asked to respond to this statement and Newbigin was one of them. He responded that the neutrality of the WCC was provisional so that unity could be pursued in a Biblical way. If the neutrality were to become permanent it would be an answer to the question and it would be the wrong answer because the proper embodiment of unity is the church and not a council of churches. This response drew Newbigin into discussions in the WCC about the nature of the unity the WCC ought to be seeking, that would culminate in the statement made in New Delhi (1961). That statement said:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people (New Delhi 1962:116).

This statement was fashioned to a large extent by Newbigin (Fey 1970:148f.); and it has a history. His first statement on this subject was made at a plenary lecture in the Evanston meeting of the WCC in 1954 (1955).<sup>10</sup> A further paper on the 'Nature of the Unity We Seek' was presented to the Faith and Order Working Committee of the WCC (1957b,c). This led to a minute addressed to the Central Committee of the WCC and finally on to New Delhi where it was adopted. These two papers (1955, 1957b) present the theological foundation for Newbigin's understanding of the unity to be sought in the WCC. In the context of this study, it is important to observe three things about his theological argument: unity is essential to the church; unity is for the sake of mission; therefore, unity ought to have both local and universal dimensions.

What has garnered the most attention in Newbigin's formulation is the consideration he gives to the local and universal dimensions of the unity of the church. In fact, this continued to be an important factor in shaping the WCC discussions on the nature of unity. Back of this concern is Newbigin's concern for the missionary nature of the church. Unity belongs "to the true nature of the Church as grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ" and "all disunity among Christians is a contraction of that upon

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<sup>10</sup>This lecture was never published. However, the substance of it was incorporated into a speech made at the University of Chicago that same year. See 1991i:1044 and 1955.

which their being Christian rests. It has the character of sin, being a repudiation of the God-given nature of the Church” (1957b:182). This is because community reconciled in love is the proper fruit of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

This unity is visible in such a way that its result will be that the world will come to believe the gospel. Newbigin quotes John 17 as evidence of this intimate connection between a visible unity and mission: “that the world may believe that thou hast sent me... that the world may know that thou has sent me and hast loved them even as thou lovest me” (1957b:181). Indeed, the unity of the church is only rightly understood in a missionary context.

The quest for unity is misunderstood if it is thought of in isolation from the fulfillment of God’s whole purpose “to unite *all* things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph.1:10). The Church is both the first-fruit and the instrument of that purpose.... The unity of the Church is wrongly sought unless it is sought from a missionary point of view—as part of the fulfillment of Christ’s promise to draw all men to himself (John 12:32) (1957b:187).

It is precisely this stress on the missionary importance of unity that leads Newbigin to conclude that unity must have local and ecumenical dimensions. For the sake of each place where the church is situated, the church in that place must be visibly one fellowship. It is the missionary obligation that constrains the church to seek a visible demonstration of the power of the atonement to bind humankind together. The world must see in each place a body that transcends the divisions that plague humankind. A visible, local unity is necessary for a faithful witness to the gospel. But there must be a universal dimension as well. If that visibly united fellowship is to be seen by the world as more than a local group, it is necessary that each local community be “so ordered and so related to the whole that its fellowship with all Christ’s people everywhere, and with those who have gone before and will come after, is made clear” (1955:15). The missionary obligation binds the church to demonstrate an historical and ecumenical unity to preclude the misunderstanding that the church is a parochial association.

#### 5.5.3.4. The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humankind

The statement at New Delhi affirmed an understanding of unity that was a fully committed fellowship in each local place that was also recognizable as a universal fellowship for the sake of a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. Even though the New Delhi statement attempted to hold these two dimensions—local and universal—together it was the local aspect that attracted immediate attention. Much attention was given to the local church in the Mexico meeting of the CWMC and the Faith and Order meeting at Montreal, both held in 1963. However, by the time that the WCC met at Uppsala in 1968, there was an attempt to recover the universal dimension of this statement. This was prompted by the growing recognition that the world is one interlocked unit. The process of modernization, westernization, and globalization was sweeping the world into one current of world history. This deepening sense of being part of one world history challenged the church to reflect on the ecumenical nature of unity. The phrase “the unity of humankind” became an explicit topic of conversation in ecumenical circles in the 1960s, was accelerated by Vatican II’s emphasis on the church as a sign of unity for the world, and was incorporated into the language of the WCC assemblies in

Uppsala. What did unity mean in this new setting?

Newbiggin addresses this issue at several points. In each case his primary concern is to combat the view that a Hinduized understanding of religion is a key to human unity. His discussion of this issue highlights the importance of the united church in world history.

The starting point for a proper understanding of the church and its call to unity and mission is the cross of Jesus Christ. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32) is a text Newbiggin frequently quotes. This word of Jesus was spoken to some Greeks who wanted to see him. Like most Greeks, they were interested in the teaching of Jesus. In response, Jesus points to his death as the centre to which all men will be drawn. The centre for unity is not the teaching or person of Jesus (1961e:5) but his crucifixion—an event in history.

The cross is not simply an historic event, but a mighty act of God whereby he accomplishes an atonement "so deep and all-embracing, that the deepest divisions between men are transcended, and a body is created in which men of every sort and kind are drawn together" (1961e:7). Human sin has brought about a disunity caused by self-love, envy, and hatred. The cross is an act of atonement, a mercy-seat (*hilasterion*) around which humanity can be reconciled to God *and* to one another. Both of these relationships are important. The cross is not simply God's act of reconciling humankind to himself; it is also an act that reconciles humanity to each other. The cross is God's creative act of reconciliation in the midst of a humanity fractured by sin. Sin, the root cause of human disunity and conflict, is judged at the cross. God's reconciling act in the cross puts to death the root cause of human brokenness and hostility. A community is created that is nothing less than the new humankind re-united and re-created by its incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus the Christian starting point in the cross requires the creation of a visible community. As Newbiggin puts it: "The gospel has the church at its heart" and "the Church is organic to the gospel" (1955:11). "It belongs to the very essence of the atonement wrought by Christ, that it leads to the creation of a visible community binding men together in all nations and generations" (1955:10).

The way in which the church is incorporated into that reconciling death is by the baptism of the Spirit into one body. Baptism is the work of the Spirit whereby He incorporates us into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our hostilities and divisions are crucified and buried with Him and we are raised with him to live by the power of the Spirit in one body. The new existence of the believer is the life of the Spirit of God given to him or her through Christ. "This is the common life in the Spirit, and this is what the Church properly is. But if Christians begin to get together in groups to exalt the name of a particular teacher or leader, to compare themselves with other Christians, and to glory in the things which separate them from other Christians, then—says St. Paul—they are falling back from the life of the Spirit to the life of the flesh" (1961e:15).

The work of God in the cross of Christ and by the baptism of the Spirit is to repair and heal the divisions and hostilities of humankind. This redemptive work of God will necessarily issue in a community that is in fact reconciled by its participation in God's healing work. The church is that body which has begun to share in foretaste the reconciling work of God. It is a sign, first fruit, and instrument of His purpose "to be put

into effect when the times will have reached fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Ephesians 1:9f.) (1957b:187).

The atoning work of Jesus Christ places me into a new relationship to other believers who claim to find their centre in the cross: we are one. It is not a unity based on intellectual agreement, natural sympathy, feeling, doctrinal agreement, or participation in a common religious experience. “It is an actual knitting together... which can be described either by saying that the Holy Spirit unites us or by saying that the death of Christ for us both places us in a new relation to each other wherein we can but acknowledge each other as brothers” (1955:10). The atoning work of Jesus Christ also places me into a new relationship with the unbelieving world.

The church is organic to the gospel. But, in saying this, we have only said the first half of what has to be said. The atoning work of Christ places me in a new existential relationship not only with my fellow-believer but also with every human being whether he is a believer or not; for that atoning act is directed to the whole human race, and not to anything less (1955:12).

It is precisely here that we see the wide gulf between the Christian and the Hindu position. The ultimate centre for human unity according to the Hindu religion is the experience of mystical union with the ultimate (*brahman*). The unity that Hinduism offers is a negative unity of tolerance. Salvation is conceived in terms of individual contact with the divine outside history. For this reason, “Hinduism has no doctrine of the Church.... Hinduism can never put a visible community into the centre of its creed, as Christianity puts the church. The unity which it offers is the cessation of strife, not the creation of a new community” (1955:6). The unity of humankind can only be achieved around some centre, and the proper question is “what is that true centre?” In contrast to Hinduism, Christianity has put the cross of Jesus Christ in the centre. That cross is the work of God which in fact reconciles humanity to God and to each other. “Therefore, it belongs to the very essence of the atonement wrought by Christ, that it leads to the creation of a visible community binding men together in all nations and all generations” (1955:10). The unity that results from the cross is not a mere toleration but a communion of the Holy Spirit. In fact, a Christian unity will oppose an insipid toleration. It will obligate the church “to wrestle with these differences in frankness and humility, until they yield deeper insight into God’s nature and will” (1955:11).

The Christian starting point in the atonement requires a visible community that is truly reconciled. While Hinduism advocates a unity with individual religious experience at the centre, the gospel places at the centre a visible community as a demonstration of the reconciling power of God in Christ and by the Spirit. The church’s task is to call all humankind to the reconciling centre provided by God. Jesus said, “I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto myself,” and those who have begun to share in Christ’s reconciliation are committed to participation in His reconciling ministry. “In other words, by their membership in the church they are committed to a mission to the world. They cannot abandon the latter without forfeiting the former” (1955:12). And that mission must be conceived “as the presence throughout the world of the one new family, the household of God, the sign to all men of their true destiny in Christ, the servant of all men for Christ’s sake, the embassy of Christ to all men everywhere inviting them to be reconciled to God” (1960j:17).

It is in this light that we see the scandal of disunity. The proclamation of Christ's atonement as the centre for the uniting of humankind requires a community that has begun to embody that unity. Disunity distorts the picture beyond recognition. "The Church faces the world not as one fellowship but as a fantastic medley of splintered fragments divided on grounds of race, of tradition, of doctrine. Instead of seeing the face of its one Saviour, the world sees a monstrous gallery of caricatures" (:1960j:17f.). The evidence of the church's life must be in harmony with its message if its mission is to be authentic.

The disunity of the church is a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement. It is quite unthinkable that the church should be able effectively to preach that atonement and to become, in fact, the nucleus of the reconciled humanity, while that denial stands. So long as it stands, the world will see in the church not the one place where all men may at last come home, but a series of separatist bodies, each marked by a whole series of cultural peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of belief and practice (1955:13).

It is this argument that Newbigin presses in the context of the revolutionary decades of the 1960s. He characterizes this period as a time when colonialism has ended and there is a growing world culture bound together by the western way of life. But it is also a time when the church is present in almost every part of the world. Newbigin articulates several things that must be recovered if the church is to be faithful to her mission in this global world. The first is that it must recover the missionary character of the church (1961c:109ff.). The second is that there must be a recovery of the church's unity. The question of a missionary church is always: What is the body into which I am inviting this person? In a global world, the answer "one of several hundred bodies into which, in the course of the cultural and religious history of the West, the Church of God has been divided" (1961c:124) becomes increasingly implausible. It draws the response:

If it is true that Jesus is the Saviour of all men, and that all mankind is to be made one family through him, how is it that you who speak in his name are unable to live as one family? If, as you say, the message which you bring is not merely part of the Western cultural tradition, but is something which transcends all cultures and belongs to man as man, how is it that you have not found in it something sufficiently transcendent, sufficiently fundamental, to enable you—with your relatively minor differences—to find a basis of unity? How can you expect us to recognize in your fellowship our true home, when you have yourselves not yet found in Jesus a foundation for a common life as one family? (1961c:125).

Our life contradicts the message of the gospel. The prosecution of the missionary calling of the church requires that the church embody the sufficiency of the atonement to bind all humankind together. Mission and unity are indissolubly united in a global world.

##### 5.5.3.5. The Threat of Reconciled Diversity and Denominationalism

The statement on organic unity elaborated at New Delhi expressed Newbigin's understanding of the model of unity that most fully conformed to the missionary nature of the church. During the last three decades of his life, Newbigin believed that the primary challenge to organic unity came from the model of reconciled diversity rooted in a denominational view of the church. The model of reconciled diversity had its

origins in the notion of conciliar unity. Ironically it was Newbigin who drafted the operative document for conciliar unity at the Louvain meeting of Faith and Order in 1971 (1993h:220f.). Conciliar unity advocated “the coming together of Christians—locally, regionally, or globally—for common prayer, counsel and decision, in the belief that the Holy Spirit can use such meetings for his own purpose by reconciling, renewing and reforming the church by guiding it toward the fullness of truth and love” (Louvain 1971:226). It is clear that councils can be the means by which organic unity is sought but can also become a substitute for organic unity. In other words, conciliarity can be an alternative to and departure from the tradition of organic unity, or it can be one dimension of that unity. This tension was present throughout the decade of the 1970s in ecumenical circles. At the Faith and Order meeting in Salamanca (1973), it was advocated that conciliar unity is not a departure from organic unity but one expression of it. The Christian World Communions (CWC) meeting in Geneva in 1974 was unable to endorse the Salamanca statement. The desire to preserve denominational identities led to a view that seized conciliar unity as a model to protect these communions as identifiable bodies. Thus conciliar unity was elaborated in terms of a reconciled diversity (Protestant) or a communion of communions (Roman Catholic)—models that departed radically from the pursuit of organic unity. The guiding principle of these models of unity is that the variety of denominational traditions is legitimate and can be a source of enrichment for the church universal. Therefore, a reconciled diversity or communion of communions model of unity does not demand a surrender of denominational identity. Different confessional traditions can live together as identifiable bodies in a dialogue of mutual enrichment and correction.

It is the denominationalism that undergirds the model of reconciled diversity that becomes Newbigin’s primary sparring partner from the mid 1970s until his death. He interacts with two books that form the backdrop for his critique: *Christian Unity and Christian Diversity* by John Macquarrie (1975) and *Denominationalism* edited by Russell Richey (1977). He detects in these books a celebration of denominationalism in contrast with the words of Richard Niebuhr a half century earlier when he said that “Denominationalism... represents the moral failure of Christianity” (Niebuhr 1929:25; 1978f:189; 1986e:144). And the reconciled diversity of unity that is based on denominationalism seems to pursue the strategy that “since grace has been given to us in our divisions we may continue in division that grace may abound” (1983c:17). It is for this reason that Newbigin believed that “a radical theological critique of the theory and practice of denominationalism” remained an urgent item on the agenda of a missionary encounter with western culture (1986e:144).

Newbigin’s fundamental critique is that denominationalism—whether represented in local denominational congregations or denominations linked together in a federal unity or reconciled diversity—has surrendered to an alien ideology and thus misunderstands the true nature of the church. The question he poses at the end of a review of Richey’s book sets the tone for his various critiques of denominationalism: “Can the phenomena here described make any claim to be an authentic manifestation of what the New Testament means by the Church?” (1978f:189). Denominationalism, in Newbigin’s eyes, has corrupted the nature of the church in at least three ways.

First, a denominational ecclesiology believes that the unity of the church can take proper form in a congeries of separate identifiable bodies. Macquarrie offers a form of

the church that maintains “the peaceful co-existence of separated bodies each representing particular traditions and a particular style of churchmanship” (1976a:328). He takes his clue for ecclesiology from sociology rather than theology (:329). For Macquarrie it is within the general context of the search for a truly pluralist society that the issue of ecumenicity must be understood (Macquarrie 1975:11). In contrast, Newbigin believes that the answer to the question of the nature of unity “can only be answered by reference to some basic understanding of the nature and purpose of the Church itself” (1976a:330; cf. :329).

For Newbigin, the church must be defined in terms of Jesus Christ and his mission (1976a:330). Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God and called out a community to follow him, to be with him, and to be sent out with the same announcement. That announcement is not simply about a future hope but a present reality. It is an announcement that all nations will be gathered around Jesus Christ on the basis of his atonement. “Clearly the Church is seen here as a company of people who are bound together in a recognizable unity, centred in the person and work of Jesus and looking towards a universal consummation of which the manifest kingship of Christ will be the centre” (1976a:330). The church must be a living embodiment of the truth of the announcement. If the church is a group of societies all manifesting a variety of styles and types they bear witness that Christ’s atonement is not a sufficient centre to enable different types to live together as one body (1976a:336).

Newbigin refers to both Galatians and Corinthians as examples of Paul’s refusal to allow different types to exist within the one body (1976a:330-331). The letter to the Galatians shows a conflict between Paul and Peter over the issue of visible unity at the table of the Lord. There were two different ‘types’ of Christians and surely, one would think, finding a way to maintain their distinct identity could be a source of enrichment. “But Paul believed that the whole truth of the Gospel was involved in resisting the proposal. To break the fellowship at the one table would be to deny the central reality of the Gospel” (1976a:330). This division would be a corruption of the very nature of the church and a denial of the gospel. In the Corinthian church, the division was based on a celebration of rival names which no doubt represented different expressions of the Christian faith, different styles, different ‘types.’ Paul rebukes this mindset and calls it carnal. The Corinthians were one body drawn together by the cross of Christ and the baptism of the Spirit (1976a:331). The reconciled diversity model of unity must fall under the same critiques from Paul; it too celebrates distinct identities as a source of enrichment. However, what is at stake is the nature of the church, faithfulness to the mission of the church, and ultimately the gospel itself.

The claim that the church’s form is properly in a loose connection of distinct bodies is sometimes bolstered by the claim of vigour and enrichment that comes from diversity. Macquarrie extols church life in the United States for just this reason. The diversity and vigour of the church in the United States is contrasted with the monochrome church life in Spain or Sweden. Supposedly reconciled diversity leads to the first, while organic unity leads to the second. Newbigin does not deny the importance of diversity and the enrichment and vigour which results from diversity. What he does contest is that this is best found in a reconciled diversity. He pits against this claim his own missionary experience when he returned to Madras in 1965. At that time the CSI had been in existence for eighteen years. He had experienced the churches in Madras before reunion

as competing congregations, but the church he found in 1965 was not the uniform church Macquarrie predicted: “on the contrary I found a rich variety of styles in worship and practice. What I found was congregations less concerned about their own affairs and more ready to think in terms of God’s will for the life of the city as a whole, less like competing clubs each trying to enlarge itself and a little more recognizable as signs and foretaste of God’s kingdom” (1976a:334).

A second way the denominational model corrupts a true understanding of the church is that it makes no claim to be the church for that local place and therefore make no claims that all in that place must be incorporated into it. Newbigin quotes from Winthrop Hudson’s famous essay on denominations which includes the disclaimers that “no denomination claims to represent the whole church of Christ;... [and therefore] none claims that all members of society should be incorporated into its membership” (1986e:144; cf. Hudson 1955). Again Newbigin attacks this misunderstanding by an appeal to the nature of the church in Scripture (1984a:7). According to the New Testament the term *ecclesia* refers to both local congregations *and* the entire body that belongs to Christ. The word *ecclesia* is qualified two ways in Scripture: first by *tou Theou* and secondly, in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus. Both of these designations are significant for defining the church over against a denominational misunderstanding. First, Paul refers to the church in each place as an assembly *of God*. Since it God that is calling this congregation together, it does claim to represent the whole church of Christ. But this is qualified by the second modifier. The church represents the whole church of Christ *for that place*. If this is true then “in contrast to what is said of the denominations, it *is* claimed that all members of society should be incorporated into this gathering. The Church is in fact simply the provisional incorporation of all humankind into the new humanity of Jesus” (1984a:7). A Biblical definition of the church challenges both pillars of the denominational structure: the true nature of the church is that it claims to represent the whole church of Christ and that all members of society ought to be incorporated into its membership. It is only when the church can make this universal claim that there can be a missionary encounter. To surrender this universal claim is to become a religious society for interested adherents.

A comparison of the early church’s understanding of itself with a denominational model highlights the distortion of a denominational view of the church. As we have seen, the self-chosen name of the early church—*ecclesia tou Theou*—made the claim to be a public assembly called by God to which all citizens were summoned. They refused the common designations of *qiasos* and *‘eranos* which were names for private religious societies. However, this is precisely what denominations are—private societies that exist to offer a future salvation to its adherents. This development is the result of the Enlightenment. Europe hailed the dawning of the new light of autonomous rationality and the Christian vision was “banished from the public sector” and “relegated to the private. The Christian faith became a private option. The Church was no longer the *ecclesia tou Theou* but a religious fraternity for those who wished to make use of its services” (1984a:8). In other words, the post-Enlightenment church embraced an identity that the early church refused at the cost of blood. This privatized Christianity takes shape in the denomination.

The visible form of this privatized religion is precisely the denomination, a body of people who, exercising their freedom as autonomous individuals, join together to

practice and propagate the religion of their choice. Such a body actually makes no total claims. It does not claim the allegiance of all, but only of those who care to join. It is not the *ecclesia tou Theou* of the New Testament. It is precisely a *thiasos*, a private association of religiously minded people. And even if all of these associations could agree to co-exist in friendly cooperation, the result would not be the Church as the New Testament portrays it (1984a:8).

The denominational model of the church, and its counterpart the reconciled diversity model of unity, is “the religious aspect of secularization” (1986e:145) and “an illicit syncretism with an alien ideology” (1984a:9). As such denominationalism surrenders the true nature of the church and abandons its claim of universality. The missionary calling of the church is compromised:

It follows that neither a denomination separately nor all the denominations linked together in some kind of federal unity or “reconciled diversity” can be the agents of a missionary confrontation with our culture, for the simple reason that they are themselves the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of our culture. They cannot confront our culture with the witness of the truth since even for themselves they do not claim to be more than associations of individuals who share the same private opinions (1986e:146).

The third way denominationalism misunderstands the nature of the church is the way that it defines mission in terms of a shared responsibility of all denominational types for society. Winthrop Hudson argues that in the denominational model “all recognize their shared responsibility for society.” This may take the social activist form in which churches are responsible for the social, economic, and political needs of society or the evangelical form in which churches share the responsibility for verbally sharing the gospel with unbelievers in that local place. Both, however, suffer from the same misunderstanding of the mission of the church. A brief look at the way Newbigin responded to Macquarrie’s understanding of mission will highlight this.

Macquarrie defines mission in terms of service to the political, economic, and social needs of society. Newbigin’s understanding, however, is that “the Church is not just (though it should always be) a body that serves society” (1976a:333). Macquarrie’s view of mission defines the church simply in terms of the instrumental role it plays in society. Questions of unity can be left to the side because they are not integral to the service the church provides society. However, the Bible defines the church not only as an instrument but also as a sign. “My belief is that the Church is put into the world as sign and foretaste and instrument of the unity of mankind” (:339). If the church is also a sign and foretaste, then unity cannot be so easily separated from the mission of the church. Central to its mission will be the manifestation of the peace, unity, and reconciliation it proclaims. The words of the evangelical and the deeds of the ecumenical must arise out of a community that embodies the new reality of the kingdom of God.

In summary, for Newbigin unity and mission belong to the very nature of the church. Both are characteristics of a church that is the fruit of the gospel. Mission and unity are closely connected. The unity of the church bears witness to the world of the sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ to reconcile humankind. According to Newbigin the statement on organic unity made at New Delhi is the model of unity that is most fully consistent with the nature of the missionary church. The thread running through

Newbigin's thought on unity is to express the unity of the church in a form that most fully conforms to the missionary nature of the church. This understanding of unity took shape in his missionary experience, was further developed during his involvement in developing the South India scheme of reunion, and was most succinctly expressed in a statement at New Delhi. He articulated the universal dimension of this definition in discussions about the unity of humankind, and defended it over against denominationalism.

#### 5.6. AN ABIDING TENSION IN ECUMENICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

To understand Newbigin's conception of the missionary nature of the church, it is helpful to place his ecclesiology in the context of an abiding tension that remains in the ecumenical tradition. David Bosch has formulated that ecclesiological tension by placing it in the context of a summary of the ecclesiological developments within the missionary stream of the ecumenical tradition (Bosch 1991:368-389). He begins with the observation that an institutional understanding of the church has prevailed in Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy for much of church history. He traces the ecclesiological developments in the world missionary conferences from Edinburgh (1910) to New Delhi (1961), noting the fundamental shift that emerged in the perception of the relationship between church and mission. In the emerging ecclesiology the church is seen as essentially missionary. Mission is not one ministry of the church and therefore secondary to its being; rather the church exists in being sent by God to participate in His mission to redeem the creation. The missionary nature of the church is captured in images like sacrament, sign, and instrument which are most characteristic of the Roman Catholic tradition but are finding central expression in the Protestant tradition also (Bosch 1991:374-376; cf. Gassman 1986:1-17; Dulles 1987:63-75). These images articulate that the church does not exist for its members but for the sake of those who are not members of it. When these images of sacrament, sign, and instrument become the centring metaphors for the church, a new perception of the relationship between church and world is implied. "Mission is viewed as God's turning to the world. This represents a fundamentally new approach in theology" (Bosch 1991:376). While ecclesiology has hitherto been done from the standpoint of a church which is a static and self-contained entity, a slow change is leading to the insight that the church can be understood only in terms of its essential orientation to the world. Barth has traced six phases of this turn to the world within Protestantism (Barth 1961:18-38; cf. Bosch 1991:377; Berkhof 1979:411). A similar shift took place within the Roman Catholic church at Vatican II. This fundamental orientation to the world has paved the way for a rediscovery of the New Testament emphasis on the local church. The missionary church is primarily the local church wherever it is found in the world (Bosch 1991:368-381).

Bosch concludes his description of this emerging ecclesiology by sketching an "abiding tension" between two fundamentally different and apparently irreconcilable views of the church (Bosch 1991:381-389). Both understandings are the fruit of the ecclesiological shift Bosch has described and accordingly both share a fundamental commitment to the missionary nature of the church, both share the common language

of sign and instrument, and both are oriented to the world. Bosch articulates the differences in terms of a spectrum:

At one end of the spectrum, the church perceives itself to be the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly; at the other end, the church views itself, at most, as an illustration—in word and deed—of God’s involvement with the world. Where one chooses the first model, the church is seen as a partial realization of God’s reign on earth, and mission as that activity through which individual converts are transferred from eternal death to life. Where one opts for the alternative perception, the church is, at best, only a pointer to the way God acts in respect of the world, and mission is viewed as a contribution toward the humanization of society—a process in which the church may perhaps be involved in the role of the consciousness-raiser (Bosch 1991:381).

In his book *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* Konrad Raiser exemplifies this tension. As the subtitle indicates, Raiser discerns a decisive change taking place in the ecumenical movement (1991a). He identifies a classical ecumenical paradigm which he labels “Christocentric-universalism” which shaped the ecumenical movement from its inception until the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC (1968) and which remains a continuing stream today (Raiser 1991a:36-51). However, various factors have produced a crisis in this paradigm (Raiser 1991a:54-78). The phrase “the crisis in the ecumenical movement” appeared in the wake of the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC, an assembly that marked a new direction for the WCC. He believes a second paradigm is emerging that accounts for various anomalies that challenge the classical paradigm (Raiser 1991a:79-120). A missionary ecclesiology is essential to both paradigms but they differ regarding the role, place, and status of the church. The ecclesiology of the classical paradigm bears marked similarities to Bosch’s first model—the church as bearer of the message of salvation. The ecclesiology that Raiser calls for manifests the characteristics of Bosch’s second model—the church as illustration of God’s involvement with the world.

Using Willem Visser ’t Hooft as his primary exemplar, Raiser explicates the classical, Christocentric-universalist ecumenical paradigm in terms of four elements. First, “the all-determining central element” in the paradigm is a deliberate *Christocentrism*” (Raiser 1991a:41). Raiser argues that the Christology of the classical paradigm brings “incarnational” and “cosmocrator” motifs to the fore (Raiser 1991a:43). The incarnational motif, advocated especially in the Anglican and Orthodox traditions, stresses the ontological reality of Christ’s humanity and divinity. The cosmocrator motif, more characteristic of Reformation churches, emphasizes the exaltation of Christ as Lord and Judge of the world.

The second dimension of the classical paradigm and corresponding to the Christocentric orientation is a “concentration on the church” (Raiser 1991a:43-44). The church is formed by its historical and existential link to Jesus Christ. “This linking of Christology and ecclesiology is of decisive importance for the paradigm” (Raiser 1991a:44). Raiser points to two different ecclesiological emphases based on the foregoing Christologies. In harmony with the incarnation Christology, a sacramental ecclesiology that embodies the new divine-human reality has emerged. The cosmocrator approach has given rise to a functional ecclesiology in which the church is conceived as an instrument to establish Christ’s universal rule through word and deed (*ibid*).

The third aspect of the Christocentric-universalist paradigm is the universal perspective. The Christ event has universal significance: he has an absolute claim to Lordship over all peoples and all areas of life by virtue of His work in creation and the new creation. The concentration on the church is a direct consequence of this universal perspective. The Lordship of Christ is made empirically visible as a unique community distinct from the world (*ibid*). This body is charged with the mission of proclaiming the Lordship of Christ to the end of the earth (Raiser 1991a:45).

A final plank in the classical ecumenical paradigm is its emphasis on salvation history and eschatology as a central category of thought. A dynamic conception of universal history links together the Christocentrism, the focus on the church, and the universalism of the paradigm (Raiser 1991a:45-46).

Raiser believes this Christocentric-universalist paradigm is facing challenges that place its continued existence in question. He emphasizes especially religious pluralism, various forms of oppression and injustice, and the ecological threat as burning issues that question the viability of the centrality of Christ, the church as a unique body, and the universal mission of the church (Raiser 1991a:54-78).

These challenges lead Raiser to the foundational issue of ecclesiology (Raiser 1991a:71-77). He recognizes that central to this whole debate is the nature of the church: "The ecclesiological orientation of the paradigm and the debate in the ecumenical movement determined by it is thus not an additional element but rather the central element of the paradigm itself" (Raiser 1991a:71). He highlights six elements of the classical ecclesiology that the ecumenical tradition shares with Roman Catholicism: its biblical foundation, its salvation-historical approach, its Christocentrism, its fresh appreciation of local churches, its universal expression in a fellowship of local congregations, and its belief that all lay people are members of the people of God called to participate in the church's mission (*ibid*). Orienting himself to the Uppsala assembly, Raiser argues that the inadequacy of this ecclesiology has become increasingly evident as it has been confronted by new challenges. The challenges to the Christocentrism, universalism, and salvation history of the classical paradigm also call into question the notion of the church underlying that paradigm. In light of this Raiser calls for a "future ecumenical ecclesiology":

Because of the central role of ecclesiology in the paradigm and its indissoluble connection with the other elements, i.e. Christocentrism, the universal orientation, and history as the central category of interpretation, it is to be expected that the difficulties indicated should also be reflected in ecumenical debate on the church and its unity and that they might well reinforce one another....

It is thus not surprising that the new directions I have mentioned, which attempt to go beyond the current ecumenical paradigm, also concentrate on discussions on a future ecumenical ecclesiology. Critical revision of the ecclesiological assumptions and implications of the current paradigm is increasingly seen as one of the decisive tasks to be undertaken in the present situation of transition (Raiser 1991a:72).

According to the classical paradigm, the church is a unique body with a mandate for worldwide mission because it bears a universally valid message concerning Jesus Christ; it is this ecclesiology that Raiser believes needs revision. Raiser offers an alternative ecclesiological vision: the church in the emerging paradigm is part of the broader worldwide community (*oikoumene*) with the mission to discern the Spirit's

work in the world and to act as an agent of change. We can summarize this revision in five points. First, the focus of God's work is no longer the church as in the older paradigm, but the world, the *oikoumene*; salvation history is replaced by the one household of life as the primary category of thought (Raiser 1991a:84-91). Second, the Christocentrism of the classical paradigm is replaced by a new emphasis on the work of the Spirit in the world to create the *oikoumene* (Raiser 1991a:91-96). Third, the church exists as a eucharistic fellowship in the midst of the *oikoumene* as a picture of God's involvement in the world to create his household of life (Raiser 1991a:96-102). Fourth, the boundary between the church and the world is blurred; the church lives in solidarity with the world as part of the broader *oikoumene* (Raiser 1991a:44-45; 73). Incidentally, it should be noted that unlike the Hoekendijk tradition, Raiser does recognize some need for a distinctive identity for the church; yet that uniqueness derives from its "primary task" to reconstruct sustainable human communities (Raiser 1997:26; 47). Fifth, the mission of the church is not to Christianize the world but to change it. The tensions of religious pluralism, the wrongs of economic injustice, and the threat to all natural life systems requires the church, not to bear the gospel to the world, but to contribute to the restoration of an ethical culture and the restoration of the basic moral fabric of society (Raiser 1991a:104-105; 1997:31). The primary way the church's mission contributes to one household of life is to "cooperate with others in rebuilding the moral fabric that sustains life in community" (Raiser 1997:39; cf. :18, 26, 31).

The impetus for Raiser's ecclesiology is frustration with an irrelevant, rigid, and self-centred church—an attitude that has much in common with the impatience of the WCC Uppsala meeting (1968) and the Bangkok CWME meeting (1973). Bosch criticizes the anti-ecclesiological thrust characteristic of the 1960s and early 1970s. Yet he also comments on the value of this stream of thought: "Thus one has to say that the attacks on the institutional church, launched by Hoekendijk and others, are pertinent insofar as they express a theological ideal raised to the level of prophetic judgment" (Bosch 1991:385). Both Uppsala and Bangkok which most characterized this trend, showed a "holy impatience" with the complacency, the introversion, the structural rigidity, and the self-preoccupation of the church in the face of terrible social evil and inequity. "For the first time a world Christian body squarely faced structural evil and made no attempt at spiritualizing away its responsibilities by seeking refuge in a sacrosanct institution" (*ibid*). The title of one of Hoekendijk's books during this time captures the mood of the day—*The Church Inside Out* (1966).

This holy impatience continues to shape Raiser's thought; he too expresses concern about the structural rigidity and introversion of traditional forms of the church. Yet Raiser's ecclesiology cannot be fairly labelled anti-ecclesiological in the same manner as Hoekendijk; his writings recognize the church as a distinct body within the *oikoumene* (Raiser 1991a:105; 1997:47). The question arises, however, whether the importance of this insight is obscured in the development of his argument. Raiser stresses the widening of the term *oikoumene* to the whole world. He criticizes both the sacramental and the 'Christocratic' ecclesiologies of the classical paradigm for their "Christian exclusivism" manifested in "attitudes and practices which not only draw a distinction between church and world but actually separate them..." (Raiser 1991a:44). He believes that subsequent ecclesiological revisions in the WCC do not go far enough in correcting a Christian exclusivism because they continue to assume that "the church

in history [is] an institutionally constituted corporate body in society” (Raiser 1991a:73). He criticizes traditional ecclesial structures, arguing that flexible structures are needed in varying contexts (*ibid*). Raiser calls for an ecclesiogenesis in which “the institutional distinctions between church and world and church and society fall into the background” (*ibid*).

Raiser’s formulations exemplify a continuing tension between the two ecclesiologies. There are two closely related, but distinct issues that contribute to this tension. First, the church is *both* a unique body separated from the world *and* members that are deeply involved with the cultural community in a relationship of solidarity. The church in its relation to culture maintains a stance of solidarity and distinctiveness. Second, the church is *both* an institution whose gathered expression is an essential element in its life and mission *and* a people who are called to contribute to the needs of the world. The church finds expression in its gathered and scattered forms.<sup>11</sup> The ecclesiology of the classical ecumenical paradigm emphasizes the first of these aspects while the post-Uppsala ecclesiology highlights the second.

Newbigin’s ecclesiological formulations maintain the emphasis of the classical

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<sup>11</sup>Both Bosch and Berkhof seem to confuse these two related but distinct issues. They relate a being-different-from-the-world to the church in its gathered or institutional form and a being-in-the-world with its scattered form in the world. This is especially clear in Bosch where he speaks of the church as an ellipse with two foci. The first focus is the gathered and institutional life of the church where prayer and worship are emphasized. The second focus is the mission of the church in the world. He equates being “called out of the world” with its gathered form. After speaking of the gathering and dispersion of the church being held in redemptive tension he equates the gathered form with its being-different-from-the-world, its uniqueness and inalienable identity. He seems to identify the dispersed form with being-in-the-world (Bosch 1991:385-386). Yet the church’s being-different-from-the-world, the church’s unique and inalienable identity cannot be confined to our being called out of the world to worship. This is where, perhaps, it is given visible expression. But the antithesis extends to every area of life.

paradigm by stressing the importance of the church as a distinct body or institution distinguished from the world. His most characteristic definition emphasizes the Bible's teaching that the church is *both* a foretaste and an instrument of the kingdom. The church is not merely an instrument in the form of an action group, a campaign, or movement within society (cf. Raiser 1991a:74); the church is viewed in Scripture as the firstfruits of the kingdom of God. Thus the church has a peculiar identity and it is precisely in that identity as firstfruits of the kingdom that it can function as an instrument. Berkhof makes this same observation:

Especially from the N[ew] T[estament] it was bound to become clear that the church cannot be conceived of as a purely apostolary functionality; in that case the letters to the small congregations in a hostile world would have looked entirely different. For that reason, Van Swigchem sees the church not only as the proclaimer of the Kingdom, but also as the provisional result, the foretaste.... G. Sevenster... reaches the same conclusion;... [namely] "that the church is also something very essential in itself, something unique... a peculiar community, in which in a variety of ways something of unique and independent existence around word and sacrament must come to expression. This fact of being church has a significance all by itself..." (1979:414).

This emphasis on the church as a sign of the kingdom and as both firstfruits and agent enables Newbigin to hold together two closely related emphases. First, while the tradition issuing from Uppsala has emphasized the instrumental role of the church at the expense of its institutional and communal nature, Newbigin maintains the importance of the latter without de-emphasizing the former. Both Berkhof and Bosch have demonstrated that a purely instrumental approach to the church is untenable and that a Christianity devoid of a communal and institutional form cannot offer the gospel as an alternative (Berkhof 1979:411-415; Bosch 1991:384-388).

A second pair of emphases that Newbigin holds together is the importance of both involvement in and antithesis with the world. While an apostolary ecclesiology rightly affirms solidarity with the world, emphasis on the antithetical posture to the world is often minimized. Berkhof reviews the Biblical evidence and observes that "apparently turning toward and antithesis are not exclusive of each other but belong together" (1979:412f.). He rightly insists that the church's being-in-the-world is at the same time a being-different-from-the-world (Berkhof 1979:414). Antithesis toward and solidarity with the world is essential to the church's mission; these do not stand in competition but are two sides of the same coin (Berkhof 1979:415). When Newbigin speaks of the church being 'for the sake of the world' he attempts to emphasize both of these aspects of the church's relation to its context.

Yet once again Raiser's uneasiness about the classical paradigm point to a weakness in Newbigin's ecclesiology. Raiser is concerned that when participation in God's mission is defined in an exclusively Christocentric manner, the work of the Spirit in the world and the solidarity of the church with culture are obscured. This is why he calls for a move from salvation history to the *oikoumene* as a central category of thought, a move from Christocentrism to the work of the Spirit in the *oikoumene*, and a broader solidarity with the *oikoumene* that breaks down the barriers between the church and world. Newbigin shares many of these concerns; however his theological basis needs development. This is especially clear when we observe Newbigin's emphases on the church as "the bearer of the Spirit." In Newbigin's understanding of the work of the

Spirit, the primary emphasis remains on the church.

### 5.7. CONCLUSION

In Newbigin's understanding, the church is missionary by its very nature. 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. Newbigin formulates the church's missionary identity in terms of two poles: its relation to God and to the world. In its relation to God, the church is defined by its role and place in the Biblical story, by its participation in the *missio Dei*, by its relation to the kingdom of God, and by its election. Yet the church is also characterized by its relation to the world. It is the church for others; as such it does not exist for itself but for the sake of the world. The people of God live in solidarity within the cultural context in which they find their existence.

The fact that the ecclesial community is defined by its relation to God constitutes the church as a unique body. The church has begun to share in the life of the end-time kingdom of God. Accordingly it is chosen by God to bear witness in each place to that kingdom precisely by being different. Yet the church is called to exist as part of a particular place in solidarity with the cultural community. Raiser is concerned that emphasis on the church as a separate body will lead to an introverted church that is preoccupied with its own forms. He calls for an ecclesiology that downplays distinctiveness in which the church identifies itself with the struggles of the *oikoumene*. Raiser emphasizes the 'world' pole of the missionary community. By contrast Newbigin begins with the relation of the church to God. The church's missionary identity is defined by its participation in God's redemptive work.

Newbigin's understanding of the redemptive work of the Triune God is both Christocentric and eschatological. The church is the fruit of the gospel; the good news is the announcement that in Jesus Christ the end-time reign of God that will be consummated at the end of history has been inaugurated. The logic of mission is that the true meaning of universal history has been disclosed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, this universally valid news must be made known. The church is formed by Jesus to bear this good news. The church's mission is defined by Jesus Christ: as it receives the life of the kingdom by being incorporated into the death and resurrection of Jesus and receiving the Spirit, the church continues the kingdom mission of Jesus. This Christocentric starting point enables Newbigin to define the church in its missionary character and give substance to the mission of the church.

Newbigin also insists that the church can only be understood in an eschatological context. This connection between the church and kingdom is elaborated with a number of helpful formulations. Newbigin's discussion of the label *ecclesia tou Theou* chosen by the early church reveals the early church's self-understanding; it was a kingdom community called out by God for the sake of all humankind. Newbigin's explication of the church as the 'provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ' provides rich insight into the relation between the church and the kingdom. His description of the

church as a 'hermeneutic of the gospel' also provides a view of the church as a kingdom community that is both fresh and helpful, as evidenced by the frequent reference to that label by many in the North American church. Newbigin's most common reference to the church as sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom elaborates the relationship between church and kingdom. This formulation protects Newbigin from two dangers evident in the ecumenical tradition. On the one hand, his emphasis on the church as instrument stands against the church-centric emphasis. On the other hand, his insistence that the church is also a foretaste and first fruits does not allow the church to be reduced to an instrument. Newbigin's formulation allows him to hold together the two important emphases: the church as a unique body standing separate from the world, and the church in solidarity with its cultural context.

Defining the missionary church in terms of the Christological and eschatological context provide the foundation for Newbigin's articulation of the close connection between mission and unity. If all things will be ultimately united in Jesus Christ in the kingdom of God, the church offers a sign of that unity in its life. Newbigin's understanding of organic unity flows from this commitment. His formulation of the church in terms of organic unity that remains inscribed in the proceedings of New Delhi is one of his most significant contributions to the 20<sup>th</sup> century church. That formulation flowed, not only from his theological commitments but also from his missionary experience and struggles for the reunion of the church in South India. Newbigin's stubborn insistence on organic unity as the only faithful model of unity raises questions. On the one hand, it rightly challenges any model that defines unity in terms of a pragmatic union which allows independent bodies to maintain their own autonomy. On the other hand, it seems to make the CSI model of ecumenism normative for unity. What would organic union mean for worldwide ecumenism? That question highlights the weakness of Newbigin's ideal. Are all other models that are less costly than organic unity simply compromises that settle for something less than the Lord intended? This remains more of an open question than Newbigin's apparent certainty indicates.

While the Christological and eschatological dimensions of Newbigin's ecclesiology are well-developed, the pneumatological dimension must be judged inadequate. Newbigin recognizes two different understandings of mission that issue from two contrasting understandings of the relation of the Spirit, church, and world. If emphasis is placed on the relation of the Spirit to the church, then mission is understood as church extension. If emphasis is placed on the relation of the Spirit to world history, then mission is understood in terms of discerning and participating in the Spirit's work in culture. Newbigin attempted to provide a solution to this dilemma by describing the church's task as a witness to what God was doing in world history. However, Newbigin did not succeed in integrating the concerns of those who want to stress the Spirit's work in history into his ecclesiology; that is, he failed to integrate an understanding of the work of the Spirit in the world with the work of the Spirit in the church. Newbigin recognizes the liberating work of the Spirit in the world; however, there are both liberating and oppressive currents in world history. The tradition within the WCC that seeks a basis for mission in the work of the Spirit in the world requires a criterion that enables the church to carry out its mission in cooperation with the Spirit. Newbigin's interpretation of world history in terms of Mark 13 does not provide a criterion by which the church can discerningly share in the Spirit's work beyond the bounds of the

church.

Newbigin has helpfully articulated three historical processes that have crippled a self-understanding of the church as missionary: Christendom, the privatization of modernity, and separation of the church and mission in the modern missionary movement. Yet certain inconsistencies and questions remain. Newbigin's interpretation of Christendom is ambivalent. On the one hand, Newbigin has provided an insightful critique of the church in Christendom: the established church of Christendom cripples a missionary self-understanding; it shapes the ministry, sacraments, structures, and theology in an unmissionary pattern; it distorts the relationship of the church to culture; it diminishes concern for the unity of the church; and it eclipses eschatology. On the other hand, Newbigin stresses the positive side of Christendom. The church was right in taking responsibility for the social, cultural, and political life of Europe. The Constantinian settlement represents the faithfulness of the church to bring the universal authority of Christ to bear on politics, culture, and society. The church's faithfulness during this period has left us with a legacy that has lasted to the present. Newbigin correctly notes within Christendom both the importance and the danger of cultural participation. The problem is that he has left these two emphases side by side without any attempt to integrate them. The need for a framework that integrates both cultural responsibility and prophetic critique is necessary to rightly evaluate Christendom and its continuing legacy.

The way Newbigin relates the church in Christendom to the post-Enlightenment church seems one-sided and inconsistent. The connection between them can be described in terms of discontinuity. Newbigin has articulated that discontinuity well; the post-Enlightenment church has permitted the privatization of the gospel, while the church of Christendom held the gospel as public truth. However, the insightful observations of Wilbert Shenk that there is deep continuity between the privatization of the post-Enlightenment church and the Christendom church would illumine the situation of the church today. The church in Christendom formed its self-identity by its role in the established political order; it took its place as one of the powers among the constellation of powers. In so doing, the church lost its antithetical posture toward culture. The loss of a prophetically critical stance is carried over into the post-Enlightenment church. It is precisely because the church of Christendom learned to define its identity by its role *within* the culture that in modernity it accepted its place in the private sector. Today's consumer church is the legacy of Christendom. Newbigin's penetrating critique of modernity would be strengthened by this insight. However, Newbigin is hindered from making this connection because in his interpretation of the post-Enlightenment church he tends to only regard the positive side of his interpretation of Christendom. In opposing the privatization of the church in modernity, Newbigin highlights the role of the gospel in Christendom in terms of public truth. The problems of Christendom for the missionary church are not raised. The relationship of the *corpus Christianum* and the Enlightenment calls for much more scrutiny that goes beyond the work of Newbigin.

A final critical note should be registered: Newbigin's understanding of the missionary church is defined almost exclusively in the context of the ecumenical tradition. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Evangelical traditions make little contribution to Newbigin's formulations. Newbigin himself recognized this. He

comments that in his *Household of God* he says nothing of the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the church and that this would be unpardonable if his book pretended to be a systematic treatment on the church. Yet his limited knowledge of Orthodox ecclesiology prohibits him from interacting with their insights on the doctrine of the church (1953d:xii). Newbigin's reference to the "Pentecostal" tradition in *Household of God* is not a reference to the confessional tradition by that name but to the pneumatological teaching of Scripture. Newbigin's contact with the Pentecostal tradition is not exploited in his understanding of the work of the Spirit. It is perhaps understandable that Newbigin did not interact with the evangelical tradition; evangelicals in general have a weak ecclesiology. However, the same cannot be said of the Roman Catholic tradition. Newbigin does interact with Yves Congar and the Catholic tradition of the church as 'extension of the incarnation.' However, the rich and broad Roman Catholic tradition on ecclesiology finds little place in Newbigin's writings. Further appropriation of the insights of these traditions would have enriched Newbigin's understanding of the missionary church.

## 6. THE MISSIONARY CHURCH AS INSTITUTION

### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

If the first relationship of the missionary church is to God, the second relationship is to its own mission. That mission is a faithful witness to the good news of God's kingdom revealed in Jesus Christ. The previous two chapters defined the church as missionary in its very nature by virtue of its participation in the mission of God. Assuming that mission is of the church's essence, the question arises as to what that missionary church would look like. What are the implications of the nature of the church for its visible life? The next two chapters discuss the two sides of the church's life: internal, in terms of its institutional character, and external, in terms of its mission in the world.

Newbigin does not often use the word 'institution' with respect to the church. However, the word is common in systematic theological discussion to discuss the internal structuring of the church's life. The ecclesiological formulations of Hendrikus Berkhof offer a helpful framework to introduce us to Newbigin's understanding of the church as an institution. Berkhof analyzes the church in terms of its threefold character (Berkhof 1979:339-422). First, the church is an institution (:345-392). Through a number of activities and ministries organized in a particular societal institution the church ministers Christ to the people. From the institutional perspective, a believer can be said to be *in* the church (:395). Under the rubric of church as institution Berkhof discusses nine different facets and activities of the church: instruction, baptism, 'preaching'<sup>1</sup>, discussion of the sermon, the Lord's Supper, the diaconate, the meeting, office, and church order. Through this organization and activity the church mediates Christ to the congregation. Second, the church is a community (:392-410). We are not only or even primarily *in* the church as institution, but *are* ourselves and collectively the church, the communion of saints. The church is a community of believers that has been given diverse gifts for the sake of building up the body of Christ.

Berkhof continues, "Yet it is not enough to ascertain this twofold character of the church" (1979:344). In ecclesiological understanding and formulation the institutional aspect of the church has dominated throughout the history of the western church, while emphasis on the community aspect has evolved since the time of the Reformation. Two factors—Europe's colonial expansion and the secularization of Europe—have highlighted the importance of adding a third dimension: the church's orientation to the world (Berkhof 1979:345). The final goal of the church cannot be the individual believer nor even the ecclesial community but the renewal of all of humanity, all of humanity's life, and all of creation. Thus the church stands between Christ and the world and is equally related to both (*ibid*).

This third aspect of the church, its orientation to the world, is not simply an addendum or an important ministry that properly belongs to the church; it is far more

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<sup>1</sup>Berkhof distinguishes between "the sermon" and "proclamation" or preaching. The latter category is broader than the first. The first is a fixed institutional activity that involves the regular exposition and application of Bible in the official gathering of the congregation (Berkhof 1979:356). I designate this activity with the more common word 'preaching.' The second is more evangelistic in nature.

important than that. Berkhof speaks of a chain running from Christ to the world: Christ is mediated to the congregation through the institution; the congregation mediates Christ to the world. “In this chain the world comes last, yet it is the goal that gives meaning and purpose to the preceding links. Everything that has come before serves this goal, even when it is not deliberately stated” (Berkhof 1979:410). Indeed, the church is misunderstood if this aspect of ecclesiology is neglected; its significance is such that it demands the rethinking of all ecclesiology from the standpoint of the relation of the church to the world (*ibid*).

In this chapter, we consider three aspects of the institutional and communal life of the missionary church—ecclesial structures, church leadership, and worship. Under these headings Newbigin addresses many of the issues that Berkhof elaborates in his nine points of the institutional church. What is significant about Newbigin’s treatment of these traditional subjects in ecclesiology is that Newbigin consistently works out each theme with a missionary orientation to the world; this third aspect of the church’s life pervades every area of his ecclesiology. The elaboration of ecclesial structures, ministerial leadership, and worship is missional through and through. That is, each of these subjects can be properly understood only when it is placed in the context of God’s mission to redeem His world. The mediation of Christ to the world—to use the formulation of Berkhof—gives meaning and purpose to each aspect of Newbigin’s ecclesiology treated in this chapter.

## 6.2. THE CHURCH—LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL

To speak of Newbigin’s understanding of the missionary *church*, it is necessary to ascertain exactly what he means by ‘church.’ He notes that the “idea of a supra historical, invisible Church has often tempted Christians” (1996c:5) and finds evidence of this in his older ecumenical mentor Joseph H. Oldham. He relates the comment of close friends of Oldham who said that when he spoke of ‘the church’ “it was never quite clear whether he was talking about the ordinary, parson-led congregation, or about something more exciting but less visible” (1989e:226). In contrast to this, Newbigin notes that the word ‘church’ is used in the New Testament to describe *visible* communities of human beings. At the same time, this term that refers to visible communities is used in two senses. It is applied equally to local congregations and to the entire community of those who belong to Jesus Christ (1984a:7). This double usage is possible because the modifier “of God” (in *ecclesia tou Theou*) indicates that God is at work in Corinth, in Rome, in Ephesus, and throughout the world drawing a community to Himself. This calling is a single action of God assembling his people in various places. “It is one action of God in each place and in all places because God is equally present in each place and in all places” (*ibid*). Thus the local community gathered in Corinth is the *ecclesia*. But since the action of God is a single action also in Rome, Ephesus and throughout the world as well as in Corinth, the whole body being assembled by God can also be designated *ecclesia*. Newbigin puts it succinctly: “Because it is the one Lord who assembles his people in every place these many local assemblies form one assembly universally. For the same reason the assembly in each place *is* the catholic Church in that place, for it is the one Lord who is assembling them”

(1985c:176). The church has both a local and universal dimension; both dimensions must be visible embodiments. Jongeneel speaks of “missionary congregations” and “missionary churches” to distinguish between the local and universal dimensions of the church: “*Missionary congregations* are local communities of Christians who dedicate themselves to ‘the spread of the Gospel’...; the planting of churches; service to one’s neighbours; etc. And *missionary churches* are communities of Christians which do the same at a supra-local level” (Jongeneel 1997:172). Newbigin’s terminology is not consistent; he uses congregation, church, and community as equivalent terms qualifying them with local, universal, or ecumenical.

The distinction between the local and ecumenical dimensions of the church is evident in the formulation of the unity of the church that eventually prevailed in New Delhi. This statement, shaped by Newbigin’s ecclesiology, speaks of the unity of the church being made visible as “all in each place” are brought together into a fully committed fellowship. A true expression of this unity must move beyond this local embodiment to include a more global manifestation. This local body must be visibly united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and in all ages (1970b:73-74). Newbigin comments on the New Delhi statement:

The primary emphasis of the statement falls on the unity of “all in each place” who confess the name of Jesus, but it immediately goes on to make clear that this local unity is to be the local expression of a universal unity which embraces all in all places and all ages who have confessed the same name (1969e:121).

This distinction between the local congregation and the universal church is driven by a missionary concern. The local congregation is the provisional incorporation of the new humankind into Christ for its particular place and therefore called to embody a witness that effectively offers to all human beings *in that place* the invitation of Jesus Christ to be reconciled to God through Him. At the same time the church must be visible also as an ecumenical community if it is to offer to humankind *as a whole* the same invitation (1969e:118). It is this distinction that led Newbigin to struggle repeatedly with a form and structure of the church that would express both the local and ecumenical dimensions (1969e; 1973c; 1977g; 1984a).

The recognition of the local and universal expressions of the church did not mean that Newbigin gives equal weight to each. In fact, Newbigin makes clear as early as 1950 that the local church is “the fundamental unit of the Christian Church”, “the primary unit of the church”, or “the basic unit of Christian existence” (1951b:4; 1960o:26; 1962b:20). Indeed, this emphasis on the local congregation only increased in the later decades of his life. He “welcomed eagerly every new effort to see the life of the local congregation afresh in missionary terms,” spawned by the growing attention given to the local congregation in the ecumenical tradition. A missionary ecclesiology that did not affect the local congregation was futile: “The whole thrust of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rediscovery of the missionary nature of the Church is lost if it does not lead to a radical re-conception of what it means to be a local congregation of God’s people” (1976e:228). In the last couple of decades of his life, Newbigin frequently expressed the conviction that the local congregation is the “primary reality” of the church and is therefore the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel (1980f:62; 1989e:227).

This growing emphasis on the local congregation as the primary reality of the

missionary church did not lead Newbigin to abandon his commitment to a visible expression of the global church. This comes out most clearly in Newbigin's response to Leslie Lyall's paper *The Church—Local and Universal*. In his paper, Lyall argues that "the essential unit" of the church is the local congregation. He continues:

God's purposes for the Church must ultimately be carried out through the local congregation. The local congregation is of far greater importance than all the complicated and costly machinery of committees and councils with which 'the Church' has become encumbered (Lyall 1962:8).

Lyall reduces the church to the local congregation, dismissing attempts to find structures that express the global dimension of the church simply as costly bureaucratic machinery that encumbers the church. His quotation marks around the expression 'the church' indicate that this attempt at global expression cannot be dignified with the label church. Lyall emphasizes the local congregation, giving little credence to any idea of a universal expression of the church. He believes the cause of Christ is best served by fostering autonomous and independent congregations who treasure a spiritual unity but devote themselves to mission in their particular location (Lyall 1962:18-19).

Newbigin's response shows, on the one hand, how much he appreciates the strong emphasis on the local congregation, but on the other hand, how he refuses to jettison the ecumenical expression of the church. He registers "strong sympathy" with Lyall: "I believe that it is true that the local congregation is the primary unit of the Church in a way in which, say, a diocese or province cannot be." He continues:

But having registered these strong agreements, I must go on to say that I think the thrust of the paper is carried beyond the limit which the New Testament evidence allows and which missionary experience indicates. I think a good case is overstated (1962b:20).

There are no independent congregations; there are only congregations that are born as part of a larger family and in a visible historic chain. Episcopal, Presbyterian, Papal, and Missionary-bureaucratic organization are simply attempts—more or less faithful—to express the wider reality of the ecumenical church. A full understanding of the church cannot be exhausted by reference to the local congregation. God's gathering in each place and in all places means that the word 'church' designates both a local and an ecumenical body.

It will be necessary to keep this distinction in mind as we proceed with an analysis of Newbigin's understanding of the witness of the missionary church. Yet a neat distinction cannot be made between the witness of the local congregation and the witness of the universal church. A fair summary statement would be that when Newbigin speaks *concretely* of the witness of the missionary church he is usually referring to the local congregation. He intentionally focusses on the witness of the universal church when he speaks of structures of unity, missions, and leadership that give expression to the ecumenical dimension. The present chapter focusses on the witness of the local congregation, except at points where it is specifically stated that the global church is in view.

### 6.3. ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES

The church must be given expression in ecclesial structures appropriate to its missionary character (cf. Jongeneel 1997:172-176). During his struggle for the reunion of the church in South India, Newbigin grappled with two broad ecclesiological traditions: Protestant and Catholic. He remarks that during this time he read Michael Ramsey's book *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* and was convinced of its main thesis: "the structure of the church is itself an expression of the Gospel" (1975e:172). This theological conviction was confirmed in later years by the sociological insight that if any idea is to have an impact in history it must take on an institutionally embodied form (1973b:6). While the gospel is not an idea—it is a verbal message about events—it too must take on a visible, structural form in the body of Christ. Consequently, "the sociologist and the theologian will be one in insisting that the idea of a structure-less Christianity is a pure illusion" (1973c:109). Newbigin devoted much of his ministry to reforming structures and much of his writing to reflecting on what kind of structures would best express the true nature of the missionary church. An oft-repeated theme in his writing is that "highest priority must be given to bringing about those changes in the structure of the Church" (1969a:263).

#### 6.3.1. *The Urgency of Structural Renewal: Developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

During the 1950s, interest in ecclesial structures increased dramatically. The backdrop for this resurgent interest was the recognition that the structures that shaped the church at that time were given form in an era when Christianity had ceased to be a missionary religion (1966b:102). During the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the rise of Islam effectively encapsulated the church on the European peninsula, cutting off all possibility of missionary endeavour. The familiar forms of the church—organizational, liturgical, and theological—were shaped at this time, when the church was reduced to a static society (1977d:213). The church had become "the religious department of European society rather than the task force selected and appointed for world mission" (1966b:103). The structures, therefore, corresponded to this established position in society rather than to its missionary identity.

The basic structure was the parish with its focus in the church building standing in the centre of each town and village. The entire population was considered to be the responsibility of this one unit of the church's organization (1980f:58). The visible centre expressed the divine invitation 'come to me' but did not express the divine command to go (1966b:106). The parish developed as a result of the mass conversion and baptism of the barbarian tribes. What was needed for this new religio-political community was a place where the local population could gather for worship and instruction in the faith (1966b:105-106). Newbigin points to at least five characteristics of the church shaped by the *corpus Christianum*: it was centred in a building; it had a central geographical location; it enjoyed an established role in society; it was wealthy; and it was characterized by institutional inertia (1966b:102-111).

While this structure may have been valid for the medieval community (1966b:106), and *may* still be valuable in a South Indian village (1966b:106, 108), these patterns "which we have inherited appear to be neither relevant to the life of the secularized

society, nor true to the biblical picture of the Church as a missionary community” (1966b:107).<sup>2</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of factors challenge the Christendom structures. Newbigin notes in various places four of these factors. The first was the growing conviction that emerged between the Tambaram meeting of the International Missionary Council (1938) and the Willingen meeting of that same body (1952) that the church is missionary by its very nature. Mission is not one activity of a settled established church but the defining characteristic of its existence. With this theological conviction came the growing recognition that the church’s structures were inappropriate to her missionary nature. Jongeneel observes that “every Christian congregation and every church needs both a ‘missionary spirit’... and a ‘missionary structure’... (1997:173). The development of a ‘missionary spirit’ produced by a new self-understanding of the church as missionary was not sufficient; it was necessary to bring structures into line with that conviction. The middle of the century brought worldwide discussions on the missionary structure of the congregation (Jongeneel 1997:172-174). Newbigin voiced the question that dominated much of ecumenical discussion: “Does the very structure of our congregations contradict the missionary calling of the church?” (1963a:9). About five years earlier he wrote in a letter: “We are saying that we have recovered a radically missionary theology of the Church. But the actual structure of our Churches (younger as well as older) does not reflect that theology. On the contrary it continues placidly to reflect the static ‘Christendom’ theology of the eighteenth century” (1993h:148). Church structures were directed to mere maintenance rather than mission (1963a:8). At worst the introverted nature of the church had led congregations to become “clubs for self-centred enjoyment of the benefits of the Christian religion” (1969a:263). Newbigin was convinced that “the primacy of the missionary obligation” is “to be determinative of the forms of the Church’s life” (1963a:8) This constituted a radical challenge to the present ecclesial structures.

The second factor that challenged the traditional Christendom structures was the social activism that erupted in the mainline churches during the secular decade. In a time of ‘rapid social change’ when social, economic, and political problems dominated the agenda of the church, self-centred and introverted structures appeared, not only outdated, but positively heretical (WCC 1967:19). There was widespread disillusionment among young people about all institutional structures. There was a revolt against congregational structures because they were “irrelevant to the task of the Christian life and action at the present hour” (1973c:108). “Ardent spirits” concluded that the mission of the church was something that should be carried on outside the present structures of the church (1969a:263; 1973c:108). If the church was to engage the social, economic, and political issues of the day, its structures must be reformed.

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<sup>2</sup>I express the abiding ambivalence in Newbigin’s thought concerning Christendom with the word ‘may.’ Newbigin is both critical and appreciative of the Christendom church.

A third factor was the growing recognition that the secular society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century West was a highly differentiated society in comparison with the undifferentiated medieval world. The Christendom structures assumed a social organization in which the family, political, economic, and social life of people were intertwined in a visible whole. The place where a person lives is also the place he works, enjoys leisure, and develops friendships. The church located geographically in the centre of that religio-political unity could stand as a sign of good news for the whole community. The secular society, on the other hand, was highly differentiated and much more mobile. A person will live in several different sectors or 'neighbourhoods.' His place of work is often remote from the place of his home, family, and leisure. He lives in many 'places' and is related to many people. The parish structure which is a single geographically determined location cannot reach the whole of society with good news. The church must rethink its structures to be, speak, and do good news in a particular place (1960n:32; 1966b:111; 1969e:122f.).

An inconsistency in Newbigin's thought arises at this point. We have noted in an earlier chapter that Newbigin's ecclesiological understanding was formed by a picture of the church in the small villages of India (2.3.2.5.). The structures of the local congregation were consistent with the undifferentiated nature of those Indian villages. Newbigin recognized in the 1960s that the complex and differentiated society of the modern West required new structures to engage the public life of Western culture (1960n:32; 1966b:111). This commitment to flexible structures within a differentiated society continues to exercise influence in his later thought (1980d:6; cf. 1980f:64-67). However, the image of the church in the undifferentiated Indian villages also remains a dominant image in his understanding of the missionary church (1961e:24; 1994k:55). In an analysis of Newbigin's later writings about the church, George Vandervelde states: "At the most crucial point in his thought, Newbigin fails to be contextual... he does not take into account the effects of Western culture, namely individualism and differentiation" (1996:13). The question arises as to how these two very different images can be reconciled? Newbigin does not offer any resolution. The image of the church formed in the Indian villages exerted increasing pressure on Newbigin's thought in the later decades of his life, and may be the reason that Newbigin never fleshed out his early suggestions in detail.

The final factor that led to a re-examination of ecclesial structures was the struggles for unity in the ecumenical tradition. Attempts to find a basis for reunion led to clashes at the level of ecclesial structure between various confessional forms. The divisions of the Reformation had produced rival doctrines concerning ecclesial structures. Claims for divine institution were made for these various forms. The ensuing polemics in pursuit of unity often led competing factions to harden their positions and absolutize their structures. The question this raised was: are these confessional traditions divinely instituted or culturally relative (1973c:107f.)?

In an effort to meet this changing situation a number of new structural forms appeared that played an important role in the mission of the church. Newbigin highlights three of these (1980f:57-62). The first of these is program agencies that have a specific focus for their ministry. They may be denominational or ecumenical organizations but their *raison d'être* is bound up with one aspect of the church's mission: evangelism, missions, education, social and political action. These program

agencies do not in any way claim to be local churches but are attached to these congregations in various ways. The second type of emerging structure is what Newbigin calls “sector ministries.” This again is a widely divergent group of ministries but what distinguishes them is that they are related to a particular sector of cultural life such as industry, education, or healing. These may be groups of Christians who meet within a particular institution or chaplains that function within a particular sector. The third new structural form is the ‘para-church.’ Newbigin says: “I use this term without any negative intention to describe the great and growing numbers of groups which are formed on the basis of a common vision for the Church, or of a common concern about Christian action in the world, and which meet apart from the traditional gatherings of the ‘local church’ for worship” (1980f:59). He includes the base ecclesial communities of Latin America and the house churches of the West in this category. This definition makes it difficult to distinguish between the local congregation and the ‘para-church’ group.

Newbigin finds many healthy signs in the development of these new forms but also points to weaknesses (1980f:59-63). These structures have arisen as a result of the insufficiency of Christendom and privatized ecclesial structures to carry out the mission of the church. Different needs that have been obscured or denied by traditional structures find expression in these new ministries. They pose a danger, however, in that their separation from the local Eucharist fellowship separates their activity from a centre in the gospel. He summarizes:

Each of these structural developments is playing an important part in enabling the Church to penetrate areas of secular life from which the privatised religion of Western culture has been largely excluded. They are important growing points for the mission of the Church. Their weaknesses arise precisely at the point of their separation from the local congregation (1980f:59).

### *6.3.2. Criteria for Structural Renewal*

Newbigin agrees heartily with those who believe that the Christendom and Enlightenment structures of the church are irrelevant to the present situation and are in need of re-formation so that they “may correspond to its proper nature and calling” (1973c:125; cf. 1969a:263; New Delhi 1962:189). What are the criteria for this structural renewal? Newbigin points to two closely related requirements: faithfulness to the nature of the church, and relevance to the particular community in which the church is set.

Newbigin observes that “every discussion of the structures of the Church presupposes a doctrine of the Church—hidden or acknowledged” (1973c:110). He learned from Michael Ramsey that the structure of the church is itself an expression of the gospel (Ramsey 1936). In two major discussions of ecclesial structures, Newbigin articulates the nature of the church first, and then proposes structures that are consistent with that reality. In the first, he begins with a summary of the contemporary context of the question (1973c:107-110). He follows with a section ‘What is the Church?’ (:110-113) and then discusses ‘Structures of the Church and Structures of Society’ (:113-117). A similar structure can be observed in a second article where, following an opening section on the background of the discussion (1977g:115-117), he proceeds to ask and

answer the question: ‘What is a local church?’ (:117-122). Only after this question has been treated does he advocate various structures (:122-128; cf. also 1969e; 1984a).

Newbigin’s approach differs in the various discussions. In one paper he gives an elaborate explanation of his definition of the church: “the Church is the provisional incorporation of mankind into Jesus Christ” (1973c:110-113). In another he analyzes the church in terms of the title we find in Paul’s letters. The church is modified by two phrases: ‘of God’ and ‘in a specific place.’ The church is a body that is defined by the call and purpose of God for a specific place (1977g:117-122; 1984a:10). At yet another point he critiques the denominational model of the church, focussing his discussion on the early church’s self-designation with the term ‘*ecclesia*’ (1984a:6-10).

In these discussions of ecclesial structures, however, Newbigin makes a fundamental point each time. It can be best stated by returning to his discussion of the importance of ‘place’ in ecclesiology. Newbigin stresses that the church must be understood as missionary by its very nature. Accordingly the church must be recognizable as ‘good news people’ in a particular place. The church exists *for the place* in which it is situated. When the church orders its life in keeping with its own concerns it becomes untrue to its proper nature (1977g:117-119). The church’s nature is to exist for the place in which it is set. Newbigin makes this point, not only by reference to the title of the church in Paul’s letters (for instance, the church *at Ephesus*), but also by his definition of the church. To say that the church is the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ also stresses the role of the church in God’s plan for the sake of the world. The church is the *provisional* incorporation of humankind into Christ. The church does not exist for itself but for the sake of all humankind (1973c:112). The church is concerned with *humankind*; “it can never regard itself as a private or sectional organization for the benefit of those who choose to adhere to this form of religion” (*ibid*). The church is the representative of humankind, the *pars pro toto*, the firstfruits of the harvest. The triad of sign, instrument, and first fruits also point to the same reality (1973c:113; 1977g:119).

The fundamental point that Newbigin makes in all these cases is that the missionary nature of the church demands that the ecclesial community be intrinsically related to the place to which God calls it. This has implications for the structures of the church.

If the Church is the provisional incorporation of mankind into Jesus Christ, then it follows that the given structures of society in any historical situation will be those which shape the structures of the Church. As the Church is for all mankind, it follows that—in relation to each segment of mankind—the Church will be the Church *for* that segment—be it nation or province or local community. The Church does not try to demolish the forms of society (except in so far as they contradict the purpose of God for mankind as revealed in Jesus Christ), but rather accepts them as the provisional form in which the new humanity is to be made manifest (1973c:113f).

With this statement we have moved into the second criteria: ecclesial structures in any historical situation will conform themselves to the given structures of society (1973c:113). The church in any social situation is to take over into its own life the forms of social organization found in the society of which they are part. Newbigin points to a number of examples in church history: the eldership in the Jewish synagogue; the episcopate in cities that reflected the predominant cultural and social power; the diocese in metropolitan centres. The principle is of enduring validity precisely because of the

nature of the church.

Accordingly there must be flexibility and change when it comes to congregational structures (cf. WCC 1967:19; Bassham 1979:71). The structures of Christendom *may* have been suitable for a time when society was static and undifferentiated. The dramatic changes of the contemporary world, however, demand new structures that conform to a mobile and differentiated situation. Newbigin draws on his missionary experience to analyze this issue. The missionary must become a pilgrim that is willing to sacrifice well-worn patterns and to utilize the idioms and patterns of the community to which he or she is sent (1966b:111). Pilgrims dwell in tents, not in permanent houses. Every movement gathers through its history personnel, experience, money, and a tradition. It becomes interested in its own development and concerned for its own maintenance (1960e:5). A missionary must be willing to leave that behind and employ new patterns and forms that are relevant to the people to whom he or she is sent. As a mission, “the Church must be where men are, speak the language they speak, inhabit the worlds they inhabit” (1966b:112).

If structures have changed, will change, and ought to change, two questions arise at this point. First, what is the relationship of structural change to the gospel and nature of the church that has been given once for all? Structural change should not be regarded as mere adaptation to changes that take place within society. Rather this change is a reflection of the gospel as translatable and of the nature of the church as the provisional new humankind. The church adjusts to the changes of its context in order to be what it is called to be: the embodiment of good news for that situation. It is not a mere adjustment to social change but an adjustment to the demands of the gospel (1983a:9).

The Church is concerned with being faithful to him, not only in its words but in its whole being. The question about the Church is not just a question of adjustment to (or even ‘relevance’ to!) the social context at any moment; it is the question of truth or falsehood. It is the question of being truly, or failing to be, the Body of Christ (1973c:109-110).

The second question is: what is the relationship of structural change to ecclesiastical traditions? Newbigin believes that any attempt to absolutize a certain structure developed in church history—whether it is Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, or Congregational—must be abandoned; there are no eternally valid structures (1973c:109; 1983a:8). This does not mean, however, that traditional forms are to be discarded. Newbigin has employed the term ‘incorporation’: we have been incorporated into the new humankind. This means there is a tradition that has been given. This tradition is rooted in the gospel and has made its course through history. We have been incorporated into this living tradition. Our question should be, “how do we move *from within this reality* to meet the demands of obedience to Christ in the circumstances of society today?” (1973c:117). It requires discernment of what Jesus demands in this particular situation. Newbigin contrasts a mechanical metaphor with an organic one. When a machine is no longer serviceable for the purpose for which it was constructed, it can be simply scrapped. In an organism, however, there is always the process of adaptation to a new environment which continues without a radical break. There will be continuity and discontinuity: the old is maintained but adapted to new situations. Newbigin’s call is for a reformation of existing structures rather than a revolutionary

destruction or a conservative preservation. There will always be both progressives and conservatives in this process, but there must be patience since it is always a struggle to properly interpret the situation and respond faithfully.

Newbigin's position can be summed up in a slogan he himself offers: "Since the study of the missionary structure of the congregation has been prolific of polysyllabic slogans, I will venture to plead for a judicious combination of morphological radicalism with evangelical fundamentalism"<sup>3</sup> (1969a:264). Structures must change but always in keeping with the call of the church to embody the gospel.

### 6.3.3. *Congregational Structures*

Since the word *ecclesia* is used in Scripture to refer both to the local congregation and to one church of Christ worldwide, it is necessary to express that reality structurally. In Newbigin's discussions of ecclesial structures, we do indeed find that this ecclesiological insight shapes his formulations.

Newbigin's systematic grappling with structural issues for the congregation began in the late 1960s, when he held high hopes for the ecumenical study of the missionary structure of the congregation. That study, however, was swept into the currents of a secularism that had little place for the local church and, in the end, said little about missionary structures of the congregation. This failure led Newbigin to address the issue with more frequency and detail. It is unfortunate, however, that his suggestions remain general and never appear to plumb the depth of his missionary experience.

Newbigin enumerates four areas of church structure in need of change: the parochial and diocesan organization, the deployment of men and money, the pattern of ministry, and forms of assembly. The second falls under the category of missions and the third under ministerial leadership; these topics are treated later in this chapter. Newbigin does not discuss in any detail the changes needed in the parochial and diocesan organization. The remainder of the present section will explore his suggestions for change in structural forms of assembly.

The problem with traditional structures, according to Newbigin, is their size and character (1969b:358). First, along trends in the WCC Newbigin emphasized that the fundamental ecclesial unit is too large (Bassham 1979:81). In the New Testament, Paul addresses groups that are small enough for members to take responsibility for building

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<sup>3</sup>Newbigin's allusion is to the WCC study *The Church for Others* that castigates parish forms of congregational life for their "morphological fundamentalism"—a rigid and inflexible attitude toward traditional structures of congregational life (WCC 1967:19). This term was introduced by Hoekendijk. For a history of the term see Jongeneel 1997:174.

one another up. Newbigin is emphatic that “we must do more than has yet been done to strengthen the small informal groups of believers who meet regularly to build one another up in the faith” (1969b:359):

We absolutely require the development of a multitude of occasions when Christians can meet together in small groups, where they can know each other, listen to each other, pray for each other and bear each other’s burdens. It is from such groups as these that real renewal can come to the Church (1974b:80).

Unfortunately, church politics tends to move churches further in the direction of large scale organizations. Yet the nurture of small groups need not destroy existing structures. In fact, the “more we can strengthen this kind of intimate, local, *caring* fellowship in the life of the churches, the more shall we find that our larger structures are delivered from their rigidity and brittleness and can become flexible means to ensure the widest possible unity of fellowship and action” (1969b:259).

Second, the character of local congregations also is inadequate. The structure of the local congregation has emerged from an undifferentiated society. The parish church could be an effective ecclesial unit for its ‘place.’ However, with an increasingly differentiated society the question of ‘place’ must be revisited. In an earlier chapter we noted Newbigin’s affirmation that the church exists *for the place* in which it is set. This raises two questions: what is the meaning of *for*? And what is the meaning of *place*? The first question was treated in an earlier section (5.5.1.2.). The question of the meaning of ‘place’ is appropriately addressed here.

In an undifferentiated society—medieval society or villages in South India, for example—most people live, work, play in one place. In a differentiated society most people live at the same time in several ‘places’ (1977g:119f.). There is the geographical place of residence, the ‘place’ of work in a certain place (as a factory or office, for example) or within a certain profession, the ‘place’ of kinship, the ‘place’ of leisure, the ‘place’ of shared political, ideological, or religious commitment, and various other places. If the church is called to be a hermeneutic of the gospel for its place, it is necessary that it be related to all these ‘places.’ Accordingly to define place simply in terms of the geographical location of a person’s residence is inadequate. There is precedent in church history for a definition of place that extends beyond geography: language, particular sector of society (various chaplaincies), and ethnic groups have been the basis for different understandings of place. While these bases have various levels of validity, Newbigin believes that this is an expression of the nature of the missionary church. It must be good news for the various *places* of humankind. Consequently, there needs to be much more diversity in the effective unit of church life.

Newbigin suggests four different forms of small groups that will begin to address the twin problems of size and character. The first is a neighbourhood group (1969b:259; 1974b:77). This provides the opportunity for those who live in the same neighbourhood to meet together for bible study, prayer, fellowship, and mission. All four must be held together. As such it can function as the sign of the kingdom for that neighbourhood.

The second is a work group that provides the opportunity for those working together in a factory or office to gather together as a sign of that kingdom for that particular work location. During his tenure as bishop in Madras this kind of fellowship became a fundamental concern for Newbigin. Madras, it will be recalled, was a centre of heavy

and light industry. A significant number of Christians worked as labourers or in management in these factories. Newbigin's experiments and suggestions challenge the traditional notion of the local congregation.

Newbigin asks: "What does it mean for the Church to be both the *congregation* of God and the *mission* of God in today's secularized, fragmented society?" (1966b:111). Negatively, "locality can no longer be the sole basis of congregation" (*ibid*). Positively, the church must experiment with congregations grouped on the basis of special types of work, responsibility, and vocation (1960n:32). In Madras, there must be congregations organized on the basis of common calling in industry. These groups must be acknowledged as truly congregations (1966b:115). They are not para-ecclesiastical organizations or out-stations of the local church but true congregations of Christ. They should be furnished with an unordained ministry (someone who also works in that setting), word, and sacraments as the centre of their common life (1966b:112, 114).

For Newbigin, it is extremely important that all mission should arise out of the gospel made known in the word and sacrament, and as importantly, that this be recognizable. It was noted above that problems with many program ministries is that they become separated from the life of the local eucharist congregation. Newbigin insists that the congregation rooted in word and sacrament is the only hermeneutic of the gospel. All activity of sector or program ministries must be seen to arise out of such local congregations (1980f:59-61). In this regard it is significant to note the primary difference between Peter Wright, chaplain of the Portsmouth Polytechnic, and Newbigin on the issue of a witness to the gospel in an academic setting. Wright wrote Newbigin letting him know of ways in which he was implementing suggestions raised in *The Other Side of 1984* in the context of the polytechnical institution. They exchanged several letters. One of the points of difference was that Newbigin believed that there ought to be a eucharistic community as a visible hermeneutic of the gospel *within the polytechnic* (1985d:2-3) while Wright was concerned only to engage people "at the level of their polytechnic experiences" (1985e:2). For Wright it was the place of the local church to provide word, fellowship, and sacrament.

This does not negate the place of the local church organized on the basis of geographical location in Newbigin's understanding. The place where people live, where their homes and families are, will continue to be one of the spheres in which people live their lives. This cannot, however, be the only structure of the church (1966b:112, 115). It will be the normal pattern that a Christian belongs to more than one congregation (1966b:116).

A third category Newbigin refers to as "frontier groups." Newbigin borrows this term from Joseph Oldham. The idea of frontier groups developed in the late 1930s among Oldham, T. S. Eliot, and John Baillie.<sup>4</sup> The concept arose out of a dilemma: how could the gospel be expressed as public truth in society yet not override the competence of the church. The church is not equipped to speak on public issues yet the gospel is public truth. Frontier groups are groups of Christians who have an expertise in the a sector of society. They bring the gospel to bear on that area of life. Thus it is believers in community that address the public square but it is not the institutional church. While frontier groups carried the notion of public truth and the mission of the laity, it is the

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<sup>4</sup>I owe these historical insights regarding frontier groups to private communication with John Flett of the Gospel and Our Culture network in New Zealand.

second of these that Newbigin emphasizes. These are small groups of Christians “working in the same sectors of public life meeting to thrash out controversial issues of their business or profession in the light of their faith” (1989e:230f.). Whereas the work groups are organized on the basis of working in the same work space, this group meets as a witness within a specific sector of public life. One of the primary goals of this frontier group is to search for ways to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ in that particular area of culture.

A final group that Newbigin identifies is an action group. This group will be organized around a concern for a particular kind of evangelistic or social action with the context of the community.

Newbigin notes three dangers that are present in the formation of small groups. The first is that they will become introverted and privatized—a place where the benefits of salvation are selfishly enjoyed. Newbigin warns that there must be an outward look that strives to understand and embody ways in which God’s will is done in the office, factory, and so on. To do this Newbigin articulates four elements that should be a part of every group. First, each should have a non-professional ministry. This person should be deeply involved in the life of the neighbourhood, factory, profession and so on, and be ready to give missional leadership. Second, each group should have full access to the congregational and sacramental life either within that small group or within the wider fellowship of a local congregation. This will sustain the life of Christ in the midst of that ‘place’ and will also connect all missional action to its source in the gospel. Third, there must be a recognition of cross-confessional unity in common commitment to a place and task. Each confessional tradition must give their blessing to these small groups as a kind of structural congregation. For the sake of faithful mission, the church must be recognizable as the *one* new humankind for that place. Finally, these groups must be committed to four things: prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and mission. The loss of any of these will lead to imbalance—either self-centred maintenance or an activism unrooted in the gospel (1969b:360f.). The second danger is that great traditions of church history will be lost. He comments that there is “a real danger that we lose the great essentials which have been preserved and handed on through the ordered life and liturgy of the great churches” (1970b:74). The final danger is that these small groups will be disconnected from the universal body of Christ. In these small groups the emphasis falls on the local place but they “give little sign that they have any organic connection with Jesus Christ” (1970b:73). Since the church is a local and universal fellowship, the structures must express both of these dimensions.

With Newbigin’s concern for small groups that maintain a missionary orientation, it is surprising that he did not engage the burgeoning literature on Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in South America.

#### 6.3.4. *Ecumenical Structures*

Two ecclesiological convictions lead Newbigin to address ecumenical structures a number of times during his life. First, the church is a universal fellowship that transcends local or cultural boundaries and must be recognizable as such. Second, the

church is always defined by its calling from God and its place in the world. Place must include all recognizable forms of human community and this includes a global dimension. These convictions are put in the form of a twofold question:

What is the form of the church order which will effectively offer to all the *human beings* in this place the invitation of Jesus Christ to be reconciled to God through him?  
And: What is the form of church order which will effectively offer to *mankind as a whole* this same invitation (1969e:118; italics his).

Newbigin's concern for ecumenical ecclesial structures is driven by his understanding of the missionary church. If the church is to be good news for all humankind, it must be recognizable as a global fellowship.

Newbigin identifies the principle that guides him as he discusses ecumenical structures of the church: "If the Church is the provisional incorporation of mankind into Jesus Christ, it follows that the structures of the Church's life will reflect the structures of human life. To put it more precisely, each effective unit of the Church's life and ministry will correspond with some effective unit of the wider life of mankind" (1973e:122). He distinguishes four levels of human society and church structure (1973c:122-124).

The first level of church structure will be the 'the church in each place.' The reference here is to the local congregation situated in its neighbourhood or village. This has been discussed above. The second level of church structure is the church in the 'human zone' (*zone humaine*). The concept of the human zone was used in ecumenical circles to designate an area which is wider than the local community but which still remains an effective unit of society. The example Newbigin gives is the district into which all Indian provinces are divided. There should be an ecclesial unit that corresponds to this wider human zone—a recognizable body which is the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ for that area.

Third, there must be a unit of the church to correspond to the nation-state. The nation state has become one of the most recognizable and powerful units of human organization in the modern world. Protestant churches have accepted the nation-state as the major unit of human society and have organized their church life accordingly. The Orthodox church is largely organized in terms of autocephalous national churches. The importance of a national expression of the churches is becoming increasingly important within the Roman Catholic communion. There are at least two concerns here, however. The first concern is the uncritical acceptance of the nation-state as the most fundamental unit of human society. National churches have become the church *of* the nation rather than *for* the nation. Second, the marked development of globalization requires that new emphasis be given to the international level of human organization.

The fourth human social unit that must be taken into account in ecclesial structures is the global level. What kind of ecclesial structure corresponds to the increasing global unity of humankind? The Roman Catholic church is the only church that gives a clear answer. There are growing developments in this direction within the Protestant communions—WCC, LWF and other world confessional bodies—but these are only imperfect beginnings.

Newbigin's struggle to define global structures arises from his concern that the church be recognizable as the new humanity. This missionary concern shapes his

discussions.

What matters is that the Church should everywhere be recognizable as simply the new, the true humanity; as the place where every human being is given the freedom of his own home where he can know and love and obey God as his Father, and Jesus as his Lord in the power of the Spirit who is himself the living presence now of the blessedness to which all are called (1977g:128).

### 6.3.5. *An Evaluative Comment*

Newbigin's discussion of ecclesial structures is rich with many seed suggestions for future development. His faithful adherence to the missionary nature of the church consistently shapes his discussion of the structures of the church. Unfortunately, many of his suggestions remain rather general. It is surprising that with his concern for more faithful structures that he did not expand his own dialogue on structures to include other confessional traditions and other experiments in ecclesial structures undertaken in the global church that share his concerns. Although he started a house church while in Geneva he does not engage the growing literature on that topic. But more significantly is an absence of any discussion of Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in Latin America. Rene Padilla has spoken of "the emergence of a new ecclesiology" in Latin American in connection with the BECs (Padilla 1987:156). He comments further:

That a new church is taking shape in the grassroots ecclesial communities can hardly be denied. The new ecclesiology that is rooted in it has become the most powerful challenge to Protestant Christians in this region of the world, and it may well become the most powerful challenge to the church of Jesus Christ everywhere else in the next few years (Padilla 1987:162).

Newbigin is concerned for structures that are more flexible, smaller, and directed toward mission. The development of BECs are concerned precisely for these issues. They are concrete experiments that have attempted to offer alternative structures that are thoroughly missional. The prolific literature that has arisen on these BECs addresses precisely the kinds of questions that engage Newbigin (Cook 1985:95-104; Boff 1988; Bonino 1988; Libanio 1987; Munoz 1988). Leonardo Boff's *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Boff 1986) is a good example of a rigorous discussion on the structures of the church and mission. Richard Shaull comments about Boff's book: "He also provides us with a new perspective from which to look critically at existing church structures, and makes a strong case for the *reinvention* of the church as an inescapable consequence of its faithfulness to the tradition in which it stands" (comment on back of book). An engagement with this literature would have enriched Newbigin's discussion of ecclesial structures.

## 6.4. MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP FOR A MISSIONARY CONGREGATION

The two issues to which Newbigin devoted more time and effort than any other were ecclesial unity and ministerial leadership. The title for this section, which treats Newbigin's understanding of ministerial leadership, is taken from the next to last chapter of *The Gospel and a Pluralist Society* (1989e). This book represents a summary of Newbigin's most mature thought in a number of areas of mission theology. The

importance of missionary ecclesiology in his thought is revealed in the structure of the book wherein the entire argument climaxes in a call for the congregation to be a hermeneutic of the gospel (1989e:222-233). The importance of ministerial leadership for the missionary congregation is displayed in the fact that a chapter immediately follows which points to ministerial leadership as one of the fundamental means by which the congregation will be a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel. He opens the chapter thus:

“If I am right in believing, as I do, that the only effective hermeneutic of the gospel is the life of the congregation which believes it, one has to ask how such congregations may be helped to become what they are called to be” (1989e:234). He offers the answer that it will only happen with a ministerial leadership that leads the congregation in mission, enabling, encouraging, and sustaining believers in their callings (1989e:235, 238, 240). This section will explore Newbigin’s understanding of ministerial leadership for a missionary congregation.

#### *6.4.1. Rooted in Ministry and Missionary Experience*

Newbigin’s later reflections on church leadership are not the formulations of a systematic theologian who engages the subject in academic isolation from the messiness of church life (cf. Verkuyl 1978:56). Rather his discussions of church leadership arise from vast experience in many different settings. That historical setting has been briefly sketched in the historical chapters. Here three themes are presented by way of introduction.

First, Newbigin’s reflection on the shape and formation of ministerial leadership has emerged from his cross-cultural missionary experience. Newbigin has described the way that a cross-cultural missionary experience enables one to see how deeply he or she has been conditioned by their own culture. Describing the early experience of a missionary he says:

Initially I am not aware of this as a myth [the worldview that shapes Western culture]. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous Western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply ‘how things are’... No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are (1978a:3).

Serious involvement with another culture begins to challenge the missionary’s most fundamental assumptions, enabling the missionary to see his or her culture with new eyes. Slowly, insight into the deep impact of the cultural myth on the shape of every part of one’s existence begins to materialize. It is precisely this process that led Newbigin to recognize the foundational assumptions that were embodied in traditional forms of ministerial order. He recognized how the non-missionary church of Christendom and the Enlightenment worldview of the West had shaped forms of ministry that were being transported to India. This led in turn to two results. First, Newbigin’s writings manifest what he has called in another context “the process of simplification” (1948d:18). In this process, all that is not of the Biblical essence of ministerial leadership is stripped away so that the real purpose of ministerial leadership might be apprehended afresh in its proper role. This process of simplification led Newbigin to the conclusion that ministerial leadership must “serve the fundamental

evangelistic purpose of the church” (1993h:87). The second result was experiments with new forms of leadership that did serve the missional calling of the church and that were appropriate to the Indian setting. He later remarked that what he had learned in India with various experiments in leadership was equally applicable to the modern western situation (1980f:65f.).

There is a further dimension to Newbigin’s missionary experience that makes his reflection on pastoral oversight valuable. Newbigin’s insight into the importance of ministerial leadership for the local congregation arises from his ministry as a bishop. The bishopric provided opportunity to implement experiments with new forms of leadership in virgin territory where the church was emerging. Also entailed in the responsibility of bishop was the training and equipping of ministers in a more settled ministry. Both of these settings provided Newbigin with a growing wealth of experience in questions of ministerial leadership.

Third, Newbigin’s discussions of pastoral leadership are framed in the context of a world setting. Throughout his life Newbigin was involved in issues of ministerial leadership at several levels. At the level of the diocese, he trained and equipped ministers and experimented with new forms of leadership. At the level of the CSI denomination, he helped develop policies on ministerial order and theological training. A third level of involvement was the world context. Newbigin participated in a number of ecumenical committees that grappled with questions of ministerial order. His most extensive experience in this regard was in the Faith and Order Committee of the WCC.

#### *6.4.2. Ministry in the Context of the Missionary Church*

To properly understand the role of the ordained ministry, Newbigin writes, it is essential to place the discussion in the context of Jesus’ intention for the church to continue his mission. “We cannot talk long about ministry without talking about mission. Ministry must be conceived always in terms of the Church’s mission” (1980d:8f.). Many of Newbigin’s discussions about ministerial leadership are immediately placed within the context of a discussion of God’s intention for the church (1977a:242-247; 1980d:7-10; 1982a:149-161; 1982e:1f.; 1983c:6-18; 1990b:335-339; cf. Hanson 1975). John 20:19-23 gives us the substance of that intention (1977a:242; 1982e:1; 1983c:6f.). Newbigin observes five points: It is a sending: “The Church is constituted from the outset as a mission” (1983c:6); The church’s mission is governed by the ministry of Jesus himself (“As the Father sent me”)—a ministry of word and deed; Mission is in the way of the cross (“He showed them his hands and side”); The mission can be carried out only in the power of the Spirit as the church shares in the risen life of Christ (“He breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”); The church continues Jesus’ ministry of deliverance from the power of sin (“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”) (1983c:6f.). This commission was given to the disciples. The question arises: Did Jesus speak to the disciples as ‘the ministry in embryo’ or as ‘the church in embryo’? (1982e:1, 5; 1983c:5). Do we move from Jesus to the ordained ministry to that of the whole church or do we move from Jesus to the whole church to the ordained ministry? Answering the question with the first of these options leads to clericalism, while choosing the second of these options downplays the importance of ministerial leadership. Both clericalism and egalitarianism

threaten the ordained leadership for ministry of the church. Indeed, leadership exercised in these ways, “instead of enabling others to follow it prevents them from doing so” (1982e:3).

Throughout his life Newbiggin resisted these two dangers. Clericalism makes a sharp distinction between the minister and the rest of the congregation. Newbiggin faced this threat during his time in India. He addresses two factors that fed this clericalism: Western forms of leadership transported to India, and a wrong understanding of ordination. On the first, he remarks that a Western style of “seminary training tends to create a professional *elite* separated from the ordinary membership. A theological seminary is seen as a sort of Sandhurst<sup>5</sup> where an officer class is trained, thus creating a chasm between ‘clergy’ and ‘other ranks’” (1978i:4). On the second, he rejects “a false ontology [which] has led to the idea that something which is in the possession of the ordained is—in ordination—handed on (by bishop or presbytery) to the ordinand” (1983c:15). This “pipeline theory” creates a special class of elite within the church that possess something others do not have (1982e:8). The second misunderstanding that Newbiggin addresses is an egalitarian reaction against clericalism that began in the 1960s. Proper emphasis on the ministry and priesthood of the whole church “has been interpreted so as to imply that the Church has no real need for an ordained ministry, or that the latter is merely a secondary development from the primary ministry which is that of the whole church” (1983c:5). The importance of ministerial leadership is downplayed. Both clericalism and egalitarianism threaten the proper role of ministerial leadership in the missionary congregation.

How does Newbiggin uphold both the ministry and priesthood of the whole church and at the same time the important role of ministerial leadership? He starts with a basic insight regarding the commission of John 20: “those to whom these words are spoken are both the first ministers and the first members of the church” (1982e:1). To be forced to choose between an embryonic church and an embryonic ministry poses a false dilemma that arises “as a result of viewing the Church from a static, ‘Christendom’ perspective, rather than from a dynamic and missionary one” (1983c:9). In contrast to this false dilemma, the commission of John 20 is given to the apostles as *both* the embryonic church and the embryonic ministry.

On the one side, this commission is given to the whole church. The whole church is to be a royal priesthood and carry out a full-time ministry. Where and how is this ministerial priesthood to be offered? “It is to the entire membership immersed throughout the week in the secular business of the world—in field and factory, in office and shop, in home and hospital—that this ministry is given and it is in these places that the ministry is to be fulfilled” (1982e:2). When Scripture speak of the ministry of the whole church it is talking about “the faithfulness of men and women immersed in the business of the world who may well have no time at all for what we call ‘church activities’” (*ibid*). If the whole church is called to ministry, why do we need ministers?

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<sup>5</sup>Sandhurst is a prestigious Royal Military Academy founded in 1799 in Berkshire, England.

Newbigin answers by pointing to the analogies of the sabbath and tithing. There is one day called the Lord's day that is set apart in order that all the days may be consecrated to the Lord. The tithe is a portion set apart to remind us that all of our monetary resources belong to God. In the same way some are set apart as ministers not to take ministry away from the rest but to enable them to fulfill their ministry—the ministry *of* the church *for* the world.

On the other side, this commission is given to the apostles as the first leaders in the church. The disciples are sent to embody and announce the reign of God in the way of the cross and by the power of the Spirit. The apostles are both themselves the embryonic church constituted as a missionary community and they are the first leaders of the church who are sent to call it into being (1983c:7). The disciples are called to follow Jesus; as such they are constituted as a missionary community. As a community of followers they are also called to lead others in following Jesus; as such they are leaders given the mandate to lead and enable others to follow. As others follow more faithfully they become leaders who lead and enable others to follow. There is not a static distinction between clergy and laity but a fluid boundary as those who follow Jesus lead others in faithful discipleship (1983c:8). Thus Newbigin offers his definition of the ordained ministry: “ministry in the Church is so following Jesus on the way of the cross that others are enabled to follow and to become themselves leaders of others in the same way” (1983c:9; cf., 1982e:4; 1990b:335; cf., Hanson 1975).

This understanding of church leadership is indebted to the compelling portrait of ministry offered by Anthony Hanson in his book *The Pioneer Ministry* (1975) (1974b:147). Hanson was a former colleague of Newbigin in the Church of South India; his understanding of leadership was formed from his missionary situation (Hanson 1975:158-162). Hanson has developed his understanding of leadership from sections of first and second Corinthians that are not normally utilized in discussions on the ministry (1975:57-88). He argues that the missionary situation of the New Testament shaped Paul's understanding of leadership. Accordingly Hanson's doctrine of ministry is closely tied to a missionary church; ministers lead the church by living example in bearing witness to the gospel. In his words:

Thus the ministry has a double relationship: it is related to Christ as responsible to him and as being the primary means by which his life is reproduced in the world. And it is related to the Church as serving the Church, and as leading the Church as a whole into the same life which itself is exhibiting. There is no suggestion here of the ministry doing anything which the Church as a whole cannot do: it is rather that the ministry is the pioneer in Christian living for the Church, as Christ was the pioneer for all of us (1975:62).

The apostolic ministry is the church in nucleus carrying out the mission of Jesus; it is the first church in a new area. As people gather into the church, the ministry pioneers in that mission leading others into the apostolic ministry of the church. Hanson describes the apostolic ministry in three stages :

There the ministry begins by being the Church, goes on to pioneer the life of Christ in the Church, and ends by helping the Church to carry out its apostolic function by itself, though never by dispensing with the ministry. The relation between ministry and Church in Paul is absolutely fundamental: one passes over into the other (1975:88).

Newbigin's recalls his missionary experience to confirm this view of leadership (cf.

Hanson 1975:158-162). The evangelists in the villages of India were the village people themselves. As these new converts learned the elements of the Christian faith, they were encouraged to share them with their neighbours. When Newbigin came, as a bishop, to confirm them, their next act—often the same evening—was to sponsor others in the village who were baptized. “Discipleship and leadership went together. As those learning to follow Christ, they were at the same time leading others. In a missionary situation that is how it is. And that is how it was in the first centuries of the Church. There was no class of what we call clergy” (1982e:6). The distinction between clergy and laity arose when Christianity became the established religion of the empire (1974b:75; Bosch 1991:469; Burrows 1981:38).

This approach relates the ordained minister to the missionary church in a dynamic and an organic way. Participation in the mission of the church and leading in that mission are two sides of the same coin. Leadership is a necessary component in the missionary community (cf. Moltmann 1977:302-304). With this formulation Newbigin provides the resources for a critique of both clericalism and egalitarianism. Over against a clericalism that makes a sharp distinction between the ministers and the rest of the church, this model presents a fluid boundary where followers are enabled to become leaders. Over against an egalitarianism that submerges the minister in the church in such a way that his or her important role is eclipsed, the indispensable significance of leadership in the church is maintained.

#### *6.4.3. Lead and Equip: The Task of a Minister in a Missionary Church*

What is the role of ministerial leadership in the missionary church? Newbigin answers that question with two fundamental words: lead and equip. Distinctive about Newbigin’s position is the way he relates these two words. Among the most fundamental words of the gospel is Jesus’ command to his disciples and to all leaders: ‘follow me.’ Beginning with the apostles, all leadership within the community begins with the response of obedient faith to that call (1983a:10; 1989e:240; 1990b:335). Leaders are those who follow hard after Jesus and make it possible for others to follow also (1990b:335).

This conception gives us a different picture than the one that is current in a Christendom model of pastoral leadership. Newbigin describes the Christendom model as follows:

The typical picture of the minister, at least in the Protestant tradition, has been that of a teacher. He faces the congregation as a teacher faces the class. They all, preacher and people alike, have their backs turned to the outside world. They face one another, and the minister encourages, exhorts, and teaches (1989e:240).

When the words ‘follow me’ are the starting point the minister “is not so much facing towards the Church as facing towards the Lord and his ministry is to encourage them to go the way he is going” (1990b:335).

This contrast between Christendom and missionary leadership is sharply portrayed in a paper written in 1983 for the Anglican-Reformed International Commission. Here he addresses the question, how should we understand the sacraments and ministry? This paper represents Newbigin’s most mature and detailed reflection on the issue of

ministerial leadership. In preparation for this meeting he read the New Testament through noting every text that had a bearing on either the sacraments or ministry. He concluded that both the Anglican and Reformed traditions of ministerial leadership stood in contrast with the New Testament. This contrast “arises from the fact that the New Testament assumes a missionary situation in which the Church is a small evangelizing movement in pagan society, while both of our traditions have been formed in the ‘Christendom’ era, in a society presumed to be Christian” (1983c:1). In the missionary setting of the New Testament, ministry is primarily leadership in mission, while in the Christendom setting, ministry is primarily the pastoral care of established communities. There are two contrasting pictures of the ministry: “In one, the minister is facing the people—gathering, teaching, feeding, comforting; in the other he is leading the people, going before them on the way of the cross to challenge the powers of this dark world” (1983c:2).

Newbigin’s description of the bishop makes the same point. He discusses various models of a bishop: lord, enabler, father, and manager. All of them can be co-opted into a Christendom understanding of the ministry. Newbigin believes a better model can be found when the bishop says with Paul: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” This model is also graphically depicted in the words of Mark 14:42: “Come on: let’s go” (1982a:160-161).

Two pictures graphically depict Newbigin’s understanding of leadership. The first is the biblical picture of Jesus in relation to his disciples as portrayed by Italian director Pasolini in the movie *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. It depicts Jesus as a commander leading his troops into battle. He goes ahead of his disciples leading them into mission, throwing words back over his shoulder to encourage, instruct, and challenge his disciples as they follow him in their missionary task.

He is not like a general who sits at headquarters and sends his troops into battle. He goes at their head and takes the brunt of the enemy attack. He enables and encourages them by leading them, not just by telling them. In this picture, the words of Jesus have a quite different force. They all find their meaning in the central keyword, “Follow me” (1989e:240).

The second picture that may help us grasp Newbigin’s image of leadership is a portrayal of his own leadership as described by Sundar Clarke, former bishop in Madras:

There had been heavy rains which had destroyed a number of houses, huts and school buildings. Without delay Lesslie rushed to these spots and found roofless schools and stunned, apathetic people. He called for a ladder, climbed it, asked the local people to pass him the leaves that had blown off, and began to thatch a shed to make into a school. It was a fascinating spectacle to see him so involved and exhibiting his faith and theology to a people who had lost not only their roofs but were also spiritually shattered. *He did it and he got them to do it!* (Clarke, in Yannoulatos 1990:88; italics mine).

It is significant that Newbigin consistently uses the term ‘leadership’ over against many others that are available. He observes that there are a great variety of metaphors used in the New Testament to characterize leaders in the church: shepherds, overseers, watchmen, stewards, ambassadors, evangelists, leaders, teachers, servants, and so forth. Some of these terms have become technical names for various forms of ministry such

as bishop, deacon, or pastor. The metaphor that has become dominant in church history is that of shepherd. The problem with this word, however, is that shepherd connotes a different image today than in Biblical culture. A shepherd was a king who governed his people and led them into battle. With the various choices, Newbigin chooses the term leadership because it best conveys New Testament leadership to contemporary people (1983c:5). While the term leader may be misunderstood as elitist, it also best conveys the combined image of leadership and discipleship found in the New Testament (1983c:6).

I have acknowledged that the term 'leadership' is an unfashionable one for several good reasons. It is not the term usually employed in discussions of the ministry. I use it both because it is implied in the most fundamental of the sayings of Jesus— "Follow me", and because it provides a framework in which both the unity and distinctness of the 'general' and 'special' ministries can be understood. Whereas the terms 'clergy' and 'laity' suggest a sharp distinction between two different classes of Christians, the language of leadership emphasises the fluidity of the boundary without surrendering to a fashionable kind of egalitarianism which denies the necessity for leadership. A good leader might almost be defined as one who does *not* draw a boundary to separate himself from others, but is only eager that others should follow so closely that they in turn become leaders for others (1983c:8).

As one who follows Jesus and leads others in that discipleship, the minister is called to equip others for that task. Throughout Newbigin's chapter 'Ministerial Leadership for a Missionary Congregation', we find a variety of verbs used to describe the task of the minister: serve, nourish, sustain, guide, enable, and encourage (1989e:234-241). The question is how is that task to be carried out in keeping with the image of leadership that the New Testament sketches. Newbigin proposes four ways that this task of enablement is carried out.

First, ministerial leadership is responsible for the ministry of the word and sacraments to the congregation. It will be recalled how tightly Newbigin ties the word and sacraments to the missionary task of the church. Christ is present in preaching and sacraments, giving his life to his followers through those channels. The minister will bring these means of grace to the congregation (1960b:119).

Second, ministers are called to uphold their people in prayer (1974b:143). The believer who attempts to be faithful to Christ in the public life of culture needs a minister "who will pray for him regularly, holding him up by name before God as he goes out into the world day by day to wrestle with principalities and powers" (1960b:119). It was during the secular decade when prayer was being eclipsed that Newbigin especially stressed that ministers should be "men of prayer"<sup>6</sup> (1962h:5).

Third, ministers can provide "space" and structures in which training for ministry in culture takes place. Speaking of the task of the bishop in this regard, Newbigin writes:

Although bishops cannot be experts, and should not even aspire to be experts, in the different areas of public practice and teaching, it is part of their task to nourish in the Church the work of those who are, and to provide in the life of the Church the spaces where rigorous intellectual effort may be engaged in the task of bringing the light of the Gospel to bear upon the several sectors of public doctrine (1990b:338).

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<sup>6</sup>And later in his life, women of prayer as well. For Newbigin's (brief) defense of women's ordination see 1983c:17, 18.

Speaking to the presbyters of the CSI in Madras Newbigin suggests that since there are “thousands of men and women working in every sector of the life of the city, who have knowledge and skill far beyond ours” ministers must be ‘enablers’ instead of ‘performers.’ “We have to liberate and mobilise the immense resources which lie latent in our congregations for the task of presenting every man mature in Christ.” He then mentions a number of structures that may be used to equip the members of the church for their callings in culture (1974b:80f.). These are primarily small groups with lay leadership which explore what it means to be faithful to the gospel in various sectors of cultural life.

Fourth, ministers must be deeply involved in ministry in the world. The first three methods of equipping could quite easily be carried out in the context of Christendom model of ministerial leadership. Even Ephesians 4:11-12, which Newbigin often quotes, could be used to uphold a false clericalism that “sees the church as an organisation to be run by a professional clergy, in which the lay members are simply there to be organised, taught and comforted” (1974b:75) or that views the minister like the Duke of Plaza Toro who leads the army from behind (1977a:246).

The ‘minister’ is not *just* a resource person who equips other people for a battle in which he is not himself engaged. He is not a ‘back-room boy’. He is not a sort of queen bee who remains at the centre of the hive while the worker bees go out into the world (1982e:3).

Newbigin observes that when Paul’s leadership was questioned Paul answered by pointing to the fact that he shared in the suffering that comes from missional engagement (1982e:3f.; Hanson 1975:60). Newbigin explains this requirement more clearly:

Ministerial leadership for a missionary congregation will require that the minister is directly engaged in the warfare of the kingdom against the powers which usurp the kingship. Of course the minister cannot be directly involved in each of the specific areas of secular life in which the members of the congregation have to fight their battles. But there will be situations where the minister must represent the whole Church in challenging the abuse of power, corruption, and selfishness in public life and take the blows that follow. As he or she does this, the way will be open for standing in solidarity with members of the congregation who have to face similar conflict (1989e:240).

Newbigin does not only mention missional engagement in social, political, and economic involvement, he also frequently stresses the role of the minister as an evangelist. Speaking of the bishop, he writes: “This means, I think, that the bishop should be ready himself to be engaged— as opportunity offers and calls—in direct evangelistic efforts or in pioneering movements of Christian action in the secular world” (1977a:246; cf., 1974b:58-62; 1990b:335-337; Hanson 1975).

#### 6.4.4. Ministerial Order and the Missionary Church

If ministry is following Jesus on the way of the cross in such a manner that others are enabled to follow, then the question arises: Is there one order that best exemplifies this

view of ministerial leadership?

The New Testament reflects an immense fluidity and variety in the forms of ministry operative in the early church (1983c:9). While there are many attempts to demonstrate that a particular form of church government—papal, episcopal, presbyterial, congregational—can be irrefutably demonstrated from Scripture, Newbigin believes that the Bible does not furnish us with such a universally valid order of ministry (1973c:109; 1980f:65; 1983c:9). And so he poses the question: “Are we, then, left with no norms at all, no criteria for deciding what are and what are not legitimate developments in church order to meet the changing situations?” (1983a:8)?

An examination of Newbigin’s vast writings on ministerial leadership show that he employs at least six principles. The first is that ministerial order must be shaped by and appropriate to the missionary calling of the church: “The primacy of the missionary obligation [is] determinative of the forms of the Church’s life” (1963a:8). Forms of ministry must be shaped by the missionary calling of the church (cf. Bosch 1991:474; Burrows 1981:83, 112; Moltmann 1977:288-314). Throughout his life Newbigin’s constant refrain was the “question that has to be asked—and repeatedly asked—is whether the traditional forms of ministry which have been inherited from the ‘Christendom’ period are fully compatible with the faith that the Church is called to be a missionary community” (*ibid.*).

Second, forms of ministry must be flexible (1960n:30; 1962a:8; 1965e:479). Various cultural contexts and missional situations will demand different forms of leadership in order to carry out the missionary calling of the church.

Closely related is the third principle:

The Church does not try to demolish the forms of society (except in so far as they contradict the purpose of God for mankind as revealed in Christ), but rather accepts them as the provisional form in which the new humanity is to be made manifest. It is thus entirely congruous with the proper character of the Church that, from the very beginning, it took over into its own life the forms of social organism which it found in the society of which it was a part (1973c:114).

The eldership took over the forms of the Jewish synagogue; the episcopate took over forms of political leadership in the cities of the empire. This does not mean that ministerial forms are simply a response to the leadership structures prevailing in a given culture. Rather employment of societal forms for leadership is governed by the proper nature of the church which is the church *for* that place, the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ (1983a:9). Flexibility and re-formation according to varying cultures is not a surrender to relevancy but obedience to the gospel. The congregation, if it is to be missionary, will take on various structures and forms in keeping with its context. As such, “flexible patterns of congregational life will call for much more flexible and varied styles of ministry” (1980f:65).

Fourth, there must be “the right relationship at every level between personal and corporate elements” (1983c:10; cf. 1982e:9). The form must make room at every level—local, regional, universal—for a kind of leadership in which each person may take individual initiative and take responsibility for their actions. At the same time “there is the need of the fullest possible involvement of the whole community in discerning and doing the will of God in each situation under the guidance of the Spirit” (1983a:10).

Fifth, church order must include both settled and mobile forms of ministry. The New Testament speaks of elders, bishops, pastors, and deacons localized form of leadership permanently settled in the congregation. There were also mobile, non-localized ministries such as apostles, prophets, and evangelists (1983c:9). When the empire became Christian under Constantine, all ministerial leadership was concentrated in the local, settled ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. This resulted in the “practical elimination of the universal, travelling ministry of apostles, prophets, and evangelists” (1982e:8). The modern missionary and ecumenical movements have given the present-day church these mobile ministries back in the form of travelling evangelists, missionaries, and ecumenical secretaries. However, they have not been integrated into official ecclesiologies or theories of ministry (1983c:9; 1982e:8). A ministerial order that reflects Scripture will establish both of these forms of ministry.

Sixth, leadership structures must express the local and universal dimensions of the church. While the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Papal, Missionary-bureaucratic, or Ecumenical-bureaucratic forms of church order cannot be read off the pages of Scripture as blueprints, each of these structures is an attempt to express the universal nature of the church (1962b:27). It will be recalled that in the discussion of ecclesial structures, Newbigin argued that there must be a structure for each level of effective human grouping—local, regional, universal. It is precisely in the forms of church leadership that this is most visible. It is for this reason that Newbigin often insisted that any authentic scheme of reunion must include a universally recognized ministry.

#### *6.4.5. Examples of Ministerial Leadership in a Missionary Church*

Newbigin did not only theorize about ministerial leadership; he was deeply involved himself in establishing forms that were consistent with the missionary nature of the church. A full discussion would examine all the committees in which he participated in South India, in Britain, and in ecumenical circles; the ministerial formation in which he was involved as a bishop; his own ministry as a bishop; and the various experiments with ministerial leadership he employed primarily in India. For the purposes of this study, it will suffice to provide a few examples.

A constant theme in Newbigin’s earliest writings about ministerial leadership is the burden of western forms of leadership on the Indian church. There are three fundamental axioms of church leadership that issued from the western church shaped by Christendom: the ministry is a paid full-time profession; ministers are highly educated; and ministers should be supported by the gifts and donations of the people (1994k:24). None of these principles is derived from the New Testament. It was not the fundamental theological understanding of minister and congregation that governed South Indian churches but questions of pragmatic necessity that arose from maintaining a professional, paid, and educated clergy.

Newbigin advocated and implemented a plan for leadership in the CSI that called for four levels of pastoral work (1993h:117; Wingate 1983). First, there is a need to train many laymen and women for volunteer service in the church as preachers, evangelists, teachers and pastoral care workers. While “it must be our duty to train the whole congregation in each place to be a missionary team and to have a consistently missionary attitude toward its neighbourhood” there is the need for trained workers to

carry on a leadership ministry within the context of the local church (1950:144; 1951c:86). Secondly, each village should have an ordained Presbyterian. This presbyter would be a recognized leader in the ecclesial community. He would usually be the one who introduced the gospel to the village in the first place. Confident that the Holy Spirit is the one that has brought this community into existence and that God has chosen this person to be a leader, Newbigin proceeded to accept him as the leader for that place. All other forms of leadership must supplement this person's ministry; they must be seen as helpers and friends, not as controllers. This person would normally earn his living side by side with the rest of the villagers and enter into their lives. He must be trained to read and explain the Bible and lead the worship with understanding. Ministry of the word, sacraments, and pastoral care would occupy his time. Therefore, theological training would be necessary to equip this local presbyter. The third level of minister would be a peripatetic ministry of teachers. These folk would be both paid presbyters and unpaid workers. Their task would be to visit the churches and instruct the people in a systematic way. These leaders should supplement, not supplant the local presbyter's work. The fourth level would be a fully trained and paid ministry who would have the ultimate responsibility for the worship and teaching of the church. This would also include a much larger number of bishops than was present at the time. These were the men that were already carrying out the task of ministry alone. Newbigin did not want to reduce their numbers but rather shift the focus of their ministry. There was a need for an increase in the numbers of local presbyters and travelling teachers and these leaders would need training. This would enable regular teaching and pastoral care to continue in the absence of a trained and paid minister. It would at the same time enable the leadership to be more local and indigenous.

The development of this kind of leadership was referred to as the volunteer principle. It was only by carrying this volunteer principle beyond existing levels of participation that "the church [would] be rooted in the country and [would] Christianize the country through and through" (1993d:117). Over the next decade 300 volunteer leaders were trained and Newbigin comments: "it soon became clear to me that the congregations under this kind of leadership were more lively and more active in evangelism than those under the care of paid teachers" (1993h:118). He was convinced that these experiments had relevance, not only for India, but the highly industrialized West (1980f:66).

A second concrete experiment Newbigin initiated arose from his ecclesiological reflection on new congregational forms in various sectors of society. Above we discussed Newbigin's call for congregations in industry, education, hospitals, and businesses. These congregations should be equipped with a ministry and the sacraments to nourish the life of Christ that was to be manifested in the midst of that public place (1980d:8). This meant that ministerial leadership had to move beyond traditional forms. More "flexible patterns of congregational life will call for much more flexible and varied styles of ministry" (1980f:65). A lengthy quote fleshes this out:

This would mean that men and women who belong to the culture of industrial labour and earn their living on the shop-floor should at the same time be ordained to the full ministry of word and sacrament so that they can become leaders of Christian congregations which are truly part of that culture.

I know from experience that this proposal meets with strong resistance from those who cannot conceive of ministry in other terms than those which have been bequeathed to us by the 'Christendom' experience. But modern industrial society is

a highly complex organism of differentiated but overlapping communities in each of which men and women have to live their working lives, interact with others and take daily and hourly decisions on highly complex and difficult issues. The ministerial leadership of the Church in such communities must be part of their life, understanding its pressures and its complexities and its ethical ambiguities. Only with such leadership can there develop in each of these communities—be it factory, university, city council, professional association or whatever—living Christian cells which can function as a sign and foretaste of God's reign for those communities (1980f:67).

A third example of Newbigin's attempt to implement ministerial leadership appropriate for missionary congregations is the bishop (Hanson 1975:167-171). There are three reasons why it is valuable to look at the bishopric. First, Newbigin was a Presbyterian who played a key role in fashioning a church order in South India that joined together Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans. The sticking point was the role of the bishop. Newbigin articulated an understanding that was acceptable to both Anglicans and others who held to a non-episcopal church order. In the process Newbigin reflected long and hard on the role of a bishop in a missionary church. This fresh reflection on a church office makes this valuable. Second, the bishop was a traditional church office. While the former example showed the radical side of Newbigin's proposals, the way he formulated the bishopric shows how he dealt with church tradition. He believed that it was foolish simply to demolish old orders (1978i:6). The bishopric is an example of the way Newbigin transformed the office to be appropriate to a missionary church. Third, Newbigin himself was appointed a bishop. His memoirs in *A South India Diary* (1951c) exhibit the concrete ways he worked out his bishopric. Thus his theological reflection flows from his own attempts to conform the role of bishop to a missionary church.

In an early reflection on his task he remarks that "the challenge was to help each one of them [700 congregations] to be a living sign and foretaste of the kingdom. This is how I understood the job of a bishop" (1993h:99). He compares his task with the role the apostle Paul fulfilled in the early church. Paul's ministry was pastoral but was not exercised in a particular location. Paul was concerned to build up local congregations to be witnessing communities. Likewise Newbigin's practice and reflection in the bishopric was tied to his concern to establish missionary congregations.

How could this be done? Throughout the corpus of Newbigin's writings we find much space devoted to this issue. There is one article, however, that summarizes succinctly the task of a bishop—*Bishop in a United Church* (1982a). The key word is leader: the bishop is a leader in worship, evangelism, social and political engagement, teaching the faith, and pastoral work. Newbigin does not neglect the important work of administration and relating to councils. However, his main concern is that the bishop lead the presbyters and churches under his care. His primary image is not that of an enabler, or father in the faith, or efficient manager of a large diocese (although each of these contains some truth) but the image of Jesus who said to his disciples "Come on: let's go" and then led them as he went to the cross (1982a:161).

The unique role of the bishop is to be a focus of unity. "It is as leader in worship, in evangelism, in teaching, and in pastoral care that the bishop can be a focus of unity" (1982a:159). This distinctive task of the bishop of being a focus for unity is exercised at three levels. First, the bishop has a special role in unifying the varied and manifold life of the diocese. For example, there is no other office that can unify the worship life

of the church with the various programs of social and evangelistic outreach (1977a:243-245.). Second, the bishop can be a focus of unity for the various congregations within the diocese. Newbigin comments that “the continual visiting of each congregation by the bishop was the first way in which their unity [CSI] in one Church became a reality to them” (1982a:150). Third, the bishop can also be a demonstration of the unity of the church to the wider world.

Newbigin says much more about the calling of a bishop. In every case his primary concern is to view even the most mundane task in the light of the bishop’s role to nurture a missionary congregation.

#### *6.4.6. Theological Education*

If ministerial leadership was to be appropriate to the nourishment of a missionary congregation, then there would need to be radical changes in theological education (cf. Bosch 1991:489-498; Bosch 1982; Conn 1983; Conn and Rowen 1984). Newbigin’s reflection on theological education flowed from vast involvement in experiments in theological training. As bishop in Madurai Newbigin was committed “to the development of high-level training in Tamil” (1993h:136). In the midst of a society undergoing a renewal of Tamil culture, standard theological training was oriented to Europe. As chairman of the council for the Tamilnadu Theological College, Newbigin helped to establish a theological institution that gave high-level training to ministerial candidates. Newbigin’s bishopric in Madras and presidency of the Synod Ministerial Committee again afforded him the opportunity to be involved in the establishment of a theological institution. With the help of the Theological Education Fund (TEF), a seminary was established which offered a “ministerial training which was more truly appropriate to a missionary Church than anything I have known before or since” (1993h:216). As an ecumenical leader Newbigin was drawn into discussions of the TEF and the later Programme for Theological Education (PTE) (1963a:9; Pobe 1991:350). In an insightful paper written a couple of years after the launch of the PTE, Newbigin details criticisms in the areas of structure, method, and content that the Third World churches raise about traditional forms of theological education (1978i; cf. 1966b:102-103).

A detailed examination of Newbigin’s critique of western theological education and his proposals for training that more effectively trains ministers to be missionary leaders is beyond the scope of this section. The simple point to be made here is that Newbigin believed that if ministers were to be effectively trained as missionary pastors, then there needed to be vast changes in the structure, method, and content of theological education. The forms of education that were prominent in the West were shaped during Christendom when the church had ceased to be a missionary community. Western theological education trained pastors for institutional self-serving maintenance rather than mission.

#### *6.4.7. The Task of Discipline*

The subject of discipline is rare in Newbigin’s writings. The few references that are found show that he believed that this was a crucial element in the missionary church.

Newbigin describes the missionary church in a cultural environment that is clearly antithetical to the gospel. A church in this setting must take the task of discipline seriously; otherwise its witness becomes hopelessly compromised (1953d:7). The missionary church may not succumb to the danger of the national church. While the national church shaped in Christendom takes seriously its responsibility for its national community, it often fails to take seriously its call to be a separate, marked out community. A missionary church must make clear that it is a separate community, marked off from the pagan world around it.

In the memoirs of his bishopric, Newbigin describes a setting in which he had to exercise discipline. He attempts to demonstrate that there is a need for a firm discipline in love. Both love and discipline must go hand in hand. The exercise of discipline is

... in many ways the severest test of a church's Christianity. It is easy—fatally easy—for a congregation simply to shut its eyes to the sins of its members and to do nothing about them. It is also easy for it, under certain circumstances, to adopt a hard legalistic attitude which is without redemptive power (1951c:75f).

Consequently Newbigin took time as bishop of Madras to exhort his fellow presbyters to exercise pastoral discipline in love and firmness, with a concern for the witness to the gospel (1974b:50-53).

It is evident that Newbigin treats the subject of discipline, as with all the other subjects of this chapter, from the standpoint of a missionary church. The life of that disciple community must evidence the power of the gospel. A compromised life blurs the missionary witness of the church.

## 6.5. WORSHIP AND THE MISSIONARY CONGREGATION

The importance that Newbigin accords worship for the missionary congregation becomes evident in his discussion of the priorities he maintained for the church that he pastored in the inner city of Birmingham. A reviewer challenged Newbigin to show how the abstract reasoning of *Foolishness to the Greeks*, a book which called for a missionary encounter with Western culture, could be concretely applied to the local church in the city. He replies that the church has been chosen to be bearers of good news and that there is only one way this gospel will become credible: through the life of a congregation who believes and embodies the gospel. God's presence in the Spirit dwells in the congregation offering a demonstration of the good news as He makes the life of Christ real in the midst of the world. He continues: "The first priority, therefore, is the cherishing and nourishing of such a congregation in a life of worship, of teaching, and of mutual pastoral care so that the new life in Christ becomes more and more for them the great and controlling reality" (1987b:5).

The following section explicates this theme. It does not attempt to articulate everything that Newbigin said about worship. It confines itself to the importance of worship for the calling of the church to witness to the gospel of the kingdom.

### 6.5.1. *Two Simultaneous Duties of the Church—Inward and Outward*

Avery Dulles aptly expresses the importance of the inner and outer life of the church:

The Church's existence is a continual alternation between two phases. Like systole and diastole in the movement of the heart, like inhalation and exhalation in the process of breathing, assembly and mission succeed each other in the life of the Church. Discipleship would be stunted unless it included both the centripetal phase of worship and the centrifugal phase of mission (Dulles 1987:220).

Like Dulles, Newbigin believes that the "Church always has two simultaneous duties" (1950:142).<sup>7</sup> The first is to nurture the new life in Christ in the regular congregational life which is centred in the weekly sacrament, the word, prayer, worship, and fellowship. The second is that "the Church has to involve itself and all its members more and more deeply in all the affairs of the world, to be engaged up to the hilt in all its temptations and sorrows, its shame and despair, its strife and labour, its struggle with disease, injustice and every manifestation of evil..." (1950:143).

Newbigin connects the inner worship life of the church with its social task. At other points he connects the inner life of the church with the evangelistic task (1950:143) and the calling of the laity in culture on Monday to Saturday (1958b:16f.). Of the latter, he says that Sunday is "the day on which the Church makes a necessary withdrawal from its engagement with the world in order to renew the inner springs of the divine life within her through word and sacrament" (1958b:17). The purpose of the church's inner life is to equip for mission: "True pastoral care, true training in the Christian life, and the true use of the means of grace will precisely be in and for the discharge of this missionary task" (1953d:167).

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<sup>7</sup>Gerrit C. Berkouwer notes Karl Barth's criticism of Reformation and post-Reformation ecclesiologies in this regard. Barth spoke of a "gap" that existed because only one of these elements—the gathering—was emphasized at the expense of mission. In his words: "According to Barth... there is a 'gap' in the doctrine of the Church—also the Reformation and post-Reformation doctrine—due to the isolation of the idea (in itself correct) of the *coetus* [assembly] or *congregatio fidelium* [congregation of the faithful]. The error lies not in what is said, but in what is not said, with all the dangers of the Church as an 'institution of salvation.' The Protestant Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, according to Barth, had a 'pronounced lack of joy in mission'" (Berkouwer 1976:393, fn.5).

The danger is that “it is always relatively easy for the Church to do one of these things and neglect the other” (1950:143). With the pressing social concerns of his bishopric in Madras, Newbigin found it difficult to keep these two things together. He found it easy to “allow two things which belong together to fall apart—with consequences which are fatal for the witness of the church” (1975c:26). On the one hand, the church that isolates its preaching, sacraments and worship from the task of caring for its neighbours, or the church that focusses only on its own growth without an equal concern for its community, distorts its witness to the gospel. The danger is an introverted, self-serving maintenance. On the other hand, when social concern is separated from the worship life of the church, it becomes just another social effort that loses its character as witness to the kingdom. “It is precisely for the sake of the mission to the world that these two things must not be allowed to fall apart” (1975c:26). A faithful missionary church will “live in the tension of loyalty to both tasks, and in that place, in that tension, to bear witness to the gospel” (1950:143).

#### *6.5.2. The Gospel: The Source of the Church's Life*

During the 1960s Newbigin began to characterize the church's mission in a new way: “The mission of the Church is to reproduce the life of Jesus in the life of the world” (1970a:211). The church is called to embody the life of Christ as a witness to the kingdom. The source of the life of Christ is the gospel. Thus the life of the church is rooted in the gospel. If the church is to be faithful to its task of representing the life of Christ as a sign of the end, its whole life must flow from the gospel.

This commitment developed in Newbigin's thinking during the battles that were fought over the reunion of the church in South India during the 1940s. Newbigin wrote *The Reunion of the Church* to defend the scheme of reunion that eventually led to the formation of the Church of South India. Newbigin saw as his primary interlocutor the Anglican tradition which holds institutional continuity as an essential mark of the church. He did not oppose their claim that institutional continuity is important for the church; it is simply visible unity extended through time. What he did oppose was a stress on institutional continuity as an essential mark of the church, which eclipsed the fact that the church is a body that constantly lives out of the power of the gospel. The Anglican tradition views the church as related to the gospel of Christ by virtue of its historical origin. Jesus is the historical founder of the church and gives to that community the resources it needs to maintain itself through history especially in the gift of the ministerial office. The church possesses the law of its own development in itself through the historic transmission of office (1948d:56). The church is defined as an historically continuous society which has, among its many activities, the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

Newbigin countered this understanding of the church by arguing that the church is connected to Christ in two distinguishable ways. First, the church “is connected with Him by nineteen centuries of church history... as a... Society which Christ instituted and to which He entrusted His saving work.” Second, the church is also connected to Christ “as the living and ascended Lord” and Christ meets his people now in the word and sacraments of the gospel. Christ is “not merely the Founder who sent out His first Apostles nineteen centuries ago, but the living Lord, our contemporary, the same

yesterday, to-day and forever” (1948d:71).

Another way Newbigin formulated this twofold connection to Christ was to say that the church finds the source of its life in the gospel in two ways: historically and eschatologically. Historically, the church is rooted in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a central part of his ministry Jesus gathered a community of disciples. This disciple-community became the nucleus of the church. The church is a society that finds its origin in these fundamental events. Eschatologically, the church’s life is rooted in a continual incorporation in the present into what those events accomplished in communion with the living Christ. The stress here is not the historic connection with Jesus of Nazareth but the present connection with the ascended Christ. “The Church acts in her true character as a society constituted by the union of her members in faith with the ascended Christ” (1948d:162). Jesus Christ is not only an historical figure who gives origin to a new community but also the living Lord and giver of the life of the end-time kingdom in the present. Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is the source of the church’s life historically, this disciple community is an historically continuous institution rooted in the mission of Jesus. But the nature of the church cannot be reduced to this historical development. Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is the source of the church’s life eschatologically, that same community now lives by those events in fellowship with the living Lord through the Holy Spirit (1948d:134). The church’s nature cannot be exhausted in a “historically developing society” but must be found in “the eschatological dimension of the Church’s existence” (1948d:71; cf. :77-83). The “Church is related to the Gospel not merely by the fact that its historical origins are to be found in these facts. The Church now and always lives by the Gospel” (1948d:61-62).

Newbigin’s critique of his Anglican opponents—despite his clear appreciation for their affirmation of the importance of historical continuity—is often quite harsh. He believed that an ecclesiology that diminished the reality of the dependence of the church on the gospel in the present was dangerous. God’s mercy is new every morning.

Just as a man who regards his justification as an event in the past which now, because it has once happened, secures him against sin, is in fact fallen away from grace; so also a Church which thinks that it possesses the law of its own development and the resources of grace in itself, is fallen from grace.... The Church does not live by what it possesses and has inherited. It lives in the dynamic relationship of ever-new penitence and faith before the Cross of Jesus Christ, and its unity, its continuity, and all its spiritual gifts are the fruits of that (1948d:101-102).

The life of the church is found in a constant appropriation of the gospel. Or, the way Newbigin would often speak, our life flows from a continual appropriation of our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Historical continuity is, like other spiritual gifts, the fruit of that life in Christ. The church which forgets that is in danger of falling from grace. His language is severe: the church that fails to understand itself in terms of a constant appropriation of the life of Christ found in the gospel is in danger of forfeiting its right to be called a church. “When a body of Christians claims to possess *in itself* the law of its own development and denies the possibility of any appeal beyond itself to its Lord, it has come perilously near to denying

its right to be called the Church” (1948d:79; italics mine).

This encounter with the Anglican tradition—a tradition about which he often spoke so positively—firmly planted this vital insight in the centre of his ecclesiology: the church is a community that lives out of the gospel. That is the source of its life and its mission.

### 6.5.3. *Nourishing the Life of Christ in the Gathered Church*

The significance of this ecclesiological perspective for the topic of worship can be seen in an address to the Diocesan Council in Madurai. Here Newbigin offers a fourfold challenge to the church if it is to be a faithful missionary church in the future. The first order of business is that it must recover the power of the gospel as the source of its life (1951b:4). Only then can the remaining tasks of the church—the mission of the local congregation, the layperson, and the evangelistic work of the trained volunteers—move forward. He entitles this first challenge “The only source of the Church’s Life—the Gospel.” “Essential and primary” to the nature of the church is the saving presence and power of God Himself in the midst of His people. The gospel is the mighty power of God that sets humanity free from sin and continues to give to them the life of Christ. Christ is present in this congregation in word and sacrament. Any understanding of the church that threatens the presence of the Living Christ in word and sacrament is to be rejected. The Anglican tradition is in danger of viewing the word and sacrament simply as two activities of an historically continuous society. Newbigin remarks:

We have, therefore, to condemn... the view which defines the Church as a historically continuous society which has, among its activities, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments.... The Church lives by faith in Christ, and the Word and the Sacraments are the means whereby Christ offers Himself to men as the evoker of faith and as the creator and re-creator of the Church (1948d:102).

It is from this standpoint that Newbigin’s strong emphasis on worship, Scripture, prayer, and the sacraments for a missionary church can be understood. The church is sent into the world to make known the life of Christ. That life is not something given historically at the founding of the community and passed down through the ministerial office. It is a life that is appropriated day by day in living communion with Jesus Christ. God has given the means whereby that living encounter with Christ might take place: word, sacraments, worship, prayer, and fellowship in the communion of the saints. Thus communal worship is not, at best, simply a gathering of naturally gregarious creatures to give corporate expression to their religious devotion, or at worst, a hindrance to the mission of the church. Rather it is essential as the source and renewal of the new life they have in Christ. If the church is to be faithful in its missionary calling to embody, announce, and demonstrate the new life of Christ in the midst of the world its gathering will be essential. Any understanding of the church that neglects the centrality of the living Christ present in its midst through the gospel has seriously compromised a Biblical understanding of the church.

A favourite pericope of Newbigin in this regard is John 15:1-11 (1975a; 1974b:140-144). The intention of Jesus for the church is “that we may be consecrated in the truth and sent into the world as one body in that unity which is the life of the Triune God”

(1975a:141). That life of the Triune God is given in the dying of Jesus and we share in that life as we abide in Him. Abiding in Jesus involves following Jesus in His love and obedience. It involves continuing the mission of Jesus in life, word, and deed. Before this can be an outward following, however, it must be an interior act of devotion. That is, our life in Christ must be constantly renewed as we “make him the continual dwelling place of our hearts and minds, [and] turn constantly to him, to meditate on his words and deeds and let them have the formative and directive authority over us” (1975a:141). It is only if there is this interior redirection and reception of the life of Christ that we can “follow him resolutely along the road which He trod, gladly accepting and bearing whatever portion of the sorrow and sin of the world the Father may lay upon us” (*ibid*). The cultivation of the life of Christ in worship, prayer, word, and sacraments must have priority because thereby we are enabled to live a life of love and obedience.

The image of abiding in the vine vividly describes this process. As vines we receive the life-giving sap of Christ’s life “through a million tiny channels hidden behind the hard bark of the trunk and branches” (*ibid*). The fruit of the life of Christ takes form as the branch remains in Christ, availing itself of each of these channels.

#### 6.5.4. Channelling the Life of Christ

What are those channels through which the life of Christ flows to his people? Newbigin alludes to a number throughout his writings. The most common elements that he identifies as crucial for the life of the church, if its life is to be centred in Jesus, are worship, the word, the sacraments, and prayer (1968d:91-92). The importance of these channels of life for Newbigin’s view of a missionary church cannot be overestimated.

##### 6.5.4.1. Worship

Worship is, for Newbigin, an all-inclusive word which includes activities such as the proclamation of the word, the sacraments, and prayer. For Newbigin “the weekly gathering for worship is by far the most important thing we do” (1974b:37). The importance he gives to worship is highlighted in the following words:

Worship is the central work of the Church, and everything else in its life has meaning and value as it finds its focus in worship.... [Worship gives] to the whole life of the diocese its emotional and spiritual focus, its centre of meaning and direction. It is from such acts of worship that everything else flows, and in them all the multifarious activities of the diocese find their true end. Everything is offered to God as an acted prayer for his Kingdom... (1982a:156).

Accordingly worship heads the list in various features he gives of a thriving church. He lists several elements that are present in growing congregations, of which the first is “a believing, worshipping, and celebrating fellowship in which the Gospel [is] proclaimed in word and celebrated in sacrament and enjoyed in the life of a caring community” (1978c:308). Of the six characteristics of the congregation that is a true hermeneutic of the gospel, the first is that “it will be a community of praise. That is, perhaps, its most distinctive character” (1989e:227). In both cases involvement in mission follows from worship in which the church celebrates and nourishes its new life in Christ (1978c:308;

1989e:229-231). It is clear that in Newbiggin's understanding, mission and worship are closely tied. As he puts it: "the biblical people of God, chosen, called and sent into the world" is tied to the vision of the church as "a worshipping community where the word of God [is] truly heard and believed and where man's response of worship [is] offered (1967b:112).

A stress on the importance of worship for the missionary church remained an essential element in Newbiggin's ecclesiology throughout his entire life (1951b:4; 1990t, u, v, y). It is instructive especially to observe in particular Newbiggin's response to the eroding currents of the secular decade. During that time social activism undermined the gathered church and its worship. In this context Newbiggin emphasized this dimension of the church's life even more frequently and more strongly (e.g., 1960b:119f.; 1960e:1, 5; 1962a:8f.; 1962j:90f.; 1963a:14; 1963e:22; 1963f:85). In fact, the "necessary corollary of a secular society" is a deepened life of worship and prayer (1968d:79). The missionary dynamic is one of being gathered together and then being sent (1960g:59). "If there is a committed people as the sign and agent and foretaste of what God intends, it can only be insofar as their life is continually renewed through contact with God himself (1972f:112f.). The mission of the church is dependent on the renewing that takes place in the gathering together. The church exists in its primary mode on Monday to Saturday when all the members are dispersed throughout the world. On Sunday they withdraw to renew themselves for service (1960b:96f.). "All true vitality in the work of missions depends in the last analysis upon the secret springs of supernatural life which they know who give time to communion with God. All true witness... has its source in a life of adoration and intercession... (1963a:14).

Newbiggin acknowledges a proper concern of Johannes Hoekendijk, John A. T. Robinson, and many who followed them in disparaging the worship life of the church. They feared that worship would lead to escape to another world that left solidarity with the pain and sorrow of others in this life behind. Newbiggin appeals to Dietrich Bonhoeffer—the misunderstood patron saint of secular theology—who called for us as the church to move "beyond the traditional religious forms in which we can become enclosed, and which can become an escape from meeting with the living God, in order that we might be called to a more costly personal discipleship" (1968d:73). Following Bonhoeffer, Newbiggin rejects an otherworldly worship as false religion (1974b:98; 1968d:79). Alternatively, the church that becomes involved in and identifies with the world's sin, sorrow, and pain but leaves a life of worship and prayer behind has simply become part of this world with nothing to give it. It is only through a sustained life of worship and prayer that our mission in the world can be sustained.

Precisely because worship plays such a central role in the life of a faithful church, Newbiggin addresses various issues throughout his life: worship that is slovenly and mechanical routine (1974b:28); the need for spontaneity, variety, and joy (1974b: 32-37; 1980d:12; ); the need for contextualization of worship using familiar cultural forms (1980d:12; 1974b:36); a self-centred consumerist approach that asks 'What do I get out of it?' (1990v:7); a trivial, chatty worship devoid of reverence (1990v:7); the need for wide congregational participation (1974b:34; 1990v:7); the scandal of a "dry mass"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The dry mass (*Missa Sicca*) refers to an abbreviated form of the mass in which there was the ministry of the Word without the sacraments. This developed during the late Middle Ages, especially in France, and became the common practice of the Reformers.

that eliminates the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper (1974b:33; 1990v:7).

#### 6.5.4.2. Proclamation of the Word

Newbigin's earliest writings emphasize the importance of the Word and Sacrament for the missionary church. Anything that threatens the "true preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments" must be expelled from the life of the church (1948d:106). Emphasis on the word and sacrament is rooted in the fact that this is the way that Christ makes his presence known. He writes: "The supernatural, saving power of God is mediated to us in the word and sacraments of the gospel." He asks: "Do we understand, do our congregations understand, that when the Word is truly preached and the sacraments duly administered, Christ Himself is present in the midst in all His saving power?" (1951c:4).

This life-giving word of God is the power by which the Church lives. The Church is created and constantly renewed by the word of God. The word is given to us in two forms—the word spoken in the reading and exposition of Scripture, and the word acted in the sacraments. The same word is active in these two different modes. In both it is active through the Spirit. Without the quickening of the Spirit, bread and wine are just bread and wine, and words are just words. But the words of Jesus, which are spirit and life, are the source of continually renewed life in the Church. The Church does not live by its organisations and its programmes: it lives by the word of God given to it as the word spoken and the word acted (1974b:23).

Thus, "are we placing these in the very centre of our Church's life? Are we jealous that nothing shall displace them?" (1951c:4). Since these are the two fundamental channels whereby the life of Christ is mediated to his people, he feels "impelled to put these questions in the forefront, and to call upon every member of the Church to do the same" (*ibid*).

A fair generalization of Newbigin's thought is that in the early part of his ministry the Word received more emphasis than the sacraments in keeping with his Reformed and Presbyterian heritage. In the latter part of his life, however, while his commitment to the Word as a life-giving channel did not waver, emphasis on the sacraments—especially the Eucharist—increased dramatically and took centre stage. Writing the year after the reunion of the CSI about the contribution of the Presbyterian tradition, he notes appreciatively that in worship "the most characteristic emphasis has been upon the sermon" (1948c:54). He stresses that the sermon is not something that occurs during worship but is itself an act of worship. When the sermon is reduced to doctrinal instruction or moral exhortation, preaching ceases to be a part of worship. The meeting of the church with Christ as Redeemer and Lord is the real meaning of preaching. "Its essence is to be the means whereby Christ the Word is Himself present to speak to those who hear" (*ibid*). "We go to the Bible to meet Christ, our present and Living Lord" (1948d:131). The fundamental pattern of preaching is "the proclamation of the event of God's work in Christ" in which Christ Himself comes to His people in saving power (1948d:132).

There are at least two fatal identifications that can eclipse the saving power of the gospel. First, the gospel must be distinguished from the ecclesiastical traditions that bear the gospel. In his discussion of the contribution of his own Presbyterian tradition to the

newly united church in South India he comments: “Traditions which are good in themselves are evil when they are put into the place which belongs to the Gospel itself” (1948c:53). Traditions can stifle the power of the gospel in the church’s life when it leads to pride (1948d:103) or when it leaves the church as a petrified fossil with the doctrinal form but devoid of the life of the gospel (1948d:142). A second fatal identification is to confuse the gospel with theology. Positively, “the whole of Christian theology is the effort to explicate that confession [that Jesus is Lord]” (1953b:515). Negatively, “dogmatic statements are for the purpose of protecting the statement of this fact [Christ on the cross] from distortion by various tendencies of human thought.” The problem comes when theology replaces the gospel: “The danger inherent in all the (necessary) work of theological statement is that it may go beyond the task of protecting the gospel and become a series of additions to the gospel” (1948d:16).

The importance of the gospel as the presence of the life-giving power of Christ in the church led Newbigin to emphasize the importance of the preaching ministry (1948c:54; 1974b:23-27). He writes to his fellow presbyters that “the business of the sermon is to bring the hearers face to face with Jesus Christ as he really is” (1974b:24). This preaching is closely connected to and essential for the mission of the church in the world:

True preaching of Christ springs out of action and leads into action. The word which we preach was made flesh, became part of history. If you and your congregation are really involved in tackling the trouble and pain and sin in the world around you, in the slums around your church, in the lives of your members; if you are standing beside your members in their battles with the world and in their trials and problems, then the words you speak in the pulpit will not be empty words. They will be a part of the obedience of you and your congregation to the living Lord. And they will lead your people into further action (1974b:26-27).

#### 6.5.4.3. Sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist

It has been noted above that Newbigin views the sacraments as one of the primary channels by which the life of Christ flows to the believing community. It is not necessary to articulate in detail Newbigin’s view of the sacraments as he shares much in common with the whole Christian tradition. It is important to draw attention to the significance of the sacraments for the mission of the church.

A good point to begin is his brief discussion of the sacraments as “pledges of faithfulness” in a series of articles that he describes as his “nearest approach to a dogmatics” (cf. 1990o, u). He begins his discussion of the sacraments with the mission of the church: the church is the body launched into the world to continue the mission of Jesus. The church is not constituted by adherence to a written text but as a company that is gathered “to be with him and to be sent out” (Mark 3:14; 1990u:18). Before his death he institutes a supper that would “become the centre of their new life” (*ibid*). Through this supper they learn that this communion meal would be the means by which they become partners in his death and risen life. As partners of Jesus, they are incorporated into his mission. The people who share in this supper are those who are committed to Christ in baptism. In Jesus’ baptism he commits himself to his mission by way of the cross.

Those whom Jesus calls to follow him are invited to go the same way. Baptism is the act through which we are committed to follow Jesus on the way of the cross. The supper is the act in which that same commitment is continually renewed. Each time we share in the Lord's Supper we re-affirm our baptism.... To be a Christian is to be part of a visible human community marked by these two visible acts. As God's word had to be spoken in the flesh and blood of a human being, so our incorporation into his life involves these visible acts (*ibid*).

Newbigin's stress on the sacraments as an incorporation into Christ is, of course, widely shared. Not so widely shared is his stress on the eschatological and missionary dimensions of the sacraments. In the Christendom understanding of the church there is a loss of eschatology and mission. When this becomes dominant the church views as its fundamental duty the administration of the sacraments and pastoral care for its own members. When the sacraments and pastoral care are detached from mission, the individual believer becomes a passive recipient of the means of grace (1953g:166-167).

The eschatological and missionary import of both sacraments is evident in Newbigin's contribution to discussions concerning baptism in the ecumenical tradition in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The issue at stake was how the younger churches on the former "mission fields" should treat baptism. There was mounting criticism of baptism as foundational to the church's life (e.g., Duraisingh 1972; Taylor 1972; Thomas 1972), for three reasons. First, baptism was viewed as a Western rite whereby non-Western people were incorporated into a Western institution. Appeal was made to the New Testament accounts in which circumcision, as a Jewish symbol that incorporated Gentiles into a Jewish form of the church, was discarded when the church entered the classical world. Analogously, baptism should be considered a Western rite and consequently discarded in the younger churches. Second, baptism was considered to be a rite that promoted a highly introverted view of the church. Baptism had become a rite of separation where the person baptized was cut off from his culture and became part of a foreign institution. There was a third reason, however, that seemed to operative at a foundational level in these discussions. It was closely tied to a current in ecumenical circles at that time which tended to minimize the importance of the visible church. This attack on baptism led Newbigin to say that the labour to "recover the meaning of baptism" must be "one of the most urgent tasks" of our day. "We shall not overcome the introversion and selfishness of the Church by dispensing with baptism. It is an illusion to suppose that we can. What is needed is something much more difficult and costly" (1973b:10-11). That difficult and costly task is twofold: recover the true Biblical meaning of baptism, and then conform our lives to our baptism (1973b:10, 11).

Newbigin articulates his understanding of baptism in this context. We must bear in mind that baptism is a rich symbol and in this context he makes no attempt to give us a systematic elaboration of all of the Bible's teaching on the subject. His formulations are occasional and addressed to this historical situation. In particular he addresses Duraisingh's dismissal of baptism, arguing for three things: baptism is not a Western rite; it is a rite of incorporation into the kingdom and thus into the church as the first fruits of that kingdom; and baptism should not lead to selfish introversion but costly identification with the sorrow and pain of the world in the discharge of its mission (1973b:8-12).

We are baptized because Jesus is baptized. This baptism was the starting point for all that Jesus began to do and teach, not simply in a chronological way, but as the initial

act which contained the whole of Jesus' work in a seed form. Jesus received the baptism of John which was a water baptism of the cleansing of sin. In this baptism Jesus accepted that which could be completed only at the cross—the cleansing from sin. That is why Jesus speaks of his death as a baptism which he had to undergo. In baptism Jesus totally identified and immersed himself with humankind in their sin, sorrow, and misery. This solidarity was initiated at his Jordan baptism, continued in his public ministry, and was consummated with his death on the cross.

John also spoke of a baptism with the Spirit and fire to which his baptism pointed. This referred to the traditional messianic baptism of fire, judgement, wrath, and catastrophe. However, Jesus fulfilled this baptism in an unexpected way. He accepted the wrath and judgement of God and took the catastrophe upon Himself. After this we speak of one baptism, a baptism of the Spirit and water. There are not two baptisms—one of water and one of the Spirit. There is one baptism—against Christopher Duraisingh and Alfred C. Krass. To speak of two baptisms is to undo the incarnation (1973b:9). Our baptism is a baptism of water in which we share in the Spirit and total baptism of Jesus that he completed on the cross.

Baptism is ultimately an eschatological sign, a rite of entry into the kingdom. It means entry into the church that shares in foretaste in the life of the kingdom. It is a sign that we share in the kingdom mission of Jesus. As such it is an act which involves total identification and radical separation. It involves identification in that as we identify with Christ, "we are committed to accepting as our own all the concerns of men, their sin and their sorrow, as well as their triumphs and their joys" (1973b:11). Yet it is an act of identification in which, like Jesus, we are not conformed to the world but separate from it. That means baptism marks off a community that is "both identified with the world and separate from the world," that shares a life which is "love for the world without being conformed to the world" (*ibid*).

So baptism, far from being a Western rite, is a rite of entry into the kingdom and the community that enjoys a foretaste of that life. Further, baptism, far from being a rite that separates the community from the world's life, struggles, sin, and pain, is a rite of identification that means taking as our own all the concerns of men. "And if the company of the baptised has become a selfish clique interested only in its own safety (here and hereafter) then it is our task to break open this ecclesiastical shell so that the Church may recover its true life, a life with all men for all men in the name of Jesus" (1973b:12). This will happen, not by discarding baptism, but only by properly understanding it and conforming our lives to it. Baptism marks off and forms a visible community in any place that is called to continue the mission of Jesus through a total identification with and a radical separation from the world in which it lives.

In this discussion Newbigin attempts to resuscitate an eschatological and a missionary understanding of baptism over against a Christendom appropriation of baptism in the Western church that has been transported to the younger churches in Africa and Asia. In a later paper, he contrasts a New Testament understanding of baptism with a Christendom approach that has been characteristic of the Reformed and Anglican traditions. The New Testament assumed a missionary situation where the church was a small evangelizing community in the midst of the pagan Roman empire. The Reformed and Anglican traditions on the other hand formulated their understanding of baptism in the context of Christendom. As a result the Reformed and Anglican

doctrines envisaged baptism as a *rite de passage* into a settled institution. In the New Testament baptism is the sign of commitment to the mission of Jesus (1983c:1). He formulates his understanding of the significance of baptism: "... it is our incorporation into the one baptism which is for the salvation of the world. To accept baptism, therefore, is to be committed to be with Christ in his ministry for all men" (1977d:217).

A similar argument for the missionary thrust of the sacrament is also made for the Lord's Supper (e.g., 1983c:3, 4). On this subject, however, Newbigin entered no substantial debates. Nevertheless his discussions of the Lord's Supper continually emphasized both the eschatological and the missionary aspects. The eucharist is an act by which we share in the eschatological life of the kingdom and the means by which we are continually incorporated into the mission of Jesus.

The Church can only be defined in terms of Jesus Christ and his mission. Jesus announced the reign of God, and called those whom he chose to follow him, to be with him and to be sent out with the same announcement.... The promise is that all nations will be gathered to the messianic feast, and this promise will be fulfilled through his atoning death. Of this his resurrection is the assurance and the Spirit given to the community of those whom he has called as the witness. At the heart of this community is the Eucharist feast which is both a sacramental participation in his atoning death, and a foretaste of the messianic banquet (1976a:330).

In Christendom the eucharist is simply the feeding of the bread of life to passive recipients. In a missionary understanding the Lord's supper is a continual participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and as such a constant renewal of the commitment to participate in Jesus' mission to the world (1983c:1). In the breaking of bread Jesus is present to communicate to his people his risen life constituting them as his witnesses (1979d:1). In the Christendom understanding, receiving the life of Christ is separated from the missionary calling of the church. Newbigin's stress is that our incorporation into the risen life of Christ cannot be separated from the call to be his witnesses

#### 6.5.4.4. Prayer

Newbigin placed a high priority on prayer in his own life and missionary calling, so it is not surprising to hear him assert that "our life of intercession is quite central to our discipleship" (1983f:6). Prayer takes a privileged place in Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology (1980d:10).

The life of prayer is rooted in Jesus Christ. We are called to follow Jesus. His life did not go directly from his baptism to death and neither will ours. Between his baptism and his death lay the crowded months and years of his ministry. During this time we see Jesus labouring and agonizing, deeply involved in the lives of people. He labours that they might recognize the presence of the kingdom in their midst and respond to his call to become its agents and messengers. But we never see this labour and ministry apart from a life of prayer (1972f:121). Jesus does not only work for God's kingdom; he prays that it will come.

If prayer was essential to the kingdom mission of Jesus it must be essential to the church who follows Him. Following Jesus the church must not only labour that signs of the presence of God's kingdom might be made manifest but also fervently pray for

its coming. Prayer is not a distraction from the missionary calling of the church, but integral and essential to it. Indeed, we might have “conferences and evangelistic campaigns and programmes of social action” but if we are not bound to Jesus Christ “by a multitude of hidden channels through which the life-giving sap can flow”—including public and private prayer—then “it may add up to zero” (1974b:141).

Perhaps Newbigin’s strongest statements on prayer occur during the secular 1960s when prayer was marginalized. The passion that grips Newbigin on this subject is palpable:

All we say about unity and mission, about drawing nations into the one household of God, about being Christ’s witnesses and servants to the ends of the earth, remains mere clap-trap—except on one condition: that there is at the heart of it all a supernatural life lived here in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Holy Spirit, a life which has its roots deep down in a discipline of prayer (1960e:5).

Why is it we have created in so many situations a picture of the work of missions which seems to be centred more in the office than in the sanctuary, more in the program than in prayer, more in administering than in ministering? Why do the typewriter and duplicator seem to bulk so much more largely than the bible and the kneeling mat? (1962a:8)

All true vitality in the work of missions depends in the last analysis upon the secret springs of supernatural life which they know who give time to communion with God. All true witness... has its source in a life of adoration and intercession... (1963a:14).

It is surprising that Newbigin does not speak often about the *corporate* nature of prayer but restricts himself primarily to the prayer of individual believers. Almost every time he addresses this issue, however, individual prayer is tied to corporate worship and prayer as it equips the church for its mission (1974b:140; 1980d:12; 1990y:7). In an article summarizing the role of the church in the world, Newbigin takes hold of the image of a ‘holy priesthood’ from I Peter 2:4-9 to elaborate the church’s calling in the world. The priesthood of the church is not primarily an affair of Sunday but of Monday through Saturday in the working place. Believers are to make visible the hidden rule of God in the midst of the world. On the Lord’s Day the church gathers to renew its membership in the body of Christ. The Lord’s Day is set aside for the whole body to strengthen and enable it in its task. “In our public worship we offer up the whole life of the world to God through Jesus, and we go out to our daily work to make manifest his blessed rule to the whole world” (1990y:7). He closes his article—the last in the series of his “dogmatics”—with the following impassioned plea for prayer:

And if we are to be in truth a holy priesthood, we need a secret altar, a place in our innermost life where, day by day, we offer to God through Jesus Christ every bit of our lives, our most secret thoughts and our most public actions, and where we receive afresh through Christ God’s ever-new gift of grace and mercy. We need also the time together on the Lord’s Day when he can take us as a whole community and renew us for his priestly service in the world. But this corporate and public worship can become lifeless if it is not constantly fructified by the time we spend each day alone to keep fresh and clean the channels of love and obedience to God and of his grace and mercy to us (*ibid*).

#### 6.5.5. *Worship as Witness*

The primary focus of Newbigin's discussion of worship is the enabling, empowering, and equipping task for the task of the missionary church in the world. He expresses it thus: "If we are truly leading our people in the worship of the living God, there will be men and women who can go out from the church every Sunday with that testimony on their lips and in their hearts" (1974b:31). Newbigin's continual persistence on this theme yields many fruitful insights. Jongeneel calls attention to other ways the term 'missionary worship' can be used (Jongeneel 1997:241-247). He refers to the connection between liturgy and the missionary task of the church in the world that is characteristic of Newbigin (1997:243). However, he also indicates that this has also been applied to worship as "a missionary act of proclamation" (:245). The apostle Paul also speaks of worship as an act of witness not only the equipping for witness (I Corinthians 14:24-25). Surprisingly this aspect of worship is rarely found in Newbigin's writing. His own missionary experience testified to this witnessing aspect of worship; the church of Indian often had no buildings and their worship was conducted in public places. That worship was a witness to the gospel and drew people to Christ (1961e:24). Newbigin does occasionally state that "all Christian worship has an evangelistic dimension" (1974b:31). On a number of occasions he points to the church in Russia who bears witness to the gospel in worship. In his words:

The Russian Church has lived for more than half a century under extreme pressure. One of the most powerful governments in the world has deliberately sought to destroy it. Every kind of outward activity in teaching, preaching or service has been forbidden. The one corporate activity which is left to the Church is its worship. Into that worship the faithful of Russia throw everything they have. Because of that worship the Russian Church is still a living reality, continuing to draw men and women to faith in God, even in the midst of an aggressively atheistic culture (1974b:37).

Yet this insight is never worked out. Debates in North America over "seeker-sensitive" worship services would have been greatly enriched by a discussion of worship as witness by Newbigin who stood firmly in the liturgical tradition of the church yet recognized the witness function of worship.

#### 6.6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has surveyed Newbigin's attempts throughout his ministry to give visible manifestation and institutional form to the missionary church. If mission gives identity to the church and is not merely one of its tasks among many, then it cannot but shape its congregational structures, its ministerial leadership, and its worship, enabling the people of God to manifest the life of Christ in the midst of the world.

The structure of Berkhof's ecclesiology offers a helpful framework to assess the significance of Newbigin's contributions on church structures, leadership, and worship. Berkhof speaks of the threefold character of the church. The church is an institution in which a number of ministries and activities are organized into a societal structure. Those ministries and activities include various aspects of worship, fellowship, ministerial leadership, and church order. The church is also a community. The congregation is more than a sum total of the activities and structures that constitute the institutional church; we are ourselves the communion of saints, a community of believers that form a network of personal relationships in Christ. However, these two characteristics do not

exhaust the nature of the church. The church exists for the sake of the world; the renewal of all things is the goal of the church's existence. Thus an orientation toward the world is not an addition to but an essential dimension of the church. Indeed ecclesiology is distorted when this dimension does not pervade the whole.

This third aspect of the church's existence has received the attention that it deserves only since the Second World War, primarily as a result of the unceasing work of Hendrik Kraemer and others in the missionary tradition (Berkhof 1979:345, 411, 412). Yet this essential dimension of ecclesiology has not been recognized in most mainline theological discourse. With the exception of Karl Barth, "the theological reflection by those concerned with missions... did not penetrate to the 'official' theology" (Berkhof 1979:411). Berkhof comments further:

It is remarkable that the great monographs on the church show little or no awareness of this aspect; also in Kung's monumental work it remains limited to the Epilogue. Apparently much of the study of the faith is still done from the standpoint of an introvert-ecclesiastical situation (Berkhof 1979:345).

Berkhof believes that ecclesiology as a whole needs to be rethought from the standpoint of the church's orientation to the world. This observation highlights the significance of Newbigin's contribution. While Newbigin is not an academic theologian, like Kraemer he has taken the lead in rethinking many traditional ecclesiological themes from the standpoint of its apostolary turning to the world. He does not engage in this re-thinking in the first place as an academic but as a missionary, a bishop, a pastor, and an ecumenical leader who is concerned about the contradiction between the theological affirmation of the missionary nature of the church and the ecclesial realities he faced in India and Britain. Each of the subjects that has been addressed is clearly a partial treatment. Newbigin never undertook to articulate a systematic understanding of worship, the sacraments, the ministry, ecclesial structures, or any other subject in this chapter. His writing is *ad hoc*; it addresses issues in the crucible of missionary engagement. He engages the burning issues of the day always with an eye to the faithful witness of the gospel. Herein lies both the strength and weakness of his reflection on structures, leadership, and worship. Negatively, he does not treat any of these issues in a comprehensive way but leaves many questions unanswered and many issues untouched. This is most evident in the fact that he does not dialogue with other ecclesiastical traditions. A scholarly treatment of each of these themes would provide enrichment that comes through conversation with a breadth of confessional traditions; Newbigin interacts primarily—almost exclusively—with the literature produced within the ecumenical tradition.

Newbigin's lack of engagement with the vast literature on Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) in Latin America on the subjects of ecclesial structures and ministerial leadership provides us with an example of the need for wider dialogue. Rene Padilla believes that the emerging ecclesiology in Latin America will become "the most powerful challenge to the church of Jesus Christ everywhere else in the next few years" (Padilla 1987:162). These BECs have experimented widely in congregational structures and forms of leadership, and the literature on BECs have analyzed these experiments in great detail. On the one hand, these BECs embody much of what Newbigin too believes to be important for a missionary congregation: small size, flexibility, non-

professional ministry, ecumenical horizon, close interpersonal relations with accountability, rootedness in Scripture, prayer and joyful worship, concern for mission, social involvement. On the other hand, these BECs have also struggled to avoid the very things Newbigin believes threaten the missionary congregation: introversion, detraditioning, i.e., losing connection with ecclesial tradition, and disconnection from the broader body of Christ (cf. Cook 1984, 1985, 1986; Escobar 1986, 1987; Hewitt 1986, 1988; Libanio 1986, 1987; Marins 1979; Padilla 1987; Schlabach 1989; Torres and Eagleson 1988; Welsh 1986). The concrete experiments of these BECs, and theological reflection on them provide models which, if engaged, would have enabled Newbigin to move from general principles to more specific proposals.

Yet Newbigin's reflection on structures, leadership, and worship remain valuable; his own discussions of each of these issues is grounded in a vast and wide missionary experience and breathes a missionary spirit. A missionary orientation to the world consistently gives form to his reflection on many traditional ecclesiological themes. Newbigin's discussion of ecclesial structures becomes more systematic and detailed at the end of the 1960s. He had long been interested in structures for the missionary congregation and church; however, he believed that the ecumenical study on 'the missionary structure of the congregation' would address this need. When the study failed to address this issue in a way satisfactory to Newbigin, he picked up the task himself. His unswerving adherence to the missionary nature of the church informs his entire discussion of ecclesial structures. A number of insights continue to be relevant for the ongoing discussion. First, Newbigin is concerned to maintain a close tie between all creative ecclesial forms and the local Eucharistic congregation. He believes that the separation of program agencies, sector ministries, or parachurch organizations from the local church damages the witness of each. Second, Newbigin offers valuable criteria for structural renewal: faithfulness to the missionary nature of the church and relevance to the local context. These are not to be viewed as contradictory; the nature of the church is to be a community that embodies good news *for that place*. Thus the church's structure must embody good news in structures familiar to that place. There is a need for much flexibility in keeping with the gospel and nature of the church. Accordingly Newbigin calls for a morphological radicalism wedded to an evangelical fundamentalism. Third, Newbigin believes that both the size and character of existing structures are barriers to a missionary congregation. The effective units of congregations are too large to enable the church to be a missionary congregation. Further, the differentiation of society requires structures in keeping with the growing diversity. Newbigin advocates neighbourhood, work, frontier, and action groups. His suggestions are not new; what is significant is his insistence that the missionary nature of the church shape these smaller, contextualized structures and that these effective units not simply be 'parachurch' bodies but Eucharistic communities with their own pastoral leadership. Mission must not turn into action groups; they must maintain a visible connection to the gospel embodied in the congregation. Fourth, Newbigin's concern for renewed ecumenical structures also flow from his convictions about the missionary nature of the church. Since the church is good news for a particular place, church structures must correspond to effective units of human life. On a critical note, two comments must be made. On the one hand, Newbigin's discussion of structures that were shaped by Christendom continue to show the same ambivalence that he manifests toward Christendom in general. These structures *may* be appropriate to the medieval time period, to the pre-modern South Indian village, and to some areas of the Pacific Islands. Yet he is critical of those structures for different reasons: sometimes because they are

out of keeping with Scripture and the missionary nature of the church, at other times because these older structures are inadequate for the contemporary situation. On the other hand, a basic inconsistency remains in Newbigin's understanding of the structure of the missionary church. Two different and inconsistent images lie side by side: the church formed in the undifferentiated villages of India, and the new flexible structures necessary for the differentiated society of the West. The image of the church of the undifferentiated Indian village was etched on his mind (1994k:55). Here the structure is shaped by a society in which there is "one total world that embraces the whole life of its people" (1980d:6). He recognized that this structure "still works well in an Indian village, but not in an English city" (*ibid*). His recognition of differentiation did not bear mature fruit (Vandervelde 1996:12-13). The communal image of a church in a undifferentiated village continued to play an important role in shaping his ecclesiology.

The same commitment to the missionary nature of the church shapes Newbigin's discussion of ministerial leadership: the only way a church can be an effective hermeneutic of the gospel is with faithful leadership. Four implications of this commitment are relevant to the contemporary situation. First, Newbigin resists clericalism and egalitarianism. He defines leadership as "so following Jesus on the way of the cross so that others are enabled to follow and to become themselves leaders in the same way." This unique approach to ministerial leadership challenges alike the clerical and egalitarian dangers—both of which cripple a missionary congregation (1983c:9). Second, Newbigin's description of the task of the ministerial leader as 'leading' and 'equipping' are both shaped by a missionary commitment: 'leading' means personal involvement in the missionary task of the church; it means going ahead of the congregation while throwing words back over one's shoulder; 'equipping' means directing all the task of the minister—preaching, prayer, sacraments, administration of ministries—toward the mission of the church. Third, forms of leadership must be flexible but in keeping with a number of Biblical norms. The six norms that Newbigin articulates all are infused with a missionary concern: they must be appropriate to the missionary calling of the church, be flexible, be shaped by context, must balance corporate and personal elements, and give room for mobile forms of leadership. This last norm is worthy of attention: mobile forms of leadership do find expression in church orders shaped by Christendom. Out of necessity these mobile forms of ministry—missionaries—have arisen and been organized outside the church. Finally, theological education must be revamped to enable leaders of missionary congregations to develop. Each of these themes within Newbigin's writings are relevant for the contemporary church. Yet his observations remain incomplete and beg systematic development by theologians committed to the missionary nature of the church.

Newbigin's commitment to the church's orientation to the world also brings a fresh discussion of many aspects of the church's worship. Newbigin consistently links the outward task of the church in the world to its inner life of worship and prayer and thereby offers new perspectives on preaching, the sacraments, and prayer. While Newbigin stresses preaching in the earlier part of his ministry, the sacraments receive more attention in his later years. Baptism is a rite whereby we are incorporated into the mission of Jesus; the Lord's Supper is a rite whereby we are continually incorporated into that same mission. It is unfortunate that Newbigin did not expand on the theme of 'worship as witness.' With Newbigin's missionary concern it is surprising that this aspect of worship does not find a large place.

The strength of Newbigin's formulations on structures, leadership, and worship are

his continual insistence that each be understood in terms of a missionary congregation. His weakness is evident in the fact that he left many questions unanswered and many issues unresolved. Newbigin has provided leadership in bringing the apostolary orientation of the church to bear on many traditional ecclesiological themes; it remains for others to work this out in a more systematic and comprehensive way both in theory and practice.

# 7. THE TASK OF THE MISSIONARY CHURCH IN THE WORLD

## 7.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will examine the second side of the church's relation to its own mission: the calling of the missionary church in the world. Newbigin makes two critical distinctions that form the basis for this chapter: mission and missions, and missionary dimension and missionary intention. Mission is a comprehensive term that refers to the whole task the church has been given in the world. Closely related to this term is 'missionary dimension.' Since the church is defined by its witness to the kingdom of God, the whole of its life exhibits a missionary dimension. Missions refers to the task of the church to erect a witness to the kingdom where one does not exist. Missionary intention alludes to specific activities that cross the frontier between belief and unbelief.

The terms mission and missions cover the various tasks the missionary church is called to carry out in the world. In terms of mission, Newbigin emphasizes three responsibilities to which the church is commissioned: evangelism, social witness, and the calling of believers in culture. Newbigin does not list these together in a systematic way. Rather these three aspects of the church's mission are included in this chapter because these are the activities that Newbigin refers to most often when he speaks of the mission of the church in the world. Missions as the calling of the church to make known the gospel in places where it is not known also receives frequent attention in Newbigin's writings. Following a brief discussion of Newbigin's understanding of the nature of mission, these four dimensions of the church's mission are investigated: evangelism, social witness, the calling of the laity, and missions.

## 7.2. THE NATURE OF MISSION

Two important distinctions are foundational for Newbigin's understanding of the task of the church in the world: mission and missions; missionary intention and missionary dimension. Equally fundamental is his understanding of the purpose of mission. These three foundational matters are briefly noted in this first section.

### *7.2.1. Mission and Missions*

Newbigin distinguishes between mission and missions. The importance of this distinction for Newbigin can be gauged by noting that Newbigin fought a major battle over the name of the International Review of Missions. While Newbigin was the editor, there was a move to remove the final 's' from missions. He refused, insisting that maintaining the 's' would distinguish the task of missions from the more comprehensive mission of the church. Mission is the all-embracing term which refers to "the entire task for which the Church is sent into the world" (1989e:121). About mission he says:

It includes the task of preaching the gospel, of healing the sick, of teaching, of service to men in all their needs. It includes or ought to include all the work of millions of Christian men and women in all the ordinary daily tasks, serving their fellow men for Christ's sake in all the multitudinous forms of work which the modern world requires. It includes the task of prophetic witness in the face of wrong, of declaring the will of God in regard to the life of men both in their personal and domestic affairs and also no less clearly in their corporate life as nations, in business, in politics, in culture, in religion. All this is included in the mission of the Church understood in its broadest sense... (1960g:60).

But there is a narrower use of the term, the plural or adjectival form 'missions.' This is a component part of the whole mission of the church and its specific task is *to make Christ known where He is not known*.

This brief summary provides structure for this section. Most of what Newbigin terms 'mission' can be summarized under the tasks of evangelism, social involvement, and the calling of believers in the world. Missions is also an important part of that mission. In this chapter we will treat the calling of all believers, evangelism, social concern, and missions.

### 7.2.2. *Missionary Dimension and Missionary Intention*

Another distinction that makes a similar point is between missionary dimension and missionary intention. In his important booklet *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958b) Newbigin introduces a distinction that has never left missionary theology (Bosch 1991:373). He distinguishes between missionary dimension and missionary intention. This distinction is similar to a distinction that Erik Nielson made at the IMC meeting at Ghana (1958) between missionary dimension and missionary concentration. Since the whole life of the Church is the visible means through which the Holy Spirit carries on his mission to the world, the whole of the church's life thus partakes of the character of witness. "The whole life of the Church thus has a missionary *dimension*, though not all of it has mission as its primary *intention*" (1958b:21). The church's missionary dimension will evoke specific, intentional acts and words that directly engage the unbelieving world with the gospel at missionary "points of concentration" (1958b:43). "While all the activities of the Church have a missionary *dimension*, there are needed specific activities which have the *intention* of crossing the frontier between faith and unbelief—and that frontier is no longer the old geographical one, but runs through every land" (1993d:155). While understanding the missionary dimension will lead to intentional efforts of missionary work, it is also true that "unless there is in the life of the Church a point of concentration for the missionary intention, the missionary dimension which is proper to the whole life of the Church will be lost" (1958b:43). This distinction enables the church to affirm the validity of missions as a distinct activity in the total mission of the church (1993d:155).

### 7.2.3. *The Goal of Mission*

Throughout the history of the church many goals for mission have been articulated: the

salvation of individuals (evangelicals); church planting (Pope Pius XII); church growth (Donald McGavran); indigenous churches (Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson); the formation of a Christian society (Gustav Warneck, A. A. Van Ruler, Social Gospel); justice and the change of societal macrostructures (WCC 1960s).<sup>1</sup> Gisbertus Voetius, founder of Utrecht University, articulated three goals: the conversion of the nations; the planting of churches; the glorification and manifestation of divine grace (Jongeneel 1997:83; Verkuyl 1978:184). Johan H. Bavinck adopted the same goals and stressed that they were three aspects of the same goal. He roots conversion, church planting, and the glory of God's grace in the coming of the kingdom: "It must be emphasized, however, that these three purposes are not distinct and separate but they are in fact three aspects of a single purpose of God: the coming and extension of the kingdom of God" (Bavinck 1964:155).

There are many resemblances between this last statement by Bavinck and Newbigin's thought. Throughout his writings Newbigin reiterates two goals. The first is the glory of God. Perhaps the text most often found throughout Newbigin's work next to John 20:21 is Isaiah 53:11: "He shall see the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." The ultimate goal of mission is that Jesus shall see the fruit of his suffering and be satisfied.

The second is conversion. "The calling of men and women to be converted, to follow Jesus, and to be part of his community is and must always be at the center of mission" (1978e:121). Conversion is the goal of evangelism (1994k:151), social action (1974b:92), and missions (1965a:149). Newbigin's comment on missions could stand for every part of the mission of the church: "... missions are concerned with the radical conversion that leads men to explicit allegiance to Jesus Christ" (1965a:149).

Newbigin's most detailed discussions of conversion occurred during the 1960s, when the issue was a hot topic in ecumenical circles (1966a; 1971a:147-148). During this period three different traditions advanced their own understanding of conversion. The evangelical understanding was primarily individualistic: conversion is the restoration of the individual to a new relationship with God. This view tended to undermine the visible church and the costly obedience associated with social, economic, and political issues. The ecumenical understanding of conversion emphasized conversion to our fellow human beings and the costly obedience that a pursuit of justice and peace involves. This tended to downplay the visible church and the conversion of people to God. The Orthodox understanding of conversion placed incorporation into the visible body of believers at the centre. Individual conversion to God and social obedience tended to be neglected. This forms the backdrop of Newbigin's threefold emphasis. Conversion "involves an inward relationship of faith, it involves a way of behaviour, and it involves a visible companionship" (1966a:33; cf. 1971a:147).

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<sup>1</sup>Johannes Verkuyl has provided an overview of many of these goals and purposes of mission in *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (1978), pp.176-204.

Newbigin does not simply list the three elements of conversion but roots them in an eschatological context (1965a:149). When Jesus began his ministry he announced the arrival of the kingdom of God and called for a radical repentance and conversion (1966a:31-33). This conversion was a return to God in repentance and the participation in a community of men that he bound to himself. At once he began to teach them what kind of behaviour was appropriate to this new relationship with God and life in the kingdom (1971a:147). It is precisely because conversion was the goal of Jesus' mission that it must now be the goal of the mission of His church.

The word conversion can be applied not only to the goal of mission toward individual people but also toward nations (1989e:198). Newbigin's famous essay that initiated the mission in western culture project was entitled 'Can the West Be Converted?' (1985a). The conversion of a nation "means to bring its whole corporate life, the whole *adat*<sup>2</sup> under the rule of God" (1974b:102). Even though this goal raises large issues—which will be treated in the next chapter—conversion remains the goal for the social life of the nation in which the church lives.

Newbigin's understanding of the goal of mission can be summarized in the following way. The mission of the church aims at conversion to the kingdom of God. This involves the conversion of individuals to God and to each other; the formation of a visible community that embodies the life of the kingdom; the struggle of that community as an agent of the kingdom to bring its life under the just and peaceable rule of God; all so that God may be glorified.

### 7.3. EVANGELISM

"God's saving power known and experienced in the life of a redeemed community has to issue in all kinds of witness and service to the world" (1951b:5). A summary of the specific content of the church's witness includes evangelism, deeds of justice and mercy, the callings of the church in culture, and missions.

Throughout his life Newbigin remained a strong advocate of the central importance of evangelism<sup>3</sup> in the mission of the church. Interestingly, while he returned to the subject repeatedly, he gave little time to sustained theological reflection on the nature of evangelism. One must discern the contours that are revealed in the frequent scattered comments. An investigation of his writing on evangelism reveals the following five themes: evangelism is the verbal communication of the good news about Jesus and His kingdom; evangelism is an indispensable dimension of the church's mission; evangelism aims at conversion; evangelism is to be distinguished from proselytism; evangelism is always contextual.

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<sup>2</sup>Customs and beliefs by which a people are bound together in community.

<sup>3</sup>Newbigin primarily spoke of evangelism rather than evangelization. He often simply referred to evangelism in terms of witness in word or a verbal witness. Jongeneel clarifies the differences between evangelism and evangelization (Jongeneel 1995:31-49).

### 7.3.1. *Evangelism as Verbal Communication of the Gospel*

Newbigin's consistent definition of evangelism is that it is "communication—by written or spoken word—of the good news about Jesus. In this definition there will be no evangelism unless the name of Jesus is named" (1982b:146; contrast Bosch 1991:420). This definition highlights an important aspect of Newbigin's understanding of evangelism: evangelism is *the verbal communication of a message*. Newbigin's participation in the ecumenical tradition constantly brought this theme to the forefront. Two examples bear this out.

The first example comes from Newbigin's time as general secretary of the IMC and director of the CWME of the WCC. He comments that "there was much less enthusiasm for the direct preaching of the Gospel and the building up of the Church than for technical assistance and political action" (1993h:194).

To feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to give help to the victims of disaster and technical assistance to those who need it—all this is an essential part of our discipleship, and it is of God's goodness that the churches are learning to do it together. But there is a need to beware lest the churches give the impression that they are not equally concerned to share the supreme riches of the grace of God in Jesus Christ (1963a:7).

During the WCC meeting in New Delhi (1961) Newbigin observed that "while very many of the participants visiting India for the first time were moved by the sight of so many people without bread, not many were apparently moved by the sight of so many without the gospel.... Half of this world is hungry, and we are learning to share our bread.... We have now also to learn... how to share that living bread with all who will receive him" (1962j:90, 94).

The gospel had become an embarrassment for many in the ecumenical tradition; they believed that technical assistance was "more humble, more realistic, more relevant" than "the presumption of trying to convert other people to one's own religion" (1965a:419). It is the duty of a faithful church to "denounce sharply" this tendency (1965a:418). Newbigin tenaciously clung to his conviction that the "preaching of the Gospel and the services of men's needs are equally authentic and essential parts of the Church's responsibility" (1965a:422). In 1962 he records a number of convictions that would "keep him on course during this difficult period" when his commitment was being challenged. The first conviction was: "That it matters supremely to bring more people to know Jesus as Saviour." The second: "That our responsibility in the political order arises out of the love command" (1993h:186). Both of these are aspects of the church's mission and neither can be substituted for the other. Over against many of his colleagues in the ecumenical tradition he maintained that no amount of service can substitute for explicit testimony to Christ and "no human deed can of itself take the place of the one deed by which the world is redeemed and to which we must direct men's eyes" (1965a:422).

During this time another important concept was developing in ecumenical circles that would downplay evangelism. This concept was captured in the phrase "Christian presence." Roger Bassham notes that "through its adoption in the *Church for Others*, the term became practically a slogan for ecumenical mission strategy" in the time

leading up to and including Uppsala (Bassham 1979:71). This understanding of mission emerged from the worker-priest movement in France in the middle of the century as these priests established solidarity with factory and mine workers by living and working with them. The term received widespread recognition when it was adopted by the WSCF and Max Warren (Yates 1994:138-143). The WSCF adopted this strategy as the most suitable way for Christians to be engaged in mission among students (Bassham 1979:72). The term pointed to a mission strategy in which Christians seek to identify with people in the world through a sympathetic solidarity and openness to dialogue about our mutual human condition.

Newbigin's response to this idea of mission was twofold. Positively, he supported the doctrine of Christian presence as right in what it affirms: before we can communicate the gospel verbally we must really be present; evangelism is not shouting from a distance but being incarnate in people's situation and sharing our lives with them. Newbigin concludes that by this standard much evangelism is actually a failure (1970a:212). Further, it is right in affirming that not every moment is the right moment for evangelism; sometimes as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, acts of love and compassion are all that is appropriate at the moment. Negatively, however, Newbigin insists that if the doctrine of presence leads us to the point where we do not speak the name of Jesus but trust our presence as an adequate substitute, we are on our way to betrayal (1967a:10; 1968c:130).

If the doctrine of Christian presence is taken to mean that the presence of the Christian Church is a substitute for the explicit proclamation of the name of Jesus and his saving work, then we have to reject it as a betrayal of the gospel. There can be no substitute for the name of Jesus. Men must have an opportunity to know him. And that means at least to know his name, and to know who he is and what he has done. In much of what is spoken and written by Christians one cannot feel but that there is a real danger of betrayal at this point. It is good to be modest about the Church, but it is not good to be modest about the name of Jesus (1970a:212).

Newbigin's definition of evangelism as verbal communication of the good news about Jesus implies another important element: evangelism is a verbal witness *to Jesus Christ and His kingdom* (cf. Bosch 1991:412-413). The stress is on what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ. It is the events of redemptive history past, present, and future that form the content of the witness. Newbigin comments: "there will always be the need to point explicitly to the central reality by which the Church exists, to the central verities of the gospel, to Christ incarnate, crucified, risen, regnant at God's right hand and to the promise of his coming to judge the living and the dead. This preaching of the gospel can never be irrelevant" (1989e:139f.). In the gospels, these events are understood in the context of the kingdom of God. The first announcement of the gospel was the proclamation of the reign of God in Jesus. Current evangelism has shunned the category of the kingdom, creating a need to recover it for authentic evangelism in the present.

If I am not mistaken, our current evangelism hardly ever uses the category of the Kingdom of God. And yet the original preaching of the Gospel on the lips of Jesus was—precisely—the announcement of the coming of that Kingdom. I believe that we may recover a true evangelism for our day if we return to that original language (translated into the idiom of our own time and place) as the basic category for our

proclamation of the Gospel (1974b:67).

Mortimer Arias has raised the same issue. In a lengthy study of evangelism he came to the following conclusions (*inter alia*): the gospel of Jesus (the first evangelist) was a gospel of the Kingdom; the kingdom of God had disappeared from evangelistic discourse and the focus had been reduced to individual and personal salvation and the incorporation of converts into the institutional church; the kingdom of God theme is multidimensional and all-encompassing and the employment of this theme resolves a number of reductionist tensions. He concludes that if the church is to be faithful in following Jesus, it must return to the kingdom of God as a basic theme for evangelism. His book probes this theme (Arias 1984). Arias's conclusions demonstrate the continuing validity of Newbigin's observation.

### 7.3.2. *Evangelism as an Indispensable Dimension of the Church's Mission*

Evangelism is an indispensable dimension of the church's mission. There are two aspects to this statement that are significant.

First, evangelism is *indispensable* (cf. Bosch 1991:413-414).. The naming of Jesus cannot be replaced by presence, deeds, or a life. This was impressed on Newbigin early in his life. As mentioned earlier, before he became a believer, Newbigin spent a summer among the unemployed miners of Wales helping in a men's recreation club (1993h:11). His Christian friends were convinced that their work must be confined to social activity and that all preaching was proscribed. Yet it became clear that their social work was not meeting the deepest needs of these people. They needed more than food, recreation, and education; they needed hope. "Our social work programmes alone could not communicate that: it needed the word, the word about Jesus and his Cross" (1974b:94). This experience led to Newbigin's conversion that night (2.2.2.4.). This permanently engraved on Newbigin's mind the indispensability of the word of the gospel to accompany all social activity.

Second, evangelism is a *dimension* of the church's total mission (cf. Bosch 1991:411-412). Newbigin usually articulates the various elements of the church's witness in terms of word and deed rooted in the life of the congregation. He says: "By its [the church's] witness—in word and deed and common life—to the centrality of the work of Jesus in his ministry, death, and resurrection it offers to all people the possibility of understanding... the meaning and goal of history..." (1989e:129). This characterization of the church's mission is rooted in Jesus Christ. Since the mission of the church is to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus, the content of His ministry must govern and shape the church's mission: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." The ministry of Jesus was a life, from which flowed words and deeds that pointed to the kingdom of God, and so likewise will be the ministry of the church: "The thing that Jesus began to do must go on. He is the Messiah, and God's rule is what is manifested in his life and deeds and words, the rule of the one who is really in charge" (1972g:56). In terms of evangelism this means two things: evangelism cannot be separated from deeds of mercy and justice; evangelism must be authenticated by the life of a community that embodies the message (1994k:151-157). Since these two points are important in Newbigin's writings each will be elaborated.

### 7.3.2.1. Inseparability of Word and Deed

“This ministry is necessarily one in which deed and word go together. The presence of the reign of God will be attested by the works of power and the words which interpret them” (1983c:6; cf. Bosch 1991:418). This statement summarizes Newbigin’s view of the inseparability of evangelism as the verbal communication of the gospel and deeds of mercy and justice. There is a long tradition in the church, however, that insists that the word must have priority, while rendering everything else secondary or auxiliary. This appears to be supported by many New Testament passages that speak of the power of the word for salvation. Yet when one turns to the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, an indissoluble nexus between deeds and words is evident. A large part of the Gospels is occupied with Jesus’ acts—deeds of healing, of exorcism, of feeding the hungry, of raising the dead. The preaching of the arrival of the kingdom is an explanation of these deeds. The deeds do not explain themselves. They can be misunderstood. Nevertheless they were signs that the power of God’s kingdom was present in the world. This meaning had to be stated in plain words: “The kingdom of God has drawn near.” The deeds without the words were dumb. However, the preaching of the message of the kingdom without deeds is meaningless and empty: “... if nothing is happening no explanation is called for and the words are empty words. They do not answer any real question. They can be brushed aside as mere talk. They are only meaningful in the context of the mighty works. They presuppose that something is happening which calls for explanation” (1989e:132). The deeds of Jesus make people aware of a new reality, a new healing power in their midst, and the question arises: “What is this new reality?” The proclamation of the good news of the kingdom is the answer to that question. “The deed without the word is dumb, and the word without the deed is empty.... Both words and deeds point to the same reality—the presence of the kingdom of God” (1982b:146). In the ministry of Jesus words and deeds were inseparable; both the *presence* and the *proclamation* of the kingdom are manifest (1987b:10-13). When Jesus commissions his disciples to participate in his mission, he charges them to exorcise and heal, and only later to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom as explanation of their works (1982a:146; 1989e:132). This small group of disciples was also the nucleus of the community he prepared to continue his mission: they were to continue his mission *as* the Father had sent him (1989e:133; 1983c:6). This pattern of a new healing power present in life and deed, calling for verbal explanation, was to continue in the church. Word and deed are inextricably intertwined in the church’s mission. To “set word and deed, preaching and action against one another is absurd” (1989e:137). Both will be essential components in the church’s mission. On the one hand, “justice and peace in the world is not something which is secondary, marginal to the central task of evangelism” (1989e:137). On the other hand, there will always be the need for a verbal witness that explicitly names the name of Jesus: “There is a gospel to be proclaimed and we are not allowed to be silent about it. However much we may wish we could, we are not allowed to deceive ourselves into imagining that anything we are, or anything we do, can take the place of the name of Jesus. We are not allowed to be silent” (1968f:4).

Neither evangelism nor deeds of mercy and justice can have priority. They are both dimensions of the total task of the church and are thus inextricably interlinked.

There is not, and there cannot be any allocation of priority between word and deed.

Both are essential. The kingly power of God is present in mighty acts and in words that interpret those acts. Neither can be subordinated in principle to the other (1982b:146).

At one point, Newbigin does speak of evangelism as the church's "primary and constant duty" (1970a:206). But this statement, made in the context of an ecumenical gathering, cannot be interpreted in the way that evangelicals spoke of evangelism as 'primary' at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism (Lausanne Covenant 1974, paragraph 6; cf. also Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 21, 1982:24-25). In Lausanne, the word 'primary' was a carefully chosen word that addressed the issue of what is most important—evangelism or social action. In Newbigin's writings the two are constantly seen as dimensions of the church's full mission.

In speaking of the equal importance of word and deed, Newbigin affirms four further explanatory statements. First, not every word needs a deed attached to it and not every deed needs a word (1974b:94; cf. Lausanne 1982:20). Second, both word and deed are fully integrated into the full life and mission of the church (1974b:94;1982b:148f.). Third, both word and deed are the means by which *the Spirit* witnesses to the kingdom (1974b:94;1978c:304; 1982b:146-148). The ultimate witness is the Spirit and both words and deeds become the means for the Spirit's witness. Fourth, there are different gifts given to the body. While all must be ready for a word to account for their hope and all must be ready with a compassionate deed, it still remains true that some are gifted in evangelism, others in showing mercy, others in pursuing justice. The mark of a healthy witness is the recognition of the various gifts of the Spirit (1974b:94; 1978c:308f.; 1982b:148f.; 1989e:231; cf. Lausanne 1982:20-21).

Newbigin's strongest defence of the inseparability of word and deed came in response to the growing polarization between evangelicals and ecumenicals (cf. Bosch 1988). The politicization of the gospel in the 1960s and early 1970s led to an evangelical reaction that stressed evangelism over social action. In an earlier chapter we have traced that historical trajectory that led to a split between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions (3.6.2.1.). The ecumenical tradition stressed social involvement to the neglect of evangelism. This was the consequence of a view of salvation that stressed the social, present and this-worldly dimensions. Over against this distortion, evangelicals advocated the primacy of evangelism. This position was firmly rooted in an individualistic, futurist, and otherworldly understanding of salvation. Word and deed had become separated in the two primary missionary traditions of the Western church.

Newbigin believed that the conflict between these two traditions was "profoundly weakening the Church's witness" (1989e:136) and so he tirelessly attempted to heal the rift between these two traditions (1982b; 1987a:9-13; 1989e:128-140). His response to the loss of evangelism in the ecumenical tradition has been noted (and his words are harsh): social and political action divorced from evangelism is a *betrayal*. His words to the evangelical tradition who remove the deed from the word are equally harsh: a preaching the gospel that does not challenge the usurped dominion of Jesus Christ as it is embodied in the political and social order and that does not bear the wounds of that conflict is *false* (1982b:148). If the church proclaims the good news, inviting men and women to take refuge in Jesus without the call to challenge the dominion of evil in social structures "it becomes a countersign" (*ibid*). Church growth achieved by evangelistic methods that avoid social and political confrontation "is only providing fuel for hell (Jn. 15:1-6)" (*ibid*).

The way to heal the rift is to return to the central theme in Jesus' preaching—the good news about the kingdom (1980f:17). There were at least two problems that led to a misunderstanding of the kingdom of God and to the fatal split between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions. The first problem was the separation of the Kingdom from the person of Jesus. When this happens two distortions follow—distortions that can roughly be attributed to the ecumenical and evangelical traditions. On the one hand, there are those in the ecumenical tradition who emphasize the kingdom at the expense of Jesus. The kingdom is portrayed as something that transcends the person of Jesus. Consequently, the kingdom is identified with a particular political program or social plan. The kingdom becomes a program or an ideology but it is not the gospel (1980f:18). “The action of the church in respect of the evils in society becomes a mere ideological crusade, inviting men and women to put their trust in that which cannot satisfy. It is to betray people with false expectations. Worse than that, it is to deliver people into the hands of demonic powers, for whenever a particular political or social programme is identified with the kingdom of God, those who follow become victims of forces that they cannot control” (1987a:9). But the message of the gospel is that the kingdom has a name and a face, the name and face of Jesus (1980f:18; 1987a:7). On the other hand, there are those in the evangelical tradition who emphasize the name of Jesus but separate that from his message about the kingdom. When this happens, Jesus is preached as one who brings a religious experience of personal salvation without involving one in costly actions at points in public life where the power of Satan is contradicting the rule of God and bringing men and women under the power of evil. Such preaching of cheap grace, of a supposed personal salvation does not go the way of the cross, of an inward comfort without commitment to costly action for the doing of God's will in the world—this kind of evangelistic preaching is a distortion of the gospel. It is seductive, and we must be on our guard against it. A preaching of personal salvation that does not lead the hearers to challenge the monstrous injustices of our society is not mission in Christ's way. It is peddling cheap grace (1987a:9).

Newbiggin believed that the tragic split between the ecumenical and evangelical traditions could be traced to this misunderstanding. To separate Jesus from the kingdom by either proclaiming the kingdom without Jesus or Jesus without the kingdom “is to betray our generation and it is to divide and destroy the church” (1987a:10).

Newbiggin addresses a second problem that also manifested itself in the split between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions of the church: the loss of a Biblical vision of the future realization of the kingdom of God as the consummation of history (1993d). Purposeful action is only possible if one understands the story of which we are a part and if we know where that story is going. The New Testament writers think in terms of a real goal, a real end to history toward which the world is moving. When this future consummation fades from view there are only two substitutes available. The first is an evolutionary, progress-oriented vision of history: by human effort a future perfect human society can be realized. The second is a privatized eschatology that looks to a life of personal blessedness after death: this “fits well with the mood of a society which has lost faith in a meaningful future for the public life of the world” (1993d:9).

For Newbiggin a faithful witness required the combination of word and deed.

In the communication of the gospel, word and act belong together. The word is essential, because the name of Jesus cannot be replaced by anything else. But the deed

is equally essential because the gospel is the good news of the active presence of the reign of God, and because this presence is to be made manifest in a world that has fallen under the usurped dominion of the evil one (1982b:148).

### 7.3.2.2. Evangelism Authenticated by the Life of the Congregation

Newbigin's discussion of the evangelical/ecumenical conflict over word and deed opens up another important theme that remained constant in his ecclesiology. The deeper problem in this split is that both traditions have lost the understanding that mission is first of all an action of God (1989e:134-137). The witness to the gospel is first of all the witness of the Spirit; the witness of the church is secondary.

The true missionary dialogue, in other words, is not initiated by the Church. In a secondary sense it is initiated by the outsider who is drawn to ask: What is the secret of this new reality, this life of praise, of justice, and of peace? In the primary sense, however, it is initiated by the presence of the Spirit who is the *arrabon* of the kingdom, and whose presence leads people... to make this inquiry (1989e:134).

This statement has an important ecclesiological implication. It is precisely in the life of the congregation that the work of the Spirit becomes evident. Newbigin argues that "both parties in this dispute need to recover a fuller sense of the prior reality, the givenness, the ontological priority of the new reality which the work of Christ has brought into being" (1989e:136). This new reality is evident in the creation of a community which embodies the life of the Spirit. Thus word and deed arise out of this prior reality of a Spirit-filled community: "The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection (1989e:137). Evangelism will be effective only if the life of the good news community conforms to the message of the gospel. There must be a visible embodiment and manifestation of the life of the gospel in the church if words of evangelism are to carry weight (cf. Bosch 1991:414). In Newbigin's words:

The purely verbal preaching of the story of Jesus crucified and risen would lose its power if those who heard it could not trace it back to some kind of community in which the message was being validated in a common way of life which is recognizable as embodying at least a hint and a foretaste of the blessedness for which all men long and which the Gospel promises.... It is in the life of a new kind of community that the saving power of the Gospel is known and tasted, and such a community—in however embryonic form—will always be the *locus* of that miracle by which the paradigm shift which we call conversion takes place (1980a:304).

This emphasis on the prior reality of a community that embodies the gospel was formed in the 1950s. Johannes Hoekendijk introduced three words to speak of the mission of the church—*koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *kerygma* (Jongeneel 1995:19; 1997:307-308). In the ecumenical tradition it had become customary to speak of these as three dimensions of the church's mission. Newbigin saw this as a mistake. The basic reality is the common life (*koinonia*) of the Spirit that is shared in the church. From this foundational new reality of life in the Spirit springs both service (*diakonia*) and

proclamation (*kerygma*) or witness (*marturia*).<sup>4</sup> “The new reality—the active presence of the Holy Spirit among men—is the primary witness, anterior to all specific acts whether of service or of preaching” (1958b:20). The church gathered is the place where the Holy Spirit is visibly present in the fellowship of believers, the word and sacrament. Both *diakonia* (deeds of service) and *marturia* (verbal witness) must be seen to arise out of *koinonia* (the gathered fellowship of God’s people who share the new reality of the Spirit).

This theme becomes dominant in the latter decades of Newbigin’s life. As he pursued his ‘gospel and western culture’ project, he became increasingly concerned about the “advanced syncretism” in the western church. A church conformed to the idols of the world would muffle the announcement of the kingdom.

The preaching of the gospel can never be irrelevant. But if the Church which preaches it is not living corporately a life which corresponds with it, is living in comfortable cohabitation with the powers of this age, is failing to challenge the powers of darkness and to manifest in its life the power of the living Lord to help and to heal, then by its life it closes the doors which its preaching would open (1989e:140).

Paul in his letters does not urge the early church to be active in evangelism. He does, however, constantly warn them against any kind of syncretistic compromise with the idols of their culture. When there is such a faithful community “there will be a challenge by word and behaviour to the ruling powers. As a result there will be conflict and suffering for the Church. Out of that conflict and suffering will arise the questioning which the world puts to the Church” (1989e:136f.). Evangelism will be the answer given to these queries; evangelism will point to Christ as the source of the life that the Spirit gives in foretaste.

There is one more theme to note here. Evangelism must be closely connected to the local congregation. It must be clear that the gospel spoken be recognizable as a word that arises from the community that embodies that gospel. The various agencies, evangelists, training courses are all “auxiliary to the primary center of evangelism, which is the local congregation” (1994k:156; cf. 1989e:229).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Johannes Hoekendijk introduced the terms *koinonia*, *diakonia*, and *kerygma*. Later *marturia* was substituted as an equivalent for *kerygma*.

<sup>5</sup>Newbigin makes this point most often in relation to agencies for social action rather than bodies formed for the purpose of evangelism. This is discussed more fully below (7.4.7.). The argument there holds for agencies and structures of evangelism as well.

### 7.3.3. *Conversion as the Aim of Evangelism*

The first evangelism was Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived. This proclamation was not simply religious news or values or information. It was an announcement about God's mighty acts for the world. Therefore the announcement "requires an immediate response in action" (1994k:151; cf. Bosch 1991:413). The response called for was repentance, a conversion and transformation of the mind and life of the respondent (1987a:2-3). Since the evangelism of the church is rooted in the evangelism of Jesus, so the church's evangelistic aim is conversion (1978e:121). Evangelism aims at conversion, baptism and church membership (1982b:149).

This theme is especially prominent in Newbigin's writing during the secular decade when many in the ecumenical tradition denied the validity of baptism, conversion, and church membership, and when, in response to this imbalance, the Church Growth school promoted these as the only goal of mission. Newbigin's response was to insist on the importance of conversion as a goal of evangelism, while rejecting the equally imbalanced position of Donald McGavran (1978e:121-124; McGavran 1970).

Over against the studied neglect of conversion in the ecumenical tradition Newbigin insisted:

The reality of any belief is tested by the extent to which the believer seeks to persuade others of its truth. It cannot be denied that Jesus called for radical repentance, conversion, the forsaking of all in order to follow Him. A movement which lacks these elements has no right to His name. Whether men hear or refuse to hear is not ours to decide. But we have the clear duty to bring to every man this call for radical decision (1965a:148).

Newbigin believed that this emphasis needed to be heard during the secular sixties. It was not popular but was nevertheless true that evangelism is "concerned with the radical conversion that leads men to explicit allegiance to Jesus Christ" (1965a:149).

Over against the reaction of Church Growth advocates, Newbigin maintained that conversion could not be reduced to individual salvation (cf. Bosch 1991:415). Nor could it be reduced to church membership or extension: "mission is not simply church extension... it involves something more radical, more paradoxical, more costly" (1965a:147). The focus of evangelism is not on the individual or the church but on the arrival of the kingdom of God. Since the announcement of the kingdom of God calls each person to repentance and conversion, and since it is the church that experiences this salvation of the kingdom which is comprehensive in scope, the call to personal conversion will not be disconnected from evangelism. While individual salvation and church growth cannot be the primary focus of evangelism, neither can evangelism be disconnected from these things. About conversion and the new reality of the kingdom, Newbigin writes,

It is not, *in the first place*, either saving one's own soul or joining a society. It is these things only secondarily, because the new reality is one in which every soul is precious, and because there is a society which is the first-fruit and sign of the new reality. If either of these things is put at the centre, distortion follows (1965a:149).

Equally, the conversion that evangelism aims at is a costly obedience (cf. Costas 1982:80). Newbigin comments:

It is notorious that the times and places from which successful evangelistic campaigns and mass conversions have been reported have often been marked by flagrant evils such as racism, militant sectarianism, and blind support of oppressive economic and political systems. How are we to evaluate a form of evangelism that produces baptized, communicant, Bible-reading, and zealous Christians who are committed to church growth but uncommitted to radical obedience to the plain teaching of the Bible on the issues of human dignity and social justice? And how can we defend a form of evangelism that has nothing to say about the big issues of public righteousness and talks only of questions of personal and domestic behaviour? Can we agree that the big ethical issues are secondary matters, which can be attended to after conversion? (1978e:134f).

Evangelism aims at conversion but conversion is not simply a turning to God and joining the church. It is the call to follow Jesus and that “includes both the inner reorientation of the heart and mind and the outward reorientation of conduct in all areas of life” (1978e:135). Conversion involves an inward turning of faith to God, a way of behaviour, and membership in a visible fellowship (1966a:30-34). While Church Growth advocates have rightly emphasized the first and third of these, they have neglected the second.

Newbigin immediately continues his discussion to argue that the danger in stressing conversion as a radical orientation of the life in ethical terms—as Biblical as this is—is that there is the danger of substituting the law for gospel. There is the threat of substituting the evangelist’s ethical agenda for the working of the Spirit through the gospel to transform the convert (1978e:135-138). Nevertheless evangelism aims at conversion which is a call to repent and enter the kingdom; this will mean a turn to God, a commitment to radical and costly obedience, and participation in the community that embodies the kingdom.

#### *7.3.4. Evangelism Distinguished from Proselytism*

At several points in his writings Newbigin distinguishes evangelism from proselytism (cf. Bosch 1991:414-415). In his fullest discussion he distinguishes between them at four points (1980a:159-160). First, in evangelism there is always an element of mystery and miracle about the way the Spirit uses the words and deeds of the church to bring about conversion, while in proselytism conversion is something that can be programmed and managed in the style of a military campaign or marketing promotion. Second, in evangelism conversion often takes place when the church is weak; a faithful word or act in Jesus’ name is the occasion of conversion. In contrast proselytism is the activity of a strong, confident group that relies on its own wisdom and strength to bring about results. Third, in the act of evangelizing the church will also be changed. The witness of the Spirit convicts the world (John 16:8) and teaches the church more about the gospel (John 16:13). The encounter between Peter and Cornelius illustrates this mutual growth (Acts 10, 11). On the other hand, the proselytizing group does not expect to be changed or learn from the encounter. It expects a growth in numbers but not a deepening understanding of its own message. Finally, since evangelism is clearly the witness of the Spirit, Jesus is glorified. In contrast the “successfully proselytising group is proud of its accomplishments and publishes them as evidence of its spiritual vitality” (1980a:160). The distinction between proselytism and evangelism is notoriously

difficult to make. Newbigin's reflections provide helpful insight on this difficult issue.

### 7.3.5. *Evangelism in Context*

The message of the good news of Jesus Christ that calls for a decision for or against Christ is not an abstract message proclaimed in a vacuum; evangelism is contextual (cf. Bosch 1991:417). This is one of the themes that characterized Hendrik Kraemer's writings which affected Newbigin's view of evangelism. Authentic evangelism presents the gospel in the context of concrete human experience. Since the gospel "is vitally related to all spheres and problems of life" (Kraemer 1938:304), evangelism will look for a point of contact in the living experience of those to whom the gospel is to be proclaimed. Evangelism that presents the gospel as a rigid formula resembles propaganda more than proclamation of good news.

During the 1960s, when the ongoing progress of technology, modernization, nation-building and 'rapid social change' captured the ecumenical imagination and dominated the WCC's agenda, evangelism was eclipsed. Newbigin frequently stressed the central importance of evangelism during this period. However, he also sought to bring the message of the gospel into close connection with the global events of the day. Newbigin attempted to demonstrate that all scientific and technological development in the West had its spiritual roots in the gospel. The evangelistic task of the church is to bear witness to the gospel precisely in the midst of the task of nation building. Evangelism witnesses that these gifts are the result of the penetration of the West with the gospel (1960n:24; 1963g:44). The title of an address given at this time captures his concern: 'Rapid Social Change and Evangelism' (1962i). In the context of the rapid social change that is sweeping the world, the church's evangelistic task is to understand and interpret the tremendous events of the day, so that a faithful verbal witness to the gospel can be given (1962i:3).

The importance, but also the limits, of evangelism in context is revealed in an exchange that Newbigin had at this time with M. M. Thomas. Their exchange finds its source in an earlier discussion between M. M. Thomas and Hendrikus Berkhof. Thomas affirms the importance of evangelism but as an aspect of the church's task of humanization (Loffler 1968:14-33). He says: "The Message *comes alive* at the cutting edge between the Gospel and the quest of modern man for a truly human existence... nobody knows the Message in a vacuum" (Loffler 1968:22-23). This statement was in keeping with the whole tenor of the Uppsala Assembly. The Assembly rejected the idea of "unevangelized areas" or "mission fields." In the traditional understanding of mission, the fact that people have not heard the gospel is sufficient reason for proclaiming the gospel to them. In contrast to this, Uppsala spoke of the obligation of the church to go to places where the gospel had some special relevance—mission points rather than mission fields (1969a:256). At this time of nation building, rapid social change, and the struggle for humanization the gospel was most relevant in those situations.

Newbigin responded to Thomas' statement (and the Uppsala emphasis) with a fourfold critique (1969a:260). First, the gospel certainly does come alive to different people in different ways at different times. However, the gospel is not an empty container into which one can pour new content that is relevant for the present time. The gospel has a content and that is Jesus Christ, his life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

Second, the gospel does not merely address human beings in their particular contexts but addresses human beings in every age, context, and cultural situation according to universal human needs and questions (cf. Kraemer 1938:203). Third, the way the gospel comes alive in various situations cannot be determined beforehand. It will be known uniquely in each person's situation as they encounter Jesus Christ. Finally, "even the most brilliant generalisations about what is happening to the human race cannot exhaustively fit every individual human being" (1969a:260). While these generalizations are helpful, people are related to the process of humanization in very different ways. We cannot limit how the gospel will come alive for each of these people. Newbigin concludes,

We do have an obligation to preach the Gospel to every human being, irrespective of the place he occupies in the struggle for full humanity. We cannot tell in advance how, where, and when this Gospel will "come alive". Our preaching of it does not depend on knowing this. We have Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit himself will be present to bring conviction to the world (Jn. 16:8) and we have seen that promise fulfilled in unexpected ways. The Gospel has its own radical originality, the sovereign originality of Jesus (:260f.).

In his book *Salvation and Humanisation*, Thomas takes issue with Newbigin's critique. He interprets Newbigin's four points of critique as a lack of concern for the particular context and situation of the hearer of the gospel. For Newbigin, the gospel is universally true and relevant to any and all situations. Therefore, the gospel creates its own relevance for each situation since the human predicament is universal. The stress on the universality of the gospel and the human predicament relieves the evangelist of concern for the particular situation of the hearer (Thomas 1971:46).

Newbigin responded to this critique in a book review of *Salvation and Humanisation* (1971c). Newbigin protests that he is not attempting to undermine the importance of the particular context by stressing the universality of the gospel and the human predicament. Rather he is concerned for a proper balance between the two (1971c:77). On the one hand, there is a desperate need for the evangelist to penetrate each particular human context with deep sympathy and understanding. "Simply to blast away with time-honoured slogans, without taking the time to listen to what are the hearer's real concerns, is a parody of evangelism" (*ibid*). In light of this, much contemporary evangelistic efforts must be criticized. On the other hand, he makes two points to keep this insight. First, "the gospel is greater than our grasp of it." Second, "the human situation is more varied and complex than any generalisation of ours can cover" (1971c:78). He then develops both of these points.

The gospel is much greater than what we can grasp of its significance and relevance. Christ may come to the hearer of the gospel in a way that is quite different and unexpected from the way that the evangelist anticipated. For example, missionaries to Africa were sure that the gospel was relevant primarily to polygamy. The hearers understood it in terms of its relevance to the issue of slavery. It affected the life of Africa in ways unexpected by the original evangelists. Newbigin concludes from this: "The bearer of the Gospel has both the right and duty to try to understand the way in which the Gospel bears upon the situation of the people to whom he goes. But in the end he has to stand aside and let the Gospel make its own impact" (1971c:78).

Human beings vary greatly in their particular needs. While a good generalization of

an era or situation may be fruitful it may fail to do justice to the particular situations of many people living in that era. Newbigin does not doubt that the struggle for humanization is part of the task of the church's mission. He resists, however, the identification of mission with a struggle for humanization. Rather the evangelistic work of the church must be carried out "within the context of a full participation in the struggle for humanization" (1971c:79).

Newbigin argues that identifying the missionary task of the church with humanization is in danger of moving from gospel to law. A constant struggle for humanization will lead to the crush of guilt that comes from our experience of dehumanization, or to hatred of those who are identified as the enemies of a true humanity. The believing community participates in these struggles in the joy and assurance of a victory already gained in Jesus Christ. Evangelism is the proclamation of that victory.

#### 7.4. THE SOCIAL WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

In Newbigin's work we can distinguish four different forms of social witness. The first is corporate witness in which the local congregation together reaches out in service to its community and to the ends of the earth. This corporate witness may find its source in the local congregation or in various programs, committees, and institutions under the denominational umbrella or organized as para-church organizations. The second is an individual witness in which intentional deeds of mercy and justice are initiated and implemented by various members of the body. Third, the community of the church bears witness to Christ by modelling in its own corporate life the life of the kingdom as an alternative community. Newbigin even says that "the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order" (1991h:85). The fourth is the witness of the various members in their various callings in culture—at home, in factory and office, in farm and hospital, in politics and neighbourhood and so forth. The communal witness of the church and the mission of the laity will be treated in detail elsewhere: the calling of the laity in the next section, and the church as alternative community in the next chapter. The remainder of the present section deals with the social witness of the church in general and the corporate and individual witness of the local congregation in particular.

##### *7.4.1. Newbigin's Ministry Experience and the Social Mission of the Church*

Newbigin's earliest Christian fellowship was with the ecumenical SCM. This involved him in concerns of mercy and justice from his first years as a Christian (2.2.2.4.). His missionary experience in India, where various institutions like schools, orphanages, and hospitals authenticated his street preaching and where there was the pervasive presence of poverty and social need, reinforced his commitment to the social witness of the church (2.3.2.3.). During his time in administrative leadership of the IMC and the CWME, the overwhelming attention given to social concerns in the secular decade moved Newbigin to deepening reflection on the nature of the social witness of the church (3.5.2.3.). It was, however, during his time in Madras that this aspect of the

church's mission dominated Newbigin's ministry (3.6.3.1.). This concern for the social mission of the church was fuelled by the continuing prominence given to this topic in ecumenical circles but, more importantly, by his office as bishop of a socially influential church in a flourishing third world city. The fruit of this extensive, life-long struggle with the issue is a wealth of reflection on the social witness of the church.

#### *7.4.2. The Nature of Salvation: Foundational to Social Witness*

Newbigin's soteriology is foundational to his understanding of the church's social witness. The context of Newbigin's reflections on salvation was the rift between ecumenicals and evangelicals on social action produced by different understandings of salvation. For evangelicals salvation is future, individualistic, and other-worldly. This leads to a misunderstanding of the church and its mission in the world. For ecumenicals salvation is present, social, and this-worldly. However, there is no place for judgement and death and so salvation is understood in terms of historical continuity. The ecumenical tradition lacked a coherent theology that distinguished between revolution and redemption, between the task of nation building and the mission of the church (1993h:186; cf. Bosch 1991:393-408).

In this context, Newbigin emphasizes three aspects of a Biblical view of salvation. First, as an eschatological reality, salvation is both a present reality and a future hope (1974b:106f.). This is a tension that must be kept if the church is to be faithful in its social mission. There is an interesting ambiguity in both the evangelical and ecumenical traditions that Newbigin recognizes. On the one hand, he often stresses that the evangelical tradition stresses salvation as a future reality; this leads to a lack of concern for social issues in the present. On the other hand, he chastises the evangelical churches in Madras for their preoccupation with salvation as a present reality. If the church stresses salvation as a present possession "there is little or no serious concern about the injustice and iniquity that reign all around him" (1974b:107). He refers to these evangelical "comfortable middle class congregations" of Madras as "private clubs designed to cater to the religious tastes of its members" (1974b:197; 1969c:111). In this situation, "the greatest task" facing the church is "to move from thinking of itself as a saved community to thinking of itself as a community which has been caught up into God's saving action for men" (1973e:10).

What was given as a mission to the world has been twisted into a privilege for ourselves. We have been more concerned that the church should be big and prosperous and strong than that God's will should be done in the world. We have sought our own aggrandizement rather than the fulfilment of the task for which we were called.... How often is the Christian church no more than a self-centred community only faintly concerned that God's will be done in the life of the world, only faintly interested in justice and mercy for this earth's exploited masses but passionately devoted to our own protection and advancement as a community and, if we are piously inclined, to assuring that after a comfortable passage through this life we can look forward to a guaranteed place in the foam-rubber-padded seats of heaven (1972f:102).

The same ambiguity is evident in the ecumenical tradition. On the one hand, the emphasis on the present nature of salvation leads the ecumenical church to throw itself into political, social, and economic issues with little concern for the future. On the other

hand, the focus on salvation as a future hope transforms mission into a desperate struggle against injustice and oppression that lacks the joy of salvation as a present reality to be shared (1974b:107).

A second aspect of Newbigin's understanding of salvation concerns both fellowship with God and social, political, economic, and ecological life. The CWME Conference in Bangkok on the theme 'Salvation Today' stimulated a great deal of discussion on the meaning of salvation and the result of the Biblical studies was that "in the Bible salvation concerns the whole man and the totality of his relationships. It includes... the political and social and economic" (1974b:105; cf. Bangkok Assembly 1973; Bassham 1979:97-98; Bosch 1991:395-397). The Old Testament vision of salvation, captured well in Micah 5, is clearly concerned with human social and economic life. Other parts of the Old Testament understand salvation in terms of a political struggle for oppressed peoples, happy family life, abundant economic prosperity, and civil peace. However, "the vision of salvation in the Old Testament is never a merely secular vision. It is never just a vision of political liberation or economic progress or social peace and justice" (1974b:106). The "true kernel of salvation" is fellowship with the living Lord (*ibid.*). Salvation is concerned with "man's fellowship with God at the very heart of his experience of being human and it also concerns his social life with other men and his experience with the world of nature" (*ibid.*). Salvation involves "commitment to the Purpose and communion with the Person. The lived and experienced reality of communion with the living God will have to be at the heart of our commitment to purposeful change" (1974c:27).

The implications for the ecumenical-evangelical debate are clear. On the one hand, for the evangelical community, an individualized view of salvation is one-sided and fatal for social concern. Newbigin writes: "Those Christians... [who] speak about being saved apparently use the phrase to refer to a purely inward experience between the individual soul and God, resulting in new feelings and intentions, but having nothing to do with actual deliverance from sickness or hunger or oppression or alienation. It is obvious that this is very remote from the biblical use of the word" (1972e:5). The church is an agent of the salvation of God's kingdom; it has been "put into the world to fight unremittingly against all the powers of evil". However, many have come to think of the church as a "place where we can enjoy the comforts of salvation here and hereafter" (1974b:107). In the Bible God thunders against a comfortable piety which thinks it can enjoy an individualized, present salvation as fellowship with God but not be concerned for social justice. Simply put, "the piety which can comfortably co-exist with flagrant social injustice is an abomination to the God.... Salvation is not a privilege which we can enjoy apart from our total commitment to God's battle with the powers of evil" (1974b:108). "It is a disastrous misunderstanding to think that we can enjoy salvation through Jesus Christ and at the same time regard action for justice in the world as a sort of optional extra—or even as an inferior substitute for the work of passing on the good news of salvation" (1972f:109). On the other hand, in ecumenical circles the social dimension of salvation is so prominent that it stifles any understanding of people being saved and renewed in their relation to God. The question 'Are you saved?' embarrasses them (1972d:5). When salvation is reduced to social justice, then the church is reduced to an instrument, and the church's mission is truncated. What is needed is an understanding of salvation that involves both a "commitment to the

Purpose and communion with the Person” (1974c:27).

A third and final aspect of Newbigin’s understanding of salvation is that it is comprehensive in scope and restorative in nature (cf. Wolters 1985). It is comprehensive in scope in that salvation is concerned not only with the individual but with human beings in the context of the whole creation. Salvation involves all of human life in the context of the non-human creation. Newbigin says: “God’s promise is of a wholly renewed creation, not just reborn individuals. It is a promise not only of new men, but of new heavens and a new earth” (1968b:22; cf. 1972f:93). It is also restorative in nature in that salvation is not salvation out of the world but salvation of the world; God is restoring his creation. Salvation is “the renewal of all things in Christ” (1968d:35; cf. 1969c:60f.). As Newbigin puts it elsewhere: “The emphasis of the New Testament teaching about last things is not upon our escaping out of this world into another one, but upon Christ’s returning to this world in glory... to reign... over a renewed and transformed creation” (1968b:22).

The end of the story is not escape into another world. It is the triumph of God in this world—a triumph that lies on the other side of death, of war and tumult and tribulation, of the shaking of all that is. It is life beyond death—not the immortality of souls liberated from this world but the resurrection of the body and the re-creation of all things (1970a:220).

The terms ‘renewal’ and ‘transformation’ highlight both continuity and discontinuity. Salvation is continuous because it is the restoration of the good creation. Redemption means discontinuity because sin has corrupted and polluted the creation and it is worthy only of judgement and death. How can this discontinuity be held with continuity? Newbigin uses three Biblical images that stress both continuity and discontinuity: the germination of a seed, the birth of a child, and the purification of fire. All of these images stress that life comes out of death, conflict, pain, and destruction. Perhaps the image of purifying fire best depicts the continuity and discontinuity. He says: “All things must pass through fire, a purifying fire, a fire which will destroy that which is unfit to endure. Some of our work will be destroyed; some of it, by God’s grace may pass the test. The point is that we ourselves hope for a personal future. It is that we hope that what we have done... may come through that fire cleansed and fit for a place in God’s new city” (1972f:95).

This view of salvation has important implications for the issue of social activity in the evangelical and ecumenical tradition. In the evangelical tradition, continuity and comprehensive restoration needs to be recovered; in the ecumenical tradition, discontinuity, judgement, and death (even otherworldliness! e.g., 1970d:6) need to be recaptured. For the church that has spiritualized salvation, there will be little motivation to be involved in the social, political, and economic life of the world. If salvation has to do with the whole created order then we will be deeply committed to battling evil wherever it manifests itself in human life. On the other hand, the discontinuity that comes as a result of God’s judgement on sin means that we cannot reduce salvation to programs of political, social, and economic improvement. All our social action is corrupted by sin and must be purified by fire. We cannot build God’s kingdom (1968b:24). “There is simply no direct road linking our activities with the consummation of God’s kingdom” (1970a:227; 1968b:24; cf. 1969e:119).

No theological question has more immediate practical implications than the one we are dealing with now. If our emphasis is placed on the transience of the world, then we shall be little interested in programs for its improvement, and much interested in what happens to the individual human person as he prepares or does not prepare for his eternal destiny. If, on the other hand, our emphasis is on the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth, we may be tempted to reduce the gospel to a program of social and political action in which the human person has no ultimate significance. That neither of these possibilities is a merely theoretical one, is a fact that does not need to be documented in any Christian gathering (1970a:216).

If the church understands salvation to be both a present reality and future hope, involving renewed fellowship with God and renewed harmony and justice among humans and between humanity and the non-human creation, to be comprehensive in scope and restorative in nature, to be both continuous and discontinuous with our present creational life, then the divide between the evangelical and ecumenical traditions of the church will be seen to be a false one based on a misunderstanding of salvation.

#### *7.4.3. The Nature of Social Action*

The nature of social action depends on the way one understands the relationship between the salvation of the kingdom and present history. There are two dangers in relating the two. The first is an identification of the salvation of the kingdom with history. This leads to an uncritical triumphalism wherein the church merely becomes an auxiliary to the social and political programs of the day. The second danger is to separate the salvation of the kingdom from history. This leads to a selfish withdrawal in which the church avoids all social responsibility. How is one to walk between these two extremes and properly relate the salvation of the kingdom to history? What are the implications of this relation for social action?

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the outpouring of His Spirit the kingdom of God has entered history. The church experiences a foretaste of that kingdom but the work of God's Spirit cannot be confined within the boundaries of the church. A number of questions arise: How does the inbreaking kingdom affect history? Can it be identified in such a way that history can be seen as a continuous line toward the consummated kingdom? Or will there be conflict between the power of the kingdom and the course of history? If the church is the bearer of this new life in some kind of concentrated way, how will the life of the church relate to the ongoing history around her? If the work of the Spirit works beyond the church how can we identify these "signs of the kingdom" and thus become involved?

The Bible offers us no hope that the kingdom will be realized in history this side of the return of Jesus Christ (1993h:186). The New Testament gives us a picture of the future that includes a deepening of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers. It speaks of the suffering of the church as the bearer of the new life of the kingdom that lives with a hope in the promise of a new world and by its suffering witnesses to that kingdom. Newbigin is not a triumphalist. History is not an incremental development that culminates in the consummated kingdom. It is, rather, deepening conflict, antithetical struggle, crisis, agony, and a suffering witness as signs of the

presence of God's kingdom, the end that God has promised (1967b:118; 1972g:68-70).

This means that we cannot build God's kingdom (1968b:24). There is no road of continuity from here in history to there in the consummated kingdom. There is no "smooth forward movement" (1972g:68) along the path of history to the end. Our social and political actions on behalf of the justice and peace of the kingdom are not the placing of building blocks of the kingdom that will ultimately lead to the completed kingdom.

What then is the nature of our social activity? If it does not build God's kingdom, does this not render all social, political, and economic activity futile or at least inferior to the more important task of preparing for the eternal kingdom? For Newbigin the answer to the question of the nature of deeds of justice and mercy comes in three points. First, our social activity has the character of witness to the presence and power of the kingdom. Newbigin expresses this a number of ways. The church's social activity is hope in action (1974h:38). It is an acted prayer for the coming of the kingdom. Action for justice and mercy is salvation in action (1974b:109).

It is a disastrous misunderstanding to think that we can enjoy salvation through Jesus Christ and at the same time regard action for justice in the world as a sort of optional extra—or even as an inferior substitute for the work of passing on the good news of salvation. Action for social justice *is* salvation in action. Of course it is true that no action of ours can do more than produce a *little* more justice in the world (1974b:109).

While it can only produce a little more justice in the world, these actions are the overflow of love (1993h:186) and as such function as signs and pointers to the kingdom that is coming.

The works of mercy, of healing, of liberation—all are part of the breaking in of a new reality. They are parts of it and therefore signs of it.... the deeds must not be separated from the new reality of which they are a part. They are part of the overflowing of God's grace. Jesus' deeds of love were not part of a contrived programme with some ulterior purpose: they were the overflowing of the love which filled his whole being. Just so, the Church's deeds of love ought to be—not contrived signs but natural and spontaneous signs of the new reality in which we have been made sharers through Christ" (1974b:93).

They are signs of the kingdom rather than instruments that establish God's kingdom: "They are not the *means* by which God establishes his kingdom. They are witnesses to its present reality" (1963g:43).

Second, social activity is aimed at conversion. Newbigin begins one of his talks to the clergy with a number of questions around the social work of the church.

What are we really doing? What do we hope to achieve by this work? It is, after all, only a drop in the bucket compared with the vast needs of this city of three million people. Why not leave this kind of work to the Corporation and Government? Why not? (1974b:91)

Newbigin does not believe that social work is bait that will make people swallow the preaching of the gospel. Our social action must have no ulterior motive; it must be performed from true love and compassion (cf. 1993h:186).

... the deeds of healing and liberation must not be separated from the new reality of which they are a part. They are part of the overflowing of God's grace. Jesus' deeds of love were not part of a contrived programme with some ulterior purpose: they were the overflowing of the love which filled his whole being. Just so, the Church's deeds of love ought to be—not contrived signs but natural and spontaneous signs of the new reality in which we have been made sharers through Christ. Those who have received so much cannot keep it to themselves. It must overflow in love to others (1974b:93).

Does this mean that we have no desire to convert people? Newbigin relates the story of one of the church workers in the slums when he was asked "Have you come here to convert us?" quite rightly answered "Yes." If conversion is seen simply as a switch from one religious community to another then conversion is not the aim. But if conversion means a meeting with Jesus Christ which changes the person and conditions that have created the slums, then the church aims at conversion. "We are agents of change who cannot be content unless others also join us in being agents of change. We are out to convert people, not just feed them" (1974b:93).

It follows that there must be words attached to the deeds. As he presses the question of the social witness of the church, Newbigin continues to argue what we have seen above (1974b:93-95). Words interpret the signs, and signs validate the words; not every word needs a deed and not every deed needs a word; there are many different gifts and callings; both the verbal witness from those gifted in evangelism and the act of justice and mercy from those gifted for that task must be seen to arise out of the "same reality—the reality of a new power, a new reign which has broken into the world" (1974b:94). The acts of mercy and justice must be recognizably connected to the community that believes and embodies the gospel of the kingdom. A close link between the deeds and the community that believes the gospel is essential.

A third answer to the question of the nature of the church's social witness is that God's saving work will spill over the bounds of the church even where Jesus is not acknowledged (1972g:71). The church's social action may thus have a salting impact on society. The church is an agent of God's kingdom. As such it struggles against all injustice that stands against the justice of God's kingdom (1974b:107). In this struggle there may be partial victories and there may be a measure of justice that results. In this way the church is salt in a decaying world. But that justice of the kingdom will be partial, shot through with sin, and incomplete. The justice of the kingdom will not be seen in fullness until the end. Yet the end victory is promised. Unfortunately, Newbigin does not elaborate this point.

#### *7.4.4. Justice and Mercy*

These deeds of love will be both deeds of mercy and justice. During the 1960s a recognition of the church's task to pursue justice and change social structures dominated the missiological agenda (Bosch 1991:402-403). This was the result of the growing participation of the churches from Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the WCC (Duchrow 1991:556). Much emphasis was put on tackling the fundamental causes of humans suffering. There was a tendency to treat mercy with contempt, as mere ambulance service, since in the end it did not solve the root cause of the problem. Mercy

treated the symptoms and left the root disease untouched. Newbigin addresses the issue of the relation between mercy and justice several times but most fully in a paper written for a consultation between the Christian Agency for Social Action (CASA) and leaders of the Indian churches (1973a). He was asked by the CASA what the churches should expect from the CASA.

Newbigin notes that the CASA is responsible for both emergency relief (mercy) and community rehabilitation (justice). He recognizes that the emphasis of the day is on tackling the root causes of human suffering and not providing an ambulance service. "It is not enough to deploy Good Samaritans around the place; we must also guard the road" (1973a:546). Newbigin recognizes that this is a valid concern. He is himself critical of many social programs that "have been perhaps to some extent instruments of charity, but not instruments of justice. I think our programmes in general have stopped short at the point where they could challenge the existing order" (1971b:257). He insists that the service of the church "involves not only the personal service that I may do for [my neighbour], but also those political actions which may be necessary to break structures of injustice, which dehumanise him, and to create new structures wherein a genuinely human social existence is possible." He regretfully admits that "Christians have too often taken a conservative attitude to political structures" (1972h:155). So Newbigin is clear that part of the church's mission is the pursuit of justice. It is not a matter of 'either-or' but 'both-and'. One cannot leave the person dying at the side of the road while he or she goes to organize a police force. Therefore, mercy will always have a natural priority. While both are necessary it is acts of mercy that maintain "first priority."

If we allow ourselves to be persuaded that 'ambulance work' is something to be treated with contempt, we have surrendered the basic Christian position and left the field to those who destroy the human person for the sake of social planning. We must do both: we must care for the victim of disaster or injustice, and we must also undertake those measures of social engineering or revolution which are needed to prevent disaster and injustice from happening. But I submit that we have the whole Gospel with us when we say that the first priority goes to the direct response to human need (1973a:546).

#### 7.4.5. *Justice and the 'Signs of the Times'*

To further elucidate the nature of the church's action for justice, Newbigin raises two more issues. The first is how to read the signs of the times. This language is taken from Scripture (Matthew 16:3), entered theological discourse during the 1960s especially because of its use by Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, and now pervades contemporary ecclesiastical discussion (Gomez 1989:365). Vatican II declared in *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), that to carry out its role as a servant "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 4, Abbott 1962:201-202).

Newbigin is heavily influenced by Berkhof's discussion (Berkhof 1966:197-205). According to Newbigin, history forms a coherent whole and Christ is the clue for understanding this universal history. A narration of universal history can be done only by one who sees the point of the story and knows where the story is going. To speak of Christ as the clue to universal history is to say that history finds its meaning in the

revelation of Jesus Christ. Knowing that history will end in a redeemed and restored creation enables us to interpret history and also to participate in God's work.

The problem is a mass of depressing evidence that seems to indicate that the church cannot interpret history. Christians in the 1930s confidently interpreted the rise of the Nazis as God's action on behalf of the German people. Many others at the present time are interpreting the cultural, political, and technological revolutions of the time to be God's work. Newbigin points to a recent debate between H. H. Wolf (1966) and M. M. Thomas (1966). Wolf, drawing on his recent experience of German theological struggles when the church utterly misunderstood Naziism, questions Thomas' discernment of God's work in the renaissance of Asian religions and the modernization of India. Bosch adds many more examples of a misinterpretation of signs: benevolent colonialism, apartheid, national socialism, secularism, communist revolutions (1991:429; cf. Berkhof 1966:201-202).

Newbigin recognizes that there is cause for some caution; yet the question must be pressed: "how can we possibly *refuse* to try to interpret what God is doing in the secular events of our time?" (1969c:81; cf. Berkhof 1966:197-205; Bosch 1991:430). The prophetic message always interpreted the events of their times. Jesus exhorted his hearers to discern the signs of the times. "Whatever be the dangers of this enterprise, are we permitted to abandon it?" (*ibid*).

If one were to abandon interpreting what God is doing in history what would be the alternative? Indeed, if one is to be committed to taking part in the public life of the day it will be on the basis of some interpretation of what is going on. What are the crucial issues? What are the forces at work? To abandon our public duty is a dereliction of duty. One must commit oneself to action in the public realm and this means interpreting history from the standpoint of faith in Jesus Christ.

If history is not a meaningless jumble of events, if God is working out a purpose in it, it is necessary to try to interpret—even if only in very modest, tentative and provisional terms—what he is doing. If we are to know where to act, where to throw our weight, where to commit ourselves, we must have some provisional answer to the question: Where is God at work and where is the Devil? (1969c:82).

The great temptation will be to interpret all successful movements as the work of God. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see the error of this way. Many western Christians interpreted the spread of western power around the world as a sign of God's activity. However, this is ambiguous at best. Newbigin asks: What practical content can we give to the faith that God is working out his purpose in history and the clue to this purpose is to be found in Jesus Christ? How are we to interpret God's action in history and so learn to commit ourselves to obedient partnership?" (1969c:83).

Newbigin's answer is vague; it leaves many questions. This ambiguity arises in part from his weak development of the work of the Spirit in world history as noted in earlier chapters. The following quote summarizes the most concrete criteria he gives:

To one who has made that commitment [to Jesus Christ and his church], the disclosure of God in Jesus Christ is determinative of his interpretation of all the events of history. Wherever he sees men being set free for responsible sonship of God; wherever he sees the growth of mutual responsibility of man for man and of people for people; wherever he sees evidence of the character of Jesus Christ being reflected in the lives of men; there he will conclude that God is at work, and that he is summoned to be God's

fellow-worker, even where the Name of Christ is not acknowledged. By contrast, wherever he sees the reverse process at work, men being enslaved, mutual responsibility being denied, and the opposite of the character of Christ being produced in men; there he will recognize the work of the Devil and will know himself summoned to resist. Jesus Christ is the sole criterion (1969c:83-84).

Bosch offers an answer very similar to Newbigin. In fact, Bosch's whole discussion is very close to Newbigin's. Like Newbigin Bosch presses the question of *how* we might interpret the signs of the time (1991:428-431). Many events have been misread by the 20<sup>th</sup> century church to point of acute embarrassment to those who hailed these signs so enthusiastically. All events are ambiguous and so the gospel must be the *norma normans*, the norming norm. Bosch concludes: "There is not doubt, then. We *have* to interpret the 'signs of the times'" (1991:430). We may err and interpret the events incorrectly; yet we have been given a compass in the gospel. Bosch offers his criterion for interpretation:

We are given some crucial guidelines, some lodestars which indicate God's will and presence in the context. Where people are experiencing and working for justice, freedom, community, reconciliation, unity, and truth, in a spirit of love and selflessness, we may dare to see God at work. Wherever people are being enslaved, enmity between humans is fanned, and mutual accountability is denied in a spirit of individual or communal self-centrism, we may identify the counter-forces of God's reign at work... This enables us to take courage and make decisions, even if they remain relative in nature, ... since our judgements do not coincide with God's final judgement (1991:431).

Yet most events exhibit both tendencies at once. The generality of Bosch's and Newbigin's answers highlight the importance of the need for much more study in this area.

#### 7.4.6. *Justice, Paternalism and Coercion*

In his autobiography, Newbigin relates that what forced him "to think very hard about the Christian approach to social justice" (1993d:211) was his confrontation with a western development worker who organized a small town community to coerce Newbigin to accede to their demands. With hindsight he grants that his pursuit of justice had been too paternalistic. Further, he was sure that "coercion is an inevitable element in securing justice" (*ibid*).

While this kind of coercion was inevitable in securing justice, the problem with the new method of community organization was that it did not link justice to reconciliation. Rather, the method continued to foment dissatisfaction and conflict between the powers and the masses.

This kind of coercion is one thing; the kind of coercion that radical groups in ecumenical circles had opened up was another. An increasingly radical approach to social justice characterized the WCC (Gill 1991:1055). The WCC had given a sum of \$200,000 to an organization that was fighting racism and was known to buy guns and bombs. This action of the WCC caused tremendous shock waves throughout the world. This action brought into sharp focus the important issue that Christians who struggle for social justice cannot evade (Gill 1991:1055-1058). Over the next decade the WCC

struggled with the issue and produced two major reports (WCC 1973; WCC 1983). Does a pursuit of justice require, permit, or forbid the use of violence directed against the established powers? (1971b:262)

The issue of coercion coming from “community organization” and “conscientization methods,” exacerbated by this radical action of the WCC, should have been a catalyst for a deepening reflection on the issue for Newbigin. One would expect to find further reflection on this issue in his writing. However, that is not the case. He reflects on this issue only a couple of times after this and does so quite briefly.

The main Christian tradition affirms that force cannot be used against the established order in the pursuit of justice. This creates the impression among those in need of justice that the church is on the side of the established order. The church is perceived to be a community which does not challenge the political, social, and economic powers. It stands on the side of the powers and will not give up power or challenge the powers on behalf of the victims. Newbigin believes that there is an ambiguity at the very heart of this tradition.

He explicates this ambiguity by comparing the Christian tradition in the area of social action to that of international affairs. Here the main Christian tradition has always supported the idea of a just war. This is because coercion is part of the very nature of political order. While there are good grounds for supporting the established order—even an unjust order is better than anarchy and chaos—questions may be raised when there is an unjust political order that is clearly tyrannical. He concludes:

It seems to me that the main Christian tradition is illogical if it sanctions the just war but refuses, under any circumstances, to sanction the just revolution. It seems to me that the possibility of a just revolution cannot be ruled out *a priori* on the grounds of the main Christian tradition (1971b:263).

Newbigin concludes that coercion and force *may* be a proper instrument in the pursuit of justice. However, he never moves beyond this to wrestle with the kind of circumstances that would justify revolutionary force and even violence (cf. Gill 1991; WCC 1973; WCC 1983).

#### *7.4.7. Deeds of Mercy and Justice Connected to the Local Congregation*

As noted above, Newbigin was concerned that deeds of mercy and justice be recognizable as actions of a community that believes and embodies the gospel. During the 1960s numerous ecclesiastical organizations, boards, committees, agencies, and programs—both denominational and inter-denominational—were formed to address burgeoning social needs. Existing alongside of these socially active institutions were bodies formed for church planting and missions. The problem was that these organizations were separated from the local congregations. The life of the ordinary congregation carried on, little affected by any of the agency’s activities (1977a:244). The dichotomy between ordinary congregational life and programs conducted by supra-congregational agencies was disastrous for both the local congregation and the institution’s social program. It was disastrous for the church because, when the life of the congregation is separated from what is done in the name of Christ for the world, the

church loses its self-understanding as a missionary body and reverts to being a community concerned with its own members. The local congregation does not ‘own’ the missional activity; it is the work of some distant agency which carries on the work supported by the offerings of the local churches (1971b:256). Mission is understood to be an activity that continues straight out from the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ into the street and the factory and the office where his righteousness and peace meet the powers of evil. It is not seen that one cannot be an authentic communicant without being committed to action in the world, that what is done in the sanctuary is not a private act for the benefit of the participants but the focus of a public action which is for the whole of society (1977a:244).

The dichotomy is equally disastrous for the social witness of the agency. The proper nature of acts of justice and mercy is blurred when these are not seen to arise out of the fellowship of believers. Deeds of compassion and justice “are nothing in themselves except signs pointing to that greater reality which can never be fully grasped in a programme of social action” (*ibid*). Their proper character as signs of the healing power of the gospel is effectively eliminated when they are cut off from their source in a community that embodies the good news. They become one more socially active program alongside of many others and are no longer a witness to the gospel. They can also “become expressions of a bad conscience and a sense of moral indignation rather than an outflow of the gospel” (*ibid*).

The problem is even more pronounced when the church co-operates with a state social agency. Newbigin believes that there should be co-operation between Christians and governmental agencies. However, if the mercy and compassion was to retain its proper character as a sign of the gospel, the “essential thing is that the congregation as such should be involved. People should be able to see that being a member of a Christian congregation means caring for your neighbours as surely as it means sharing in worship and in the ministry of the Word and sacraments—indeed the Word and sacraments of the gospel are emptied of their meaning if they are not part of the life of a caring congregation” (1994k:36).

In his capacity of bishop of Madras, Newbigin was constantly addressing social needs. He attempted to connect all deeds of mercy and justice to the local congregation. An example of this is evident in a talk given to one of those newly created supra-congregational agencies—the Christian Agency for Social Action (CASA) (1973a). The address unfolds the thesis that the ministry of the CASA should be “to bring about such a fundamental change in the life of the churches that *caring for the community as a whole* becomes an integral element in Church membership” (1973a:543). The task of the CASA is not to be an agency which carries out its task of caring for various social needs within India apart from the local church. Rather it is to co-ordinate the efforts of the local church so that they are recognizable as a body that cares for the *whole* community. The local congregations should be involved in the CASA in at least two ways: the local churches should participate in determining what programs should be developed; and their members should be trained in active caring, specifically as health care and emergency relief workers (1973a:544-545). Social agencies of the church are necessary for enabling the congregation to be more actively involved in the social needs of its neighbourhood. If the CASA replaces that involvement, it truncates the church’s social witness.

Newbigin insisted constantly that a congregation which is a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel “will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighbourhood” (1989e:229). The twofold relation of the church to God in Christ and to its place calls the church to mercy and justice for the place in which it is set.

With the development of powerful denominational structures, nationwide agencies for evangelism and social action, it can happen that these things are no longer seen as the direct responsibility of the local congregation except insofar as they are called on to support them financially. But if the local congregation is not perceived in its own neighborhood as the place from which good news overflows in good action, the programs for social and political action launched by the national agencies are apt to lose their integral relation to the good news and come to be seen as part of a moral crusade rather than the gospel (1989e:229).

#### 7.4.8. *The Church as Servant Community*

While the image of sign, foretaste (sometimes first-fruit or deposit), and instrument (sometimes agent or task force) of the kingdom dominates Newbigin’s understanding of the church, the image of a ‘servant community’ can be found a number of times throughout his writings of this period (1971b). The image of the church as servant was intimated at Vatican II (1962-1965) but became more central in the years following that council. Similarly a servant ecclesiology marks many ecumenical statements since 1966 (Dulles 1987:92-93). Dulles has treated this ecclesiological model in detail (1987:89-102). Newbigin writes that the “fundamental form” (1968c:131) or “authentic nature” (1971b:261) of the church will always be the form of a servant. The images do not stand in opposition to one another. Rather it is as the congregation is a humble servant of Jesus for the sake of its neighbours that it fulfills its role as first-fruit, sign, and instrument of the reign of God (1974b:89). The primary context in which this image is found is the social task of the church.

Newbigin places before us two Biblical images of service. The first is of the prostitute who visits Jesus while he is a guest of a respectable and devout religious leader. She anoints Jesus’ feet with precious ointment as an overflow of gratitude because Jesus has forgiven and delivered her from sin and restored her to fellowship with God. “In this little picture one has a true image of what service means—the spontaneous overflow of a heart which has been broken and healed, uncalculated, extravagant love poured out at the feet of the Lord” (1972h:153). Service is the response of love to God who has forgiven us; other people are the “authorised representatives of the Master to receive that love” (1972h:154). The second is the well-known story of Jesus stripping, taking a towel and stooping to wash the disciples’ feet. “The church will prove its faithfulness to the Lord when it is seen in the same posture” (1972f:107; 1974b:95).

The church can be criticized for a number of ways it has failed to be a servant in the past. The social activity of the church has not evoked the costly sacrificial service of its ordinary members. Newbigin notes that very few churches have responded to his call to take up one of the slums as its responsibility. The church has sought prestige in society rather than humble service. The church’s social action has been an instrument of condescending charity in solidarity with the existing order rather than the pursuit of

justice in humble identification with the marginalized (1971b:259-260).

Being a servant church means solidarity with the poor and deeds of justice and mercy that flow from love on their behalf (1971b:260). And this is essential to the very nature of the church: "If we are faithful to the New Testament we shall recognize that the care of the poor belongs, along with the Word and the Sacraments, to the fundamental bases of the Church's life" (1969d:20; cf. 1971b:258).

What I am trying to stress is that we are dealing here with something which is not, as it were, one of the possible activities of the church. We cannot say: 'A Church may or may not be active in social service.' A congregation cannot say: 'This Church is not interested in social service: it is interested in something else.' It is not this kind of question we are dealing with. We are dealing with a question which concerns the integrity of the church itself, its fundamental character as a Church.... It is a question of whether the Church in its fundamental character is a servant Church; whether it is possible to have in any valid sense a Christian congregation, or a Christian liturgy, or a Christian ministry in which this concern for the poor is not integrally involved (1971b:260).

This is not a condescending, paternalistic charity. In the past the church has been involved in social work providing charity while entrenched in the established order. When the church is seen as part of the established order rather than on the side of the oppressed "it creates the impression of being a society which accepts, and is content to benefit from the established order, and at the same time to reach out the hand of charity as far as possible to those who are the victims of that order" (1971b:263). Therefore, the time has come when "we must somehow find ways by which the Church as a corporate body in its ordinary life, its liturgy, its ministry, its congregational fellowship can be recognisably a body which is on the side of the oppressed, the rural share-cropper, the coolie, shockingly exploited as he is in the present feudal structure of our village society" (1971b:264).

How can the church take on this servant nature to the exploited in the whole of its life? Newbigin points to the early church as an example. It was able to take solidarity with and justice for the poor into its very congregational life. He points to the office of the diaconate that was concerned for the care of the poor, widows, underprivileged, and marginalized. This brought compassion to the poor into "the very heart of the Church's ministerial life" (1971b:259). As a result of this, care for the poor "penetrated to the very heart of the liturgy" (*ibid.*). The deacon who was responsible throughout the week for the poor, sick and underprivileged stood up at the time of intercession to share the urgent concerns for prayer. He also brought this concern to the heart of the liturgy when, at the point of the Lord's Supper, he collected gifts for the poor and then was responsible for their distribution. The ministry of the deacon also led to a recognition of solidarity of the whole church with the poor. This was so evident, says Newbigin, that the question 'Where is the Church?' or 'Where is Christ actually met now?' was answered, not where the word is truly preached or the sacraments duly administered or where there is a ministry in valid succession from the apostles, but where the poor are served in Christ's name (1971b:260).

#### *7.4.9. The Gathered Congregation and Social Witness: Structures, Leadership, and Worship*

If the church is to be a servant church that pursues justice and mercy, there must be structures that enable this service to take place (1971b; 1974b:80f.), leadership that encourages, equips, and leads in deeds of justice and mercy (1974b:74-78, 80; 1971b:261), and a liturgy that nourishes a social vision (1968d:73; 1973b:6; 1974b:81, 98). It is not necessary to expand on these themes since they are taken up elsewhere (6.3, 6.4, 6.5). What is important here is to note that Newbigin links leadership, structures, and worship, on the one hand, with the social witness of the church on the other.

### 7.5. THE MISSIONARY CALLING OF THE LAITY

While Newbigin distinguishes four different forms of social witness, he did not view them as four equal components in the church's mission. From the earliest years of his ministry (cf. 1952a) until the end of his life (cf. 1995b), Newbigin insisted that the mission of believers in the world of culture is the primary place where the church's missionary engagement takes place (1989e:139). During his bishopric in Madras he expressed this conviction clearly:

I do not believe that the role of the Church in a secular society is primarily exercised in the corporate action of the churches as organized bodies in the political or cultural fields.... On the contrary, I believe that it is through the action of Christian lay people, playing their roles as citizens, workers, managers, legislators, etc., not wearing the label 'Christian' but deeply involved in the secular world in the faith that God is at work there in a way which is *not* that of the 'Christendom' pattern (1972a:127).

Newbigin's stress on the callings of individual believers in the world is not unique. He developed his position in the context of the ecumenical tradition's growing emphasis on the laity. J. H. Oldham and the Oxford World Conference on Church, Community, and State in 1937, the establishment of lay academies throughout Europe after 1945, the founding of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey in 1946 led by Suzanne de Dietrich and Hendrick Kraemer, the establishment of WCC Department on the Laity in 1955 led by secretary Hans-Reudi Weber, and important books by Kraemer (1958) and Yves Congar (1957) on the laity and the church—all these are highlights in this growing concern for the laity that shaped Newbigin. The remainder of this section will be devoted to explicating Newbigin's understanding of the calling of believers in the world.

#### 7.5.1. *Ecclesiological Foundations*

To speak of 'the missionary calling of the laity' as one of the sub-sections of 'the witness of the church' raises certain ecclesiological questions (Kraemer 1958:12, 155-160; Congar 1957). The church has been traditionally understood as a gathered community that engages in cultic or "religious" rituals, neglecting the fact that the majority of its life and work takes place outside the bounds of this institutional and gathered expression. Newbigin's understanding of the church goes a long way to healing this split.

Newbigin always places the church in an eschatological context. The gospel is a

gospel of the kingdom and the kingdom involves God's rule over all of creational life. His two most common ways of describing the church highlight that the church must be understood in the context of the kingdom. The most common way he describes the church is with the terms sign, instrument (or agent), and first fruit (sometimes deposit or foretaste) of the kingdom (5.2.3.). The formal definition that he often gives of the church points to the same thing even more clearly. "The church is the provisional incorporation of mankind into Jesus Christ" (5.2.2.; 1973c:111; 1994k:53).

Both of these descriptions of the church point to the fact that Newbigin does not understand the church simply as a religious community gathered to engage in certain religious rituals. Rather the church is the new humankind which already shares in the life of the kingdom of God and that life spans the whole of human affairs. He comments: "... the Holy Spirit is present in the believing congregation both gathered for praise and the offering up of spiritual sacrifice, and scattered throughout the community to bear the love of God into every secular happening and meeting" (1987b:4). The local congregation has two expressions—gathered and scattered.

Newbigin challenges the professionalization and clericalization of the Christendom church that understands the work of the church to be centred in the work of the clergy. Newbigin explains,

When men say 'The Church should go into educational work', they mean that the Church as an organized body should employ and pay teachers. But if thousands of Church members are teaching in the schools of the nation that is not regarded as 'Church work', we have largely lost the great Biblical conception of the Church as the Body of Christ through whose *entire* membership the Lord wills to do His will in the world. When we speak of the Church's evangelistic force, we generally mean its force of paid evangelists. But that is a caricature of the truth. The Church's evangelistic force is—or ought to be—its entire membership, nothing less (1952a: 185).

Yet Newbigin is not consistent with this insight. This can be highlighted by reference to the discussion of the church by New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos and by James Skillen's critique of Newbigin's language of 'lay theology.' In Scripture the term *ecclesia* can refer to the community that is the new humankind and to an identifiable congregation that gathers for worship. The New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos has noted that the word *ecclesia* is used in three different ways. The first refers to the new people of God in the totality of their lives as the re-constitution of humankind in Jesus Christ. As such its life comes to expression in the totality of its life and not only as it gathers for worship. The second use of 'church' refers to local identifiable congregations. These congregations are organized as communities and are recognizable as a human community in a certain place. The third use of the word *ecclesia* points to a community gathered for certain "religious" activities—worship, prayer, sacraments, and so forth (Ridderbos 1975:328-330). It is the first of these definitions of the church that the Evanston Assembly employs in an attempt to redefine the church as the new humankind over against long established patterns of ecclesial definition that reduce the church to a community that engages in cultic acts: "... the laity are not mere fragments of the church who are scattered about in the world and who come together again for worship, instruction, and specifically Christian fellowship on Sundays. They are the church's representatives, no matter where they are" (Evanston 1954:161). As the new humankind reconstituted in Jesus Christ, it comes to expression in the totality of their

lives not only when it gathers for worship, prayer, and fellowship. As such it is the church both when it is gathered and when it is scattered (Evanston 1954:161). It is this fundamental ecclesiological conviction that shapes Newbigin's commitment to the importance of the witness of believers in the totality of their lives as an important dimension of the missionary church. It may be asked, however, whether Newbigin is always consistent. Sometimes Newbigin follows the more traditional and common understanding and limits his use of the word church to the gathered local institutional expression and falls into the trap of seeing the laity as a fragment of the church scattered about in the world.

We find a clear example of the reduction of the church to the gathered, organized body in Newbigin's discussion about the laity. This comment is not simply an unfortunate statement that stands in tension with his normal use of the word 'church'; it highlights the way Newbigin often employed the term 'church.' He comments that the activities of believers in their individual callings are "in the line of God's will as revealed in Christ but... fall outside of the boundaries of that body explicitly committed to Christ by faith and baptism" (1967d:6). In this statement, the boundaries of the *ecclesia* do not extend to the church as it is scattered in the world of culture. Yet if the church is conceived as the new humankind, *ecclesia* is the people of God in the whole of life; no activity falls outside the boundaries of that body explicitly committed to Christ.

James Skillen is critical of Newbigin's use of the terms 'lay' men and women and 'lay' theology. He notes that when the apostle Paul addresses believers, he does so in their capacities as husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, or citizens who live under the authority of Jesus Christ in their various callings. He does not address them as 'lay men or women', implying that their "identity in those roles is as ecclesiastical non-professionals" (Skillen 1996:17). By contrast, Skillen believes that "the words 'lay person' should be a designation applied to church members who do not hold ecclesiastical office, and should not be used to describe the roles people have in nonecclesiastical areas of life" (:18). Skillen distinguishes between the church as an instituted local congregation and the church as the new humankind. He believes that Newbigin confuses these two by reference to 'lay' men and women, and 'lay' theology.<sup>6</sup>

It must be noted again that while this inconsistent use of the term 'church' and 'lay' person can confuse issues, Newbigin's primary ecclesiological thrust militates against defining the church merely as a gathered, organized religious institution. His emphasis on salvation as restorative in nature and comprehensive in scope, on the calling of the laity, and on the relationship of the church to the kingdom all finally prevent Newbigin's understanding of the church from being reduced to its gathered expression. While Newbigin may not always have been consistent with this theological insight concerning the church, it is clear that his primary understanding of the *ecclesia* is shaped by the broad scope of the coming kingdom. The believers at work in their

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<sup>6</sup>Herman Ridderbos makes a similar point: "Today there is much discussion of the "neglected office" (i.e. the office of *all* believers and of the problem of the *laity*. There would be, in my view, less confusion on this issue if it were seen that this office of all believers is not confined within the limits of the institutional church but that it penetrates every area of life. And there would be less need to speak about the *problem* of the laity if the communal activity of the believers in the world were also viewed as an expression, *Gestaltung*, of the church" (1965:27).

various callings is the church at work.

### 7.5.2. *Mission of the Laity as Focal Point*

The mission of believers in the world is the focal point of the church's mission (Kraemer 1958:136-138). It is in the context of the various callings of each member of the body that "the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ must be given" (1960b:28), because the "enormous preponderance of the Church's witness is the witness of the thousands of its members who work in field, home, office, mill or law court" (1951b:6; 1982e:2; cf. Moltmann 1975:66-67).

The primary mission of the laity is not to evangelize or even manifest the gospel in personal-ethical categories—although these are not excluded. It is much deeper than that: it is in the obedient exercise of their jobs in keeping with God's creational intent that they show themselves to be servants living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (1963g:57). The believer living under the Lordship of Christ in business or factory or government witnesses to "the true purpose for which God created [those structures]." To accept the existing structures as they are would be "to deny Christ's cosmic lordship" (1963g:57). We catch a glimpse of this in the sermon Newbigin delivered when he was installed as bishop of Madras. He reminded the church that "Christ is not just the Lord of Christians; he is Lord of all, absolutely and without qualification." Therefore, "the entire membership of the Church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of his lordship in every area of life" (1993h:203). Newbigin offers an example from Archbishop William Temple to illustrate this.

... a farmer who farms his land well but neglects to say his prayers will be certainly condemned by Christians as failing in his duty. But a farmer who says his prayers, and allows weeds, bad drainage, or soil erosion to spoil his land, is failing in his primary duty as a churchman. His primary ministry in the total life of the Body of Christ is to care rightly for the land entrusted to him. If he fails there, he fails in his primary Christian task (1952a:186).

Newbigin's concern for the calling of individual believers in the public square is a long standing one. As a student in Cambridge, his disappointment with the SCM's practice of simply emphasizing the ordained ministry as the primary place of Christian service led him to form a 'Christians in Business' society. This group was to provide a forum for Christians who were entering business to struggle with what it meant to be faithful to the gospel in that sector of life (1993h:17). As a newly appointed bishop he expressed the conviction that if the church in Asia was to become a missionary church it must attend to "the task of training Christian laymen to be effective Christians within their own special vocations." He continues, "We have to help the church member be a Christian *in his job*" (1950:144, italics his). A year later in his address to the diocese he outlined the four most pressing needs facing the church in India. Since the most important witness of the gospel will be done by believers in their various callings in the world— "the Church's front-line troops in her engagement with the world" (1951:6)—much more time must be given to equipping these people. As a veteran missionary he expressed the concern that the mission of the church in society had been reduced to the maintenance of educational, healing and service institutions. This narrow focus led to the "deep-seated and persistent failure of the churches to recognize that the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ must be given, and can only be given, in

the ordinary secular work of lay men and women in business, in politics, in professional work, as farmers, factory workers and so on” (1960b:27f.; cf. 1965f:10). In response to the urging of Hendrik Kraemer, Newbigin established a study centre in Madurai whose task was *inter alia* to equip the church’s lay membership for its “secular witness” (1993h:118-119).

His time in Geneva coincided with a growing interest in the calling of believers in the world fuelled by the breakdown of the *corpus Christianum* and growing secularism. In 1954 the department of the laity had been established in the WCC. By the New Delhi assembly of the WCC in 1961 the laity had become a central issue (New Delhi 1962:18-19, 85-90, 202-207). This led to a deepening conviction on his part of the centrality of the witness of believers in the world. When he returned to India as bishop of Madras these deepening convictions begin to emerge and find expression. He describes his earlier understanding of mission as being “too narrowly ecclesiastical.” At his installation service he preached Christ as Lord of all of life insisting that “the entire membership of the Church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of this lordship in every area of public life” (1993h:203). As bishop he understood his task to equip believers for this task and, indeed, this continued to be a major preoccupation during this time. He urged structural reforms that would equip all believers for their calling (1952a:187-189).

His return to the West did not dampen this concern. In fact, a major pillar in his call for a missionary engagement with the public square of Western culture was the calling of individual believers (1983d:41f.; 1986e:141-144; 1989e:229-231; 1994k:156, 174). Newbigin continues to refer to this dimension of the church’s mission as “primary” (1994:154); “Here is where the real missionary encounter takes place” (1986e:143). And so he writes:

There is urgent need for the Church to give higher priority to the formation of groups of Christian men and women in particular sectors of public life. These would include education, industry, commerce, politics, drama, the arts, the natural and social sciences, and historical studies. The groups would explore ways in which a Christian perspective can be developed in these areas, and ways in which this perspective can challenge and redirect contemporary practice (1994k:174).

In the third lecture he gave at Western Seminary he outlines three concrete points to enable the church to “speak the truth to Caesar.” It is the third that many today in North America are emphasizing. His third point calls for the church to challenge the public life of Western culture by itself being an embodiment of the new order of the kingdom. The other two points have to do with the calling of individual believers in culture. First “... it must be the responsibility of the Church to equip its members for active and informed participation in public life in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that participation” (1991h:81). “Second, if such training were widely available we could look for a time when many of those holding responsible positions of leadership in public life were committed Christians equipped to raise the questions and make innovations in these areas which the gospel requires” (1991h:84).

### 7.5.3. *Callings in Culture: Faithfulness and Suffering*

When the Christian is faithful in living the story of the gospel in his or her calling,

suffering will be the result. How integral suffering is to the witness of the church can be seen in the following statement: “The closeness of our missionary thinking to the New Testament may perhaps be in part judged by the place which we accord to suffering in our understanding of the calling of the Church” (1964g:42). In the missionary encounter between the gospel and culture, there is a clash of fundamental assumptions. In any encounter with anti-Christian beliefs that shape a culture, there are three possibilities: withdrawal: “running away from real duties for fear of compromising”; accommodation: “acquiescing in the preventable evils because they appear to be part of the structure of the secular world”; or faithfulness and suffering (1952a:188).

This encounter with anti-Christian ideological or religious beliefs is especially acute in the public square where the believer works. In a series of Bible studies on 1 Peter, Newbigin contrasts the world of business driven by the profit motive with an understanding of business shaped by the gospel. He poses a number of questions to illustrate this antithesis in the realm of business. Does a Christian employee in a store persuade his customers to buy worthless products on orders from his employer or challenge the firm and risk his livelihood? Does a businessman challenge the whole standard of business ethics if it is wrong and risk status and livelihood? How does a businessman relate the sermon on the mount to the fiercely competitive market? All these examples differ but the point is the same: obedience to the Lord of economics and business will be costly. He comments, “... if we take seriously our duty as servants of God within the institutions of human society, we shall find plenty of opportunity to learn what it means to suffer for righteousness’ sake, and we shall learn that to suffer for righteousness’ sake is really a blessed thing” (1960b:112; cf. 1980d:10).

#### *7.5.4. The Need for the Church Community*

Newbigin’s emphasis on the work of the church as it is dispersed does not diminish the importance of the church as it is gathered as a community—in fact, it highlights its significance (1952a:188; cf. Congar 1957:309-332). The witness of believers in their callings in the world requires a faithful fellowship of believers. One can feel the passion of his concern in the following questions he poses to his fellow church leaders early in his first bishopric.

Are we taking seriously our duty to support them in their warfare? Do we seriously regard them as the front-line troops?... What about the scores of Christians working in offices and shops in that part of the city? Have we ever done anything seriously to strengthen their Christian witness, to help them in facing the very difficult ethical problems which they have to meet every day, to give them the assurance that the whole fellowship is behind them in their daily spiritual warfare? (1951b:6; cf. 1952a:187).

In his writings on the calling of individual believers we find at least four different ways that the local instituted church equips, supports, and nourishes the church in its task in the world.

The first is a fellowship that nourishes the life of Christ through the Word, sacraments, and prayer (1974b:79-81). This has been treated above.

The second is a fellowship that supports all believers in their callings (1952a:188). Those who dissent from the reigning plausibility structure in different sectors will run

risks. A “corollary” of the call for the mission of the laity is that there are ways “in which Christians can stand by one another and support one another in taking the risks that are involved in radically questioning the reigning assumptions that control the different sectors of our culture” (1994j:10). In his discussion of the believer engaged in business who joins the battle with powers that oppose the gospel he comments:

There are existential decisions which must be taken from time to time in the midst of the battle by those who are actually engaged in the battle and who will pay the price of the decision. But they are not decisions which ought to be taken in solitude. We ought not to ask each Christian in solitude to bear the burden of the real front line warfare.... the Church must find ways of expressing its solidarity with those who stand in these frontier situations, who have to make decisions that may cost not only their own livelihood but also that of their families (1960a:111).

He never spells out explicitly what forms of support this might take but the context of his discussions suggest that this would include at least encouragement, prayer, financial support, and insight (1952a:188).

The third are structures that equip the body of Christ for their tasks. In a lecture at the founding assembly of the EACC, Newbigin argues that if the church is to embody her missionary calling at least three bold structural experiments were urgent: in forms of ministry, in equipping lay members for their different “secular” callings, and in forms of congregational life (1960o:30-33). Bold experiments were necessary because existing congregational structures that dominated the western church were shaped in a time when Christianity had ceased to be a missionary religion (1966b:102).

During his early years as a missionary Newbigin points to three things. The first is what he calls a church meeting—a creative structural innovation to connect the worship life of the church with the missional calling of the laity in culture.<sup>7</sup> The church or congregational meeting was a familiar gathering in the Indian church and was being revived in Britain and the U.S.A. at this time. Newbigin calls for a missional restructuring of this meeting. So conceived, a church meeting is “a gathering of God’s anointed people, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to find out together what witness and service He wants of them from week to week, as individuals and a body” (1951c:5). In each congregation once a month the communicant members should meet after Holy Communion *inter alia* to share experiences of God’s grace in their daily lives, to bring forward problems that various members face as they witness to Christ’s kingdom in the course of their daily callings, and to discuss areas in which the whole fellowship may give special witness (1951:5). The second was a study centre that would carry out research and training in social and political issues in light of the gospel. This missiological analysis of Indian culture would provide resources that would equip Christians in their callings in public life (1993h:119). Third, other initiatives were launched in the way of conferences and meetings that enabled “laymen” in different professions to consider together what God was calling them to do at the national and local level (1952a:187-189).

In his later bishopric in Madras, when the callings of the laity were the centre of attention and when Newbigin himself gave much more attention to the social calling of

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<sup>7</sup>It is important to note that the discussion of the church meeting falls between sections entitled ‘The Only Source of the Church’s Life—the Gospel’ and ‘The Layman in the World.’

the church, suggestions of and experiments with structural features that would support believers in their individual callings increased. Newbigin recognized that in a highly differentiated society more is required than a parish church. He proposed different structures to equip believers: training leadership for industrial workers; 'Cottage Prayer Meetings' revamped to equip the laity; small group ecumenical Bible studies formed on the basis of specialized expertise; "frontier studies" i.e., discussion and study groups of people in particular callings such as those of lawyer, doctor, businessperson, government servant, teacher, professional administrator; small groups formed around a concern for action in some particular sector of public life; a Community Service Centre that co-ordinated and organized the task of training men and women for witness in their daily work (1974b:40, 76-77, 80-81, 90, 102-103).

This concern continued during the later years of Newbigin's life when he called for a missionary encounter with western culture. He continued to urge the church to search for structures that would equip the believer for his or her calling in the world (1980f:64-67; 1986e:143; 1994k:73, 154, 156, 174). "There is a need for 'frontier groups,' groups of Christians working in the same sectors of public life, meeting to thrash out the controversial issues of their business or profession in the light of their faith" (1989e:230-231). He went on to explain: "I am thinking of groups of men and women in—say—a particular profession, or a particular sector of commerce or industry or in one of the sectors of education or politics, who can wrestle on the basis of direct personal involvement with the claims of Christian obedience in particular situations, who can share experiences of the grace of God in this wrestling, who can pray and worship together out of the midst of these shared experiences. I believe that, in our kind of society, such groups will have to be the basic units of the church if it is to be a sign to the world of the reign of God in Jesus" (1980d:6). Closely related to this was Newbigin's persistent call for a "theology of secular work" (1952a:188), a "declericalized theology" (1985a:7; 1986e:141; 1994k:73), or "lay theology" (1994j:10). In 1952 Newbigin defined this as "corporate thinking of trained theologians and laymen in different areas of life" (1952a:188). The dualistic way of approaching Scripture had eroded any foundation upon which the mission of the laity could rest. This created an urgent need to struggle with Scripture's teaching on the calling of the laity.

The fourth aspect of the gathered church's life that supports the callings of the laity is a leadership that enables (1989e:231).

For the Christian layman who is really out in the world, really seeking to be subject for the Lord's sake to the human institutions about which we are speaking, the political order, the economic order and so forth, really seeking to face the desperate difficult decisions that this involves, seeking to bear on his heart the obligation of his participation in these orders, to keep his conscience both sharp and clear, this man knows that he needs one thing: he needs a true pastor (1960b:118f).

A leadership that equips believers for their tasks in the world is a frequent theme in Newbigin's writings (cf. Bosch 1991:472; Moltmann 1977:303). In the above section on leadership, we have noted that Newbigin suggested that ministers can support people in their daily callings with the word (interpreting God's purposes for that time; offer of forgiveness; cf. 1982e:2) and sacraments, through prayer (1960b:119; 1962h:5), and by providing space and structures for people to struggle together toward faithfulness. In his sermons to pastors, as bishop of Madras, Newbigin exhorts the presbyters under his care

to give high priority to training people in their congregations for their callings in the world. Only half of the pastor's work is to gather the people together for worship. "The other half is to send them back to their daily tasks equipped to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If we forget this second part, the other can be positively dangerous" (1974b:80). He exhorts the pastors, "we ought not to be content until we can honestly say that we are helping every member of the Church to fulfill his ministry in the secular world" (1974b:77).

At the most sophisticated level we have to think of our task in a city like Madras to train our lay members who are playing key roles in the life of government, business, and the professions to become ministers of Christ in these secular situations. All of this is involved in our calling and ordination. It is for this purpose that we have set up such institutions as the Community Service Centre, in order that there may be opportunities for Christians in various secular callings to learn how they can become effective ministers of Christ in their daily work (1974b:76).

## 7.6. MISSIONS: CREATING A WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL WHERE THERE IS NONE

One aspect of the all-embracing mission of the church is missions. Missions are intentional activities undertaken by the church to create a Christian presence in places where there is no such presence or no effective presence (1989e:121). Newbigin often used the phrase 'missionary enterprise' synonymously with missions. This section will examine this dimension of the church's mission.

### 7.6.1. *Missions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Context for Newbigin's Reflections*

The missionary advance of the church during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was shaped by colonialism. The rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century effectively encapsulated the Christian faith on the European sub-continent for 800 years, isolating Europe from Asia, Africa, and America. It was during this time that Christendom developed its characteristic forms of life and thought. The Christian faith became fused with political, cultural, social, economic, military, and religious elements in one theocratic system. It was in the Iberian peninsula in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries that the Roman Catholic nations of Spain and Portugal gained enough strength to break out of the encircling power of Islam. Geographical expansion proceeded with the Spanish and Portuguese explorers, soldiers, political agents, merchants, and missionaries who saw themselves as representatives of one theocratic power. Missions were intertwined with this colonialist, expansionist enterprise. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant nations of northern Europe were ready to join the quest in earnest. In the intervening time the Enlightenment had swept Europe, eroding the foundations of Christendom and putting a more economic interpretation on colonial expansion. With the separation of church and state, mission societies replaced political authorities and the Pope as the primary initiator of missions. Missions continued, however, to proceed along the lines of economic power, cultural prestige, and political influence from the Christian nations of the West to the non-Christian nations in the rest of the world. During the 25-year period from 1878-1914 European countries seized more than 10 million square miles of land and subjugated a half billion people in Asia and Africa. Thus over a period of 400 years

the nations of western Europe, along with their overseas daughters, in effect imposed not only their political rule and commercial dominance, but also their religion on the rest of humankind. Missions in the minds of many church members continue to be associated with this unidirectional, expansionist enterprise.

Many factors have combined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to make this understanding of mission obsolete. The first is decolonization. Beginning in 1947 on the Indian sub-continent and continuing through the next two decades, virtually every nation under European colonial rule gained its independence. Second, the growth of the third world church and the crisis of the church in the West challenged the unidirectional flow of mission from the Christian West to the non-Christian non-West. Third, the growth of global unity challenged the idea of a frontier that beckoned missionaries to regions beyond. Fourth, this global unity was shaped by the influence of western modernity. The division of this united global world into developed and undeveloped nations spawned the concept of development. Development projects replaced the traditional picture of the missionary sent to unknown lands to preach the gospel. Finally, the new situation in the Western 'sending' countries challenged traditional missions. As the Enlightenment permeated the West, three things resulted that eroded the missionary enterprise: the loss of confidence in the gospel, the dissolution of Christendom, and the chronic guilty conscience about years of imperialism.

At the Willingen conference of the IMC (1952) Max Warren told the assembly: "We have to be ready to see the day of missions, as we have known them, as having already come to an end" (Warren, in Goodall 1953:40). Speaking to the Ghana Assembly of the IMC (1958), Walter Freytag spoke of 'the lost directness' of missions (Freytag, in Orchard 1958:142-143). In the former paradigm missions was conceived as taking the gospel to nations who had not heard it. With the emergence of churches in every part of the world, missions could not be understood in the same way. A review of 20<sup>th</sup>-century ecumenical and mission history—especially from the middle of the century—reveals the western church attempting to come to terms with this new situation.

### 7.6.2. *Newbiggin's Involvement in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Missions*

While Newbiggin was an author, Biblical expositor, theologian, ecumenical leader and statesman, as well as apologist, his most fundamental self-identity was that of a missionary (1993d:113; 1998d:x). For ten years (1936-1946) Newbiggin was a district missionary in Kanchipuram followed by a thirteen year tenure as bishop of Madurai in the CSI. During this time he was actively involved in global leadership for the missionary movement. His writings manifest a continuing reflection on the place of missions in the mission of the church (1933; 1945; 1950). His twenty-three years of missionary experience, his involvement in global leadership, and his reflection on missions placed Newbiggin in a favourable position to play a central role in the redefinition of missions for which the changing circumstances called. In 1959 he was called to be the General Secretary of the IMC and for the next six years, in that position and later as Director of the CMWE of the WCC, he provided global leadership for "missionary planning and policy" (1993h:158). Already in 1958 he authored the document *One Body, One Gospel, One World* that functioned as a manifesto in the

ecumenical tradition, consolidating the gains made in the theology of missions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and offering missions a way forward that was untainted by the colonial paradigm. This document outlined a new vision for missions that not only shaped Newbiggin's views for the remainder of his life, but also heavily influenced the whole missionary tradition. As might be expected, it was during his years in the IMC and WCC that Newbiggin turned his attention to the problems of missions. While Newbiggin continued to uphold missions as an essential dimension of the church's missionary witness throughout his entire life, his most detailed reflection on missions takes place over this six-year period. This must be kept in mind as this section proceeds. While much of his reflection on missions is surprisingly relevant almost three decades later, his primary reflection on missions was done in the 1960s. He occasionally returned to the subject but other issues occupied his attention in later years (e.g., social mission in Madras; mission in Western culture and religious pluralism in Britain).

Newbiggin's oft-repeated dictum that "history is a conversation between the present and the past about the future" is certainly appropriate for the way he treated the subject of missions (1974b:129; 1977d). While many in the ecumenical family of the missionary tradition were quite ready to trash the past and the old as irrelevant, Newbiggin was concerned to preserve the faithfulness of a past generation and build on their insights for a new time (1962j:90). The loss of the past would mean conformity to new cultural spirits. His own assessment of the colonial past balances a critique of the distortions while firmly preserving the faithful legacy. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was both a time of "great achievements" and "unspeakable horrors" (1977d:210; 1962j:90; 1970c:173; 1993f:1-6).

### *7.6.3. New Symbol for Missions: One Body with One Gospel for the Whole World*

With the colonialist paradigm of missions crumbling, the most urgent issue was the way forward. Newbiggin refers to two wrong courses (1958b:10f.; 1977d:210f.; 1986a:1f.). The first was the path that many in the ecumenical tradition were taking. These had become so embarrassed and ashamed of the arrogant imperialism of the earlier period that missions were replaced by ecumenism and interchurch aid, and missionaries by fraternal workers. The second was the path that many evangelicals were taking. An escape from the uncertainty was available by going backwards and recapturing the methods and attitudes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Over against the rejection of missions in the ecumenical tradition and the retrenchment of missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century paradigm in the evangelical tradition, Newbiggin advocated a new pattern that is both founded on a biblical and theological foundation and takes account of the present reality (1958b:11-12; cf. Bassham 1979:44-45).

What is needed "above all" is "a vision, a symbol, a myth" of missions that is rooted in Scripture, that is in keeping with the present situation, and that evokes from Christians a faithful and obedient response to God's call to make the gospel known (1958b:12). The image of 'regions beyond,' graphically depicted in Livingstone's picture of the smoke of a thousand villages that had never heard the gospel, provided a fitting symbol for a world that was in the process of being opened up to Europe during the age of discovery. "The traditional picture of the missionary enterprise has been of the lonely pioneer going out from the secure citadel of Christendom into the world of

heathendom. Today the picture must be redrawn” (1994k:12; speech given in 1960). Newbigin offers the following symbol: “The whole Church, with one Gospel of reconciliation for the whole world” (1958b:12). Stated in another way, he says: “The first and fundamental thing that needs to be said about the pattern of the Christian missionary enterprise is that we must recover the sense that it is the enterprise of the whole Church of God in every land, directed towards the whole world in which it is put” (1994k:11).

There are two important facts that have led to this new formulation. First, the Christian church is no longer confined to one small part of the world but is global in its extension. Second, the Biblical truth has been rediscovered “that the mission is not a detachable part of the Church’s being, but is the central meaning of the Church’s being” (1994k:12). Thus both the ‘home base’ and the ‘mission field’ are everywhere.

This new symbol displays a number of facets. First, the missionary nature of the church means that the gospel has been entrusted to that community and must be communicated. Second, it is entrusted to the “whole church” not simply to some in that community who take it as their task to carry on the missionary enterprise. Third, since the gospel is universally valid—“one gospel of reconciliation for the whole world”—this task cannot be restricted simply to the neighbourhood in which the church is located but is to be “directed towards the whole world.” Fourth, since the church which is missionary by its nature is now “in every land”, this responsibility rests on the church in every place. Fifth, the task of communicating the gospel is the task of the “whole church” working together in partnership.

#### *7.6.4. Fundamental Starting Point for Missions: The Church as Missionary*

The starting point for Newbigin’s thinking about missions in a new time is the *missio Dei* and the missionary nature of the church (1958b:17-24; 1977d:213-215; 1994k:11f.).

Many of the themes that have been developed in the preceding chapters articulate the context in which Newbigin thinks about the missionary enterprise. Two are important in the present context. First, since the mission of the Triune God extends to the ends of the earth, so does the mission of the church. Second, since the church is by nature both local and ecumenical, its mission will be both in its own neighbourhood and to the ends of the earth. It is necessary in this context to articulate the implications of Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology for a new vision of missions.

First, the church is mission; mission societies separate from the local eucharist community are not the primary missionary bodies. Second, each congregation is missionary by its very nature; thus each congregation has a share in the missionary task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Third, each of the younger churches is likewise missionary by its very nature; therefore each of these younger churches is responsible for participating in the missionary task to the ends of the earth. Fourth, each of the younger churches is responsible for being the mission for their particular neighbourhood; western missions may not bypass these churches but rather must work in partnership with them to carry out the missionary task.

#### *7.6.5. Missions as an Indispensable Part of the Mission of the Church*

In a day when mission defined everything the church did, Newbigin believed that it was essential “to identify and distinguish the specific foreign missionary task within the total mission of the Church” (1960i:23).

Four initial things may be said about Newbigin’s distinction. First, missions are *narrower* than mission. Mission is concerned with all that God has sent the church into the world to do, while missions are one part of that task. Second, missions are a *necessary* part of the total mission of the church. “This task is not the whole of the Church’s mission, but it is an essential part of it” (1960i:23). Third, the specific nature of missions is concerned with intentional activities to take the gospel to places where the gospel is not known. Reproducing a few of those definitions will clarify his understanding. “Missions must concentrate on the specifically missionary intention of bringing the Gospel to those who have not heard it and this must be directed to all six continents” (1993h:185). “The abiding factor in missions is the intention to go outside the existing areas of Christian belief in order to bear witness to Christ and invoke faith in Him where faith did not exist” (1960g:60). “Missions [are] particular enterprises within the total mission which have the primary intention of bringing into existence a Christian presence in a milieu where previously there was no such presence or where such presence was ineffective” (1982b:149). The operative word is “intention.” The whole of the life of the church has a missionary dimension, but there are intentional activities that aim at the communication of the gospel in places where it is not known. Fourth, missions are finished when an authentic witness to the gospel has been established (1977d:216). This does not mean that the total mission of the church has been accomplished. The mission of the church continues where missions has completed its work successfully.

Newbigin finds support for this understanding of missions in the book of Acts. The scattering of believers from the Jerusalem church under heavy persecution produced an enormous missionary expansion (Acts 8). There was, however, no missionary intention on the part of the church. In Acts 13:2, 3 we find something different. The church in Antioch laid hands on Saul and Barnabas and “sent them off” to preach the gospel among the gentiles. The missionary intention is fundamental and so this text constitutes “the central New Testament paradigm for missions” (1982b:150). The church in Antioch was a witnessing community growing by spontaneous expansion (Acts 11:19-26) with a life of compassion that embodied the gospel (Acts 11:27-30). However, the Spirit moved the church to set aside some men for the specific purpose of taking the gospel to a place where it was not known. The continuing story of Acts shows that when Paul has established an authentic witness to the gospel in a place, he moved on and, as it were, said “You are now the mission in this place.”

When the church was located predominantly in western countries, missions necessarily crossed a geographical or cultural frontier to make the gospel known. Today, however, the church exists in every part of the world and the *differentium* can no longer be exclusively geographical. The *differentium* that entitles an activity to be called missions does not lie in the crossing of a geographical frontier but it lies in crossing “the frontier between faith in Christ as Lord and unbelief” (1958b:29). Today missions must be defined as “activities directed to the task of bringing into existence an authentic witness to Christ in situations (whether defined geographically, ethnically, culturally, or otherwise) where such witness is absent” (1977d:216). An example that

Newbigin gives of missions that is not defined geographically is missions to industry. It is instructive to see how Newbigin compares the learning of the language and the *adat* of industry with the way a traditional missionary learned the language and culture of a people in a geographically distant area (1974b:100-102).

This does not mean that the geographical dimension is no longer important for missions. There are two fundamental reasons for this. First, the essence of the gospel is concerned with the ends of the earth and the end of the world. The gospel is not simply a local story concerned with one strand in the human story; rather it is concerned with the whole meaning and end of creation. Therefore, mission is rightly carried out when it is concerned with the ends of the earth and the end of the world. "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). The mission of the church may not be confined to the immediate neighbourhood although it must begin there. Mission looks to the end of the world and the redemption of all nations. This must be the ultimate horizon of the church's mission. Therefore, foreign missions—the crossing of geographical boundaries to make Christ known—will always be part of the church's mission.

The significance of this can be seen in the distinction Newbigin makes in an address to the general assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (1960). He distinguishes between mission and missions; mission is concerned with everything that the church is sent into the world to do and missions is the concern that in places where there are no Christians there should be. But he continues:

And let us narrow the concern down still further and say that within the concept of missions there is still the narrower concern which we call—or used to call—Foreign Missions—which is the concern that Jesus should be acknowledged as Lord by the whole earth (1960i:23).

The horizon of the ends of the earth will be essential if the church is to be missionary (1958b:27). While "the church is mission, we still need 'missions' in order that it may be truly so.... this is not in order to relieve the rest of the church of missionary responsibility but to ensure that its whole life is missionary" (1982b:149).

This emphasis on the nature of missions as 'mission to the ends of the earth' plays a central role in Newbigin's understanding of mission. When missions is defined in this way, it is not simply another part of mission that stands alongside other parts. Missions is the ultimate horizon of the whole missionary task of the church. Mission begins in the neighbourhood of the local congregation but by the very nature of that missionary task it moves to the ends of the earth. Mission without missions is an emaciated and distorted concept. As Newbigin puts it: "The Church's mission is concerned with the ends of the earth. When that dimension is forgotten, the heart goes out of the whole business" (1958b:27). Missions is mission carried out faithfully toward its ultimate horizon—the ends of the earth.

The ends of the earth means something different today than it meant in the last century. When Christians were primarily congregated in western countries, the ends of the earth meant the 'regions beyond', in the non-West. With the development of the church into a world-wide fellowship this perspective is invalidated. Today when the home base is in every part of the world, the perspective must change to that of the

world-wide church. The ends of the earth must be seen from the standpoint of the local church wherever it is in the world (1958b:27-29). Missions will mean *to, from, and in* all six continents.

The second reason that the geographical dimension remains fundamental to missions is that it is of the very nature of the gospel that we must hear it from someone else and when the gospel is spoken out of another culture, it often comes with new and fresh power (1958b:30). There is always the danger that the gospel will be domesticated within a certain culture and lose its proper strangeness and power to question us. Faithfulness to the “universal, supranational, supracultural” nature of the gospel demands that the gospel cross cultural frontiers.

The affirmation that Jesus is *Lumen Gentium*, the light of the nations, is in danger of being mere words unless its value is being tested in actual encounters of the gospel with all the nations, so that the gospel comes back to us in the idiom of other cultures with power to question our understanding of it. In this sense the foreign missionary is an enduring necessity in the life of the universal Church, but of course, the missionary journeys have to be multidirectional and not—as in the former period—only from west to east and from north to south (1994k:115).

If missions is concerned with establishing a witnessing presence in places where there is none, then it follows that it will exclude much of what is done under that label by mission boards and will include other endeavours that are not normally included by those bodies (1977d:216). Colonial patterns defined mission in terms of a unidirectional movement of personnel and resources from the West to the third world. However, the large majority of the personnel and money designated ‘foreign missions’ is actually inter-church aid and does not foster a missionary advance into places where Christ is not known. Newbigin observes that “the majority of ordained missionaries engaged at the present time are engaged in the work of the life of the church—teaching, pastoral work, administration—and there are not many missionaries engaged in directly evangelistic work. This seems to be true in most parts of the world” (1962g:3). While Newbigin upholds the importance of ‘fraternal workers’ who are sent from the western church for pastoral and teaching work, he insists that this is not missions and these fraternal workers are not missionaries (1977d:216). These distinctions are not simply a matter of semantics but are important for clear thinking and holding before the church a dimension of the church’s mission that was being eclipsed (1960i:23).

The importance of maintaining missions as a distinct task within the mission of the church became urgent during the 1960s. During this period there was “the rapid expansion of interchurch aid into agricultural, medical, educational, and social projects of the churches in the southern hemisphere” (Gruber 1991:517). The United Nations named the decade of the 1960s the first Development Decade. Government funding and proliferating specialized agencies accelerated this program and it soon enveloped the CWME. Anxious to shake themselves free of old missionary paternalism and imperialism, many missions advocates embraced this new direction. Missions were being buried beneath all kinds of development projects and interchurch aid (1993h:158). “The dilemma with which I constantly wrestled was how to achieve a permeation of all activities of the Council with a missionary concern, and at the same time to preserve and sharpen a specific concern for missions as enterprises explicitly intended to cross the frontier between faith and no-faith” (1993h:189; cf. 1993h:159; 1962j:91).

Newbigin's resolution of the relationship between missions and interchurch aid can be summarized with three negative statements and two positive ones (1958b:40-43; 1970c:190; cf. Jongeneel 1997:315-316). Negatively: the distinction between missions and interchurch aid cannot be divided geographically with mission involved in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and inter-church aid devoted to Europe; the distinction cannot be made between evangelism and service; the terminology of missions cannot be dropped and absorbed into interchurch aid. Positively, in the first place, interchurch aid should always aim to equip the church for its mission. The problem is simply "the fact that we have corrupted the word 'Church' (and distorted the life of the churches) by constantly using it in a non-missionary sense. If it was always clear, both in our speech and in our ecclesiastical life, that the Church *is* the mission... then inter-church aid would always be aid-for-mission and nothing else" (1958b:42). Second, while both would "be working in a common field... each would have a distinct focus of concern" (1970a:190). Newbigin recalls the distinction between missionary intention and missionary dimension (1958b:43). Missions must be an intentional act to take the gospel across the frontier of unbelief. This aspect of the church's mission must never be surrendered.

Maintaining missions as an indispensable dimension of the church's total mission remained a concern for Newbigin to the end of his days. He feared that missions would be eclipsed in the WCC. His most explicit statement in this regard came in an exchange with Konrad Raiser (1994c). Newbigin comments that one of the most remarkable things about Raiser's *Ecumenism in Transition* is the "total amnesia" with the respect to the evangelistic and missionary task of the church.

One of the most important documents produced by the WCC in the past three decades was entitled "Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation." This was developed during the years 1976-81, and was approved by the Central Committee in 1982. In his wide-ranging study of the work of the WCC, Raiser does not mention this document; it is briefly referred to in a quotation from the Roman Catholic ecumenist Thomas Stransky. Indeed this total amnesia in respect of the missionary and evangelistic work of the churches is (for me) the most remarkable feature of the book.... There is no sign of any concern about the fact that the great majority of the world's people have not made this confession and have not been baptized (1994c:5).

He continues: "I have to confess a deep personal concern here, for if the vision for the WCC that this book represents were to be realized, then the bringing of the International Missionary Council into the WCC would have to be judged as having been a mistake" (1994c:5). To allow the missionary and evangelistic task to disappear from the agenda of the WCC is more than a paradigm shift; it is a reversal. Missions must remain central to the church's existence.

Bryant Myers notes that "Christians are allocating only 1.2% of their mission funding and their foreign missionaries to the 1.1 billion people who live in the unevangelized world" (1996:48). He believes that there is enough money for Christian missions in every part of the world. However, the disproportionate allocation of monetary and human resources in missions is a "scandal." Bryant continues: "Something is wrong when over ninety percent of the church's mission force is working in that part of the world that calls itself Christian" (1996:55). In this situation Newbigin's distinction between mission and missions, and his insistence that taking the

gospel to places where there is no witnessing presence, remains an important issue.

#### *7.6.6. Missions as the Responsibility of Every Local Congregation*

If the church is missionary by its very nature and if missions is simply the church's mission extended toward its ultimate horizon, then it follows that missions is the responsibility of every congregation. "A true congregation of God anywhere in the world is at the same time part of God's mission to the ends of the earth" (1962j:89). Unfortunately, the foreign missionary movement grew up at a time when the church did not understand its missionary nature. Those who wanted to be faithful to the call of God to take the gospels to the ends of the earth had to form separate organizations to accomplish the missionary task. Missions were separated from church (1958b:25). When this happens the church "becomes an introverted body, concerned with its own welfare rather than with the Kingdom of God, and—even if successful missionary work is carried on by others—the Church will be no fit home for those who are gathered in" (1958b:26).

Today the missionary nature of the church has been recovered; however, the structural division between church and missions remains, reinforcing the dichotomy between church and its missionary calling in the thinking of many Christians. Newbigin's concern is to break this dichotomy and re-establish each local congregation as the body charged with the responsibility of mission in its own neighbourhood *and* to the ends of the earth. And so after arguing that the picture of missions must change to "be a picture of one universal family present in almost every land, possessing the secret of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ and offering that secret to all nations and peoples", he immediately goes on to draw the first consequence of this new image:

... every church, however small and weak, ought to have some share in the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Every church ought to be engaged in foreign missions. This is part of the integrity of the gospel. We do not adequately confess Christ as the Lord of all men if we seek to be his witnesses only among our neighbours. We must seek at the same time to confess him to the ends of the earth. The foreign missionary enterprise belongs to the integrity of our confession (1994k:13).

It is true, of course, that the primary responsibility of the local congregation is its own neighbourhood (1958b:23). Our thinking begins with the local manifestation of the church's mission. Yet it must move beyond that to consider the ultimate horizon of the missionary task—the ends of the earth. The question with which the church must be concerned is: What can be done in partnership at a local, regional, and international level to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth? In this concern we are not merely concerned with strategy, planning, and central organization, but with the integrity of the church's character and mission. The church is a fellowship that must be recognizable as a local body and a universal fellowship that offers the gospel to people nearby and far-off, indeed everywhere (1958b:50).

The task of mission nearby and missions nearby and far away is a task for which each member bears a measure of responsibility. In his address to the churches of East Asia Newbigin remarks: "The fact that we have to put before each member this responsibility for the evangelization of a distant part of the world is of great value for the development of the Church's sense of missionary responsibility. I covet for every

church this same privilege” (1950:145). How concretely can each member share in the task of missions?

... it is the duty and privilege of every part of the church everywhere to be involved not only in the missionary task at its own door, but also in some other part of the total world-wide task... and every Christian has the duty and privilege to take his proportionate share, whether in intercession, in dissemination of knowledge, in giving, or in actual life-service (1958b:31).

One factor that cripples the local congregations in the West in its discharge of the missions task was an obsolete picture of foreign missions that does not correspond to reality. “Unless I am much mistaken, the picture that is still projected on the screen when foreign missions are spoken about is largely a picture of the backward, the underprivileged, the underdeveloped, the sick, the blind, the uneducated, the ignorant. Consequently missions are able to appeal to the powerful motive of pity” (1994k:19). This misunderstanding left the churches in the West ill-prepared to make a significant and informed contribution to the missionary enterprise in a changing world. Newbiggin proposed that there be an effort to bring mature, highly competent and cultured members of the younger churches into intimate contact with the life of the older churches. In that way the picture they have of the ‘heathen’ would be found to be invalid, and therefore their erroneous concept of missions shattered. This would prepare the western churches for their missions task.

If the church is the primary agent of missions, the question arises as to the validity of missions boards and organizations. Newbiggin treats this question together with the issue regarding the place of the various social agencies that have arisen to carry out the mission of the church in public life. The argument has been detailed above. Here we can briefly state the position with respect to missions organizations. First, when missions boards are separated from the local church, it is fatal for both bodies (1980f:59-61). The local congregation becomes a body that is concerned with catering to the needs of its own members and not a body concerned with a mission to the whole world (1980d:6). The witness of the missions society is not seen to arise out of a community that embodies the gospel. Second, this does not mean that bodies created for a specific ministry are to be jettisoned. Rather it means that this particular body must facilitate the missionary task of the church by co-ordinating the efforts of local congregations to carry out their mission. Newbiggin points to the IMC as one of many parachurch organizations “for which no clear theological rationale can be given because they do not correspond to what are called ‘churches’ in the New Testament” (1985c:178). It did play a positive role, however, in the missions task of the church as it facilitated local cooperation in missions. The key for the integrity of these missions organizations is their anchorage in the local congregation both at home and abroad.

#### *7.6.7. Missions as the Task of the Universal Church Together*

With the rise of the church in every part of the world, the issue of partnership in mission became urgent. Three different factors pressed the urgency of this question. First, missions is the responsibility of each congregation. The ends of the earth is the horizon of each congregation’s mission. Indeed, Newbiggin regards as an absolute principle the

following: “No part of the Church ought to be denied the right to take such share in the total missionary task as it is capable of. It ought never to have to be said to any church which is eager to engage in foreign missionary work: ‘We do not need your help’” (1958b:36). The problem arises when there is a church in every part of the world. When there were ‘regions beyond’ which were totally unevangelized, the missions enterprises of churches could proceed uninhibited (1958b:31f.). When there is a church in the area that is responsible for the missionary task in that location, the question of partnership arises. What is the responsibility of the church desiring to engage in missions to the church in that geographical area? Early missions simply bypassed the indigenous church; the church was a container in which converts of missions were to be placed. This did irreparable harm to the young churches, however. When the missions organizations continued to take control of the missionary outreach in the area of the church, the young church drew the obvious conclusion: mission does not belong to the church’s nature (that is a task for mission societies) and the younger church becomes a body concerned only with its own maintenance. Recognition of this situation led the missionary movement to begin to speak of partnership between older and younger churches.

Partnership became a pressing issue for a second reason as well: there were tasks that could not be effectively tackled except by working together in ecumenical partnership. If missionary work proceeds in isolation, with different resources and methods, confusion will be the result. There is a need for collaboration and partnership to shoulder many of the larger and more difficult tasks. Newbigin gives three examples of tasks that demand ecumenical cooperation: the penetration of the great non-Christian cultures of Asia with the gospel; the encounter between the gospel and Islam; and urban mission in Africa (1994k:14-15).

A final reason that partnership in missions must be a priority is the nature of the church. The church is both local and ecumenical (1958b:23, 49). Structures of partnership “should be— universally and locally—recognizable as one reconciled fellowship offering to all men everywhere the secret of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ” (1958b:49). Regional and ecumenical structures of partnership express the ecumenical nature of the church.

The need for partnership grew throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was first given official articulation at the IMC conference in Whitby (1947) where the slogan ‘partnership in obedience’ was coined. Older and younger churches were to work together in equal partnership, each taking responsibility and contributing their God-given gifts for the task of mission. At this early date, however, partnership remained for the “non-Christian world” or “mission lands”; the partnership did not extend to the mission task in the North America or Europe (1970a:177; cf. Bosch 1991:379).

The need for partnership between the churches for the mission of the church was recognized. The problem was that true partnership was impossible to achieve with the structures that existed between western missions and the younger churches. The spiritual, financial, and administrative dominance of the older churches made it impossible for younger churches to achieve a sense of responsibility for the missionary task in their area or throughout the world. Newbigin records his own temptation to pray that all foreign money and foreign personnel be cut off from the church in India so they might be able to achieve a real spiritual freedom and sense of their missionary

obligation (1993k:16). However, in India only 3% of the population were Christians and 90% had never heard the gospel. With the evangelistic task so stupendous, the removal of missionaries and money would appear more like mission abandoned rather than mission completed (1993k:17). Newbigin summarizes the dilemma that existed at this time: “Is there a way that the strength of the older churches can be used for the task of world evangelization without spiritually weakening the younger churches?” (1993k:17).

The structures received from the colonial period were characterized by paternalism on the side of the sending countries and infantile dependence on the side of the younger churches (1960k:38). Neither the ‘three-selves’<sup>8</sup> nor the process of ‘devolution’<sup>9</sup> had resolved the problem. While the point had been reached where the younger churches were technically independent, a relationship of financial dependence remained between each of the younger churches and a single older church or missionary society (1958b:34). This resulted in two problems. First, this financial dependence led to one-track relationships between the younger church and one missionary board. Money flowed from one to the other, locking the two into an exclusive relationship. Second, a dilemma was established between dependence and independence. If the mission board withdrew funds, the church might develop independence but there were fewer resources for the missionary task in the area. If the mission boards continued to send funds, this perpetuated dependence in the younger churches. The money was used to prop up static churches and any missionary advance was hindered (1993h:126; Goodall 1953:17f.). There existed, therefore, a “growing conviction that great evangelistic advance cannot be expected while these partnerships are confined to the traditional relationships

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<sup>8</sup>Self-supporting, self-governing, self-extending. This was the goal of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson for indigenous churches in Asia and Africa. It became a ‘famous trinity’ that was widely adopted in missions to promote the independence of younger churches (Jongeneel 1995:327-328; Verkuyll 1978:184-188). The Chinese church adopted this as a goal and it became known as the ‘Three-Self Movement’ (Jones 1971:599f.).

<sup>9</sup>Devolution is “the transfer of responsibility from a foreign missionary organization to the church in the country concerned which has come into being as a result of the preaching of the gospel” (Orchard and Neill 1971:164; see further Beyerhaus and Lefever 1964; Jongeneel 1997:198-199).

between a mission board and the daughter church which is the fruit of its work” (1963e:17). If there was to be true partnership, if there was to be further missionary advance in the third world, the structure of relationships had to be changed. Willigen articulated this conviction by declaring that new patterns of partnership were needed if there was to be a fresh missionary advance (1970a:180; Goodall 1953:17-18, 233, 236).

What was needed to break this pattern were structures that embodied three things. First, the structures must engender *interdependence*. “The true position of the church is neither dependence nor independence, but interdependence, a mutual interdependence of the different members of the one body that rests upon the absolute dependence of each upon God” (1993h:18). This was to be an interdependence of equals in which all share their unique gifts and strengths and all receive from one another. Second, the structures must replace the unilateral relations between the younger churches and missions bodies with multi-lateral relations. The one-track channels between the missions societies and the younger churches was the primary culprit that maintained the patterns of dependence. The younger churches must be brought into fellowship with their sister churches in Asia or Africa. The resources of the missions societies were invaluable but these bodies must be participating members offering their gifts as well as receiving in the context of fellowship. Third, the focus of the new relations and the use of funds must be missions. Willigen had noted that 90% of the mission funds were used for nurture in the third world rather than evangelism (Goodall 1953: 236). Newbigin had complained that the majority of funds propped up static churches rather than contributed to a missionary advance (1993h:126). Here was an answer to the dilemma. If this three-fold pattern was followed the western mission societies could contribute their resources without weakening the spiritual freedom and missionary consciousness of the younger churches. Partnership could lead to a fresh missionary advance.

The new pattern was hammered out during the early 1960s and became known as ‘Joint Action for Mission.’ Newbigin played an important role in forging this new pattern (Scott 1971:311). Joint Action for Mission was patterned after a statement on partnership in missions adopted at the EACC in Kuala Lumpur (1959). The statement on the missionary obligation of the Asian churches dealt with two issues: the reception of foreign missionaries to Asia and the sending of missionaries from Asia. The same conference also recognized that any fresh missionary advance in Asia would require the severance of one-track relations between the parent mission organization and daughter churches. The goal was a partnership of multi-lateral adult relationships between the churches and the missions bodies working together to accomplish the evangelistic task in a given geographical area. These proposals of the EACC. fired the imagination of the IMC staff who had been struggling with this issue. The fruit of their reflection was a document entitled ‘Joint Action for Mission’ that was presented to the New Delhi Assembly and endorsed Uppsala (1963e; New Delhi 1962:251f.; Bassham 1979:81). This joint action called, in the first place, for a survey by the churches and related missionary bodies of needs and opportunities facing them in a certain geographical area and of the resources available to meet these needs. Second, it called for a consultation between the missionary bodies and the churches to decide goals and the deployment of resources to meet those goals. Third, it called for the implementation of the agreed plan by the churches and missionary organizations acting together in a structure appropriate

to its operation.

With this plan for joint action in place, another question arose for Newbigin and the newly formed Division of World Mission and Evangelism (DWME) of the WCC. Should the DWME simply concentrate on stimulating and encouraging these joint actions in local situations? Or was there a need for new ecumenical missionary structures? Should the DWME initiate and manage missionary projects on an international scale? In other words, were the new missionary structures to be local or ecumenical or both? Some feared large centralized bureaucracies and other believed that the global world required international action. Newbigin's understanding of the local and ecumenical nature of the church led him to proceed in both directions, a move authorized by the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) (1970c:190-193).

Yet missions continued to be primarily from the West/North to the East/South. The two-fold conviction that 'the home base of mission is world-wide' and 'the mission field is world-wide' did not issue in a sustained discussion of missions to the West. During a speech given in 1933 Newbigin argued that "great as are the needs of our own land, the needs of the foreign mission field are very much greater" (1933:99). While there is no explicit statement to this effect thirty years later (1960s), he continued to stress the tremendous need in other parts of the world (1962g:2; 1960i:23; 1994k:17). When Newbigin returned from India, his tune began to change. He devoted himself to the problem of mission in western culture and frequently referred to the need for third world missionaries in the West (e.g., 1986e:147). During his pastorate in Birmingham (1980-1988), he worked with an Indian colleague whom he referred to as "a missionary sent to us by the Church of North India." He goes on to say that "England needs the witness of a Christian from India at least as much as India needs missionaries from the West" (1993k:115). Beyond these brief hints and references, however, Newbigin does not speak in detail of the missionary movement from the Third World to the West.

#### *7.6.8. The Need for New Missionaries*

Newbigin's treatment of missions begins with mission as the task of the local congregation, a task that stretches to the ends of the earth. Since there are local congregations in every part of the world and the home base is everywhere, there must be structures of partnership to express the ecumenical nature of the church in its mission. The emphasis is on mission as the task of the whole church for which every member bears a measure of responsibility (1958b:44). The issue of the role of missionary as particular agents of the church's missionary enterprise arises. Is there a place for the 'foreign missionary' in the new paradigm of mission? If so, how is it to be conceptualized?

Missionaries of the modern missionary movement have not followed the example of Paul who, leaving behind a community that was a witness to the gospel, moved on to new areas of evangelization. Missionaries have continued in places for decades and, when they hold positions of final responsibility, they impede the growth and maturity of the younger church. So from this perspective it would appear that the age of the foreign missionary is over. That is not the total picture, however. From the standpoint of the indigenous church it may appear better for the missionary to return home. From the standpoint of the country in which the church is located, a different picture emerges:

only a small fraction of the population is Christian. “If the missionary knows that his vocation is precisely a missionary vocation, knows that he is called to cross the frontiers of faith and make Christ known as Lord among those who are utterly strangers to that knowledge, then how can he leave?” (1958b:46). The dilemma is that from the vantage point of the indigenous church it is better for the foreign missionary to leave but in terms of the need in the area it is impossible to conceive of leaving.

“The solution to this dilemma can only be found at the point to which we have returned again and again in this discussion—the point where it is recognized that the Church *is* mission” (1958b:46). The missionary cannot bypass the local church but must offer himself or herself to the local church as an agent of help for the common missionary task in that area (1958b:46f.). In 1945 Newbigin recognized that the missionary calling was moving “more to collegueship than to pioneering, more to the patient task of helping a community to grow in love than to the task of pushing out on one’s own into new spheres and new schemes” (1945:94). From the late 1950s on, Newbigin continued to affirm this partnership but in light of the growing evidence that the majority of missions resources were being used in interchurch aid, he stressed more strongly the unfinished evangelistic task (1962g:2-3).

This new situation called for the consideration of new initiatives, methods and practices. Newbigin discusses the benefits and drawbacks of short-term service (1958b:47-48); the need for some kind of ecumenical order of missionaries who are devoted to a life service of missions (1958b:48-49; 1982b:150); and tentmakers in missions (1970c:179f., 191; 1962j:91f.; cf. Weerstra and Smith 1997).

## 7.7. CONCLUSION

Newbigin believes that the good news that God is restoring his rule over the entire creation in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit has been entrusted to the church to communicate to the world. Accordingly this gospel must be communicated by deeds of mercy and justice that signify, and words that announce, the arrival of the kingdom. The rule of Christ covers the whole of human life; therefore the primary point of missionary engagement will be where each member embodies the gospel in their various callings in life. This mission cannot be confined to the local neighbourhood but extends to the ends of the earth. Thus foreign missions will always be an essential dimension of the church’s mission. These are the four tasks of the church that are found most frequently in Newbigin’s writings—evangelism, social action, calling of the laity, and missions.

Newbigin’s discussion of these four aspects of the church’s missionary calling is rooted in an understanding of the comprehensive scope of the kingdom of God. This opens rich insight into many of the issues he discusses. It enables Newbigin to understand the nature of evangelism and the works of justice and mercy. In harmony with Mortimer Arias, Newbigin points to the basic category of the kingdom as the only means to recover an authentic evangelism that follows in the steps of Jesus (1974b:67; Arias1984:passim). Newbigin’s understanding of eschatology keeps him from being either triumphalistic or defeatist and enables him to illumine the precise nature of deeds of justice and mercy in the church’s mission: they are signs that point to the coming

kingdom. Further, approaching the ecumenical and evangelical divide between word and deed from the standpoint of the kingdom enabled Newbigin to offer a harmony of evangelism and social concern in the church's mission. Finally, the full scope of the salvation of the kingdom of God spurred Newbigin to emphasize the breadth of the church's mission in social, economic, and cultural life. The believer witnesses to the good news of the kingdom in all of life; thus Newbigin emphasizes the calling of each believer in culture as the focal point of mission.

Newbigin also connects each of these aspects of the church's calling in the world in the local congregation. First, evangelism is authenticated by the life of the local congregation. Further, evangelism and deeds of mercy must be recognizable as words and actions of a community that believes and embodies the gospel. All ecclesiastical bodies organized for special purposes— evangelism, social justice, mercy, and missions—must be connected to the church. A dichotomy between the two is harmful both for the church and the specialized agency. The church loses its missionary self-understanding as its task is overtaken by a specialized body; the words and deeds of the agency lose their proper character as signs that point to good news. Rooting the obligation for foreign missions in the local congregation is an important insight that bears much more scrutiny. Finally, the believer's calling in culture is supported and nourished by the life of the local congregation. Newbigin's discussion of each aspect of mission consistently highlights the importance of the ecclesial community.

Another positive feature of Newbigin's discussion of the various aspects of the church's mission is his insistence that each of them is indispensable to the total mission of the church. Newbigin upholds the essential task of evangelism over against ecumenical neglect in the 1960s and early 1970s fostered by social activism and the doctrine of Christian presence. He maintains the importance of both deeds of justice and mercy against an evangelicalism that advocated evangelism as the primary if not exclusive duty of the church and against an ecumenical stream that downplayed mercy (i.e., relief work) in pursuit of social justice and structural renewal. He maintains the importance of the calling of individual believers in the world of culture in spite of neglect due to a narrow view of salvation. Finally, he maintains the obligation of missions over against various movements that threatened the whole enterprise—interchurch aid, chronic guilty conscience in the wake of imperialism, and the urgency of social justice.

Finally, Newbigin's distinction between mission and missions, and missionary dimension and missionary intention remain significant. On the one hand, it enables the church to maintain the breadth of its mission while at the same time maintaining the specific focus of missions. On the other hand, it specifies the task of missions within the total mission of the church, and holds before God's people its unfinished task. In view of the "scandalous" allocation of missions resources, emphasis on missions as an activity that takes the gospel to places where there is no witnessing community remains critical (Bryant 1996:55).

Next to these positive features, several weaknesses must be noted. In the first place, Newbigin's understanding of the church is inconsistent. There is a long established tradition that reduces the church to a community that is organized to engage in cultic acts. Ridderbos challenges this narrow understanding by highlighting three uses of the word '*ecclesia*' in the New Testament: as the new humankind, as an organized local

congregation, and as a community gathered for certain “religious” activities (Ridderbos 1975:328-330). On the one hand, Newbigin recognizes that the church is much more than an identifiable local congregation that is gathered for prayer, worship, fellowship, and instruction. His understanding of the close connection between the kingdom of God and the church, along with his appreciation of the comprehensive scope of salvation, enable Newbigin to recognize that the church is the new humankind that lives under the authority of Christ’s rule beyond the boundaries of the instituted church. On the other hand, Newbigin’s language and ecclesiological formulations often betray a return to the older tradition of limiting the church to its gathered and instituted form. Even Newbigin’s stress on the mission of believers in culture sometimes gives the impression that they are “mere fragments of the church who are scattered about in the world and who come together again for worship, instruction, and specifically Christian fellowship on Sundays” (Evanston 1954:161). Newbigin’s use of the terms ‘laity’ and ‘lay theology’ also seems to point in this direction (Skillen 1996:13).

A second criticism concerns Newbigin’s discussion of the ‘signs of the times.’ In two previous chapters we have seen that Newbigin’s discussion of the work of the Father and Spirit in the world outside the bounds of the church is underdeveloped. This weakness comes home to roost at the point of his discussion of the social calling of the church in culture. Newbigin recognizes that the social calling of the church requires that the church interpret the ‘signs of the times.’ If the church—corporately, but even more so in its scattered form—is to be involved in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the world, it must know where the Spirit of God is at work. Yet history bears eloquent testimony that the church fails in its interpretation again and again. In light of this failure, it is essential to struggle with valid criteria that equips the church for its social task. Newbigin does not offer helpful guidance here; his underdeveloped Trinitarian basis contributes to a vague and ambiguous answer (Hoedemaker 1979:456).

Newbigin was a highly contextual thinker. His discussion of each of these aspects of the church’s mission was forged in the heat of pressing problems and issues. The need remains today to bring his insights to bear on different problems and new contexts.

## 8. THE RELATION OF THE MISSIONARY CHURCH TO ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

### 8.1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the relation to God and to its mission, the third relationship of the missionary church is to its religio-cultural context. The word 'contextualization' was first used by Shoki Coe in 1972 to describe the task of theological education in various cultural contexts. Since that time it has rapidly gained in popularity to describe varying models of understanding the relationship between the Christian community and its message to its total religio-cultural context (Upkong 1987:161, 163). Newbigin began to employ the term contextualization soon after it was coined.

Newbigin's understanding of gospel, church, and culture offers a unique model of contextualization. Stephen Bevans has sketched five models of contextualization (1992). He recognized at the end of his work that Newbigin's way of approaching the question of gospel, church and culture did not fit any of the five models. He outlined a sixth model calling it the 'counter-cultural model.'

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, this chapter examines Newbigin's understanding of contextualization and will consist of five sections. The first section sketches the development of the concept in contextualization as the setting in which Newbigin's understanding is developed. Section two explains Newbigin's model of cross-cultural communication. Understanding Newbigin's notion of cross-cultural communication of the gospel is critical for grasping his model of contextualization. He elaborates the model of cross-cultural communication into a way of understanding of the whole relationship between gospel, church and culture. The third part describes the relationship of the missionary church to its culture in light of this model. Few models of contextualization place the church so firmly in the middle of the relationship between gospel and culture. The next section lays out the elements involved in the faithful contextualization of the church's witness. Central to this understanding are the notions 'challenging relevance' borrowed from Alfred Hogg and 'subversive fulfillment' taken from Hendrik Kraemer. A final section examines the notion of a missionary encounter as the normal way in which the church relates to its cultural context. This is a key notion in Newbigin's understanding of contextualization; all the threads of his discussion draw together here.

### 8.2. FROM CONTEXT TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

The gospel has always taken shape in the social, lingual, and cultural context of those who received it. The initial incarnation of the gospel by the church was in the Jewish milieu, embodying and proclaiming the gospel in Hebrew categories and social institutions. Yet the young Jewish church found itself in the midst of the Roman empire and its missionary expansion required that the gospel be translated into the Hellenistic context. Already in the canon of the New Testament this process of translation had begun to take place. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the central category that Jesus

employs in the announcement of the gospel is the kingdom of God. It is not surprising that Jesus takes hold of the image of the kingdom; it had become a dominant image in the Jewish culture in which Jesus carried out his ministry. While the prophets used a plethora of images to announce the end-time salvation that would be ushered in by the Messiah, the image of the reign of God became increasingly popular over the inter-testamental period. By the time Jesus opens his ministry it is the central image that fuelled Jewish eschatological expectation.

When one reads John, however, the image of the kingdom of God virtually drops out of sight. Instead, all kinds of concepts that were quite common in classical philosophy and had made their way into classical culture—light/darkness, life/death, heaven/earth, body/soul—become the categories of choice for the proclamation of the good news. We do not hear that the kingdom of God has arrived but rather that “In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:4). On the surface the translation appears to be so starkly different that some New Testament scholars have argued that the gospel was syncretistically absorbed into Hellenistic thought (Bultmann 1951:168; 1956:163f.) The gospel in the synoptics is defined by Jewish categories and looks forward horizontally in time to the renewal of the creation in the kingdom of God. The gospel in John and Paul is defined by Greek categories and looks upward vertically in space to the salvation of individuals in heaven (cf. Ladd 1968:9-40).

This New Testament paradigm of translation continued during the New Testament period as the church spread to differing cultural contexts: Jewish, Greek, barbarian, Thracian, Egyptian, and Roman. In the post-apostolic period the same pattern is evident as the gospel is incarnated in many different cultural settings—Syriac, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, and Maronite (Bosch 1991:448). The norm was a plurality of cultural expressions of the gospel.

This all began to change in the fourth century. There were at least two reasons for this. First, the conversion of Constantine ultimately led to the establishment of the church as the official religion of the empire. With the close connection of the church with the Roman empire, the gospel was associated with *one* culture, which was considered the *dominant* and *superior* culture. Second, as the gospel was contextualized in the empire, the Greek spirit proved to be too strong for the church. Greek notions of truth as timeless, supracultural ideas reshaped the gospel in its mould. The aim of theological expression was to capture this single, suprahistorical truth in its theoretical articulations. As a result of this development, the plurality of expression found in the early church was lost. The theological articulation of the gospel, the liturgy, and Christian ethical behaviour was standardized. The rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the problem as it hemmed in Europe to the south and east. This isolated the gospel on the European peninsula from the other cultures of the world. Issues of contextualization and cultural plurality simply were not part of the Christian experience for many centuries as the gospel found a monocultural home.

The age of discovery in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries opened new opportunities for missions to have contact with various cultures. A number of factors confronted missions with the problem of the gospel and cultures: the initial communication of the gospel in terms that were understandable to the people and faithful to the gospel; the translation of the Scriptures into the native tongues of the people; the ongoing question of the treatment of the indigenous cultures in their social, cultural, moral, and religious

practices; and the need to find forms of worship and churchmanship suited to the new setting.

Since the European powers that commissioned overseas voyages during the first wave of exploration were the Catholic nations of Portugal and Spain, the first missionaries to seize these new opportunities were Roman Catholic. Unfortunately, the growing recognition of the need for a new dialogue between the gospel and cultures by Jesuit foreign missionaries (Robert de Nobili, Pedro Paez, Alessandro Valignano, and Matthew Ricci, for example) coincided with the Counter-Reformation whose first priority was, in face of the Protestant threat, to safeguard Catholic unity by imposing a rigid theological and liturgical uniformity on the church (Shorter 1988:153, 162). Any hope that Roman Catholic missions would break the monocultural uniformity of the gospel in Latin culture was put to rest in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when Pope Clement IX and Pope Benedict XIV condemned Ricci's contextualizing experiments in China and recalled all Jesuit missionaries. The question of gospel and cultures was silenced for the moment (Shorter 1988:157-159; Bosch 1991:449).

Protestant missions rose to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This coincided with new competition within Europe precipitated by the industrial revolution. The rivalry resulted in fresh initiatives of exploration and colonization that encompassed vast areas of the earth. With missions following in the steps of the colonizers, there was a new encounter with the cultures of the world. This fresh contact of the gospel with the various cultures of the earth raised again, with new urgency and complexity, the questions that had been voiced by the Jesuits and subsequently suppressed by the Vatican. Unfortunately, the stranglehold of western culture on the gospel was not immediately broken. Colonialism seemed to demonstrate the superiority of European culture, and missions adopted this mindset. The scientific rationalism that now encompassed European society fostered the illusion that truth is ahistorical and uncontaminated by the taint of human culture. For missions this meant that western theology is objective and stands above the relativities of history and culture. Western ecclesiastical, social and theological practice were considered supracultural and universally valid. The mission of the church was to export these normative forms of the gospel to the rest of the world.

The strategy to expedite this process was called by various names: adaptation or accommodation in Roman Catholicism and indigenization in Protestantism. The process to which these words pointed did not yet comprehend the full implications of a true encounter between the gospel and culture. The following critiques can be made of this process (Bosch 1991:448-449). First, the western expression of the gospel was considered normative and the need was for *it* (i.e., western form of the gospel and not the gospel itself) to be accommodated to the various cultures. Second, adaptation was deemed to be a problem only for the younger churches and not for the western churches since the gospel was supposedly already faithfully expressed there. Third, accommodation was thought to be a once-for-all procedure that was accomplished at the point of the insertion of the gospel into a particular culture. In the West, this process was a *fait accompli*. Similarly, in the younger churches the process would be complete when they were furnished with all the accountments of the western church. Fourth, accommodation was a concession to the Third World churches. It was not something constitutive of the gospel, but merely a pragmatic tool, a pedagogical strategy to communicate the gospel and expand the church. Fifth, this process affected only certain

elements of culture that were not polluted by non-Christian religions. Adherents of accommodation and indigenization did not yet understand the indivisible unity of cultures in which every element is shaped by the underlying religious worldview.

A number of factors combined to challenge the accommodationist approach in missions. Paul Hiebert argues that the three primary factors were the breakdown of colonialism, new advances in the social sciences—especially anthropology, linguistics, and postmodern history and philosophy of science (1994:81-84). The demise of colonialism levelled the myth of western superiority; advances in anthropology and linguistics revealed the profound unity within and differences between various cultures; postmodern history and philosophy of science exploded the positivist myth of ahistorical knowledge. We may add another, and perhaps the most important, factor: the maturation and independence of younger churches. The growing contextualized theologies of the Third World churches demonstrated a faithfulness to Scripture and new insights into the Biblical story that challenged the self-sufficiency and universal validity of western theology.

These factors moved the church into a new realization that contextualization is essential for the missionary church. The following commitments characterize the new situation. First, contextualization is constitutive of the gospel. There is no such thing as a culturally disinfected gospel; it is always expressed and embodied in some cultural context. This is not something to be regretted but is given with the very nature of the gospel. Far from threatening the universal validity of the gospel, a contextualized communication of the gospel is already evident on the pages of the New Testament, as the gospel moves from its Hebrew home to the Greek setting. Faithfulness to the Christian message requires recognizing this characteristic of the gospel. Second, there can be varying cultural expressions of the gospel that are faithful to the gospel. Since the gospel is not an idea that stands above history but the announcement of universally valid events that have significance for all of history, this can be expressed with various mutually enriching and correcting images. There is no universal theology or embodiment that stands in judgement of various contextualizations of the gospel. The spectre of relativism is continually present but the resolution of this issue is not found in the absolutization of some local theology or particular incarnation of the gospel as universal adjudicator. Authentic contextualization will avoid both relativism and an ethnocentric absolutism. Third, contextualization is an on-going process. Since culture is constantly changing and since the gospel must be translated faithfully into every idiom, if the church is to live out of the gospel, the process of contextualization will never be a *fait accompli* but a continuous challenge intrinsic to the church's mission. Fourth, contextualization is a process that takes place in every cultural setting. Contextualization is as much an issue for the western church as it is for the younger churches of the Third World.

The development of these underlying convictions has not led to any kind of consensus on contextualization. Various authors have attempted to group together the varying models of contextualization that are present in the world church today (Bevans 1992, 1993, 1999; Dyrness 1990; Friedli 1997:220; Schreiter 1985:6-16; Upkong 1987:163-168; Waldenfels 1997:82-87). All of these models struggle with two fundamental questions: How can the church be *faithful* to the gospel and *relevant* to the particular culture without falling into syncretism? How can the church be faithful to *one*

*gospel* without falling into ethnocentrism and at the same time embrace *plural expressions* without falling into relativism? It is unnecessary in this context to review the various struggles toward formulating answers. However, it would be useful to place Newbigin within the context of some of these typologies.

Typologies differ, of course, depending on the precise nature of the organizing criteria. Friedli produces a typology on the basis of the relationship of salvation to the cultural context (1997). He identifies five different contextual approaches: fulfillment, wherein salvation provides the answer for the questions of the culture; judgement, wherein salvation judges culture; the offer of a salvation that transcends religions and history; the invitation for conversion; and solidarity in suffering (Friedli 1997:220). In this typology Newbigin would fit into the fourth category. He would reject fulfillment; all of culture has been corrupted by sin including even the questions asked by the culture. He would reject the judgement model because culture is not only corrupted by sin; it also reflects God's good creation. He would reject the third model since salvation is the renewal and restoration of God's creation. While he would affirm solidarity in suffering—the fifth model—he would argue that contextualization must move beyond that to offer a word of hope and acts of justice and mercy.

Dyrness groups contextualization in terms of geography and the specific problems faced by the world church in that particular location (1990). The African church faces the problem of cultural estrangement created by the suppression of their cultural memory and identity by European ethnocentrism during the colonial period (Dyrness 1990:36-41). Contextualization needs to focus on the recovery of traditional culture and the relationship of the gospel to it in the present-day African church. The Latin American church faces a context of widespread poverty and misery upheld by unjust social, economic, and political structures that are both national and international in scope (Dyrness 1990:71-75). Contextualization needs to focus on issues of cultural analysis and social change that will secure justice. The Asian church represents a small minority in the midst of the ancient and powerful religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Dyrness 1990:121-126). Contextualization must face the issue of religious pluralism and the relationship of the gospel to a culture pervasively shaped by these vigorous religions. To Dyrness' list we might add the situation of the church in western culture. The church in the West has a long history of a symbiotic relationship with its culture. One might say that the gospel has been overcontextualized in the West. Perhaps the largest issue facing the church in contextualization in the West is the need to recover the counter-cultural dimensions of the gospel. To place Newbigin in any of these typologies, it is necessary to be reminded of his geographical setting. Newbigin spent thirty-eight years as a missionary in India. His views of gospel and culture were developed in relationship to Hindu culture. The next section will demonstrate how that Asian paradigm affected his understanding of contextualization even as he brought it to bear on the western situation.

As to placing Newbigin in a typology, Robert Schreiter and Stephen Bevans present an interesting situation. Schreiter distinguishes between three models placed on a spectrum between gospel/ Christian tradition and cultural context. The translation model begins with the gospel and attempts to translate it into another culture by way of a two-step procedure of decontextualization and translation (Schreiter 1985:6-7). At the other end of the spectrum is the contextual model that "begins with the needs of people in a

concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith” (Schreiter 1985:13). The adaptation models stand between emphasizing the received faith more than the contextual model but paying closer attention to cultural context than the translation model. The underlying assumption appears to be that attention to cultural context requires one to make that context the starting point for contextualization. Contrariwise Newbigin is adamant that the process of contextualization must begin with the gospel and then move to the context (1989e:151). His approach differs significantly, however, from the translation model, both in his understanding of revelation and in his recognition of the profound shaping effect of culture on the gospel. Thus Newbigin defies classification within this typology. Bevens discovered a similar problem. As he completed his well-known book on various models of contextualization, he became aware that Newbigin did not fit the five models he had elaborated (Bevens 1993:5). He has subsequently begun to work on a sixth model—the counter-cultural model—in which he classifies Newbigin, among others (Bevens 1993, 1999; Muller 1997:201). Bevens’ description of Newbigin’s position will be taken up a little later in the chapter.

### 8.3. MODEL OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Newbigin’s writings begin to reflect on the problem of gospel and culture in a more focussed and systematic way in the 1970s after his return to Britain. He employs the understanding of contextualization he gained from his Indian situation to articulate his program for the gospel and western culture. It is precisely this process that must be understood to rightly assess Newbigin’s views. Newbigin’s understanding of contextualization developed during his missionary experience in India and is most fully elaborated in the situation of mission in the West. The close connection between Newbigin’s missionary experience and his views on gospel and culture have been examined in an earlier chapter (2.3.2.12.). In this section Newbigin’s model of cross-cultural communication is explored. Newbigin expanded the notion of cross-cultural communication to include a whole theory of relating gospel, church, and culture. This model becomes a pattern for his missionary encounter of the church with its culture (1986e:1-9).

Street preaching was a regular evangelistic activity for Newbigin in his early missionary days in India. The question that pressed itself on him was ‘how can one preach to a crowd of people who have never heard of Jesus?’ Cross-cultural communication of the gospel involves three things. First, the evangelist must use the language of the hearers (1986e:5). Yet that language uses terms that reflect a worldview by which the hearers make sense of their world. Each word is not a transparent medium that can simply be shaped at will to communicate what is in the mind of the evangelist. The Tamil language, for example, is a shared way of understanding the world. As such it expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. Therefore, there will be a clash of ultimate commitments between the gospel and Hindu culture. Thus, cross-cultural communication, secondly, will call into question the underlying worldview implicit in the language. The gospel calls for repentance and conversion, for understanding and living in the world according to the gospel rather than the Hindu worldview (1986e:6).

Newbigin illustrates these two dimensions of cross-cultural communication (1978a:1-3; 1978e:146-150). The problem that faces the missionary to India is which word in the native language can be effectively used to introduce Jesus. *Swamy* meaning Lord offers a possibility. The problem is that there are many lords—three hundred and thirty million of them according to one tradition—and if Jesus is just one more lord there are more important matters to attend to. *Avatar* seems like an obvious choice since it refers to the descent of God in a creaturely form to put down the power of evil and to establish the faltering rule of righteousness. The trouble here is that *avatar* was bound up in a cyclical worldview that cannot ascribe finality to any particular *avatar* the way finality ought to be ascribed to Christ if the gospel is to be proclaimed faithfully. Maybe one should just begin to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth. But if one proceeds in this way Jesus is identified with the world of *maya*, the world of passing events which is simply an illusion in Hindu tradition. All other attempts—*kadavul*, supreme transcendent God; *satguru*, a teacher who initiates his disciple into the experience of realization; *adipurushan*, the primal man who is the beginning of all creation; *chit*, the intelligence and will which constitute the second member of the triad of ultimate reality—eventually founder on the same problem. “What all these answers have in common is that they necessarily describe Jesus in terms of a model which embodies an interpretation of experience significantly different from the interpretation which arises when Jesus is accepted as Lord absolutely” (1978a:2f.). However, there is no escape from the necessity of this tension if evangelists wish to communicate the gospel to their hearers. The language of the hearers must be used but used in such a way that the gospel is communicated faithfully.

This is the problem of the missionary in relationship to the religio-cultural setting: the missionary must be *both* faithful to the gospel and relevant to the culture. The missionary must be faithful to the gospel as it has been transmitted in the tradition of the church and at the same time must make the gospel relevant to the cultural situation. The first danger is faithfulness without relevance. Jurgen Moltmann calls this fossil theology—the present remnant of something that was once alive but is now dead. The second danger is relevance without faithfulness. Moltmann calls this a chameleon theology—something that takes on the colour of its surroundings to such an extent that it cannot be distinguished from it (Moltmann 1975:3).

Newbigin solves the tension with the notion of ‘challenging relevance’ or ‘subversive fulfillment.’ Both of these terms point to the same process. Hindu terms and categories are used but they are ‘burst open’ by the power of the gospel. Since Hindu categories are used, the proclamation of the gospel is *relevant*. The gospel *challenges* the Hindu understanding of the world by calling for repentance and conversion. The proclamation of the gospel *fulfills* the religious longing of the Hindu heart as expressed in their terminology. However, the gospel also *subverts* the Hindu understanding at its roots. Newbigin finds in the gospel of John a model for this kind of missionary communication (1995j:336). Of the gospel of John, Newbigin writes:

I suppose that the boldest and most brilliant essay in the communication of the gospel to a particular culture in all Christian history is the gospel according to John. Here the language and thought-forms of that Hellenistic world are so employed that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them. And yet nowhere in Scripture is the absolute contradiction between the word of God and

human culture stated with more terrible clarity (1986e:53).

The only way missionary communication can take place and the Hindu or Gnostic begin to see things in a different way is by a radical conversion that is the work of God (1986e:6). This is the third aspect of missionary communication.

Yet there is more to the cross-cultural missionary communication of the gospel. The issue is distorted if it is considered simply as the missionary's attempt to communicate a culture-free gospel into a pagan environment. The communication process enabled Newbigin to recognize how deeply his own understanding of the gospel was shaped by the culture from which he had come (1978e:146-147). As a new missionary, he was unaware of the formative power of western culture on his own understanding of the gospel.

My confession of Jesus as Lord is conditioned by the culture of which I am a part. It is expressed in the language of the myth within which I live. Initially I am not aware of this as a myth. As long as I retain the innocence of a thoroughly indigenous Western man, unshaken by serious involvement in another culture, I am not aware of this myth. It is simply 'how things are'. It is 'modern scientific world view'. It is the corpus of axioms which are accepted as such by those who have received a modern Western style education. No myth is seen as a myth by those who inhabit it: it is simply the way things are (1978b:3).

Cross-cultural missionary communication makes it clear that western languages, like Tamil, also embody a worldview. Western languages express foundational assumptions about the world that are incompatible with the gospel. Indeed, being unaware of this reality set up Newbigin for a syncretistic alliance between the gospel and his western worldview (1978a:5). The gospel is always culturally embodied and all cultures are incompatible with the gospel. The recognition of the cultural embodiment of the gospel in both cultures—that of the missionary and of the hearer—sets up a three-cornered dialogue between the gospel, the missionary's culture, and the target culture (1978e:147-149).

This description of the missionary experiences elicits the following observations. They are listed here briefly and expanded on throughout the remainder of this section.

First, Newbigin approaches the relation of gospel to culture from a missionary standpoint. He does not attempt to start at a scientific, neutral description of the relationship between the two but from the standpoint of one who is charged to faithfully communicate and embody a message.

Second, the missionary encounter involves a confrontation between ultimate beliefs or foundational assumptions. Two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world meet. The concern of the evangelist is to communicate the gospel to people and call them to believe the good news. It quickly becomes apparent that each 'individual' is part of a community or social network that shares a way of life. "The idea that the gospel is addressed only to the individual and that it is only indirectly addressed to societies, nations, and cultures is simply an illusion of our individualistic post-Enlightenment Western culture" (1989e:199). That person shares a whole range of beliefs, customs, symbols, and institutions. The evangelist sees that at the heart of this social network is a formative core of fundamental religious beliefs that shape each part

of society. Each custom, symbol, and institution embodies these core assumptions. These foundational beliefs are not neutral but religious and stand in some degree of opposition to the gospel.

Third, the gospel is not a timeless message quarantined from all cultural ‘contamination.’ Rather, the gospel is always embodied in the life and words of a particular culture.

Fourth, the religious shape of culture and the necessary cultural embodiment of the gospel combine to produce a tension in the attempt to faithfully communicate the gospel. On the one hand, the gospel must be translated into the language and culture of the hearers if it is to be relevant. On the other hand, the communication of the gospel must be faithful to the tradition given in Scripture and not reshaped by the faith commitments of the culture into which the gospel is translated.

Fifth, the resolution of this tension begins as an internal dialogue between the gospel as expressed in the story of the Bible and the target culture. With the deepening recognition of the cultural assumptions of the missionary, this internal dialogue becomes a conversation between three partners: Scripture, the missionary’s culture, and the target culture.

Sixth, conversion is necessary. There is no straight line from the fundamental assumptions of any culture to an understanding of the gospel. The gospel calls for conversion and repentance—a turn from idols to Christ to see all of life from a new set of foundational beliefs. Conversion will, of course, be a process for both hearer and missionary. Conversion is a work of God opening one’s eyes to the truth of the gospel.

These six observations form the foundation of Newbigin’s understanding of the relation between gospel and culture. The remainder of the chapter will deepen the significance of these themes.

#### 8.4. THE MISSIONARY CHURCH AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

Newbigin’s model has significance beyond the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. He opens *Foolishness to the Greeks* by asking what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and modern western culture (1986e:1). In western culture, the relationship between gospel and culture has been dealt with primarily by those who have not experienced crossing a cultural frontier, for example, H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) and Paul Tillich (1959). Newbigin believes that the question of a missionary encounter between gospel and culture can best be understood from the vantage point of the cross-cultural missionary. He begins by describing what is involved in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel (1986e:4). This model of cross-cultural missionary encounter becomes a foundational approach for his understanding of a missionary engagement with culture. Thus contextualization is not just an issue for the cross-cultural missionary, nor is it a peripheral issue for the missionary church: contextualization is constitutive of faithfulness to the missionary task in any cultural setting. The present section probes the relationship between the missionary church and its cultural context.

##### 8.4.1. *Mediating the Good News to Each Cultural Setting*

The church is defined, on the one hand, by the call of God to communicate the good news and, on the other, by its relationship to its particular location. In relationship to its cultural context, Newbigin speaks of the church as being *for* the local context in which it is situated.

... a local congregation will be a congregation in which everyone who belongs to that place will be able to recognize the call of Christ addressed to him or her in words, deeds, and patterns of life and worship which he can understand and receive as being truly the call of his own Maker, Saviour and Friend. The whole existence of the congregation must be such as to mediate to the people of that place the call of Christ which speaks to them as they are but calls them from what they are in order that—in Christ—they may become God's new creation (1977g:120).

To be for the cultural context means to mediate the good news to that place. If the church is to faithfully mediate the call of Christ to people in their cultural context, the communication in life, word, and deed must be both familiar and understandable on the one hand, and challenging and critical on the other. Newbigin articulates this Christologically. The relationship of the church to its cultural environment is to be understood in terms of the threefold relation of Christ to the world (1977g:118-119). Since Christ is the creator and sustainer of the world the church is to “love and cherish all of its created goodness” (1977g:119). Since Christ is the consummator of all things and one in whom reconciliation takes place, the church will be a sign of the true end for which that particular culture exists. Since Christ is the one who has died and risen to take away the sins of the world, the church will stand opposed to the evil of each culture. Thus the church must assume a threefold relationship: “It must communicate in the idiom of that culture both the divine good that sustains it and the divine purpose that judges it and summons it to become what it is not yet” (1978e:150). The church is to be a sign, instrument and foretaste for the context in which it is set. “In order that the Church may truly be sign, foretaste and instrument of God's purpose to consummate all things in Christ, it must in each place be credible as such a sign, foretaste and instrument *in relation to the secular realities of that place*” (*ibid*). The call of God to the church to embody the good news of the kingdom is not a general call to a standardized form of faithfulness, but the summons to be, do, and speak good news *in a particular cultural context*. The importance to Newbigin of this local cultural context to the missionary witness of the church is evident when he continues: “This must be so if the Church is to be true to its proper nature. When the Church, on the other hand, tries to order its life simply in relation to its own concerns and for the purpose of its own continued existence, it is untrue to its proper nature” (*ibid*). A *contextualized* witness belongs to the proper nature of the church.

If the church is to be faithful in contextualizing the witness of the gospel, there are two stances toward culture that are necessary: affirmation and rejection, solidarity and separation. The absence of either of these will muffle the call of Christ. The absence of solidarity will mean that the summons is not heard in understandable terms. The absence of separation means that the call of the gospel will not lead to true conversion (1977g:118, 120). The double event of the cross and resurrection is the clue that enables us to see that we are called “neither to a simple affirmation of human culture nor to a simple rejection of it.” On the one hand, the resurrection is God's ‘yes’ to culture and

so we cherish culture as a gift of God's good creation. On the other hand, the cross is God's 'no' to culture and so we stand in opposition to that "whole seamless texture of human culture" which is in rebellion against God. "We have to say both 'God accepts human culture' and also 'God judges human culture'" (1989e:195). Accordingly the church's posture toward its cultural context will similarly be identification and discrimination.

#### 8.4.2. *A Missiological Analysis of Culture*

Two dangers accompany the call to both solidarity and separation. Concern for affirmation and solidarity may lead to uncritical identification, whereas concern for rejection and separation may lead to polemical confrontation (1977g:118). To avoid these twin dangers, it is necessary to have a profound understanding of the culture in which the gospel is preached and embodied. If the model of cross-cultural communication holds true for the missionary encounter between the gospel and culture, then a missiological analysis of culture is essential. A missionary who shoulders the responsibility of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel is well-advised to make a careful study of the culture to which he or she is going, and so is the missionary church (1994k:100; cf. Hendrick 1993:64, 65).

Foundational to any analysis of a particular culture is a significant measure of understanding of the nature of culture. Newbigin nowhere engages in a theoretical analysis of the nature of culture. In fact, when he gives preliminary definitions of gospel and culture, his description of culture is a brief paragraph based on a simple dictionary definition. Below the surface of his analysis of western culture, however, a number of implicit assumptions about the nature of culture are evident. There are two that are especially relevant for the consideration of contextualization: the organic unity of culture and the comprehensive, socially embodied, and religious nature of the culture's underlying convictions.

First, culture is a unified network of institutions, systems, symbols, and customs that order human life in community. Newbigin starts with a dictionary definition of culture: "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another" (1978a:9). Culture is a human construction produced by a community that enables it to share its life together. It consists of the sum total of a vast array of human patterns of life: science, art, agriculture, economic and judicial systems, and so forth. "It includes all of that which constitutes man's public life in society.... we are speaking about humanity in its public, social, and historical aspect" (1978a:9). This societal network hangs together and constantly changes (1978e:144).

Second, a deeper religious worldview shapes this vast network of cultural elements. There is a distinction between the surface or peripheral level of culture and the depth level or core of foundational beliefs that shape the culture. Newbigin speaks of committed beliefs (1978e:146), basic assumptions and commitments (1980c:155), dogma that controls public life (1994k:150), ideologies, myths, worldviews (1989e:221), idols (1994k:150), even "gods" (1989e:220; 1994k:150) that function as a formative core at the centre of human society. This core is made up of "a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. I am

speaking, obviously, about religion” (1986e:3). In a discussion of Romans 12:2, where Paul exhorts the church ‘not to be conformed to this world’, Newbigin clarifies the distinction between a periphery of cultural organization and its formative centre or core. When Paul commands the Romans not to be conformed to the *world* (Romans 12:2), he is referring to culture “which does not mean just art, literature, and music, but the whole way that our world is organised. It means our language, our thought-patterns, our customs, our traditions, our public systems of political, economic, judicial, and administrative order—the whole mass of things which we simply take for granted and never question.” While this word ‘world’ can be used in a positive sense to speak of God’s good creation, it can also be used in a negative sense to refer to “a world organised around another centre than the creator’s” (1983f:4). Human culture is created to find its centre in the Creator but with human sin the Creator is replaced by idols which then integrate and shape every part of the culture.

Newbigin challenges the assumption, widespread in western culture, that religion is an activity separate from the rest of cultural life. He comments:

Neither in practice nor in thought is religion separate from the rest of life. In practice all the life of society is permeated by beliefs which western Europeans would call religious, and in thought what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience. The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture (1989e:172).

Newbigin’s understanding of culture is similar to that of Harvie Conn and Johann H. Bavinck. Conn begins by affirming the view that culture forms a fundamental unity as found in the writings of Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert (Kraft 1977; cf. 1979; Hiebert 1976; cf. 1985; 1994). Running through all of these views is the common theme of culture as an integrating and organizing force that patterns our ways of seeing reality. “Within this cultural structure, forms, functions, meaning, and usage remain distinctive but interrelated. Every cultural form serves particular functions, conveys meaning to the participants of a culture and... is dependent for its meaning and function on how active human agents use it in their cultural framework” (Conn 1980:148). However, these definitions do not give the proper place to religion. Conn draws on the views of Bavinck to do justice to the fundamental dimension of religion. No cultural forms are neutral because “their ties with the functions, meaning, and usage given to them by the culture never leave them absolutely neutral” (Conn 1980:149). He quotes Bavinck:

All elements have their secret ties with the religious faith of the people as a whole. Nothing is to be found anywhere that can be called a ‘no-man’s land.’ Culture is religion made visible; it is religion actualized in the innumerable relations of daily life (Bavinck 1949:57).

This formulation challenges the functionalist conceptions of culture which include religion as one part of culture. Following Bavinck, Conn wants to stress “the core place of religion in the structuring of culture’s meaning and usage.” Religion “is not an area of life, one among many, but primarily a *direction* of life... Religion, then becomes the heart of culture’s integrity, its central dynamic as an organism, the totalistic, radical

response of man-in-covenant to the revelation of God” (Conn 1980:149-150). The world’s cultures and religions are “powerful life-controlling entities, indivisible structures, each element cohering with all others and receiving its meaning from the total structure” as it is shaped by the fundamental religious assumptions of the people (Conn 1980:150; Bavinck 1960:172-173).

Culture is built on a certain anthropology. Human beings are religious creatures and the direction of their heart shapes every part of their being—rational, lingual, social, economic, etc. Culture is the shape given to their corporate existence. As Newbigin puts it, culture is “humanity in its public, social, and historical aspect” (1978a:9). Since human beings are political they form political orders in their life in community; since they are economic creatures they create economic systems to govern their production, buying, and selling; since they are lingual creatures they form a language in common to communicate; and so forth. Humanity also shares their religious lives in community; they share their fundamental religious convictions that lie at the heart of their communal lives together. Thus the whole of cultural formation is shaped by central religious commitments that underlie, integrate, and shape the whole.

While Newbigin’s views of culture move in the direction of Conn and Bavinck, he is not as clear and consistent as either of them about the religious direction of culture. Newbigin often speaks of presuppositions, fundamental or basic assumptions, worldviews, rationality traditions, fiduciary frameworks, and plausibility structures that lie at the heart of culture, without calling them religious commitments. Occasionally he seems to place language in the central place because language becomes the way that the foundational or central assumptions are expressed and transmitted (1978e:146; 1983d:5; 1986e:3). This focus on language is understandable considering his missionary experience. It was at the point of language that it became most clear to him that the underlying religious worldview of India was incompatible with the gospel: “... language provides the framework in which experience is placed, the spectacles through which one ‘sees’” (1983d:5). However, Newbigin does not distinguish clearly between language as one of the social forms and functions and the underlying religious convictions that are expressed and transmitted by that language. Newbigin’s later writings on the gospel and western culture show a deepening awareness that the core of culture is “faith-based” (1994k:107); culture is formed around central idolatrous faith commitments (1989e:220; 1994k:150). He speaks of the “central shrine” of culture being filled with idols: “Human nature abhors a vacuum. The shrine does not remain empty. If the one true image, Jesus Christ, is not there, an idol will take its place” (1986e:115). Newbigin comes closest to what Bavinck and Conn mean by religion when he speaks of religion as “ultimate commitment.” He rejects a narrow definition of religion that refers to “beliefs and practices concerning God and the immortal soul” and defines religion as “the final authority for a believer or society, both in the sense that it determines one’s scale of values and in the sense that it provides the models, the basic patterns through which the believer grasps and organizes his or her experience” (1978e:161; cf. 1989e:172f.). This includes traditional tribal myths and ideologies—including the modern scientific worldview—as well as recognized world religions. In a telling observation he distinguishes between a person’s *professed* and *real* religion. He notes that a person’s ‘religion’ may in fact be something quite other than what he or she professes. A people’s real religion is that which is “the ultimately authoritative factor in their

thinking and acting.” For example, if the church limits the operation of its Christian commitment to a restricted area of life and allows the more ultimate commitment of the modern scientific worldview to shape their understanding of life as a whole, then their real religion is the modern scientific worldview. As Newbiggin comments: “In this case the commitment to Christ will be conditioned by the person’s commitment to the overriding ‘myth,’ and the latter will be his or her real religion” (*ibid*).

Beyond their religious nature, these foundational assumptions have two other characteristics. On the one hand, they are comprehensive; they shape every part of human life and society. On the other hand, they are communally held; they are not the fruit of individual insight but the product of human life in community. Each person does not hold a different set of beliefs, but shares them with others. They are expressed and transmitted in a common language.

A missionary encounter is the clash between the gospel and the fundamental convictions of a culture, “a clash between ultimate faith-commitments” (1978e:154), expressed in the various institutions, systems, symbols, and customs of a culture. The call of the gospel is to conversion and repentance; the call to shape all of culture life with the formative core of the gospel rather than the idolatrous faith commitments.

#### 8.4.3. *Identification with the World: The Church For Culture*

To mediate the call of Christ faithfully, the church will assume a twofold stance toward the different faith commitments of its cultural environment. First, the church will identify with its culture, living in solidarity with it while mediating the call in terms that speak with familiarity and authenticity. Second, the church will be separate from and not be conformed to the culture, lest the gospel become simply the echo or reflection of the particular context (1977g:120). The starting point for this proper relationship to culture is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1989e:195).<sup>1</sup> These events must form the pattern for the missionary church (1970a:203ff.). The missionary church must be recognizable as the church *for* its particular context. That *for* must be defined in terms of the way Christ is *for* the world. The atonement is where we see most clearly the way Christ is for the world: in the cross, Christ is, on the one hand, totally identified with the world; at the same time, Christ is totally separated from the world (1994k:54). “The Cross is in one sense an act of total identification with the world. But in another sense it is an act of radical separation. It is both of these at the same time” (1974b:98). Following its Lord, the church will be for and against the world: “We must always, it seems to me, in every situation, be wrestling with both sides of this reality: that the Church is for the world against the world. The Church is against the world for the world. The Church is for the human community in that place, that village, that city, that nation, in the sense that Christ is for the world. And that must be the determining criterion at every point” (1994k:54). While the church is to reject a culture shaped by idolatry, it is to affirm that same culture as God’s good creation.

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<sup>1</sup>Sometimes Newbiggin speaks of the cross and resurrection together as the starting point for his thinking about the relationship of the church to culture and at other times he simply refers to the cross. When he refers only to the cross, it is an interpretation of the significance of the crucifixion *in the light of the resurrection*. So even when he speaks only of the death of Jesus, it is both the crucifixion and the resurrection that form the lens.

A society which accepts the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as its ultimate standards of reference will have to be a society whose whole style of life, and not only its words, conveys something of that radical dissent from the world which is manifested in the Cross, and at the same time something of that affirmation of the world which is made possible by the resurrection (1970d:6).

It is important to note that Newbigin *begins* with affirmation: the church is *for* the world (1994k:53-54). It is precisely because it is for the world that it must stand against the sin and idolatry that oppose the abundant life of the good creation. Jesus loved the world and his cross was an act of judgement on the sin that corrupted his good creation. The church follows Jesus in standing against the fundamental beliefs of the culture that have a detrimental impact on the life of its people. But, again, the starting point is God's affirmation, love, solidarity, and identification with his creation and this must be the starting point of the followers of Jesus. It will be observed in the next section that Newbigin speaks more often in terms of separation and dissent from culture. This has led to the classification of Newbigin's contextualization theory as 'counter' or 'against' culture. Yet this emphasis is misunderstood if it is not placed in the context of Newbigin's concern that the church be *for* the culture in which it is placed.

There are two reasons that the missionary church must take a stance of affirmation. First, this affirmation arises from the confession that the creation is good: "The world itself is not evil, but is under an evil power" (1967a:12). Newbigin clearly distinguishes between the good creation and the evil power that corrupts and distorts it (1977g:119). Since culture gives expression to God's good creation, the church must affirm culture; since it is polluted by sin the church must oppose culture. The call of the gospel is to *radical* discontinuity but not to *total* discontinuity. The gospel demands a break with, and conversion from, a wisdom and a pattern of life based on experience other than the gospel. Yet there is also continuity with pre-conversion experience: after conversion the convert recognizes that it is the same Creator God that was dealing with him or her all along (1972f:59f.). There is radical discontinuity because of the pervasive scope of sin; there is not total discontinuity because God is creator, ruler and redeemer.

Various examples of this could be adduced but only one is offered here: Newbigin's approach to the problem of power (1973f:51). At Bangkok there were many attacks on first world churches which hold overwhelming economic, political, cultural, and ecclesiastical power. The whole issue of power and powerlessness was central to the discussion. He observes "a naive sort of philosophic anarchism" that lay behind much of what was being said. Anarchism is a Gnostic rejection of power as evil. Newbigin does not believe that power is evil, just corrupted by sin: it is the abuse of power that must be condemned (1986e:126). The need of the hour was "help for those entrusted with power to learn how to use it" (*ibid*). Power is creationally good; abusive power is that creational gift distorted by sin. Abusive power is to be rejected; power itself is to be affirmed as a creational gift. Anarchism wrongly locates sin in power itself rather than in its misuse. To treat all power as evil is to fall into the heresy of Manichaeism which does not distinguish between the good creation and sinful corruption (1986e:102). While this distinction clearly underlies Newbigin's wrestlings with culture, it is unfortunate that he did not make this differentiation clearer and more central to his formulations.

Closely allied with the affirmation of the goodness of creation is the second reason the Christian community must affirm and live in solidarity with their culture: the confession of the cultural task of humankind. This theme arises at two points in Newbigin's writing: in connection with the calling of the church in nation-building in the Third World, and in the challenge to the western church not to privatize the gospel but take responsibility for the public life of the nation. He summarizes this commitment: "... the church today cannot without guilt absolve itself from the responsibility, where it sees the possibility, of seeking to shape the public life of nations and the global ordering of industry and commerce in light of the Christian faith" (1986e:129). Once again while this commitment underlies Newbigin's thought, he does not make this as clear as it should be. Newbigin rarely even acknowledges the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 yet its thrust remains important in his thought.

This twofold affirmation of the creational good of culture will undergird a full identification and solidarity of the church with its culture. It will adopt its language, customs, symbols, institutions, and systems. The good news then may be communicated in understandable and familiar patterns (1989e:141).

#### *8.4.4. Separation from the World: The Church Against Culture*

While Newbigin affirms the creational structure of culture, he also recognizes that an idolatrous foundational worldview shapes every part of culture. Since the gospel is comprehensive it calls for a discipleship that embodies all of life. The gospel cannot be fitted into the cultural story: "It is totally impossible to fit the story of a crucified and risen Lord into any view of the world except the one of which it is the starting point. From any other point of view it is either scandalous or meaningless, as Paul knew well" (1978j:5).

It is easy for us... to forget how strange, and even repelling, the Gospel is to the ordinary common sense of the world. You will have seen the reproduction of the famous graffito from the 1<sup>st</sup> century which shows a man worshipping the figure of a crucified ass, with the words scrawled below: "Anexamenos worships his god". In a world which longed for personal salvation, and which was full of gods and lords claiming to meet that need, how utterly absurd and indeed revolting to claim that a Jew from a notoriously troublesome province of the Empire who has been condemned as a blasphemer and executed as a traitor was the Saviour of the world! How on earth could anyone believe that? Nineteen hundred years later, after so many centuries of Gospel preaching, the claim is still as offensive to ordinary common sense (1978c:301).

Accordingly the preaching and embodiment of the gospel must challenge the worldview of the hearer, making it clear that the public vision that shapes society is not only radically different from the gospel but also false (1986e:132). This means that there will be an encounter at every point between various faith commitments; the missionary church will take a stance of radical dissent from culture (1970d:6). Throughout his writings, Newbigin stresses this aspect of contextualization most frequently. While contextualization involves both separation and solidarity, judgement and grace, rejection and affirmation, it is the first of these pairs that receives primary attention in Newbigin's writings.

During the 1960s, Newbigin observed the two different stances taken toward culture

by the ecumenical and evangelical traditions. The evangelical tradition, rightly concerned to protect the truth of the gospel, ended in a sterile and repellant sectarianism that shunned culture; theirs was a separation without solidarity. The ecumenical tradition, motivated by a genuine concern to sympathize and identify with the struggles of humankind, attempted to be relevant to the needs of the world and meet the world on its own terms; theirs was a solidarity without separation that ended “near or at the point of apostasy” (1967a:12). Again the cross provides the clue for a third way: the cross both identifies with the sorrow and suffering of humankind yet exposes and destroys the sin that was the root of it all (1974b:98).

Since Newbigin’s primary context was the ecumenical tradition, it is not surprising to find that he stressed the importance of a radical dissent from culture over against the pervasive “chameleon theology” of the WCC. He emphasizes the “dissenting otherworldliness of those whose citizenship is in another world” (1968b:26). He speaks of the church as discriminating non-conformists (1968b:26), radical dissenters (1970d:6), radical critics and misfits (1968b:26) with a relationship of conflict (1968b:26) and radical discontinuity with the world (1972f:59-60). “There is a stark contrast between the faith by which the Church lives and the mind of the world” (1968c:13). While Newbigin’s emphasis on radical dissent never becomes a Gnostic rejection of culture, this does remain his primary emphasis.

In response to the advanced state of syncretism in which he found the church in western culture Newbigin increasingly emphasized this dimension of contextualization. Western culture is a pagan society and the western church has “in general failed to realize how radical is the contradiction between the Christian vision and the assumptions that we breathe in from every part of our shared existence” (1987b:4). It is because of this accommodation of the church in the West that the word ‘challenge’ becomes so frequent in Newbigin’s writings that call for a missionary encounter with western culture (1989e:140, 220).

The Christian church is a minority in its culture. That means “questioning the things that no one ever questions” whether that be the church in India that questions the laws of *karma* and *samsara* or the church in the West that questions the fact/value dichotomy and the consumerist way of life. The church stands against its cultural story by offering another story—the true story—which is a more rational and comprehensive way of understanding and living in the world. Thus the church is an alternative community embodying a different story to their culture.

And when we offer a different fiduciary framework, an alternative to the one that is dominant in our culture, we are calling for *conversion*, for a radical shift in perspective. We need the boldness of the foreign missionary who dares to challenge the accepted framework, even though the words he uses must inevitably sound absurd to those who dwell in that framework (1994k:112).

It is at this point that Newbigin’s emphasis on suffering in mission comes clearly into view. Speaking of the cross, Newbigin states: “The cross is, on the one hand, the ultimate act of solidarity with the world; it is, at the same time and *necessarily*, the ultimate act of rejection *by* the world” (1970a:202; emphasis mine). The world cannot understand the secret of how the church lives; this means rejection by the world. This fundamental paradox—solidarity with and rejection by our culture—“belongs to the

essence of the Church's life in the world" (*ibid*). This pattern also is founded on following Jesus. He lived in solidarity with the world yet stood in antithetical opposition to the world corrupted by sin. This led to suffering. "His ministry entailed the calling of individual men and women to personal and costly discipleship, but at the same time it challenged the principalities and powers, the ruler of this world, and the cross was the price paid for that challenge. Christian discipleship today cannot mean less than that" (1989e:220).

Suffering as a mode of mission is a frequent motif in Newbigin's writings but it is especially clear when he addresses the issue of church and culture. He explains why suffering is unavoidable in a missionary encounter with culture.

No human societies cohere except on the basis of some kind of common beliefs and customs. No society can permit these beliefs and practices to be threatened beyond a certain point without reacting in self-defense. The idea that we ought to be able to expect some kind of neutral secular political order, which presupposes no religious or ideological beliefs, and which holds the ring impartially for a plurality of religions to compete with one another, has no adequate foundation. The New Testament makes it plain that Christ's followers must expect suffering as the normal badge of their discipleship, and also as one of the characteristic forms of their witness (1964g:42).

When ultimate beliefs clash, the dominant worldview strives to become the exclusive worldview. It exerts tremendous pressure for dissenting communities to abandon their uniqueness and conform to the dominant community. They must either opt for accommodation or live out the comprehensive call of the gospel faithfully and pay the price for their dissent with suffering.

#### *8.4.5. An Anticultural Model of Contextualization?*

Newbigin's emphasis on the antithetical side of the contextualization process has led a number of analysts to characterize his model of contextualization as anti-cultural. In a critique of 'The Gospel and Our Culture' movement in Britain, Elaine Graham and Heather Walton remark that Newbigin's position "might more adequately be described as 'Gospel Against our Culture' movement" (Graham and Walton 1991:2). They base their analysis of Newbigin on their own syncretistic accommodation to postmodernity, as Newbigin points out in his response (1992c:1-10). Analyses of Stephen Bevans and Sander Griffioen make a similar point albeit in a more sympathetic and nuanced way.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Bevans groups Newbigin together with Protestants Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Roman Catholics Avery Dulles, Mary Jo Leddy, and John Coleman under 'The Counter-Cultural Model' of contextualization. Bevans articulates this model as one that is primarily found among theologians who do theology in the

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<sup>2</sup>Bevans writes: "All of these models are valid as such, and all could be valid in the context of contemporary North America. However, I would suggest that serious consideration should be given to what I have called the 'counter-cultural model' for carrying out the church's mission in this context" (1999:153). Griffioen is similarly appreciative referring to his model of contextualization as "inspiring" and "brilliant" (1996:1).

deeply secularized context of the West (1993:6).<sup>3</sup> There are two things that Bevans highlights about this model. First, “culture is regarded with utmost suspicion,” almost as “utterly corrupt and resistant to the gospel” (Bevans 1993:6, 14). He rightly observes that Newbigin believes that the gospel is not to be read in the light of the culture but the culture in the light of the gospel and that ‘counter-cultural’ means that “the biblical worldview provides a vision that runs deeply at odds with what has developed in the West” (Bevans 1993:6). Second, Bevans notes that the gospel has primarily a critical function in relation to culture. “The first task of theology according to the counter-cultural model is to expose those pagan, anti-gospel assumptions as false and ideological. This is done by a re-reading of the gospel over against these cultural assumptions...” (Bevans 1993:12). In both cases, Bevans highlights the negative side: the sinful corruption of culture (and not the creational goodness) and the critical function of Scripture (and not the renewing function). In an article published six years later, Bevans more carefully nuances his position. He recognizes that various adherents of this model exhibit a spectrum: while Hauerwas and Willimon would approach more of an anti-cultural position, Newbigin takes more seriously the cultural responsibility of believers. In other words, Bevans acknowledges Newbigin’s emphasis on the positive side of the relationship of the church to its culture (1999:151-152).

Sander Griffioen wrestles in a similar way with Newbigin’s model of contextualization. He recognizes that Newbigin’s position cannot simply be defined by its critique of culture. Analyzing *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he observes that the first half of the book is primarily concerned with critique and the second with the more positive role of cultural development. He comments: “The question which arises is how these two anthropological conceptions—that of the critic of culture and that of the manager of the world—are related to each other. Does Newbigin intend to say that these are two sides of the same coin, or must we conclude that they are incompatible?” (Griffioen 1996:11). Griffioen believes that in the church’s cultural calling the struggle against idolatry and the task of managing creation belong together and are only distinguishable theoretically. While Newbigin never really works out his own position, Griffioen sees “some indication” of an incipient tension between these two. Griffioen illustrates the problem by reference to Martien E. Brinkman’s book *De Theologie van Karl Barth* (1983). Brinkman discusses a controversy between the Barthian theologian Kornelis H. Miskotte and the neo-Calvinist theologian Klaas Schilder. Schilder emphasized Christ as the renewer of culture who restores his people to pursue their cultural task. Miskotte believed that Schilder was lacking in prophetic and critical spirit:

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<sup>3</sup>In Bevans later article he speaks not only of ‘models of contextual theology’ but ‘contextual models for a missional church’ (1999:148-154). The models hold not only for doing theology but also for the church’s engagement of its context in mission.

“... the prophetic light of the church has been almost completely extinguished” (Griffioen 1996:12). Schilder emphasized the developmental task of the church’s cultural responsibility and lost the critical dimension, while Miskotte stressed the prophetic task of the church in culture and failed to find a place for cultural development. Griffioen believes that the neo-Calvinists Dirk Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd have been able to state more positively the relationship by speaking of the “inner reformation” of culture. The gospel renews culture; this means that development and critique are two sides of the same coin. The Barthian Miskotte is not able to move beyond an “impersonal relationship” of the gospel to culture and thus critique and affirmation are not unified. Griffioen sees in Newbigin some of this tension. He comments: “I find it striking that in his discussion of contextualization he pays virtually no attention to the gospel as an agent of inner reformation or cultural renewal. All the emphasis is on the critical and judging function of the Word” (Griffioen 1996:12). Yet Griffioen immediately adds that this is not the whole picture. In his treatment of the various public domains of western culture (politics, science) Newbigin gives consideration to faith as an agent of cultural reformation (Griffioen 1996:13).

An evaluation of Griffioen’s and Bevans’s analyses is needed. First, the affirmation of the creation’s goodness and of humankind’s calling to cultural development are not given the explicit attention in Newbigin’s writings that the Biblical record warrants. It is not surprising that Bevans and Griffioen represent two traditions, Roman Catholic and Dutch neo-Calvinist, that have paid close attention to Scripture’s teaching on creation. While a careful reading of Newbigin’s entire corpus of writings fixes in one’s mind his implicit assumption of these dimensions of Biblical thought, his discussions of contextualization do not make this theme explicit. His starting point in the cross and resurrection does not open up into a full doctrine of creation and this draws the critique of Bevans and Griffioen. However, it must be stated that an implicit understanding of creation and humanity’s role in its development underlies so much of his writing that Newbigin cannot be read as one who entertains *only* a deep suspicion of culture (1986e:65-123). Here Newbigin must be distinguished from Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, and Douglas John Hall.<sup>4</sup> Bevans is correct in saying that Newbigin is concerned for transformation; Newbigin is also concerned to identify and embrace the good within culture (1977g:119). George Vandervelde notes that Newbigin’s idea of a ‘missionary encounter’ includes both a ‘positive relation’ to *and* a ‘critical appraisal’ of culture: “Newbigin calls for an encounter that entails a positive relation to culture by way of a critical approach” (1996:6). Vandervelde critiques others who have been so fearful of Christendom that they advocate a strictly counter-cultural stance. In fact “being simply counter-cultural is impossible” (:7). Vandervelde rightly contrasts Newbigin to this model: “For Newbigin, however, the Christian community is properly *counter-cultural* only to the extent that it is *engaged in culture*; conversely, the church is properly engaged in culture only to the extent that it is counter-cultural” (:6).

Second, the particular settings for Newbigin’s writings must be taken into account.

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<sup>4</sup>About the same time that Newbigin delivered the paper *Can a Modern Society Be Christian?* (1995c), offering his agenda for the church’s pursuit of this goal, Douglas John Hall made the comment at the 1996 Gospel and Culture Conference that it is wicked to seek a Christian society (cf. 1999:73). For Hall, cultural power was one of the problems of Christendom; for Newbigin Christendom cannot be judged so easily.

His missionary experience in a climate where an ancient religion stood opposed to the gospel; his ecumenical experience where he met a syncretistic accommodation to the currents of the day; and his return to Britain where he found a timid and deeply compromised church—all these moved him to emphasize the antithetical side of contextualization. It is especially the British context that must be highlighted. The majority of his writings on the issue appeared after 1974, when he returned to Britain. In those speeches and articles Newbigin is primarily concerned to work out a model of contextualization that is appropriate to western culture. For a church that has lived long in its environment developing a symbiotic relationship, the need of the hour is the call for counterculture, so that the church may be freed from its syncretistic accommodation. In a situation where the church is in an advanced state of syncretism, Newbigin stresses the antithetical side of the contextualization dynamic. Miskotte's comment about the extinguishing of the prophetic light of the church is telling. While Schilder would speak of both cultural development and antithesis, it appears that development has swallowed up the antithesis. It is difficult to hold these two together, even when they are seen as two sides of the same coin. While Griffioen's critique of Newbigin is valid, Newbigin's prophetic response to a situation where the antithetical side of the cultural task has been eclipsed must be taken into account.

There is a similarity here between Newbigin's and Hendrik Kraemer's critics in their analyses. Most commentators label Kraemer with the term 'discontinuity.' A careful reading of Kraemer, however, shows a fine integration of continuity and discontinuity within the concept of 'subversive fulfillment.' Yet in the situation of the day, where the majority of writers were stressing continuity, there was a need for the emphasis that was missing. Kraemer says: "In fact, therefore, the only reason we have to side so resolutely with 'discontinuity' and argue for it, is that the 'continuity' standpoint has so many able advocates, and that it is evidently so seductive" (Kraemer 1956:352). Marc Spindler's comment about Kraemer is also to the point: "... the idea of 'discontinuity' was misunderstood as being totally negative, whereas it must be interpreted in the dialectical framework of the pascal [sic] mystery of death and resurrection, judgement and grace" (Spindler 1988:12). Both Kraemer and Newbigin stress emphases that have been neglected.

Third, Newbigin's understanding of challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment are very similar to the ideas of inner reformation held by Griffioen and others in Dutch neo-Calvinism. Both reject a revolutionary sweeping away of cultural institutions as well as a conservative acceptance of the status quo. Both affirm that the whole is distorted by sin and must be reformed or subverted. Both distinguish between cultural form or structure and the underlying faith commitments that shape it. The missionary encounter is at the level of ultimate faith commitments that shape the culture and not at the level of cultural structures *per se*. The language and emphases between Newbigin and Dutch neo-Calvinism differ; but there is a fundamental agreement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>There is a difference in focus between Newbigin on the one hand and Griffioen and other neo-Calvinists on the other. Newbigin's concerns are *kerygmatic*; he is concerned for the preaching of the gospel. Griffioen's concerns are *philosophical*; he is concerned to reflect on the implications of the gospel for a philosophical description of the world. Nevertheless, the fundamental agreement remains; both are concerned for a right relationship between gospel and culture.

### 8.5. FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALIZATION

The more deeply the church senses the contradiction between the gospel and the cultural assumptions shaped by a different vision, the more the unbearable tension of living between two different worldviews is felt. As Newbigin moved to Britain and engaged western culture, he stressed the public doctrine of the West as a story. Both the gospel and the worldview of western culture are in the form of a story—an interpretation of universal history (1989e:89-102). The missionary church finds itself at the crossroads between two stories.

This unbearable tension of living at the crossroads arises from three factors. First, the church is part of a society that embodies a cultural story. That cultural story is rooted in an idolatrous religious faith, determinative of every part of human life and culture, and embodied by a community. The church is part of the community that embodies this pattern of social life. Second, the church finds its identity in a different story, one that is also rooted in faith, equally comprehensive, and also embodied. The gospel is not a disembodied message, “an ethereal something disinfected of all human cultural ingredients”, but is always incarnated in a community (1989e:188). Third, the unbearable tension emerges because of ‘two embodiments’ in the life of the church. As a member of the cultural community, the church is shaped by the cultural story. As a member of the new humankind, it is shaped by the Biblical story. Therefore, the embodiment of the gospel will always be culturally embodied: “there is not and cannot be a gospel which is not culturally embodied” (1989e:189). The tension arises because the gospel and the cultural story are at odds and yet “meet” in the life of the church. Contextualization is not the meeting of a disembodied message and a rationally articulated understanding of a culture; to pose the issue in that way is both abstract and dualistic (1989e:188-189). The encounter between gospel and culture happens in the life of the community called to live in the story of the Bible. The church incarnates the intersection of gospel and culture; the incompatibility of the two stories, even radical contradiction (1987b:4), produces an unbearable tension.

Newbigin refers to this tension as the ‘secular-apostolic dilemma’<sup>6</sup> (1972h). In a paper on education in India, he grapples with the question of how Christians can be involved in the Indian school systems when there are two fundamentally different understandings of education, based on two different understandings of the purpose and goal of human life. The ‘secular’ state mandates education for its own purposes and is willing to support Christian schools if they fall in line with that purpose. The apostolic gospel, however, envisions an entirely different purpose and goal for human life and therefore education plays a different role. From the standpoint of the state, the gospel nurtures children in a way that is destructive of national unity. How can Christians

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<sup>6</sup>The ‘secular-apostolic dilemma’ is similar to what Moltmann refers to as the ‘identity-involvement dilemma.’ How does the Christian remain faithful to his or her Christian (apostolic) identity while becoming involved in the ‘secular’ affairs of public life of culture when it is shaped by a fundamentally different story (Moltmann 1975:1-4). It is noteworthy also that, while Newbigin stresses the tension, he does not yet consider it unbearable—as he will in his later years when he is not as enamoured of processes of secularization. In fact, respondents to his paper wondered if he downplays the tension (Gasimir 1972; Soares 1972).

participate in ‘nation-building’ and remain faithful to the gospel in their educational endeavours? (1972h; cf. 1973e).

Authentic contextualization is the resolution of this tension in the life of the community. Newbigin refers to this as ‘true’ and ‘faithful’ contextualization (1978a:10; 1989e:141-154). Such contextualization requires both faithfulness to the gospel and relevance to its culture. Only in this way is the good news mediated in patterns of life, words, and deeds that are familiar and challenging. According to Newbigin, faithful contextualization involves three things: faithfulness to Scripture, a dialogue with the local culture that avoids syncretism and irrelevance, and a dialogue with the ecumenical fellowship that avoids ethnocentrism and relativism. The next three sub-sections will treat each of these.

### *8.5.1. Faithfulness to Scripture*

The starting point for contextualization is the primacy of the gospel: the affirmation that the church begins by attending to the story of Scripture as its ultimate commitment. This starting point stands in contrast to the majority of current contextualization models. Newbigin critiques the liberation theology model for locating its starting point in the needs of the people (1989e:149-151; 1978e:113-120; cf. Bevans 1999:150). Schreiter distinguishes the contextual models from the translation and indigenization models on the basis that culture is the starting point for the contextualization process (1985:12). In Bevans’s five models only the translation model, primarily endorsed by conservative evangelicals and conservative Roman Catholics, takes its starting point in Scripture (1992; 1999:146-147). Newbigin’s understanding of Scripture and culture differs significantly from the translation model. Yet, like them, he believes that the contextualization process must begin by attending to Scripture: “It [authentic Christian thought and action] must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend to the real needs of people...” (1989e:151). For Newbigin, primary attention to Scripture means at least three things: an understanding of Scripture as a narrative of universal history; an indwelling of the Biblical story by the ecclesial community; and an understanding of the gospel’s ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to culture.

For faithful contextualization it is necessary to properly understand the nature of Scriptural revelation. The emphasis in Newbigin’s work in the last twenty-five years of his life on the contextualization of the gospel in the West coincided with a heightened interest in the authority of Scripture (3.7.2.4.; 1986e:42-64). In a virgin missionary situation the process of contextualization takes place as the new community begins to wrestle with the newly translated Biblical story in relationship to its cultural life. The problem in the West is that this book has been a part of this culture for so long that it has been absorbed into and accommodated to western culture. If a missionary encounter is to take place and there is to be a faithful contextualization of the gospel, the Bible must be the starting point—but the Scriptural authority must be understood in the proper way. A full discussion of Newbigin’s understanding of Scriptural authority and

contextualization is beyond the scope of this section.<sup>7</sup> It will suffice to call attention to two aspects that are centrally significant: Scripture must be understood as a single narrative; Scripture tells the story of the mighty deeds of God.

The Bible displays the form of universal history and therefore must be understood as a canonical whole (1989e:89). When the process of contextualization proceeds by selecting particular aspects of Scripture that are most compatible with the patterns of various religions and cultures, Scripture will be interpreted in light of the culture rather than the culture in light of Scripture. When the Bible is broken up into little bits—historical-critical, devotional, systematic-theological—they are easily accommodated to the cultural story; there is no challenge to that story. Syncretism rather than missionary challenge is the end result. If the Bible is to be the controlling reality, the fundamental authority that shapes the life of the missionary church, it must be embraced as a story of universal history and understood in terms of its canonical wholeness (1994k:163-165).

The Bible is not a book of religious ideas, but rather tells the story of the deeds of God that culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (1989e:152). The central events of the gospel of Jesus reveal and accomplish the end of history. It gives the community an understanding of the meaning of history, the place of humankind in that history, and the enablement to begin to live in that story as a foretaste of the kingdom. The temptation is to turn the Bible into timeless statements (1989e:12-13). When this happens a particular local theology is absolutized and the life-changing power of the gospel to enable the church to be good news for its particular place is swallowed up in irrelevancy.

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<sup>7</sup>In two lengthy discussions of contextualization, Newbigin grapples with a number of questions that have arisen in the West surrounding Scriptural authority (1978a:15-22; 1978e:153-159). For the purpose of this section it is not necessary to reproduce those discussions. The three issues he addresses are: the cultural embodiment of the New Testament itself; the variety of images of Christ found in the New Testament; the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

In emphasizing Scripture as the mighty act of God and in its canonical whole, Newbigin follows Willem A. Visser 't Hooft (1992g; Visser 't Hooft 1967).<sup>8</sup> Visser 't Hooft asks the question: "Can the characteristics of... accommodation which respects the authority of the canon be spelled out? To do so adequately would be to formulate a complete biblical theology. We can however mention some criteria which are of primary importance" (1967:11). His first two criteria are: "Does this new presentation of the gospel interpret it in the light of the Bible as a whole?" and "Does the new presentation 'tell the great deeds of God?'" (1967:12).

Moreover to make Scripture the starting point in contextualization means that the believing community must "indwell" the story of Scripture. Newbigin employs two images to make this point: visual and tactile. In terms of the visual image, Newbigin frequently insists that one must view the culture through the lens of Scripture. He asks: "Do you try to understand the gospel through the spectacles provided by your culture, or do you try to understand your culture through the spectacles provided by the gospel?" (1994k:99). The responsibility of those charged with bearing the gospel to a culture requires the church to embrace the latter. Newbigin also employs a tactile image that he borrows from Michael Polanyi. He speaks of the use of Scripture by the missionary community as analogous to the use of a probe by a surgeon. When a surgeon uses a probe to explore a patient's body, he or she does not focus on the probe but rather on the lumps, cavities, and hollows of the patient's body. The surgeon is tacitly aware of the probe he or she is using but focally aware of the body that is being explored. The probe becomes the means by which the surgeon understands the patient's body. The surgeon indwells the probe for the purpose of understanding the patient's body: it almost becomes an extension of the body for the purpose of examination. This analogy neatly exposes to view the way a story functions tacitly to enable us to understand our world. Since Scripture is the true story about the world and the church is called to make known that story in life, word, and deed, the task of the church is to indwell the story of Scripture as the most real story of their lives (1989e:34-38).

I shall suggest that the Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look *at*, but for us to look *through*. Using Polanyi's terminology, I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to *indwell* the story *tacitly* aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but *focally* attending to the world we live in so that we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it.... this calls for a more radical kind of conversion than has often been thought, a conversion not only of the will but of the mind, a transformation by the renewing of the mind so as not be conformed to this world, not

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<sup>8</sup>Harvie Conn also emphasizes the importance of these two aspects of Scriptural revelation for contextual theology. He identifies 'biblical-theology as the first criterion for doing contextual theology (Conn 1984:225-229).

to see things as our culture sees them, but—with new lenses—to see things in a radically different way (1989e:38).

Finally faithful contextualization requires a church that discerns the word of grace and the word of judgement that the gospel pronounces on our culture. “True contextualization accords the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and to speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgement and grace” (1989e:152). Or as he puts in another place: “... this story, with its centre in the cross and resurrection of the eternal Word, will always provide both a critique of every culture and also the resources of divine grace to sustain the human enterprise of culture” (1993b:100).

Interpreting the way Newbigin understands this ‘yes’ and ‘no’ is not easy. Bevans believes that, for Newbigin, this means that “God’s Revelation in the Gospel of Jesus represents a ‘Yes’ to humanity by saying a ‘No’ to any and all human cultural constructs” (1993:8). By this interpretation, the ‘no’ drowns out the ‘yes’ and cultural resistance and protest become the primary posture of the missionary community. However, we do not find this distinction between humanity and cultural constructs in Newbigin’s thought. The ‘yes’ and ‘no’ of the gospel are pronounced on the cultural constructs themselves. A better way to interpret this grace and judgement is in terms of creation and sin. God’s ‘yes’ is pronounced on the goodness of creation as that comes to expression in cultural constructs, and his ‘no’ stands against a sinful distortion evident in cultural constructs. Every cultural product displays something of God’s good creation and at the same time a sinful twisting. Political tyranny embodies both the creational goodness of political power and the sinful distortion of tyrannical abuse. Newbigin’s frequent return to the question of power supports this interpretation. Power is creationally good; its abuse is the result of human sin (1994k:143-144). The missionary church will support neither anarchy nor the status quo. Again, even though the distinction between the good structure of creation and the evil twisting of human sin underlies his formulations, Newbigin did not make this distinction clearly.

### *8.5.2. Dialogue with Cultures: Avoiding Syncretism and Irrelevance*

Faithful contextualization will involve a dialogue with the various cultures of the world that avoids the twin problems of syncretism and irrelevance. The issue that arises at this point is *how* all of culture can be both affirmed and rejected. Failure in contextualization within a particular culture takes place when either of these ‘words’ of the gospel are suppressed. When God’s word of judgement is not applied, syncretism will be the result. The culture is simply affirmed and the gospel is domesticated into the plausibility structure of the culture. Alternately, when God’s word of grace is not present, irrelevance will be the result. The culture is rejected and, since cultural embodiment is inevitable, the church will attempt to embody a cultural form of the gospel from another time or place and will, thus, be irrelevant to its culture.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>This central contrast of syncretism and irrelevance in Newbigin is helpful in many ways. However, in practice irrelevance and withdrawal is ultimately impossible. We are cultural creatures by our very constitution. Some parts of the embodiment of the gospel may be irrelevant—e.g., theological formulations—but without a serious engagement with contemporary culture, syncretism will also be the result in much of life. I think, for example, of some conservative Christians who cling to past theological

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formulations yet whose lives are shaped by the reigning economic system of North America. Paul Hiebert is more aware of this in his model of critical contextualization. The attempt to simply deny culture—rejection of contextualization—will push pagan cultural ways underground resulting in syncretism (1985:184, 188).

Newbiggin finds a solution to the issue of affirmation and rejection in two phrases—challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment. The first, the one used most often, he borrows from Alfred G. Hogg (1945:9-26)<sup>10</sup> and the second from Kraemer (1939:4). The way ‘subversive fulfillment’ is employed in Newbiggin’s notion of contextualization, however, is clearly indebted to Visser ’t Hooft (1967:13-14; cf. 1992g:80; 1994k:163).

Hogg invites his readers to consider the challenge of the foreign missionary sent to proclaim the gospel in a region where Hinduism prevails. How will this missionary make a relevant and sympathetic approach? The question that has shaped the Hindu mind for centuries is: “How shall I escape from being born again and again, in an endless succession of lives, some of them happier, some more miserable, but all of them unsatisfying, all of them held in the shackles of unreality and illusion?” (Hogg 1945:14). The missionary begins to preach that salvation has been wrought for humankind through Jesus Christ. Soon, however, both missionary and hearer will be aware that the word salvation has different meanings depending on the belief structure of each. When the Hindu realizes that the missionary is not talking about a way of escape from endless reincarnation, he or she may lose religious interest and the message will not connect with their deepest religious longings. Disputation and argument will not resolve the proper understanding of salvation. This approach “amounts to an effort to make the Hindu minds travel the distance to the preacher’s mind, instead of making his mind travel the distance to theirs” (Hogg 1945:14-15). How can the proclamation of the gospel be relevant and yet avoid domestication in the Hindu worldview? Hogg turns to the approach of Jesus—the “Master-Missionary” (Hogg 1945:15). Jesus opens his ministry with the proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God. He chose the image of kingdom of God “for the sake of its challenging relevancy” (Hogg 1945:17). This was a well-known category that raised hope in the heart of the Jews. The plethora of interpretations of the kingdom at that time, however, were far from what Jesus proclaimed. Into this expectant longing for the kingdom Jesus came with an announcement of its arrival. Yet the understanding of Jesus was not reshaped by the popular notions of the day. The “current popular beliefs” were “bent to His purpose” (Hogg 1945:19). The kingdom had relevance because it responded to the people’s dearest hopes and so commanded an enquiring attention. Jesus’ message, however, challenged the popular notions, calling for repentance.

In the Hindu setting the missionary who rejects the Hindu notion of salvation will not be heard; the missionary who simply employs methods used in the homeland will, likewise, not be heard. Yet taking the starting point of the Hindu may lead to “a Christianizing of Hinduism instead of an Indian way of expressing Christianity” (Hogg 1945:23). The only way forward is to employ the familiar images of Hinduism which express the religious longing of the Hindu and burst them open, giving them new

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<sup>10</sup>Newbiggin appears to attribute the term ‘challenging relevance’ to Hogg’s *Karma and Redemption* (1909) (1978a:11-12). The term does not appear in that volume, however, but in his later work *The Christian Message to the Hindu* (1945).

meaning with the fact of the gospel. Choosing a familiar category is inevitable yet challenging it is necessary because there is no straight line from Hinduism to the gospel. Hogg expresses this in terms of his missionary experience:

In the early years of my missionary life I used to dream that there might be found some superlatively apt line of approach. Might there not exist, I asked myself, some one theological issue where Christian and Hindu thought not only meet one and the same soul-problem with divergent solutions, but meet it with solutions the divergency of which is determinative of all their other divergencies? If such an issue could be found, it should light the preacher's road to a discovery of supremely relevant lines of sympathetic approach. With the passing of the years, however, that dream of mine has faded (Hogg 1945:26).

Familiar categories must be employed but given new content. Hogg sets out to achieve this with the concept of *karma* in the remainder of the book.

Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment is quite similar. He, too, recognizes that there is no straight line from the religions of humankind to the gospel. The gospel cannot simply be fulfillment; the religious pilgrimage of humankind is not a preparation that is fulfilled in Christ (1939:2; 1938:351-352). Christ can "in a certain sense be called the fulfillment of some deep and persistent longings and apprehensions that everywhere in history manifest themselves" yet this cannot be the perfecting of what has gone before (1939:3). The wisdom of Christ stands in contradiction to the power and wisdom of humankind. Therefore, the gospel is a contradictive or subversive fulfillment of the longings of humankind (1939:4). With his understanding of general revelation, Kraemer sets his understanding on a firmer theological base than Hogg, Newbigin, or Visser 't Hooft. Religious longing arises in the heart of humankind because of the continuing revelation of God in the creation.

Visser 't Hooft utilizes Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment in the context of cultural adaptation. He writes:

Key-words from other religions when taken over by the Christian Church are like displaced persons, uprooted and unassimilated until they are truly naturalised. The uncritical introduction of such words into Christian terminology can only lead to that syncretism that denies the uniqueness and specific character of the different religions and creates a grey relativism. What is needed is to re-interpret traditional concepts, to set them in a new context, to fill them with biblical content. Kraemer uses the term "subversive fulfillment" and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts (Visser 't Hooft 1967:13).

Newbigin employs the notion of subversive fulfillment to solve the dilemma of contextualization within a particular culture. Like Visser 't Hooft, he utilizes the model of missionary communication that John offers in his gospel (1986e:6; 1995j:336). John freely uses the language and thought forms of classical religion and culture that form the world of his hearers. Yet John uses this language and these thought-forms in such a way as to confront them with a fundamental question and indeed a contradiction. He begins with the announcement "In the beginning was the *logos*." As he continues it becomes apparent that *logos* is not the impersonal law of rationality that permeated the universe giving it order but rather the man Jesus Christ. John begins by identifying with

the classical longing for the source of order but subverts, challenges, and contradicts the idolatrous understanding that had developed in the classical world (1982c:1-3). In this way John is both relevant and faithful. Speaking of the Hindu situation Newbigin writes: “The formulation of the theologian must be seen to be relevant: it must work with the models which the Hindu is accustomed to use. It must also be challenging, not accepting these models as of ultimate authority but introducing by their means the new fact of Jesus whose authority relativises whatever authority they have” (1978a:12). There are two questions that must be asked to determine whether our proclamation and embodiment of the gospel is faithful:

Does it enable the inhabitant of this particular culture to see Jesus in terms of the models with which he is familiar, or does it require him as a pre-condition of seeing Jesus to emigrate from his own-thought world into another—perhaps from the past?... Does the Jesus who is so introduced judge and determine the models used, or is he judged and determined by them in such wise that only those elements in the portrait are allowed which are acceptable to the contemporary culture?” (*ibid*).

The notion of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance is applicable not only to language and verbal missionary communication. It is the process by which the church interacts with the various institutions and customs of its culture. Referring to these institutions and customs as powers,<sup>11</sup> Newbigin notes that they have been created in Christ and yet have revolted against Christ. Since they are part of the good creation, they are not to be destroyed; since they are twisted by rebellion, they are not to remain as they are. When referring to the task of the church in the public square, Newbigin turns the image of subversive fulfillment to that of subversive agent. He writes:

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<sup>11</sup>Following the publishing of Hendrik Berkhof’s *Christ and the Powers* (E.T. 1962), we find Newbigin increasingly utilizing the notion of powers to speak of the structures of society (e.g. 1989e:198-210). Al Wolters has offered a sympathetic, yet penetrating critique of Newbigin’s understanding of the powers on exegetical, conceptual, and perspectival grounds (1996). He believes the essential insights that Newbigin makes with his notion of the powers can be better articulated with a Biblical understanding of creation (1996:15-21). I have attempted to deepen that understanding of creation for mission in the public square (Goheen 1996). Wolters’ critique led Newbigin to remark: “One of the papers contributed at Leeds is the one from Al Wolters about my treatment of the principalities and powers. Here I must say that his criticisms have a great deal of weight in them. I think he is right in pointing out the weaknesses of my treatment, both as regards the exegesis of scripture and as regards the internal coherence of my arguments. I have to confess that I ought to do some real rethinking” (1996c:6-7). He goes on to say, though, that “there is more to my argument than Wolters grants” (:7).

If I understand the teaching of the New Testament on this matter, I understand the role of the Christian as that of being neither a conservative nor an anarchist, but a subversive agent. When Paul says that Christ has disarmed the powers (not destroyed them), and when he speaks of the powers as being created in Christ and for Christ, and when he says that the Church is to make known the wisdom of God to the powers, I take it that this means that a Christian neither accepts them as some sort of eternal order which cannot be changed, nor seeks to destroy them because of the evil they do, but seeks to subvert them from within and thereby to bring them back under the allegiance of their true Lord (1991h:82).

Newbigin draws on the Biblical example of the runaway slave Onesimus. The command is for slaves to obey their earthly masters because they serve the Lord in the process. He sends Onesimus back as a slave but with a new status. “The structure is not to be simply smashed—as so much popular rhetoric advocates; it is to be subverted from within” (*ibid*). This is the way that the tension between antithesis and solidarity can be resolved.

Newbigin advocates involvement in the public life of the nation and solidarity in the task of cultural development based on this understanding. An analysis of the way he approaches education, politics, science, and other areas of public life shows that subversive fulfillment is the operative contextualization principle that underlies his endeavours (1991h:83). The gospel speaks a ‘yes’ and a ‘no’ to each cultural institution and custom. The believer is called to discern what subversive solidarity means in each situation.

The process of discernment of God’s word of grace and word of judgement on culture will continue by way of an internal dialogue in the heart of each Christian and a communal dialogue in the church that has both local and ecumenical dimensions. The believer learns to live so fully in both the Scriptural and the cultural story that the debate between their competing understandings of the world is internalized. The Christian’s ultimate loyalty is to the story of Scripture. The believer seeks to indwell Scripture in such a way that its models and story become the means by which he or she makes sense of the world. Yet the believer is also part of a community that embodies the cultural story. Thus the debate between these two different ways of looking at the world is internalized. The commitment to Scripture shapes the debate: the cultural story is constantly brought under the scrutiny of the Biblical story (1989e:65). It is clear that if this debate is to take place, a knowledge of both the story of Scripture and of the religious-worldview currents of culture is essential. This internal dialogue can never be simply an individual affair. The believer is part of a community that seeks to embody the story of the gospel. Contextualization takes place in the life of a congregation that rehearses and remembers the story the Bible tells in its proclamation and sacraments (1989e:147; cf. Hiebert 1985:186-187) and then proceeds to bring the Biblical story to bear on its culture.

Newbigin has developed a profound sense of the importance of subversive fulfillment or challenging relevance in a faithful embodiment of the gospel. At the same time, however, Newbigin has not provided a solid theological foundation for this notion. There are two areas in which both Kraemer and Bavinck<sup>12</sup> have provided a sounder

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<sup>12</sup>Bavinck does not use the term ‘subversive fulfillment.’ Rather he speaks of ‘*possessio*.’ He writes: “We would... prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take possession... Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely

basis for this concept. First, both Kraemer and Bavinck have provided a better foundation for subversive fulfillment in their twofold analysis of culture. On the one hand, the entire culture is a unified whole: “We regard them [pagan religions and cultures] as powerful, life-controlling entities, as complete indivisible structures, because each element coheres with all the others and receives its meaning from the total structures” (Bavinck 1960:173; cf. Kraemer 1938:135). On the other hand, each aspect of culture is shaped by the idolatrous religious core: “The entire culture, in all its manifestations, is a structural totality, in which everything hangs together, *and in which religion occupies a central position*” (Bavinck *ibid.*; emphasis mine). Above we have noted that both of these elements of culture are implicit in Newbigin’s thought but insufficiently developed. Affirming these two dimensions of culture by itself would lead to a pessimistic analysis of culture which could only provide a basis for rejection but not for subversive fulfillment. Therefore, the second theological observation is equally significant: God’s creational revelation or common grace continues to uphold his creation and does not permit human idolatry to run its gamut. “[W]e must remember that although man has fallen from God, and that the results of this fall are in evidence in his every thought and deed, nevertheless, thanks to God’s common grace,<sup>13</sup> man is safeguarded against complete deterioration” (Bavinck *ibid.* cf. Kraemer 1956:340-352; ). It precisely a recognition of both of these factors—the idolatrous shaping of all culture and the powerful creation revelation of God—that provides a foundation for subversive fulfillment. Every custom, institution, and practice of culture is corrupted by sin; yet the creational structure remains because of God’s faithfulness to His creation. While Newbigin’s work clearly moves in this direction, he never provides the explicit analysis that is found in Kraemer and Bavinck.

### 8.5.3. *Ecumenical Fellowship: Avoiding Ethnocentrism and Relativism*

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different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come... [Christ] fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it new direction. Such is neither ‘adaptation,’ nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth” (1960:178f.).

<sup>13</sup>This term is often misunderstood. Bavinck does not stop to explain this term but his understanding is the same as G.C. Berkouwer who writes: “Life on this earth does not yet disclose the full consequences of sin. Calvin speaks of ‘common grace’ and, in this connection, he discusses virtues to be seen also in the lives of unbelievers. He did not wish to ascribe these phenomena to a left-over goodness in nature—as if apostasy from God were not so serious—but rather he discerned here the power of God in revelation and in grace preserving life from total destruction” (1959:20f.; cf. Berkouwer 1955:137-230).

Faithful contextualization requires a dialogue that moves beyond cultural boundaries. This dialogue must be “open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of that place and enabled to represent to that place the universality, the catholicity of God’s purpose of grace and judgment for all humanity” (1989e:152). There is a danger that any one local contextualization will be absorbed into the culture of that place; if it is to be challengingly relevant then a dialogue must take place among all believers from every culture. This dialogue will involve both mutual correction and mutual enrichment (1978a:13; 1989e:196). It will involve mutual learning since each cultural contextualization opens up new insights into the gospel. It will involve mutual criticism because each cultural contextualization has blind spots.

The history of contextualization has shown the twin problems of ethnocentrism and relativism. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the problem was ethnocentrism: the western shape of the gospel was considered to be normative. In the middle of this century there was a shift toward relativism: there are no criteria to judge a faithful contextualization of the gospel. Only through a continual ecumenical dialogue can we be saved from either of these dangers. Referring to the devastating effects of the ethnocentric reduction of the gospel to its western form, Newbigin writes: “The reference to mutual correction is the crucial one. All our reading of the Bible and all our Christian discipleship are necessarily shaped by the cultures which have formed us.... the only way in which the gospel can challenge our culturally conditioned interpretation of it is through the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. We have to listen to others. This mutual correction is sometimes unwelcome, but it is necessary and it is fruitful” (1989e:196). It is only as the gospel is contextualized in other cultures that this kind of dialogue can take place. However, not all contextualizations are faithful. It is the *gospel* that must be contextualized.

... the gospel is not an empty form into which everyone is free to pour his or her own content. Scripture, it has been wittily said, is not a picnic where the authors bring the words and the readers bring the meaning. The content of the gospel is Jesus Christ in the fullness of his ministry, death, and resurrection. The gospel is this and not anything else. Jesus is who he is, and though our perceptions of him will be shaped by our own situation and the mental formation we have received from our culture, our need is to see him as he truly is. This is why we have to listen to the witness of the whole Church of all places and ages (1989e:153).

Newbigin notes three problems that face the ecumenical church if it is to pursue this kind of ecumenical dialogue. First, the constantly changing relationships of the churches to their cultures makes ecumenical fellowship difficult (1978a:13-14). Churches at various points in their histories stand in polemical or affirmative relationships to their cultural setting. Ecumenical dialogue between the European church that is critical of western culture and sympathetic to Indian culture, on the one hand, and the Indian church that is critical of Indian culture and sympathetic toward the West, on the other, would be extremely difficult. The fact that there could be found churches in India that are affirmative of Indian culture and anti-West and churches in the West who are similarly sympathetic to their cultural setting and antithetical to Indian culture complicates the picture. In fact, mutual sympathy might be expressed on the basis of a

concealed contradiction. The culture-critic (radical) and the culture-affirmer (conservative) might find themselves in agreement about the goodness of Indian culture. The Indian church is conservative, affirming the status quo while the western church is radical standing in opposition to the status quo in their situation. Their reasons for affirming Indian culture are mutually contradictory.

Real mutual understanding, learning, and criticism have to go on in the midst of these extremely complex and constantly changing patterns of relationship between Church and culture. This calls for qualities of discernment and sensitivity, but this is the very heart of the ecumenical task, and it is one of the conditions of the Church's faithfulness to its mission (1978a:14).

A second barrier faces the process of ecumenical dialogue. At present, the dialogue takes place in the context of "one of the tribal cultures of humankind" (1978e:152). The dialogue proceeds in the context of only one cultural tradition of the church—the West (1986e:9): "All of its [i.e. the ecumenical church's] work is conducted in the languages of western Europe. Only those who have had long training in the methods of thinking, of study and research, and of argument that have been developed in western Europe can share in its work" (1978e:151). For people in the West who have never had another cultural experience it sometimes appears as if the modern scientific worldview is the only way in which systematic and rigorous thinking and dialogue can be done. Newbigin's own experience with Tamil lyrical poetry challenges this narrow assumption. The reduction to western patterns limits ecumenical dialogue: "Because of the dominance of one set of cultural patterns, the whole ecumenical movement is severely limited, and Christians who inhabit this cultural world do not receive from Christians of other cultures the correction that they need" (1978e:152). Even third-world theologies are written in the language and patterns of Europe; the real power of Asian and African Christianity does not lie in these theologies. Thus the western church is not challenged by the potency of the third-world churches.

Because of the total dominance of European culture in the ecumenical movement, there has seldom been any awareness among Western theologians of the extent to which their own theologies have been the result of a failure to challenge the assumptions of their own culture; and because theologians of the younger churches have been compelled to adopt this culture as the precondition of participation in the ecumenical movement, they have not been in a position to present the really sharp challenge that should be addressed to the theologies of the western churches (1978e:152-153).

The third hurdle the church must face if ecumenical dialogue is to move forward is the forum in which the conversation is to take place. On the one hand, Newbigin notes that the WCC has been the primary forum in which the dialogue has occurred. Newbigin places the rise of the WCC in 1948 in the context of a need for ecumenical dialogue. He asks: "Where do I find a stance from which I can look at myself from the point of view of the Bible when my reading of the Bible is itself so much shaped by the person that I am, formed by my culture?" (1989e:196). A look at the experience of the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century helps give an answer to this question. Almost all the churches on both sides of the First World War totally identified the cause of Christ with their own national cause. This scandal enabled many to see a fatal syncretism of their Christianity

with nationalism and the need for a fresh listening to the Bible. Out of this fresh encounter with the Scriptures grew the ecumenical developments of the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, in the Second World War the identification of gospel with nation was not repeated on the same scale. Through the war the churches maintained spiritual bonds and quickly after the end of the war met together to work and pray for a new Christian presence in Europe. This ecumenical fellowship made the churches more aware that they could not succumb to the role of domestic chaplains to the nations. There was a need for a “supranational entity which could in some measure embody and express the supranational and supracultural character of the gospel. That recognition was given concrete form when, at Amsterdam in 1948, churches whose nations had been so recently at war pledged themselves to be faithful to one another in a mutual commitment to receive correction from one another. That reference to mutual correction is the crucial one” (1989e:196). Thus the rise of the WCC can be attributed, in part, to the need for mutual correction. The WCC has remained the primary forum for this kind of dialogue.

At the same time Newbigin raises a twofold problem about the future of the WCC as the primary place where dialogue can take place: the dominant pluralist presence and “wider ecumenism” threaten an authentic and faithful dialogue that centres in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (1994k:119, 125); many of the thriving evangelical and pentecostal churches of the world church remain outside this fellowship (1995f:9).

Newbigin does point to another possibility for ecumenical dialogue. The cross-cultural missionary will always be a necessity for the faithful church precisely because this ecumenical correction takes place in his or her person. Newbigin describes his own experience.

My Christianity was syncretistic, but so was theirs. Yet neither of us could discover that without the challenge of the other. Such is the situation in cross-cultural mission. The gospel comes to the Hindu embodied in the form given to it by the culture of the missionary.... [A]s second and third and later generations of Christians make their own explorations in Scripture, they will begin to test the Christianity of the missionaries in the light of their own reading of the Scripture. So the missionary, if he is at all awake, finds himself, as I did, in a new situation. He becomes, as a bearer of the gospel, a critic of his own culture. He finds there the Archimedean point.<sup>14</sup> He sees his own culture with the Christian eyes of a foreigner, and the foreigner can see what the native cannot see (1994k:68).

The missionary has the gift of new eyes; but he or she also has the knowledge of the sending culture that enables him or her to be able to translate that insight for the church (Sanneh 1993:162-164). It is for this reason that “the foreign missionary is an enduring necessity in the life of the universal Church.” The reflexive action of the missionary is crucial “so that the gospel comes back to us in the idiom of other cultures with power to question our understanding of it” (1994k:115). Newbigin himself is an outstanding

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<sup>14</sup> The significance of ecumenical dialogue for faithfulness to the gospel within a certain culture is evident when noting the use of this image of Archimedean point. When Newbigin returned to Britain he was consumed with the question: “How can one find a perspective on one’s own culture. I had asked for a Christian approach to contemporary Western liberal capitalism, in fact to the culture of which I was a part and by which I had been formed. Could there be an Archimedean point, so to speak, from which one could look critically at one’s own intellectual and spiritual formation?” (1993h:250f.).

example of this dynamic in action. Perhaps it is this “medium” of ecumenical fellowship that needs to be stressed in light of the problems that Newbigin raises about the WCC, although that kind of mutual fellowship must never be removed from the missionary church’s agenda.

#### *8.5.4. A Myriad of Unpredictable Faithful Embodiments*

Contextualization concerns the question of how the gospel can come ‘alive’ in particular contexts. This ‘coming alive’ of the gospel in a particular settings, Newbigin insists, cannot be predicted; it is a work of the sovereign Spirit in a community that seeks to live faithfully by the gospel and to identify with people in their particular need. When this happens the richness of gospel is expressed in numerous ways. “The history of the Church, and missionary experiences, certainly show that this ‘coming alive’ happens in a myriad of different and unpredictable ways.... It happens over and over again that the gospel ‘comes alive’ in a way that the evangelist never anticipated” (1989e:152).

#### *8.5.5. A Missionary Encounter with Culture*

A faithful contextualization of the gospel will lead to a missionary encounter between gospel and culture (cf. Jongeneel 1997:339-340).<sup>15</sup> This is the normal relation of the church to its culture. A missionary encounter occurs when the church embodies the gospel as an alternative way of life to the culture in which it is set and thereby challenges the culture’s fundamental assumptions. While Newbigin developed this notion in the context of a missionary encounter with western culture, this is the normal way any church relates to its cultural context.

To express the notion of a missionary encounter, Newbigin employs the language of sociology of knowledge: the church is an alternative plausibility structure to the one that exists in western society.

... the gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel. The Church, therefore, as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures without exception (1989e:9).

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<sup>15</sup>Jongeneel heads this section with an apt quote that summarizes the importance of missionary encounter for Newbigin: “The confrontation of Christianity with non-Christian faiths and ways of life is not only an academic question, but a matter of life and death to the church. What is at stake is the nature and purpose of the gospel” (Myklebust 1995:I, 29; quoted in Jongeneel 1997:339).

Later in his reflection on the church he says: “The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another” (1989e:228). ‘Plausibility structure’ is a term used by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann to describe social structures that make certain beliefs plausible (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 154-163; cf. Berger 1967). Berger and Luckmann speak of the “social construction of reality” (1966). There are three moments in this social construction of reality: “*Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:61; emphasis theirs). First, there is externalization which is an outpouring of human social and cultural activity that expresses the fundamental beliefs of the people. Second, there is an institutionalization wherein the social and cultural products of this human activity attain an objective status external to the human producers. Third, there is internalization when these objectivized products are reappropriated along with the fundamental beliefs that are embodied in them. The process of socialization takes place as one subjectively appropriates the fundamental beliefs that are embedded in the social constructs and institutions. This humanly constructed social world must be maintained; explanations given to maintain the status quo are legitimations. These legitimations go beyond simply verbal explanations; the social base and structure concretely legitimate and maintain the social world and its fundamental beliefs. These social structures and institutions that embody and transmit the beliefs of a society are called plausibility structures (Sanks 1992:27-30). All cultures exhibit a plausibility structure that embody and transmit the fundamental beliefs of its inhabitants. Those fundamental beliefs stand in opposition to the gospel and if there is to be a missionary encounter, the church itself must be a community that embodies an alternative set of foundational beliefs. The church itself is the social structure that makes the gospel plausible as a total vision of life that is radically different from the one that controls the public life of culture. Thus an essential clue to understanding Newbigin’s call for a missionary encounter is his missionary ecclesiology; as one commentator has put it: the church must become “a living incarnation of an alternative plausibility structure” (Weston 1999:58).

Insofar as the church is faithful to the gospel, there will be three aspects to this missionary encounter. First, the foundational beliefs shared by a cultural community will be challenged. A missionary encounter requires the church to live fully in the Biblical story and to challenge the reigning idolatrous assumptions of the culture. The culture must be understood and encountered in the light of the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to be absorbed into the fundamental assumptions of the culture. Only in this way is the culture challenged at its roots. Second, the church will offer the gospel as a credible alternative way of life to its culture. “No amount of brilliant argument can make it [the gospel] sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it” (1989e:232). Third, there will be a call for radical conversion, an invitation to understand and live in the world in the light of the gospel. As Newbigin expresses it, the church that embodies the gospel

... must necessarily clash with contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole ‘fiduciary framework’ within which our culture operates. It must call unequivocally for radical conversion, a conversion of the mind so that things are seen differently, and a conversion of the will so that things are done differently. It must decline altogether

the futile attempt to commend the biblical vision of how things are by seeking to adjust it to the assumptions of our culture (1983d:53).

This notion of a ‘missionary encounter’ highlights the antithetical side of cultural involvement; the positive side of cultural involvement—although clearly present in Newbigin’s thought—does not receive the attention it deserves. Griffioen’s critique of Newbigin can be applied here.

## 8.6. CONCLUSION

Newbigin did not address the topic of gospel, church, and culture in any substantial way until the last three decades of his life. By that time, a wealth of missionary experience enabled him to make an important contribution to contextualization studies. His understanding of the cross-cultural communication of the gospel is widened into a model of contextualization for the missionary church.

Contextualization is an umbrella term that is employed in missiology to group together studies that examine the relationship of the gospel to culture. The burning issues in contextualization are captured in the questions: How can the church be both faithful to the gospel and relevant to the particular culture without falling into syncretism? How can the church be faithful to one gospel without falling into ethnocentrism and at the same time embrace plural expressions without falling into relativism? A number of models have emerged that grapple with these questions. Stephen Bevans has given the most complete survey of the current models (Bevans 1992). It is significant that when Bevans had finished his book, he recognized that Newbigin offered a unique alternative (Bevans 1993). A number of important elements in Newbigin’s model of contextualization converge in his notion of a missionary encounter.

In the first place, Newbigin highlights the religious nature of the formative worldview that lies at the heart of a culture. Beneath the network of elements that form a culture lie foundational religious commitments and assumptions that function as a formative core for the whole structure of culture. These idolatrous beliefs function like a tectonic plate that gives shape to the observable patterns of life in a human community. Newbigin emphasizes two elements of these formative beliefs: their religious nature, and their comprehensive scope. It is common in contextualization studies to place religion as simply one more cultural form alongside others. By contrast, like Bavinck and Conn, Newbigin emphasizes the central role of religion in shaping the functions and meanings of the various cultural forms. For Newbigin religion is more than a cultural form; it is more than an institution that embodies beliefs and practices concerning God and the destiny of the soul. It is a set of ultimate commitments about the nature of the world that gives shape, direction, and meaning to life and demands final loyalty. The modern scientific worldview also expresses ultimate faith commitments (1989e:172-173; 1986e:3). Rather than religion being a cultural institution it is the directing dynamic at the heart of culture. If that religious core is not the gospel of Jesus Christ, then an idol will fill the void (1986e:115). In stressing the religious core of culture Newbigin has moved beyond culture theorists like Hiebert and Kraft. Moreover, Newbigin highlights a second aspect of culture: These religious faith

commitments are also comprehensive in scope and therefore shape every aspect of culture. There are no neutral cultural forms; all are shaped by the formative set of ultimate beliefs.

A second aspect of Newbigin's model of contextualization is his understanding of revelation. Bevans highlights this element in each of the contextualization models he discusses; one's understanding of revelation significantly shapes the particular contextual model. For Newbigin, Scripture is not a set of religious doctrines or timeless ideas about God and salvation; rather it is the story of God's mighty acts in history to redeem His creation. This narrative culminates in Christ who reveals and accomplishes the end of history. The Bible is universal history; it is the true story about the destiny of the world. In this light one can see why Newbigin contends that culture must be read in the light of Scripture and not the other way round. If it is the true story of the world then everything else must be understood in its light. In this insistence Newbigin finds himself in company with the contextual models of Willem Visser 't Hooft and Harvie Conn.

There is a third aspect of Newbigin's model of contextualization that provides the foundation for his notion of a missionary encounter: both the Scriptural story and the culture's foundational beliefs are socially embodied. Newbigin's comment on the normal approach to gospel and culture makes this point:

The question of the relation of gospel to culture is one of the most vigorously debated subjects in contemporary missiology. But one has to ask whether the way in which the question is posed does not imply already an unacknowledged and disastrous dualism.... The question of gospel and culture is sometimes discussed as though it were a matter of the meeting of two quite different things: a disembodied message and a historically conditioned pattern of social life (1989e:188).

For Newbigin, there is no disembodied gospel: the gospel is always given communal form and shape within a cultural context (1989e:144). Furthermore, culture is a comprehensive way of understanding and ordering the life of a community on the basis of shared foundational commitments. The story of the Bible is centred in Jesus Christ; the culture story finds its core in idols. These two ways of understanding and living in the world are equally comprehensive and at the same time mutually incompatible. Newbigin speaks of a unbearable tension in the life of the believing community, one that results from the attempt to live faithfully in the Biblical story while at the same time participating in a community that shares a different story. For Newbigin, contextualization takes place with the meeting of gospel and culture *within the life of the church*; the church lives at the cross-roads between two ways of understanding and living in the world. More specifically, contextualization is the encounter of two all-embracing and competing understandings of the world shaped by two different stories—the story of the gospel and the reigning story of the culture—within the life of the Christian community.

Newbigin does not resolve this tension by either isolation or absorption. The church cannot withdraw from the world; it bears responsibility to participate in its cultural development. Neither can the church simply accommodate itself to the culture; this would mean to be conformed to the world's idolatrous patterns. Newbigin resolves this unbearable tension with the notion of 'challenging relevance' or 'subversive fulfillment.' Challenging relevance, the term most often used by Newbigin, is a concept

taken from Hogg. Subversive fulfillment is borrowed from Kraemer and Visser 't Hooft. Both expressions point to a similar understanding of the relation of gospel and culture. If the church is to be relevant it must embody the forms of its culture fulfilling the religious longings of the people; however, if the church is to be faithful it must challenge and subvert those forms from within, giving them new content in keeping with the story of the gospel. Thus the church takes a position both *for* and *against* its culture. On the one hand, the church identifies with the forms of its host culture; on the other hand, the church challenges the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to those forms. The church develops a faithful and relevant embodiment through an internal dialogue that constantly tests the culture by the gospel, and through a communal dialogue that is both local and ecumenical.

If the church is faithful, there will be a missionary encounter. The foundational beliefs of the culture will be challenged by an alternative way of life shaped by the gospel. The church will stand as a witness to the kingdom in forms familiar to its cultural contemporaries.

Few contextualization models give the church such a central place. Newbigin stresses the communal embodiment of the gospel and the cultural story as well as the resulting clash between those two stories within the life of the church. This model has contributed significantly to our understanding of the role of the church in the encounter between gospel and culture.

Yet there are a number of weaknesses and inconsistencies; this chapter has uncovered three inconsistencies at a theoretical level. First, Newbigin's theoretical articulation of culture is inadequate. His model of contextualization assumes a view of culture in which both the organic unity of the "surface" elements of culture and the religious direction at a "depth" level are stressed. While these elements of culture find expression in his writings, both are articulated weakly. Moreover, the articulation of the religious core of culture is not consistently elaborated. Although this notion is foundational to his contextual model and understanding of a missionary encounter, he is not as clear and consistent as Conn and Bavinck in depicting this aspect of culture. The latter authors have rooted their understanding of the religious direction of culture in a certain anthropology and a well-formulated theory of culture. They consistently and explicitly develop an understanding of culture that distinguishes between the various forms, symbols, and institutions of culture and the underlying religious direction. Newbigin is not as explicit nor is he consistent. An example of this inconsistency is found in the way Newbigin often places language at the centre of culture. In his missionary experience it was language that first revealed the underlying religious commitments. He does not distinguish between language as one of the cultural forms and the religious core that shapes the language.

A second weakness is found in his failure to provide a Biblical foundation or theoretical articulation of the positive task of the church in culture. The critiques of Griffioen and Bevans reveal this weakness. Both Griffioen and Bevans recognize that the notion of cultural development is not absent from Newbigin's writings; in fact, his missionary encounter with western culture, especially in the callings of believers in the world, is dependent upon such a notion. However, both have rightly pointed to a problem. Bevans believes Newbigin's model of contextualization overemphasizes the critical side of the church's encounter with culture. Accordingly Bevans describes

Newbigin's contextualization model as "counter-cultural." He fears that a church which follows this path can become anti-cultural (Bevans 1993:18). Likewise Griffioen believes that the church's cultural task involves both development and antithesis, management and critique as two sides of one coin. Newbigin's contextualization discussions emphasize the second of these pairs. Newbigin's discussions of a missionary encounter with culture assumes and elaborates in the concrete spheres of society the church's responsibility for development; yet in his formulation of the encounter between gospel and culture in the church's life and mission, he does not give sufficient attention to this positive side. Any discussion of the creation mandate, for example, is absent. The particular settings in which Newbigin has formulated his understanding of gospel and culture, and especially his concern over the syncretistic western church, has led him to overemphasize the critical and judging side of church's calling in culture. Yet the plausibility of his whole understanding of a missionary encounter with culture would seem to call for a more nuanced and consistent discussion of the church's responsibility for and participation in the development of culture.

Finally, Newbigin does not distinguish clearly between the creational structure and the religious direction of cultural forms; yet his understanding of subversive fulfillment and challenging relevance depends on such a distinction. Bavinck's concept of *possessio* and Kraemer's notion of *subversive fulfillment* are very similar to Newbigin's understanding. Both Kraemer and Bavinck have provided a much more solid foundation for their formulations. Kraemer's discussions elaborate in detail an understanding of creation revelation; Bavinck recognizes the importance of common grace in the forms and structures of culture. Kraemer and especially Bavinck explicate the religious direction of culture. Newbigin's notion of challenging relevance, Kraemer's concept of subversive fulfillment, and Bavinck's understanding of *possessio* all assume that each cultural entity has a creational structure preserved by God as well as an idolatrous twisting of that structure. In Newbigin's thought we find this distinction implicitly, and occasionally explicitly in concrete examples. Yet Newbigin's weak articulation of creation revelation does not enable him to express this crucial distinction clearly.

Newbigin's missionary experience, his profound entry into the Hindu worldview, his commitment to communicating the gospel, and his knowledge of missiological discussions have enabled him to articulate a model of contextualization that offers rich insight into the relation between gospel, church, and culture. Few authors on contextualization make the church so central to their understanding. Nevertheless a deepened appropriation of Scripture's teaching on creation and the religious heart of culture, evident in the writings of missiologists whose understanding of contextualization is similar to Newbigin (Bavinck, Kraemer, and Conn), would supplement weaknesses that remain evident in Newbigin's formulations.

## 9. THE MISSIONARY CHURCH IN WESTERN CULTURE

### 9.1. INTRODUCTION

A number of historically significant contributions to the world church have characterized Newbigin's life, securing him an important place in 20<sup>th</sup>-century church history: his theological work in the area of church government that contributed to the formation of the CSI, his formulations of the missionary church expressed in the official documents of the significant Willingen Conference, his chairmanship of the famous 'committee of twenty-five' that produced one of the most significant and foundational theological statements for the World Council of Churches that was adopted at the Evanston Meeting, the fashioning of the statement on local and ecumenical unity adopted at the New Delhi meeting of the WCC, and his role in the integration of the WCC and IMC along with the part he played in shaping the WCC and CWME in those early days. Perhaps the most significant historical accomplishment is his role as catalyst in challenging missiologists (and many other Christians in the West) to consider the central importance of mission to modern western culture. Newbigin believed that a missionary encounter with modern western culture was the most urgent item on the agenda of missiology: "It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture" (1986e:3). Newbigin produced more than half of his writings after he returned to Britain in 1974 and the majority of that literature has engaged the subject of mission in western culture.<sup>1</sup>

When Newbigin returned to Britain he observed that the church was timid about the truth of the gospel. The primary root for this lack of confidence in the gospel was the enthronement of reason in the modern scientific worldview (1993h:230f.). Accommodation to this worldview threatened the church as a missionary community. Newbigin believed that the worldview at the centre of western culture needed to be addressed if the church was to faithfully embody and commend the gospel.

In this chapter we examine Newbigin's response to the threat posed by western culture. However, we will not attempt to summarize Newbigin's entire contribution but view his treatment through the lense of his missionary ecclesiology. There do exist a number of summaries of Newbigin's missiology of Western culture but the central place of a missionary ecclesiology has not been sufficiently recognized. By way of exception, Paul Weston (1999:50-51; 57-60) and Ian Barnes (1994:29, 32), in their brief descriptions of Newbigin's work, recognize the centrality of the church and the profound ecclesiological implications of Newbigin's mission and western culture project. The present chapter unfolds the centrality of a missionary ecclesiology for Newbigin's missiology of western culture in response to the modern scientific

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<sup>1</sup>This subject has been canvassed in at least one Ph.D. dissertation (Keskitalo 1998). Unfortunately, this dissertation is in Finnish and, in any case, was not available to me when writing this section. An English translation is planned. There is a twelve-page English summary that I received late in my writing.

worldview.

Newbigan believed that the western church was in an advanced state of syncretism. It had accommodated itself to the modern scientific worldview.<sup>2</sup> Following a brief

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<sup>2</sup>Many today would argue that the primary threat to the gospel is postmodernism. Newbigan acknowledges that there are two important changes to the picture that he paints of the ascendancy of the modern scientific worldview. The first is the rise of religious fundamentalism; the second is the rise of postmodernism (1993g:230-231). He defines postmodernism as “the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion” (1993g:231). He recognizes that modernity and postmodernity pose two different problems for the evangelist: modernity advocates the immensely powerful yet unexamined assumption of neutrality; postmodernity poses the problem of relativism. Yet Newbigan sees the two as intimately related; postmodernity is the collapse of modernity (1995f:5). Nietzsche (the father of postmodernity) is the consistent outworking of Descartes’ critical principle (the father of modernity) (1995h:16-28). In terms of mission, Newbigan believed that modernity continued to be the primary threat to the Christian faith because it is embodied in the institutions of western culture: “In spite of its (modernism’s) erosion by the growing movement of ‘deconstruction’ among intellectuals in the ‘developed’ societies, *Modernism* is still the major challenge which the world faces, primarily because it is embodied in the global economic-

discussion of the syncretism of the western church, we examine Newbiggin's remedy for the liberation of the western church for a missionary encounter. This involved an historical, an epistemological, and a theological task. A missiological analysis of culture enables the church to understand its reigning doctrine as a historically construction. An alternative epistemology frees the church from the tyranny of autonomous reason. Understanding the gospel as public truth equips the church for her witness in western culture. The ecclesiological implications of this will then be elaborated.

## 9.2. THE WESTERN CHURCH: AN ADVANCED CASE OF SYNCRETISM

In Jesus Christ God has acted decisively and definitively to reveal and effect the divine purpose and goal for all cosmic history (1989j:50). The centre of the gospel is the cross; at the cross God made known and accomplished the salvation of the cosmos. If God has done this, then it is true and universally valid for all humankind; it must be communicated to all the world. The question that Newbiggin constantly poses is: "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?" (1989e:227). What is the most effective vehicle through which a scandalous gospel can be communicated so that it is credible? He answers: "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it" (*ibid*). During his ministry, Jesus formed a community to bear this gospel to the world. The importance of the church in Newbiggin's thought is evident in his repeated comment that Jesus did not write a book but formed a community (*ibid*). Jesus made provision for the communication of the gospel to the world, not by committing it to writing and disseminating the written page throughout the world in the way Mohammed left behind the Koran, but rather by forming a community to bear that gospel in its life, deeds, and words. The primary vehicle by which the gospel is communicated is a community that believes and lives the gospel. When the gospel is faithfully embodied, a missionary encounter occurs between the gospel that the church bears and the fundamental beliefs and reigning public doctrine

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financial-industrial system which is now more powerful than even the most powerful nation-states..." (1996b:8). Therefore, Newbiggin primarily addressed the modern scientific worldview as the cardinal danger to the missionary church and only near the end of his life included comments on postmodernity. But, in fact, his critique of modernity also holds important insights for interpreting and responding with a missionary encounter to the postmodern condition in western culture.

that shapes the society in which the church lives. The church is a “different social order” that challenges the dominant social order embodied in the culture’s institutions, customs, and practices (1989e:231). The witness of the church calls the inhabitants of the dominant culture to conversion, to the different way of life offered by the church in the gospel. How will conversion ever take place? “No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it” (1989e:232).

Newbigin calls for a ‘missionary encounter’ between the gospel and modern western culture (1986e:1). In these words we find the cardinal concern that shapes Newbigin’s mission in western culture project. If a missionary encounter between the gospel and western culture is achieved through the life of the church, then ecclesiology lies at the centre of this project.

We have noted in earlier chapters that there are two dangers that can eliminate a missionary encounter with culture—irrelevance and syncretism. In Newbigin’s view, the problem the Christian church faces in the West is “an advanced case of syncretism. Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture” (1994k:67). Our forms of Christianity within the Protestant churches—liberal, fundamentalist, and pietist— have surrendered the comprehensive claims of the gospel to the public doctrine of the Enlightenment (1983d:22). This syncretistic absorption of the church into the reigning plausibility structure of the culture effectively silences the gospel and eviscerates a missionary encounter between the comprehensive demands of the gospel and the equally comprehensive claims of the cultural story. This accommodation is endemic in the West because the churches have lived in a symbiotic relationship with its culture for so long that they have become “domestic chaplains to the nations” (1994k:114).

The peaceful co-existence of Christianity with the post-Enlightenment culture which this secured has endured so long that it is hard for the Church now to recover the standpoint for a genuinely missionary approach to our “modern” culture.... The Church has lived so long as a permitted and even privileged minority, accepting relegation to the private sphere in a culture whose public life is controlled by a totally different vision of reality, that it has almost lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision and therefore to “modern western civilization” as a whole. Looking at the world missionary situation as a whole, this failure is the most important and the most serious factor in the whole world situation, because this western culture has penetrated into every other culture in the world and threatens to destabilize them all (1983d:22-23).

Newbigin’s critique of the western church focuses on the problem of syncretism. His appraisal of Peter Berger’s attempt to find a place for the Christian faith within the framework of modern western culture is an enlightening paradigm of his numerous critiques of culturally captive Christianity in the West (1986e:10-16). Berger examines what would be involved in religious affirmation in modern western culture. The subtitle of his book *The Heretical Imperative* is *Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979). Berger believes that we live in a pluralistic culture in which there is no plausibility structure or accepted doctrine that shapes the public life of society. In this pluralistic situation there are three possibilities for Christian affirmation which he labels deductive, reductive, and inductive. Karl Barth exemplifies the deductive

affirmation that simply affirms the truth of the Bible without giving rational grounds for this starting point. The truth of the gospel is simply asserted over against other non-Christian accounts of reality. Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization typifies the reductive strategy. It unashamedly accepts the secularized world of science as ultimate and tailors the gospel to fit into it. Berger opts for the third alternative, the inductive, which is best illustrated by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher. The clue to the human situation is the religious experience that is the focal subject of all theologies and religions. All these various religious experiences are signals of transcendence. To distinguish between true and false signals of transcendence one must weigh the claim in the 'scale of reason.' While Berger claims that this is not a capitulation to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Newbigin argues that Berger's religious affirmation rests on the rationalist assumptions of our culture rather than on any particular religious commitment. Berger has demonstrated, not that there is no plausibility structure in western culture, but that the *traditional* plausibility structure of Christendom has been dissolved by the acids of modernity. Newbigin writes: "My point here is simply this: while Berger correctly shows how the traditional plausibility structures are dissolved by contact with this modern world-view, and while he correctly reminds us that the prevalence and power of this world-view gives no ground for believing it to be true, he does not seem to allow for the fact that it is itself a plausibility structure and functions as such" (1986e:13f.). Berger is unaware that to distinguish between the public role of reason and private religious experience is already to succumb to the reigning plausibility structure of modernity. Christian faith finds its place as one more manifestation of universal religious experience that is confined to the private realm; this does not challenge the plausibility structure but leaves it intact, finding a place for the gospel within it. Newbigin comments:

Berger is a true follower of Schleiermacher in commending religion to its cultured despisers, and in seeking to show that there is a proper place for religious affirmation within the plausibility structure of the modern scientific world-view. But all of this procedure leaves that world-view unchallenged. The autonomous human being is still in the center—with total freedom of choice.... [The gospel] has been silenced by co-option into the modern scientific world-view. The gospel is treated as an account of something that happened in one of the enclaves where religious experience took place (1986e:15).

Thus Newbigin holds up Berger as an example of how the truth claims of the gospel have been relativized by the more ultimate truth claim of public reason. Berger finds a place for Christian affirmation *within* the plausibility structure of modernity. Newbigin believes that this constitutes a form of cultural captivity that effectively eradicates any missionary encounter. The mission of the church is not to accommodate but to challenge the plausibility structure of modernity with an alternative plausibility structure. A missionary encounter is the confrontation between two ultimate and universal truth claims based on faith commitments, not the absorption of one into the other. The church encounters its culture as it remains faithful to the gospel as its ultimate commitment, embodies its story, and judges the story of its culture in the light of the gospel. Ian Barnes puts it well when he says of Newbigin: "His purpose is not to make a 'space' for Christianity *within* a wide pluralism, but to recover the alternative universalist *counter* claims of Christianity based on the particular grammar of the life, death and resurrection

of Jesus” (Barnes 1994:29). All three adjectives used by Barnes to describe the ‘claims’ of Christianity are important: ‘alternative’ because the gospel’s claims present another way of understanding the world; ‘universalist’ because the call of the gospel is valid for all people and claims the whole of human life; and ‘counter’ because the gospel challenges the story of modernity, calling for repentance and conversion (1983d:53).

Newbigin’s recognition of the cultural captivity of the gospel and his call for a missionary encounter is rooted in his missionary experience in India. As a missionary in India Newbigin recognized that the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* were foundational to the Hindu understanding of the world and had not been challenged in all the great revolutions within India from Buddha to Ghandi. These foundational assumptions simply describe the way things are and always have been. It is natural that the person and work of Jesus would be interpreted in terms of this explanatory framework. He describes this accommodation:

As a young missionary, I used to spend an evening each week at the Ramakrishna Mission, studying with the monks the Hindu Upanishads and the Christian Gospels. The great hall of the monastery was lined with pictures of the great religious figures of history, among them Jesus. Each year on Christmas Day, worship was offered before the picture of Jesus. It was clear to me as a missionary that this was an example of syncretism; Jesus had simply been co-opted into the Hindu world-view (1989f:1).

He continues: “It was only slowly that I began to see that my own Christianity had this same character, that I too had, in measure, co-opted Jesus into the world-view of my culture” (1989f:2). Upon his return to Britain he believed that the West had become as much a mission field as India was during his ministry there. He expresses in one sentence the concern that would motivate his call for a missionary encounter with western culture for the next several decades: “It has become clear to me that instead of allowing the gospel to challenge the assumptions of our culture, we have co-opted Jesus into our culture, giving him a minor role in the private sector” (*ibid*). A missionary encounter embodies and proclaims the gospel in such a way that the fundamental assumptions of the culture are challenged. In the case of the western church, the gospel has been domesticated by the fundamental assumptions of western culture.

Newbigin identifies the fact-value dichotomy that issues from the enthronement of autonomous reason as the primary threat to a faithful embodiment of the gospel in the church in western culture. The modern scientific worldview is based on a faith commitment to the autonomy of reason. All truth claims are judged at the bar of autonomous reason. Those claims which are judged to be universally valid according to the criterion of scientific reason are considered facts; those claims which cannot are values. Facts are public truth; values are private opinions, preferences, or tastes. One can know the facts with scientific certainty; values are simply believed. Scientific truth claims are admitted to the prestigious realm of facts; religious truth claims cannot be verified empirically and thus are dismissed as values. In the realm of values we are pluralist; in the realm of facts we are not.

Newbigin believes that this dichotomy is at the heart of the modern scientific worldview that has given rise to pluralism. As *karma* and *samsara* are the unexamined yet foundational beliefs of Hindu culture, the fact-value dichotomy has assumed the same role in western culture. The gospel had been seriously compromised as Jesus had been relegated to a minor role in the private sector. It is this insight that leads Newbigin

to examine the foundational beliefs of our culture in a way that a missionary would carry out the same exercise in India (1986e:21).

Newbigin's identification of the fact-value dichotomy as foundational for western culture opens much insight into the problems the western church faces in its missionary witness. Unfortunately, Newbigin does not explore other idols of our culture. Both Walsh and Middleton and Bartholomew and Moritz identify economism or consumerism as the primary idol that weakens the church's witness (Walsh and Middleton 1984:131-139; Bartholomew and Moritz 2000:2). While Newbigin's later reflections recognize the power of this idol, he never offers a detailed critique or how a missionary church might propose an alternative. He restricts his critique to the debilitating power of the fact-value dichotomy. This uncovers many important aspects of the church's syncretism; at the same time the breadth of the critique remains limited.

The remainder of the chapter will examine Newbigin's analysis of and response to the threat of the modern scientific worldview. Particular attention is paid to the ecclesiological issues in this response. How does Newbigin's response enable and equip the church to be a missionary community in western culture?

### 9.3. THE THREAT OF THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW TO THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

Wilbert Shenk suggests that if the church in western culture is to recover its missionary character two things are required: an inner and an outer mission consciousness (Shenk 1995:86-99). On the one hand, the church must cultivate a missionary self-understanding by comprehending its existence in relation to the reign of God; the church's nature is defined by its participation in God's mission to restore his rule over all creation. On the other hand, the church must develop a missionary understanding of culture. These are not two separate issues: fostering a missionary identity and nurturing a missionary approach to culture are two sides of the same coin. If the western church is to recover a sense of being an alternative community that embodies and announces the gospel within the dominant culture, a necessary corollary is to recognize where that culture has pressed the church into its own mould. Nourishing a missionary self-understanding requires a missiological analysis of culture that exposes the foundational assumptions and basic faith commitments of the dominant culture that domesticate and compromise the gospel. Traditional ecclesiologies can safely ignore the cultural context because that setting has little bearing on its life. A missionary ecclesiology that recognizes the church's orientation to the world recognizes that cultural analysis is essential for its self-understanding. How can the church embody a challenging witness in a particular culture? This question can be answered only by discerning the cultural currents that compromise the church's life. Thus cultural analysis is significant for ecclesiology. This section investigates Newbigin's analysis of and response to the threat of the modern scientific worldview in two parts. First, we briefly survey Newbigin's historical, epistemological, and theological work in response to the modern scientific worldview. Then we examine the ecclesiological implications of this analysis. What would a missionary church in western culture look like? How can the church in western culture live as an alternative community that challenges the prevailing cultural

worldview?

### 9.3.1. *Liberating the Church for a Missionary Encounter*

Martin Luther has said somewhere that the gospel is like a caged lion; it does not need to be defended, just released. For Newbigin this would be an ecclesiological statement. The barred cage that forms the prison for the gospel in contemporary western culture is the syncretistic accommodation of the church's understanding and forms to the fact-value dichotomy. The liberation of the gospel can only occur as the church's understanding and embodiment of the gospel is released from the idolatry of the reigning public doctrine of western culture.

Newbigin's 'mission to western culture' project can be interpreted as an attempt to liberate the church from its syncretistic accommodation and to recover its missionary posture. For this liberation and recovery three tasks are important: historical, epistemological, and theological. As to the *historical* task Newbigin writes: "One way to gain a perspective on our culture is to look at it from the angle of history. European culture was not always so.... There was a time when the Gospel was regarded as part of public truth... How did it come about that Christianity ceased to be part of public truth and became a matter of private opinion?" (1990z:2). When surveying Newbigin's writings on the topic of gospel and western culture, one is struck by the frequency of analyses that examine the historical roots of the missionary crisis of the church in the West. An historical analysis enables the church to see how the plausibility structure which appears to be simply the way things are is, in fact, a social construct that has been developed throughout the centuries of western history. This kind of analysis equips the church for its missionary encounter by showing "that the axioms and assumptions of our modern culture are not simply an objective account of 'how things really are', but are themselves questionable and vulnerable" (1984b:16). There are various themes that provide the clue for selection of data in Newbigin's historical narratives. Yet one motif is found repeatedly: it was the emergence of the humanist-rationalist tradition in the Renaissance which came to maturity in the Enlightenment to occupy the place of the public doctrine in the West that has marginalized the gospel to the private realm. The second task necessary to release the western church from its cultural captivity is *epistemological*. The idolatrous role of reason has established a widely accepted and unexamined epistemology in the public square of western culture that dismisses the truth claims of the gospel. Newbigin's writings attempt to demonstrate that this epistemology does not conform to reality. In its place he offers an alternative epistemology that liberates the church to embody the Scriptural story. The third task is *theological*: if the church is to reclaim the public truth of the gospel it is necessary to translate this epistemology in terms of the mission of the church. This requires a recovery of the proper understanding of Biblical authority. The gospel is a true story about the end of universal history that must be embodied by a community. From this standpoint, a doctrine of Scripture is closely connected to a missionary ecclesiology. The church is a hermeneutic of the gospel as it makes known the end of history in its life, deeds, and words. As Barnes puts it: "The recovery of the gospel as 'meta-narrative' applies not only to intellectual understanding but also to ecclesial practice" (Barnes 1994:33).

This brief summary demonstrates that the range of Newbigin's writings on the topic of mission to western culture is broad: historical, philosophical, theological, and missiological. This summary also shows that missionary ecclesiology is an important entry into the whole project. The goal of all Newbigin's analysis is a missionary church that embodies a counter story centred in the events of the gospel. It is not accidental that the most important books Newbigin writes on this subject conclude on an ecclesiological note: 'What must we be? The Call to the Church' (1986e:124-150); 'The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel' (1989e:222-233).

### 9.3.1.1. The Historical Task: Missiological Analysis of Western Culture

Newbigin's approach in analyzing the foundational assumptions of our culture is to uncover its historical roots. Newbigin writes in the opening pages of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: "The purpose of these chapters is to examine the roots of this culture which we share and to suggest how as Christians we can more confidently affirm our faith in this kind of intellectual climate" (1989e:7). Telling the western story explodes the myth that the axioms that shape our culture are simply the way things are; they are a socio-cultural construct that has been fashioned over time. The belief that the gospel is only a private opinion that cannot attain to the status of truth has a history; such an understanding has not always been the case.

To expose the vulnerability of these unexamined assumptions which appear so obvious to a person living in the West requires the telling of the story from a missiological standpoint. There is an African proverb that states: "Until the lions have their historians the hunter will always be the hero of the story." Newbigin is aware that any telling of the story involves a commitment to a 'hero' whereby the facts of history are selected and interpreted. Most western histories assume the 'hero' of autonomous reason. Newbigin's retelling of the story motivated by missionary concern demonstrates the way that autonomous reason has replaced the gospel as the light of the world.

Western culture is the product of two incompatible historical streams: classical rationalistic humanism and the Biblical story (1989e:1-3; 1995h:3). The difference between the Greek and Hebrew views of the world is the location of reliable truth. In the Bible, truth is located in a story of God's deeds in history centred in Jesus Christ, while classical thought locates reliable truth in timeless ideas that can be accessed by autonomous reason. The gospel was born into the classical milieu and the ensuing mission of the church made it necessary to relate the gospel to the classical worldview. Newbigin interprets the missionary encounter of the early church in terms of faithful contextualization: the gospel was not domesticated into classical culture but provided a new *arche*, a new starting point for understanding and living in the world (1995h:4-9).

Newbigin's telling of the western story highlights the place of Augustine's *credo ut intelligam*. Indeed it is essential to Newbigin's narrative: he believes that the mission of the church in modernity has been crippled by an epistemology that places doubt before dogma. Modernity reverses the order of faith and reason fashioned by Augustine. His slogan 'I believe in order to know' forged a synthesis that endured for a thousand years in which "the biblical story was to have the greater part in shaping the thought of Europe" (1995h:9). In Augustine's thought, the classical-rationalist tradition was understood within the context of a faith commitment to the gospel.

Toward the end of the medieval period the writings of Aristotle reappeared in Europe when he was translated into Latin from the Arabic by Avicenna and Averroes (1995h:17). Thomas Aquinas accommodated the empirical rationalism of Aristotle within the otherworldly Christianity characteristic of the medieval church by distinguishing between things that can be known by reason and things that can be known by faith in divine revelation. This two-storey ontology and epistemology pried apart reason and faith and opened the way for classical rationalism and humanism to resurface as the dominant tradition at the time of the Renaissance (1989e:2; 1995h:19). The incompatibility of the two traditions of understanding and living in the world (classical and Christian) that had comfortably co-existed together in the Augustinian fusion during the medieval period became evident as the classical tradition challenged the faith foundation laid by Augustine. On Newbigin's view, the late medieval period and Renaissance form the hinge into the modern age. While the Biblical tradition provided the framework within which the classical tradition found a place during the medieval period, the roles of these two traditions are reversed in the modern period.

Newbigin highlights the work of four men in engineering this shift: Rene Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Descartes is the primary villain in Newbigin's telling of the western story. Descartes divorced the objective and subjective poles in human knowledge and turned Augustine on his head by advocating the priority of doubt over faith in the knowing process. "Doubt, not faith, was to be the path to knowledge. By relentless skepticism, the famous 'critical principle,' every claim to truth was to be put through the critical sieve in which only the indubitable would be retained" (1995h:21). John Locke reinforced this commitment to autonomous reason as the fundamental arbiter of truth by distinguishing between knowing and believing (1994k:103). Newbigin follows Michael Polanyi's contrast of Locke and Augustine (Polanyi 1958:266). Augustine brings the critical age of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating a post-critical philosophy; classical reason is understood in the context of the fiduciary structure of the Christian faith. Locke introduces into the English-speaking world a new critical age by inverting the relationship between belief and knowledge. The distinction between knowing and believing, with the former occupying pride of place, is the result of an exchange of traditions: the classical humanist tradition replaces the Christian tradition as the dominant way of understanding and living in the world. Francis Bacon contributed to this shift with his advice to "abjure speculation and collect facts" (MacIntyre 1981:7; Newbigin 1995h:55). Speculation refers to the universals of medieval philosophy: essence, existence, substance, cause, and purpose. However, since the ideal of a total empiricism is impossible, Bacon maintained the universal of 'cause.' Bacon's legacy is to reduce explanation to the cause-effect relationship and reject the concept of purpose as a clue to understanding (1986e:24, 34; 1989e:36-37). Isaac Newton strengthened the grip of autonomous reason and the classical tradition by his development of a method that seemed to explain the cosmos. "His model seemed to provide a clue to the understanding of everything from the movement of the stars to the fall of an apple. Descartes's vision of a world ultimately understood in terms of indubitable certainties of mathematics seemed to be vindicated" (1995h:29). The scientific method offered a way to certain knowledge that does not depend on divine revelation or faith.

While Descartes, Locke, Bacon, and Newton gave philosophical articulation to the developments in western culture during this time, the combination of two historical events enabled confidence in autonomous reason to become widespread at the time of the Enlightenment. The first was the remarkable success of science (1995h:29). The scientific method seemed to provide a reliable centre to unite people in the truth as it moved from success to success. It offered a method that could ‘explain’ reality without recourse to divine revelation or faith; science could liberate the West from the tyrannies of contentious religion and superstition. The second was the concurrent religious wars (1995h:30). While science appeared to unite people in the truth, the religious wars were stark evidence that religion leads to factions, violence, and bloodshed.<sup>3</sup>

For decades Christians soaked the soil of Europe with blood, warring over rival interpretations of the Christian message. It is surely not surprising that this dazzling new vision of reality should have exerted such a powerful attraction. A new light was dawning, and a bloodstained past could be seen for what it was—the Dark Ages, or, as the light slowly began to penetrate, the Middle Ages, the period between the ancient glory of classical culture and the newly dawning age of reason (1995h:30).

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<sup>3</sup>For a defence of the thesis that secularism in the West is rooted in confessional wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries see Wolfhart Pannenberg (1989:11-19). He writes: “Rather it was the unintended consequences of the Reformation in church history, politics, and world history which created the starting point for the origin of modern secular culture.... In this period of confessional wars, in which an attempt was made more or less vainly, and only in some cases successfully, to impose unity of faith in terms of one or other of the confessions, people realized that religious passion destroys social peace. Hitherto the dominant conviction had been that the unity of religion is indispensable as the foundation for the unity of society” (1989:11-12). Like Newbiggin, Pannenberg also notes that the result of these confessional wars was that “religion was no longer seen as a constitutive element of human nature... but as a matter of private preference...” (:16).

This led to the collective conversion of Western Europe at the time of the Enlightenment (1984b:11f.; 1986e:23). This age is called the ‘age of reason’ because a mathematical and analytical rationality is enthroned as the centre of European culture.<sup>4</sup> Reason becomes the ultimate arbitrator in judging what truth claims may shape the public life of society. Truth cannot bow before any other authority than facts—interpreted in terms of cause and effect relationships captured in a method that employs the senses and mathematical rationality (1986e:25). It is precisely this enthronement of sovereign reason that has produced the public fact-private value dichotomy that shapes the plausibility structure of western culture.

Newbiggin’s narration of western history is a story of two different traditions of understanding and living in the world. Both traditions are committed in faith to some light to make sense of the world. The Christian tradition offers the gospel of Jesus Christ as the light of the world while the classical tradition offers autonomous reason disciplined by the scientific method as the light of the world. Augustine is the father of a synthesis that places the classical tradition in the context of the biblical story. Descartes is the father of a synthesis that places the gospel in the context of the classical tradition.

Newbiggin’s indictment of the church is that it has followed Descartes and thus been unfaithful to the gospel. When autonomous reason, the light of the classical tradition, is the ultimate arbiter of truth, the gospel cannot be propagated as truth but is reduced to the category of values, private opinion, and subjective taste (1989e:40). Timidity incapacitates the church’s witness; there is no missionary encounter. The question is: “How, in this situation, does one preach the gospel as truth, truth which is not to be domesticated within the assumptions of modern thought but which challenges these assumptions and calls for their revision” (1989e:5). The need of the hour, if that missionary encounter is to be recovered, is to again acknowledge the gospel as public

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<sup>4</sup>Newbiggin is often portrayed as an opponent of the Enlightenment (cf. Ottati 1993:49-50). This ignores his numerous positive comments, such as: “we have to acknowledge the immense achievements of the Enlightenment” and “recognize that the agenda of the Enlightenment is not completed” (1984b:12). It also misunderstands why Newbiggin is critiquing the Enlightenment: a missiological concern—how has the enthronement of autonomous reason cut the nerve of the church’s confidence in the gospel? His is not a cultural, social, or intellectual history in which the enormous achievements of the Enlightenment must be duly recorded.

truth. This begins with the household of God; they must see where the gospel has been compromised in their own fellowship by these dichotomies. This claim must then be pressed beyond the boundaries of the Christian fellowship by a community that believes, embodies, and proclaims the gospel as public truth.

Newbigin's narration of the western story raises many issues that cannot be addressed in this section. Yet one basic problem can be noted since it concerns the basic structure of Newbigin's narrative. It appears that Newbigin has been too generous with the early church fathers and especially with Augustine. It may be questioned whether Augustine's synthesis was in harmony with the principle *credo ut intelligam* and whether the early church and Augustine faithfully followed the model of subversive fulfillment provided by John in relating the gospel to the classical worldview. It is more accurate to note that the early church fathers and Augustine were heavily dependent upon Platonic categories. Both J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh as well as Jonathan Chaplin rightly argue that the problem of dualism in western culture goes back to early church's and Augustine's "uncritical acceptance... of concepts drawn from pagan Greek thought" (Chaplin 1986:101; cf. Walsh and Middleton 1984:110-112). Chaplin is more generous with Augustine than Walsh and Middleton. He sees a fundamental tension in Augustine's thought between a robustly Christian faith which masters the classical tradition and a syncretism in which neo-Platonism compromises the gospel (Chaplin 1986:104-105). Newbigin has simply highlighted the positive stream within Augustine. While Newbigin sees the turning point at Aquinas' appropriation of Aristotle, he does not sufficiently recognize that the Augustinian synthesis with neo-Platonic rationalism paved the way for Aquinas. Newbigin too easily interprets the medieval period shaped by Augustine's synthesis as Christian; the pagan humanistic rationalist stream in the Middle Ages is not sufficiently recognized.

### 9.3.1.2. The Epistemological Task: An Alternative Theory of Knowledge

For Newbigin "the fundamental issue is epistemological: it is the question about how we can come to know the truth, how we can know what is real" (1994k:104). Indeed, issues of epistemology occupy a large place in Newbigin's later writings. It would be easy, however, to misunderstand this concern and to classify Newbigin simply as another western apologist or philosopher with a proclivity toward epistemological questions. Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that western philosophy, as it faced the storms of mutually conflicting worldviews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, "got stranded in the shallows of epistemology" (Gadamer 1981:6). Obsession with epistemology filled a void created by skepticism about truth. Newbigin's concerns for epistemology could be misunderstood to stand in this tradition of retreat from ontology to tentative and myopic concerns with epistemological theory. If we approach Newbigin's whole project, however, from the standpoint of a missionary, we gain the proper vantage point from which to understand his concern with epistemology. His forays into knowledge theory are rooted in his recognition that the religious foundations of our culture are epistemological because autonomous reason has become a central idol in the West as the classical tradition has become ascendant. He comments: "The culture of which we are a part has prized above all the autonomy of reason" (1983d:51). Newbigin's concern is not to dabble in epistemology but to encounter and challenge the foundational beliefs

of western culture that hold the gospel captive. Newbigin's task is to liberate the church and the gospel from its captivity to western culture is "through a resolute attack on the fundamental problem which is epistemology, the way we formulate an answer to the question: 'How do you know?'" (1989e:25). This involves both a challenge to the existing epistemology and an offer of a more truthful model of the way we know the truth.

Newbigin draws on two sources to accomplish this task: the insights of post-empiricist philosophy and history of science, and sociology of knowledge. This is significant for this study because both of these disciplines strongly stress the importance of a *hermeneutical community* in the process of knowing.<sup>5</sup> Newbigin's appropriation of the insights of these academic fields enables him to highlight the importance of the ecclesial community in knowing and communicating the truth. We might call this Newbigin's 'missiological appropriation' of philosophy and history of science and sociology of knowledge, or his 'missionary epistemology.' In an earlier section we have probed the significance of sociology of knowledge for a missionary encounter with culture by opening up Newbigin's use of the concept of a 'plausibility structure.' In this section we attend to his employment of categories from post-empiricist history and philosophy of science.

There are two philosophers important for our purposes that Newbigin utilizes to challenge existing epistemological assumptions and advance an alternate way of understanding knowledge. First, Newbigin utilizes Michael Polanyi's thought to demonstrate the importance of a hermeneutical community in understanding and living in the world. Newbigin draws ecclesiological conclusions from this alternate epistemology. Second, Newbigin leans on Alasdair MacIntyre's account of a paradigm shift (dependent on Thomas Kuhn 1970) to articulate the process of a missionary encounter between the church and its culture.

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<sup>5</sup>In his helpful book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Richard Bernstein describes various stages in the development of the philosophy of science (1988:71-79). In summarizing the most recent developments he argues that to understand the rationality of scientific inquiry we must focus on theories, paradigms, and research programs in their *historical development*. With this shift it becomes clear that rationality always operates in the context of a *tradition*. When the importance of tradition for scientific rationality is recognized it is evident that "we must also consider the nature, function, and dynamics of *communities of inquirers*...scientific rationality... essentially involves the notion of a community" (1988:77).

Newbiggin's primary ally in challenging the popular way of understanding knowledge and developing an alternate epistemology is Polanyi. Polanyi challenges the subject-object dichotomy in science by speaking of personal knowledge (Polanyi 1961). In this phrase, Polanyi affirms the personal commitment of the whole person in the process of knowing. According to Polanyi scientific knowing involves apprenticeship into a tradition of knowledge. In contrast to the modern assumption that all traditions and authority must be subjected to the test of methodological doubt and critical reason, Polanyi affirms that the "authority of science is essentially traditional" (Polanyi 1961:466; quoted in Newbiggin 1989e:43). If one wants to participate in the scientific community, it is essential to internalize a tradition. The student must submit to the authority of the tradition by trusting the teacher, accepting what is being taught, and learning the skills that are necessary to employ the scientific method. Authority and tradition are not to be set over against the autonomy and freedom of human reason. Rather, one relies on the authority of a tradition precisely so that one can see for themselves (1989e:43-47). Scientists work by internalizing and indwelling this tradition. The assumptions, the past findings, the assumed method all become part of the equipment that the scientist relies upon to carry out his or her work. This tradition functions like spectacles or a probe in the hands of a surgeon. One does not attend focally to the probe or the spectacles. Rather one looks through the spectacles and attends focally to the object he or she is looking at. The surgeon feels through the probe and focusses his or her attention on that which is being examined. The whole scientific tradition functions like a probe or spectacles that are assumed in the process of scientific work. Polanyi calls this a fiduciary framework: it is a framework of assumptions, practices, and skills that the scientific community trusts when it carries out its work. It functions as a probe in which the scientist dwells and trusts to make advances in knowledge (1995h:40f.). The tradition becomes the assumed 'equipment' trusted by the scientist to enable him or her to carry on scientific work. This fiduciary framework contains a vast amount of 'tacit knowledge' that is transmitted by the scientific tradition which the scientist does not explicitly formulate but trusts uncritically to know the world. The scientific tradition is embodied and maintained by the scientific community (1989e:46). Polanyi calls this the 'republic of science.' It can be said of skilled practitioners of the tradition that "the tradition dwells fully in them and that they dwell fully in the tradition" (1989e:47). The tradition is maintained by the scientific community through the articles accepted for publication in scientific journals, the appointment of masters of the tradition to teaching and research posts, and the transmission of this tradition to the next generation of students.

Newbiggin highlights three elements of this description of science that are important for equipping the church for its missionary encounter. First, autonomous reason is an illusion; reason always works in the context of the authority of some tradition (1989e:58). The assumption of reason as a neutral umpire of truth is the result of an uncritical acceptance of the classical tradition. Even the most rationally rigorous of disciplines—the natural sciences—work within the context of a tradition.

Second, this rationality tradition is always socially embodied; the community of scientists work together in carrying forward this tradition and bringing its foundational insights to bear on various situations. The Enlightenment propagated the illusion that all authority and tradition must be brought under the searching light of rational criticism

to be validated. In fact, what took place was the triumph of one rationality tradition over another. It is not a matter of setting faith and revelation over against critical reason. Rather it is a matter of which tradition is shaping the rational process. According to Newbigin, rationality functioned in the context of Biblical revelation in the tradition rooted in Augustine's work. This is replaced at the Enlightenment by a tradition in which reason works in the context of a commitment to the autonomy of rationality and the almighty competence of the scientific method to provide the instrument for reason (1989e:58-59).

The third element that Newbigin accents in Polanyi's description of science is that the scientific tradition arises when there is an imaginative disclosure or leap that marks the birth of a new vision for scientific discovery. The imagination and the intuition play a role in the formation of new theoretical patterns.

There is an intuition that a kind of rational coherence lies hidden behind the apparently incoherent data. There is often a long period of brooding reflection. At some point there is an imaginative leap with a new vision of coherence, something which compels assent by its beauty, its simplicity, and its comprehensiveness (1989e:59).

This new insight or imaginative disclosure provides the light for working within the tradition. The scientific community labours to bring that insight to bear on the various data and problems with which it deals. Newbigin points to the imaginative disclosures of Kepler, Newton and Einstein which provided the light for the continuing scientific traditions (1989e:31, 59; cf. Polanyi 1958:7). Newton and Einstein shaped the work of generations of scientists with a "sudden illumination," an imaginative insight into the pattern of reality. This discovery of new patterns, often by an imaginative leap or intuitive insight, becomes "the starting point of a tradition of reasoning in which the significance of these disclosures is explored, developed, tested against new experiences, and extended into further areas of thought" (1989e:60). Thus this imaginative disclosure functions as light for the tradition in two ways. The tradition both arises by this disclosure and continues as the light of this insight is brought to bear on new contexts and new situations.

While Polanyi is concerned with a true account of how science works, Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi is fundamentally ecclesiological and missiological. The insights of this alternative epistemology are brought to bear on the mission of the church as Newbigin draws an analogy between the scientific tradition and the Christian tradition (1989e:52-65). The structures of both are similar. In both cases reason operates in the context of a continuing tradition; the tradition is socially embodied by a community—the church in the case of the Christian tradition and the scientific community in the case of scientific tradition; the tradition arises out of a disclosure which functions as the ultimate light in which the community works, and the tradition continues as that community brings the light of the original disclosure to bear on new contexts and situations. For the scientific community the light is scientific insight; for the church it is the light of the gospel.

Lamin Sanneh, who is uncomfortable with this analogy, writes: "I am a little uneasy about the parallel lines drawn for science and religion, for, however helpful, rather different vehicles proceed by them, the one being a triumph of instrumental contrivance and the other the ark of the religious covenant" (Sanneh 1993:166). He believes

Newbigin's Enlightenment roots are clear when he makes a path for Christianity by "turning it into a look-alike or surrogate rationality" (Sanneh 1993:167). Yet Sanneh has not taken account sufficiently of the differences Newbigin articulates concerning the starting points of the two traditions. While both traditions arise out of original disclosures, they fundamentally differ on the nature of the original disclosure in two ways. First, while the scientific tradition begins with the original experience "I discovered," the Christian tradition begins with the original experience "God has spoken" (1989e:60). Newbigin explicates this difference in terms of Martin Buber's distinction between I-You and I-It knowledge (1989e:60-61). I-It knowledge is the world of autonomous reason where the knowing subject is in control. He or she decides on the questions and tests, carries out the analysis and dissection, formulates the hypotheses and forces the object to yield answers to the question put to it. It is characterized by "I discovered." I-You knowledge differs fundamentally. Knowledge of another person is only available if I am willing to trust the other person as a free subject, open myself up to his or her communication, listen and answer questions put to me. Sovereign autonomy must be abandoned in the place of a trustful listening. This kind of knowledge will say "It has been revealed to me." Whereas Sanneh fears an incipient rationalism in Newbigin, this fundamental distinction challenges rather than upholds autonomous rationality. This is subversive fulfillment rather than syncretism.

The second difference between the two traditions is that the original disclosure in the Christian tradition concerns ultimate questions. This gives rise to a much broader tradition. Newbigin comments on the Christian tradition:

Unlike the scientific tradition ... this tradition is not confined to a limited set of questions about the rational structure of the cosmos. Specifically, unlike science, it concerns itself with questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of things and of human life—questions which modern science eliminates as a matter of methodology. The models, concepts, and paradigms through which the Christian tradition seeks to understand the world embrace these larger questions. They have the same presupposition about the rationality of the cosmos as the natural sciences do, but it is a *more comprehensive rationality* based on the faith that the author and sustainer of the cosmos has personally revealed his purpose (1989e:49; emphasis mine).

The scientific tradition is simply a tradition of understanding that seeks a limited knowledge of the lawfulness of creation on the basis of scientific discovery. The Christian faith is a wider rationality tradition that witnesses to the action of God in history which has revealed and effected the purpose of the Creator for all the world. The original disclosure of the Christian tradition is a story of universal history that tells us what God has done, is doing, and will do for the whole creation (1989e:50-51). Ultimately the Christian tradition can incorporate the origin, nature, and place of science into its story while the opposite cannot be done.

There are two important ways that these insights from philosophy and history of science are important for Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. First, the close connection between rationality, tradition, and community exposes the important place of the church in embodying the gospel. The analogy and parallel between the scientific community and the church reveal the significance of a hermeneutical community in maintaining and communicating a tradition of understanding. The gospel is transmitted by a community that faithfully lives in its light.

Second, a grasp of this epistemology liberates the church to again believe and embody the gospel with confidence. Speaking about the church's mission Newbigin affirms that a missionary encounter in the public square "would require a church that actually believes its creed" (1994j:9). "Uncertainty cuts at the root of any real missionary witness" (1984b:9); only a church that is confident that the 'Christ event' constitutes historical events that reveal and accomplish the end will boldly embody and announce that gospel over against the prevailing public doctrine. Christopher Duraisingh rightly notes that Newbigin's *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is a call to believe the gospel. Duraisingh writes of Newbigin:

He regrets the consequent attitude of timidity or of anxiety on the part of Christians, especially in the West. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is a call to renewed confidence in the gospel. It is an attempt to see 'how we can more confidently affirm our faith in the kind of intellectual climate' in which we find ourselves (1989e:vii).

Newbigin has challenged the timidity of the western church by showing that the claims of autonomous reason are not simply the way things are; they are an alternative plausibility structure or tradition in action. The church is free to decline that way of looking at the world and can joyfully and confidently offer an alternative—the gospel as truth.<sup>6</sup>

Newbigin appropriates Polanyi in an insightful way and offers a 'missionary epistemology.' Polanyi's philosophy offers Newbigin the opportunity to stress the community in embodying a fiduciary tradition. However, it is unfortunate that Newbigin restricts himself to Polanyi. Developments in philosophy of science have brought out even more clearly the importance of the hermeneutical community in a continuing tradition.

Newbigin draws out the missionary implications of Polanyi's epistemology with the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre's description of a paradigm shift or conversion from one tradition to another. MacIntyre's comments are made in the context of a defence of tradition-based knowledge over against the charge of relativism (MacIntyre 1988:349-388; cf. 1989e:55-57). If all rationality functions in the context of a socially and linguistically embodied tradition, then what criteria are there to judge between the adequacy of rival traditions? In the Cartesian-Enlightenment tradition a supracultural and neutral rationality was considered to be the unbiased umpire to adjudicate competing truth claims. If this is an illusion, and scientific rationality is shown to be simply one tradition of reasoning, what criteria remain? McIntyre argues that traditions can be judged according to their adequacy for grasping and coping with the reality of creation that all human beings face (1989e:56). All traditions are constantly changing in an effort to make sense of the experience that confronts them. As new situations and problems arise, the community makes sense of these new experiences rationally within the light of the tradition. Sometimes anomalies challenge the tradition. Often the tradition is flexible and strong enough to bend and change to meet these new exigencies. At other times these experiences challenge the tradition in a more profound way and the tradition faces a crisis. There are basic contradictions and inconsistencies between the

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<sup>6</sup>I have used *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* in mission classes for ten years in the university setting and have seen this liberation take place every year with numerous students.

tradition and experience that threaten the coherence of that tradition. At this point of crisis, adherents of that tradition will search for a rival tradition that can make more sense of these conflicting experiences. If another tradition offers another way of seeing things, another vision that accounts for the anomalies, there is a paradigm shift, a conversion to a new tradition. Traditions are not static entities; they bend and change and may even be abandoned if they cannot deal with the reality they face. Over against the charge of relativism, a tradition can be “subject to the test of adequacy to the realities which it seeks to grasp. Truth is grasped, can only be grasped, within a tradition, but traditions can be and are judged adequate or inadequate in respect of their perceived capacity to lead their adherents into the truth” (1989e:55).

This account of paradigm shifts and conversion has significant implications for Newbigin’s understanding of the missionary church. MacIntyre has opened up the dynamics of how scientific communities function in conversion from one tradition to another (1984b:15; cf. Kuhn 1962:52-135; Polanyi 1958:150-153, 318-319). When there are two rival scientific traditions, as in the case when the Einsteinian paradigm challenged the Newtonian paradigm, the adequacy of a tradition is demonstrated, not by recourse to a neutral adjudicator that stands above both, but by that tradition which is able to make the most sense of the world. The importance of a community for the embodiment of this ongoing tradition is helpful for seeing the way in which the church can challenge the reigning public worldview.

This is an especially relevant insight for the western church in today’s world. Modernity is breaking down and the church can offer an alternative way of understanding and living in the world based on the gospel rather than the scientific method. Modernity is characterized by scientism—a faith in science to bring salvation. Newbigin comments:

... it is clear that for many in the so-called Christian West science has become more than merely an organized body of knowledge or basis for technical progress. It has become itself a kind of religion. Multitudes of people look to the sciences as the ultimate source of truth. They see in science a body of finally reliable thought as contrasted with the myths and superstitions of religion. And if they have any hope of salvation from the ills that flesh is heir to, it is rather based on the achievements of science than on the promises of religion (1961c:15).

Science is translated into a rational world in two ways. The scientific approach masters the non-human creation with technology (1991h:25) and rationally organizes human society with the help of social sciences. Science is “the central citadel of our culture” and is “embodied in our political, economic, and social practice” (1986e:79). The dream of the Enlightenment was that a rationally organized society and technologically dominated nature would produce happiness. “Happiness (*bonheur*) was hailed by the eighteenth century philosophers as ‘a new word in Europe’.... Enlightenment people looked forward to ‘happiness’ here on earth. This would come within the reach of all through the cumulative work of science, liberating societies from bondage to dogma and superstition, unlocking the secrets of nature and opening them for all” (1983d:13f.).

Yet today the promises of science and technology are failing:

The centuries since Newton have seen the project of Enlightenment carried to the furthest parts of the earth, offering a vision for the whole human race of emancipation,

justice, material development and human rights. It was, and is, a noble project. Yet it has failed disastrously to deliver what was promised (1996d:73).

Today the broader cultural tradition that has shaped western culture is breaking down; economic, ecological, psychological, social, and military issues emerge as anomalies that contradict and challenge the claim that autonomous methodological reason offers the light that will lead to happiness and freedom. These failures bring a challenge and crisis to the Enlightenment tradition that grips the public life of western culture. It is precisely in this crisis that the church is called in its mission to offer the gospel as a fresh starting point that can give a more adequate account of the world. In a culture that is experiencing disintegration “it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture;... without such radical renewal our culture has no future” (1983d:27). The church is a community that offers a rival tradition in its life—a tradition shaped by a different faith commitment. If the worldview of the West is failing, there will be the search for a rival tradition that is adequate to handle the contradictions of western idolatry. If the church is faithful in living an alternative plausibility structure, it offers an attractive alternative or rival tradition to which people may be converted. This offer of an alternative or rival tradition is not made by way of a rational framework or synthesis but is offered *in the life of a community*; the church is the hermeneutic of the gospel.

Newbiggin compares our era to the time when the Roman empire was disintegrating (1991h:15-25). In both cases there was a culture of extraordinary brilliance that was in crisis. In both the classical and modern scientific culture the remarkable achievements of the culture were threatened with destruction by the dualisms that arose from idolatry. Augustine offered the gospel as a new starting point<sup>7</sup>, a new *arche* for the development of culture. His synthesis not only provided a basis for social and cultural life for the next millennium but also preserved the splendid achievements of the classical period. Yet the basis for a new social order was not simply the rational synthesis of Augustine: “the Catholic Church was that new society, based on a new foundation, which could hold in trust the real treasures of classical culture even while it denied the foundation on which that culture had been built” (1991h:38). The offer of a new starting point at the time of Augustine was made in the communal life of the church based on a different faith commitment. Likewise today, if the achievements of the Enlightenment are not to be destroyed by the dichotomies that threaten the foundation of western culture, the church in its communal life—both publicly and privately—is to offer a fresh starting point for cultural life in the gospel. Newbiggin comments:

To those who fear that a fresh and unambiguous affirmation that the gospel of Jesus Christ must be the starting point and the criterion of all human thought and action will threaten the achievements of the Enlightenment and of those who have shaped our society on its principles, we can say with confidence that, on the contrary, we are offering the only basis on which the true fruits of the last 300 years can be saved from the new barbarians. But to say that is to set a daunting agenda for the universal Church today—no less than *to show in both public and private life what it means to confess Jesus as Lord* (1991h:38-39; emphasis mine).

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<sup>7</sup>In the ten pages in which Newbiggin discusses this parallel he describes the gospel as a “new” or “fresh starting point” eight times. He comments: “The question of the starting point is the fundamental one” (1991h:25).

### 9.3.1.3. The Theological Task: The Gospel as Public Truth

Before we can speak more specifically of the ecclesiological implications of this alternative epistemology there is one more task that occupied Newbigin's attention to which we must turn. We have noted that the Christian tradition embodied in the life of the church lives in the light of the gospel's revelation of God's purposes for the creation. Yet one of the factors crippling the missionary church today is a lack of confidence and a misunderstanding of the Biblical authority. "I think that there is one theological task which we must undertake if we are to recover this kind of confidence in the Gospel for which I am calling. I refer to the urgent need for the development of a coherent and intellectually tenable doctrine of Scriptural authority" (1995f:7). If the church is to embody and announce the gospel as good news for all of life over against the bad news that scientific rationality is failing, it is essential to understand the nature of the gospel's authority. Indeed, "one of the central issues involved in a missionary encounter with our culture is the question: How do we appeal to scripture as the source of authority for our mission?" (1984b:13). The problem that confronts the church in the West is that the Bible has been part of the culture for so long that it has accommodated itself to the fundamental assumptions of the culture and appears unable to challenge them. The response of the Protestant church to the Enlightenment was to interpret the Bible in terms of the ultimate faith commitments of the Enlightenment rather than the other way round. A missionary encounter—which is essential to the church's life—was surrendered. Newbigin asks: "have we got into a situation where the biblical message has been so thoroughly adapted to fit into our modern western culture that we are unable to hear the radical challenge, the call for radical conversion which it presents in our culture? (1984b:11). Newbigin's view of Biblical authority has been addressed several times in previous chapters. This section will simply treat Newbigin's discussion of the ways that Biblical authority has been reshaped to fit into western culture, thus derailing a missionary encounter with modernity. The centrality of the missionary church will again be evident.

There are four dichotomies that deform Scriptural authority and threaten a missionary church: fact-value, cause-purpose, public-private, subject-object dichotomies. First, the fact-value dichotomy threatens the narrative structure of Scripture. The church is called to live in a different story than the one that shapes the dominant culture. The Bible reveals the story of universal history revealing the goal for all creation. If the narrative structure of Scripture is surrendered under the power of the fact-value dichotomy, the shape of the missionary church will be distorted.

With science as the arbiter of public truth, only statements that pass through the screen of autonomous scientific reason are established as 'facts.' The church responded to this dichotomy in two ways (1997a:100). On the 'liberal' side of the Christian fellowship the Bible was split by the fact-value dichotomy. On the one hand, the Bible was reduced to religious experience: "We are not dealing directly with acts and words of God, but with human religious experience which has interpreted events in a religious way on the basis of their cultural traditions and assumptions" (1991h:43). The Bible is reduced to the private world of values. On the other hand, modern scholarship sought to determine the 'historical facts' in the Bible: "Modern scholarship, following the

models of modern science, has worked by analysing and dissecting the material into smaller and smaller units and then re-classifying and re-combining them—obviously on the basis of a modern understanding of ‘how things really are’” (1984b:14). This reconfigured the narrative structure of the Bible. On the ‘conservative’ side of the Christian church the Bible is simply reasserted as propositional truth in the fashion of Enlightenment truth. In other words, the Enlightenment notion of fact is functioning in this notion of Scripture; Scripture asserts the ‘facts’ of Scripture over against the ‘facts’ of science. In this tradition too the story design of Scripture is changed. In the case of conservative scholars, it is not historical scholarship but systematic theologies that reshape the narrative of the Bible and reduce it to a set of timeless dogmas (1989e:12f.). As a result the text is able to say only what Biblical and theological scholars allow it to say and it says it in a way very different from what it was originally meant to say it.

In both cases the Enlightenment understanding of facts is operative. Both traditions are haunted by the Cartesian legacy that “there is available a kind of truth which is ‘certain’ in the sense that it cannot be disbelieved, ‘objective’ truth, ‘scientific’ truth”, truth that is achieved by the employment of a hermeneutical method (1985k:2). For the liberal tradition, the Bible as a true story cannot live up to the scientific notion of fact, and so the Biblical expositor employs the higher-critical method to determine what the facts are. The historical facts of Israel’s religion become simply *their* subjective religious experience. For the conservative tradition, the Bible is simply cast into the mirror image of its Enlightenment enemy. Newbigin draws on John Millbank (1990) to show that the roots of modern science as a special kind of knowing involved a “shift from a way of seeing truth as located in a narrative, to a way of seeing truth as located in timeless, law-like statements” (1992d:6). Instead of challenging this shift in the location of truth, the church has simply adopted it and reshaped the Bible into historical-critical statements of truth, theological statements of truth, or moral statements of truth. ‘Liberals’ have set forth historical truth as verified by the historical critical method, abandoning all religious truth claims. ‘Conservatives’ have set forth the ‘truth’ of the Bible as timeless theological propositions. Over against this Newbigin argues:

The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.... Here, I think, is the point at which we may well feel that the eighteenth-century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man. The Bible was a source of information about such of these eternal truths as could not be discovered by direct observation of nature or by reflection or innate human ideas (1989e:12-13).

This formulation offers an alternative to the liberal and conservative traditions of the church. On the one hand, this story is a story about universal history and so holds universal validity; it is true. This stands against the liberal contention. On the other hand, it is a story (1989e:12, 38, 51) and not a system of timeless theological doctrines. This stands against the conservative contention.

In a missionary encounter with western culture it is essential, says Newbigin, to stress two things about the Biblical narrative. First, historical truth is essential to the Biblical narrative of universal history. Newbigin finds George Lindbeck’s categories helpful (1986e:59; 1996d:34-35). In *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Lindbeck contrasts three understandings of doctrine: propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-

linguistic. Adherents of the propositional model believe that the Bible asserts timeless propositional truths. Advocates of the experiential-expressive model believe the Bible employs Biblical imagery to represent general religious experience. These categories are roughly similar to the contrasts Newbigin makes between liberals and conservatives. The third category is cultural-linguistic. This understanding emphasizes the importance of the Bible as a narrative in which the church dwells and makes sense of the world *through* that story. Newbigin adds a qualifier so that his appropriation of narrative theology is not misunderstood. When we speak of Jesus as the clue to the meaning of the whole human story, it is not merely a cognitive clue for understanding. It is an historical act of atonement through which the world is being redeemed. It is more than a matter of illumination and intellectual understanding; “it is a matter of reconciliation” (1996d:39). This carries tremendous significance for Newbigin’s understanding of the importance of the church (1996d:25-32). If revelation is simply a “cognitive clue” then revelation is best communicated by way of a book; this is the unexamined contention of many within a more conservative tradition. However, if revelation is an act of God which atones and reconciles, this can be communicated only by a community that has experienced the power of the atonement and exhibits reconciliation in its fellowship. For this reason Newbigin continues to insist that the historicity of the Biblical narrative is essential to its authority. If narrative theology neglects this historicity, it fails to live up to the true nature of Scripture.

When the word *narrative* is used in theological discourse, it is sometimes with the implication that the historical truth of the narrative is not important. The narrative that structures our understanding of things might be nothing more than a story told by us to explain our experience, something with no ontological status beyond our imagination. It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story (1996d:40).

The second thing that Newbigin stresses about the Biblical narrative is that the interpretation of Scripture must take account of the Bible as a redemptive-historical whole. Since it is a story about universal history the Bible must be understood in terms of its canonical whole. This is important for a missionary encounter with western culture. Western culture offers one story with a universal claim. The Bible offers another story with an equally universal claim. If the Bible is reduced to timeless statements of one sort or another (historical-critical or systematic-theological) they are easily absorbed into the reigning story of the culture. Newbigin writes: “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” (1991e:2).

This last point highlights the significance of a true understanding of Biblical authority for a missionary church. If ‘Bible bits’ are absorbed into the reigning cultural story, then there is no challenge. The church finds a place within the culture. It is only as the story as a whole in its comprehensive claim is maintained and embodied that the church will offer a contrasting way of life to its contemporaries.

The second dichotomy of the modern worldview that reshapes the Scriptural narrative and threatens the missionary church is the purpose-cause dichotomy; explanation is reduced to cause-and-effect relationships. When cause-and-effect

relationships are enthroned as the only way to explain reality, the category of purpose is effectively eliminated (1986e:23-24). The gospel reveals and accomplishes the purpose for all creation; the church embodies that purpose in its life. Discarding purpose as an explanatory category threatens the life of the missionary church.

In contrast Newbigin wants to restore 'purpose' as a category of explanation. We have observed above how Bacon and the other fathers of modern science attempted to advance an empirical knowledge that simply gathered facts. However, while many of the medieval universals were discarded, the notion of cause remained as the fundamental interpretive category. Following the Enlightenment it seemed natural that the Bible should be placed in this nexus of cause and effect. Newbigin comments of the Scripture: "It is firmly held within the web of facts, events, and experiences that are all at least in principle, patient of explanation in terms of the invariable operation of cause and effect" (1986e:43). The question that confronts Newbigin is how to recognize the rightful place of cause-and-effect explanations but at the same time affirm the truth of Scripture as it reveals the purpose of God.

In pursuit of this goal Newbigin offers a teleological and hierarchical epistemology (1986e:81-91). He begins his discussion with the nature of a machine. A machine can be analyzed in terms of physical and chemical laws that govern the structure and movement of its parts. These physical and chemical processes are the necessary condition for the operation of the machine but do not explain it; it can be explained only in terms of the purpose for which it has been designed. Already at the level of a machine purpose is an important explanatory category but it does not eclipse the importance of understanding the cause-and-effect relationships in the realm of physics and chemistry. To explain mechanics in terms of chemistry or physics would be reductionistic. Newbigin moves to animals as the next step. The physical, chemical, and mechanical constitution of the animal's body provides the necessary condition for the functioning of the animal. Yet these levels cannot explain the animal; numerous tests have shown that all animals can identify and solve problems according to some purpose. While a machine embodies the purpose of its designer, purpose is internalized in animals. Again purpose is a necessary explanatory category that does not jettison cause-and-effect relationships. To explain biology in terms of mechanics, chemistry, or physics would be a reductionistic explanation. Newbigin moves to the level of human relationships. The understanding of another human being comes not by tests and examinations. It is true that much can be learned by examining the human body in terms of its physical, chemical, or mechanical processes. Even laboratory experiments on the model of the study of animals will produce informative data. However, what is precisely new in the relationship between humans is the purposeful effort to communicate and understand. We move from an I-It relationship in the non-human creation to an I-You relationship between persons (cf. Buber 1937). Here there must be a listening, trustful openness if there is to be knowledge or understanding of the other person. The methods of the natural sciences fail in their endeavour to understand another human being. With the discussion of the mutuality between human beings we have not reached the top of the hierarchy of knowing. If there are conflicting purposes between human beings how are we to discern what is good, true, right, or best? This is possible only if there is a purpose for the whole creation.

... the concept of purpose becomes more and more necessary as we ascend without a

break through the realms of physics, chemistry, mechanics, and biology to the human person. I have reached a place where one could say that there are pointers to the fact that we cannot stop with the human level and that human conversation itself becomes inexplicable without reference to something beyond itself.... But no analysis of nature from the lowest proton to the highest form of life, could enable us to have direct knowledge of any purpose beyond our own (1986e:87f.).

At this point Newbigin argues that revelation is essential to the knowing process. “If purpose is a significant category of explanation, then revelation is an indispensable source of reliable knowledge” (1996d:76). If one is to discover the purpose of the universe there are two options available. Either one can wait around until the end of history and observe the purpose, or one can listen to the person whose purpose it is. The enquirer would have to decide whether to believe but, in any case, waiting until the end is not available. “If the whole drama of cosmic and human existence has any purpose, it could only be made known to us by revelation from the one whose purpose it is, and this revelation could only be accepted in faith” (1990z:9). It is for this reason that Newbigin wants “to speak of the Bible as that body of literature which... renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (1986e:59).

The ecclesiological implications of the category of purpose are important. The church is that body that God has entrusted with the clue to the purpose of the creation. That purpose has been made known and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church is the community incorporated into that purpose and therefore called to make it known. As it participates in the salvation of the end in foretaste, it makes known in its life, deeds, and words the goal of all history. Thus the being of the church is bound up in the call to embody that purpose and in the language of testimony to make it known.

As a member of the Christian church and from within its fellowship, I believe and testify (and the shift to the first person singular is, of course, deliberate) that in the body of literature we call the Bible, continuously reinterpreted in the actual missionary experience of the church through the centuries and among the nations, there is a true rendering of the character and purpose of the Creator and Sustainer of all nature, and that it is this character and purpose that determines what is good (1986e:88).

The third dichotomy that threatens a right understanding of Scriptural revelation and thus of the missionary community is that of public-private. If the story of Scripture is that of universal history and if the gospel is the revelation and accomplishment of the purpose of all history, then this is universally valid truth. The church is called to embody this purpose in the whole of their life. The public-private dichotomy threatens this comprehensive witness.

In contrast to the public-private dichotomy that reduces the Bible to the private realm, Newbigin affirms the Bible as public truth. He began to use this term in *The Other Side of 1984* to challenge the cultural dichotomy between private opinions and public facts (Weston 1999:51). The phrase becomes so common and characteristic of Newbigin’s thought that Ian Barnes has referred to the whole of Newbigin’s call for a missionary encounter with western culture as his “gospel as public truth project” (Barnes 1994:28). Newbigin’s concern for the gospel as public truth is summarized in the following words.

... truth must be public truth, truth for all. A private truth for a limited circle of believers is not truth at all. Even the most devout faith will sooner or later falter and fail unless those who hold it are willing to bring it into public debate and to test it against experience in every area of life. If the Christian faith about the source and goal of human life is to be denied access to the human realm, where decisions are made on the great issues of the common life, then it cannot in the long run survive even as an option for a minority (1986e:117).

Newbigin believes that for many years the Bible provided the model or story by which the world and history as a whole was understood. This role was displaced by the modern scientific worldview at the time of the Enlightenment, marking a return to the classical worldview as the public doctrine and marginalizing Scripture to a private role (1982i:6-7). Biblical scholars sought to fit the Bible into the Enlightenment assumptions rather than the other way round. Newbigin points to two clear examples. Schleiermacher attempted to fence off an area of inward religious experience that would be protected from the “objectifying consciousness” of the Enlightenment. He found a place for the Bible in the private world but left the public ideology of the West unchallenged (1986e:44f.). Bultmann’s program of demythologization and the construction of *heilsgeschichte* which belongs to the private world rather than public history also tailors the Bible to suit Enlightenment assumptions.

Again this reconstruction of Scripture threatens the church as a missionary community. If the gospel is restricted to the private realm of life, then the witness of the church is similarly limited. An effective missionary encounter in the communal and scattered life of the church is effectively neutralized. The missionary calling of the church is to offer a contrasting way of life that is comprehensive and challenges the whole of the modern scientific worldview.

There is a fourth threat to the missionary church that arises from a misunderstanding of Scripture. The three foregoing points have demonstrated the close connection between the church and Scripture in Newbigin’s thought. The subject-object dichotomy characteristic of modern Biblical scholarship effectively pries apart this close relation.

The claim was made that modern Biblical scholarship is objective and neutral. It was supposed that a neutral vantage point for the interpretation of Scripture in the hermeneutic method was available to western Biblical interpreters. There was no need to presuppose the truth of the Biblical story or to begin with a faith commitment but simply to employ a method to describe what is the case (1984b:14). In fact, objectivity and neutrality are illusions; critical scholarship is not a move to a more objective understanding of the Bible but “a move from one confessional stance to another, a move from one creed to another” (1995h:80). Or as Newbigin puts it elsewhere: “The Enlightenment did not (as it is sometimes supposed) simply free the scholar from the influence of ‘dogma’; it replaced one dogma by another” (1985k:1). The power of the Enlightenment vision is such that it is difficult to convince modern biblical expositors “to recognize the creedal character of their approach” (*ibid*).

Newbigin quotes favourably Lewis Mudge’s observation on the way the Bible has been misconstrued by the Enlightenment dogma. In Mudge’s introduction to the hermeneutical essays of Paul Ricoeur he writes: “We are deaf to the Word today. Why?... We construe the world in terms of the Cartesian dichotomy between the self as sovereign consciousness on the one hand, and an objectivized, manipulable nature on the other. We conceive ourselves as authors of our own meaning and being, set in the

midst of a world there for us to interrogate, manipulate and control” (Mudge 1980:4; quoted in 1985k:1). This Cartesian dichotomy distorts the nature of the text and interpretation in a number of ways. The text is no longer a conversation between two subjects in which the modern reader listens with trustful openness but simply an object which is the object of our masterful autonomy. The I-You relation is twisted into an I-It relationship in which the reader alone is in control. The message of the text is silenced and the reader is not challenged; he or she examines the text but in turn is not examined by it. The distance between the world of the text and the world of the reader widens as the horizons of subject and object are separated (1984b:13f.).

In contrast to the subject-object dichotomy that has objectivized and distanced Scripture from the interpreter, Newbigin emphasizes the role of faith and community in a true understanding of the Bible. The Bible and the church are inextricably woven together: “The Bible is the book of the community which testifies. The Book cannot be understood except in its relation to the community, and the community cannot be understood except in its relation to the book” (1985k:2). The Bible and the church exist in a dialogical relationship.

On the one hand, the Bible is a collection of books that is the product of the community. The books of the Bible have arisen out of a faith community whose authors participated in the ongoing tradition that interpreted and reinterpreted reality in the light of God’s deeds in history. The Bible is a product of faith and of the community that embodies that faith. On the other hand, the existence of the community can only be accounted for by the story that is at the core of its being—a story that is proclaimed and celebrated. The church is a community that embodies the story that the Bible tells. It is a record of God’s purpose for universal history as revealed and accomplished in the events of Jesus Christ. It is not simply an objective record that informs us of it but also an invitation to participate in it; the Bible is revelation and invitation. The church is the community made up of people who have responded positively to that invitation and now embody and proclaim God’s purpose for the world (1986e:62-64).

The Biblical story is “from faith to faith” (1984b:14). “The Bible comes into our hands as the book of a community, and neither the book nor the community are properly understood except in their reciprocal relationship with each other” (1986e:55). The community of the church is shaped by the attention it gives to the Bible. It is also true that the way the community reads the Bible is shaped by a tradition that has continued to read the Bible and bring its light to bear in varying contexts. Therefore, every Christian reader comes to the Bible with the spectacles of faith in a tradition that is fully alive in the community. And that community continues to be reshaped and modified as it endeavours to be faithful to the gospel in its context (1986e:56). Newbigin finds in this hermeneutical circle a clue for a proper understanding of the nature of Scripture. Modern scholarship, using the tools of literary and historical criticism, has enabled us to see that the present text is the result of a continual wrestling with the revelation of God’s purpose in the light of new experience. “Generation after generation, the story has been retold so as to bring out its relevance to the contemporary situation” (1986e:56). This ongoing tradition continues to be shaped by the faith response of the church; all interpretation of Scripture comes from “within our commitment to faith and discipleship, which has been shaped by the tradition in which we share as members of the community that acknowledges the book as authoritative” (*ibid*).

This account of Scriptural authority clearly moves beyond the subject-object dichotomy and the false objectivism that grips Scriptural interpretation. Interpretation of Scripture comes from within a community that embodies its story—a story told by former generations that also indwelt the narrative of God’s redemption. Proper interpretation of Scripture demands a faith response and personal commitment to the story the Bible tells. “But being personal does not mean that it is subjective. The faith is held with universal intent. It is held not as ‘my personal opinion,’ but as the truth which is for all” (1989e:50). The missionary nature of the church is defined by this commitment. It indwells the story of God’s activity in history. The church has been entrusted with the good news of God’s purpose for the creation as revealed in Jesus. The tradition that arises from that revelation in the community of the church is a missionary tradition; it exists to make known the good news.

### 9.3.2. Ecclesiological Implications: *The Way of a Different Social Order*

There is a “radical discontinuity” between the modern worldview embodied by the cultural community of the West and the Biblical story embodied by the church. It is a matter of two different faith commitments shaping two different social orders (1984b:15). It is therefore true that if “the Church is bold in giving its testimony to the living God who is revealed in particular events and in the scriptures which are the primal witness to these events, then it must necessarily clash with our contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole ‘fiduciary framework’ within which our culture operates” (1983d:53). The Biblical story is comprehensive and universal; it shapes every part of human life and culture. The western story is equally comprehensive and similarly claims all of human life. The question arises as to how the church is to engage the public life of its culture that is shaped by different faith commitments. How is the church to relate to the comprehensive claims of the gospel to the public life of western culture which is shaped by different foundational assumptions? Newbigin puts the question in the following way:

The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become *corporately* a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, and all nations, and all human lives.... What does the calling imply for a church faced with the tough, powerful, and all-penetrating culture [of modernity]... ? (1986e:124; emphasis mine).

#### 9.3.2.1. Rejection of Privatization and Christendom

Newbigin rejects three options that offer an answer to the question just posed: privatization, Christendom, and perpetual protest (1986e:124-134). Each of these labels represent a way the church has related to its culture in past history. Privatization describes the contemporary church that has allowed the claims of the gospel to be folded into the public-private dichotomy characteristic of post-Enlightenment culture. Christendom or the *corpus Christianum* describes the church of the medieval period (with its legacy to the present century) that was part of the established society and demanded universal recognition of the comprehensive claims of the gospel by enforcing

its truth with political, social, and military power. Perpetual protest describes the early church that was a small minority and embraced the antithetical side of its missionary task without sufficient recognition of its calling to participate in cultural development.

Privatization is an option that has been seized by a church that has accommodated the claims of the gospel to the public-private dichotomy. Redemption is reduced to the salvation of the eternal soul (1986e:95-97). Newbiggin's rejection of the privatization option is based on three areas of the teaching of Scripture. First, to view humanity in terms of an eternal soul dwelling in a physical body unrelated to the social and natural world is rooted in an ancient pagan dichotomy and is a very different picture from the one that the Bible gives (1983d:38). The Bible gives a picture of human beings always related to each other and to the non-human world. This picture is given both in creation and in redemption; redemption is the renewal of creation (1986e:97).

Second, the message of the gospel is that the kingdom of God is at hand. God's reign is comprehensive and the community that begins to share in that reign is "sent forth to proclaim and embody in their common life the victory of Jesus, the reality of the reign of God" (1986e:99). This means that the "proper freedom of the Church is inseparable from its obligation to declare the sovereignty of Christ over every sphere of human life without exception" (1991h:71f.). As we have seen, Newbiggin contrasts the contemporary church that seeks a place in the private realm, away from an engagement of the public life of culture, with the early church that refused to accept the designation under Roman law of *cultus privatus*. The private cults of the Roman empire dedicated themselves to the propagation of purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members.

Such private religion flourished as vigorously in the world of the Eastern, Mediterranean as it does in North America today. It was permitted by the imperial authorities for the same reason that its counterparts are permitted today: it did not challenge the political order. Why, then, did the church refuse this protection? Why did it have to engage in a battle to the death with the imperial powers? Because, true to its roots in the Old Testament, it could not accept relegation to a private sphere of purely inward and personal religion. It knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations (1986e:99f.).

Accordingly, as noted earlier, the early church refused to accept the names characteristic of private cults (*thiasos* and *heranos*; cf. Schmidt 1965:515f.) and instead called itself the *ecclesia tou Theou*, the public assembly to which all humanity is called. It was precisely this all-embracing claim of Jesus Christ embodied by the church that made a collision with imperial Rome inevitable (1986e:100). Privatization was not an option for the early church, because it was faithful to its identity as a kingdom community. Neither ought it to be an option for the church in the West today.

A third reason for rejecting privatization is the Bible's teaching on the powers. While this alliance with secular culture assumes the presumed neutrality of the public square, "the truth is that, in those areas of our human living which we do not submit to the rule of Christ, we do not remain free to make our own decisions: we fall under another power" (1983d:39). The shrine of the public square does not remain empty; if Christ is not Lord, an idol will take His place (1986e:115). The idea of a neutral secular society is a myth (1989e:211-221). Therefore, the choice is not between "religious" and "neutral" societies but between Christ and idolatry. Privatization is a capitulation to idolatry. Newbiggin presses this insight, with respect to western culture, by insisting that

we do not live in a secular society but a pagan one. He comments:

The result is not, as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time (1986e:20; cf. 115).

Having eliminated privatization as a legitimate option, Newbigin also rejects Christendom as a way of mission in the public life of western culture. While the alliance of church and state has made important contributions to European society—for example, science, political democracy, and traditions of ethical behaviour (1986e:124; cf. :101)—the *corpus Christianum* has been shattered by the religious wars of the seventeenth century and is no longer an option (1986e:101). Furthermore, the history of Christendom has shown that the fruit of a partnership between church and state leads to a loss of the unbearable tension between gospel and culture that is necessary for a missionary encounter that sustains the church's identity (cf. 5.5.2.1.).<sup>8</sup>

No matter how often Newbigin attempted to clear himself of the charge of advocating a form of Christendom, it has continually returned. His assertion of the gospel as public truth continues to raise the spectre of theocracy and questions about 'coercive power.' This charge is sharply made by David Toole. In a letter to Stanley Hauerwas, Toole takes issue with a quote of Newbigin that Hauerwas had included in a lecture. For Toole, the claim of universal truth necessarily implies violence and oppression: "Is there not already a violence implicit in the conviction that one possesses the truth?" (Toole 1991:158). Toole recognizes that Newbigin and Hauerwas do not advocate an *imposition* of the truth on others by coercive power; nevertheless the question remains whether or not the claim that one possesses the truth already contains seeds of violence and coercion. Toole reproduces words from Hauerwas' lecture in which he quotes Newbigin. According to Toole, Newbigin's language is "incredibly violent and exclusionary" (*ibid*). His italicized words stress this violent and exclusionary posture:

As Newbigin reminds us, Christians can *never* seek refuge in a ghetto where their faith is not proclaimed as public *truth for all*. They can *never agree that there is one law* for themselves and *another* for the world. They can *never admit* that there are *areas of human life where the writ of Christ does not run*. They can *never accept* the thesis... that there has been no public revelation before the eyes of all the world of the purpose for which *all things* and *all peoples* have been created.... We know now, I think, that

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<sup>8</sup>The tension between this critical note of Christendom and the more positive interpretation remains characteristic of Newbigin's thought. We observed in the section above (9.3.1.1.) that Newbigin characterizes the medieval period as 'Christian.' The reversal of doubt and faith in Descartes signalled an end to this period where the Bible had the upper hand in shaping culture. Again the formative and critical dimensions of the church's task in culture stand in tension.

the only possible product of that ideal is a *pagan* society (Toole 1991:158; italics his; the Hauerwas quote is in 1991:151; the Newbigin quote 1986e:115).

Can Newbigin withstand this criticism? Does he provide a basis for claiming the public truth of the gospel that is not also violent and coercive? Does he escape the charge of a return to the *corpus Christianum*? It is certainly clear from Newbigin's writings that he does not shy away from advocating the use of power to shape the public life of the nation with the gospel. He recognizes that some beliefs and not others will shape the public square. For example, in a discussion of education he says:

How is this world of assumptions formed? Obviously through all the means of education and communication existing in society. Who controls those means? The question of power is inescapable. Whatever their pretensions, schools teach children to believe something and not something else. There is no "secular" neutrality. Christians cannot evade the responsibility which a democratic society gives to every citizen to seek access to the levers of power (1989e:224; cf. 1994:171).

There is no pluralistic or secular neutrality that holds the ring equally for all traditions; this is an illusion. *Some* tradition of rationality *will* shape the public square and that tradition will find its centre either in Christ or an idol. Hauerwas illustrates this contention. He observes that the story of Columbus "discovering" America, "enshrined now in the language of objectivity effectively silences other voices" (1991:136). Drawing on Newbigin, Hauerwas further notes: "In the name of objectivity, which serves the politics of the liberal state, we have accepted the notion that the state can be neutral in religious matters. But as Newbigin observes, there is no way that students passing through schools and universities sponsored by the Enlightenment can avoid being shaped in certain directions" (1991:143). A neutral secularism based on universal reason is a myth; secularism itself has a very clear exclusionary truth claim. The pluralism of postmodernity is no different; it too enshrines exclusionary commitments. Contrariwise Terry Eagleton claims:

We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself (Eagleton 1987:9).

Yet the "laid-back pluralism" of postmodernity has produced culture wars on an unprecedented scale. This would support Newbigin's constant contention that there is no neutrality. The claim for a neutral secularism or pluralism is rooted in some tradition based on certain assumptions that claim truth. Yet Newbigin claims that the truth of the gospel is not coercive. Can this claim be sustained? Five considerations support his claim.

First, the Biblical story is unique in its understanding of history in that it is interpreted in light of the cross. All other universal stories look to a victorious end within history: "They look to the intrahistorical triumph of their cause" (1994k:204). Any community holding to a triumph for their cause within the confines of history will be inherently imperialist; such, for example, is Islamic theocracy. Unfortunately, the church has acted precisely in this imperialistic way, but this is a betrayal of the gospel. Newbigin finds the uniqueness of the Biblical story in the fact that the centre is found

in the cross. At the cross we learn of a triumph *beyond* history. Until then, in this already-not yet time period of redemptive history, the church must pursue justice in the public square under the sign of the cross.

The fact that the cross stands as the central Christian symbol must forever forbid the identification of the gospel with political power. The Church's witness to the gospel must always be made in the knowledge that the manifest reign of God can only be at the end when he brings all things to final judgement, that for the present age the reign of God must be veiled in the weakness and foolishness of his Church, and that it is God alone who can reveal to people his presence within this veil (1994k:167f).

The truth that has been revealed in Jesus does not take the form of "dominance and imperial power but that of one who was without power, or—rather—whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering" (1989e:163). A church who follows this Lord cannot coerce conformity.

Second, and closely related to the foregoing point, the gospel centred in the cross is the only foundation that can preserve true freedom. In the latter years of his life Newbigin stressed that the freedom offered by a pluralistic society is an illusion. On the one hand, insofar as other committed beliefs are enshrined in the public square, there is no true freedom. On the other hand, insofar as there is a real loss of confidence in any truth that can shape western society, there are only two possibilities for the future. In the distant future such a society will collapse and disintegrate; no society can exist except on the basis of common beliefs which are accepted as true. In the more immediate future western society will be ripe for domination by a person or group that does have some view of the truth. Newbigin recognizes that the freedom won at the Enlightenment is in great danger from the onslaught of an agnostic pluralism. The vacuum will be filled with some beliefs. The *only* way that true freedom can be maintained is on the basis of the gospel. Freedom can only be protected by a view of truth centred in the cross which recognizes that the final judgement has been withheld to protect liberty to accept or reject the gospel (1997e; 1986e:128, 137-141).

A third reason for rejecting the charge that Newbigin's claim of truth for the gospel is coercive is that he advocates a committed pluralism as a third possibility over against a coercive theocracy and an illusive privatism. He distinguishes between an 'agnostic pluralism' and a 'committed pluralism' (1994k:168). An agnostic pluralism believes that ultimate truth is unknowable and therefore there are no criteria to judge true from false, good from bad, or right from wrong. All lifestyles are to be equally tolerated in the absence of standards. In this tradition of rationality "to make judgements is... an exercise of power and is therefore oppressive and demeaning to human dignity" (*ibid*). A committed pluralism, by contrast, is devoted to a search for truth. Newbigin turns to Polanyi's notion of 'the republic of science' to illustrate committed pluralism. In this 'republic' scientists are free to differ from one another as they pursue their own research in a quest for truth. Yet their differences are not left to exist side by side. When scientists differ on a particular issue they do not congratulate one another on their pluralistic tolerance; they struggle to find out which person is correct.

Because it is believed that there is reality to be known, differences of opinion are not left to coexist side by side as evidence of the glories of pluralism. They are the subject

of debate, argument, testing, and fresh research until either one view prevails over the other as more true, or else some fresh way of seeing things enables the two views to be reconciled as two ways of seeing one reality (1991h:58).

As for the mission of the church in the public square “the key lies in the acceptance of personal responsibility for seeking to know the truth and for publishing what we know.... And if this is so, then the call to the Church is to enter vigorously into the struggle for truth in the public domain” (1991h:59).

A fourth reason in support of Newbigin’s claim that the truth of the gospel is not violent or coercive is his post-empiricist epistemology that opens the way for a dialogue with society. Ian Barnes has rightly argued that Newbigin’s tradition-based epistemology provides a basis for a non-coercive claim to truth because it opens the way for a dialogical engagement with culture (1994:36f.). Barnes comments further:

Newbigin is not a fundamentalist, presenting the gospel as a set of propositional truths: a body of truth and experience which is simply asserted over against other non-Christian accounts of the world. Yet Newbigin’s alternative approach enables him to engage more effectively in dialogue with alternative belief systems—a dialogue in which the language and more specific knowledges of other religions, cultures and modern science can be critically interpreted in terms of the ‘plausibility structure’ and ecclesial practice of Biblical faith (Barnes 1994:33).

This dialogue between the gospel and culture has been discussed above. The gospel does not simply shout a loud ‘no’ to culture; it equally affirms the good creation in all cultural development. Another way of expressing the same idea is to say that the church “does not claim to *possess* absolute truth: it claims to know where to point for guidance (both in thought and in action) for the common search for truth” (1989e:163). The truth as it is revealed in Jesus gives us the clue for searching for more truth wherever it can be found. This formulation opens up the way for dialogue with rival traditions in the search of further truth in God’s creation.

Fifth, Newbigin leans on the Dutch tradition of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd to argue that the problem with Christendom is not that Christians exercised power but that the institutionalized church exercised power. Over against this ecclesiastical totalitarianism Newbigin advocates the neo-Calvinist notion of sphere sovereignty, the doctrine that God has given in the creation order a measure of autonomy to each of the various areas of human life such as art, science, politics, and economics. The institutionalized church does not have direct authority over these spheres; rather each sphere is shaped by God’s word discerned and implemented by those within that sphere. This avoids both the post-Enlightenment idea of total autonomy of these spheres and the medieval understanding that each of these spheres is under the rule of the church. So while the church as an organized body has no right to authority in these spheres, Christians with insight into these areas may exercise power (1986e:143-144).

Newbigin faced the question of the task of the church in the public life of culture most explicitly in his chapter ‘Speaking the Truth to Caesar’ in *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991h:65-90). Here Newbigin’s ecclesiology is revealed clearly. In this chapter Newbigin spells out both a critical and a constructive task for the church within the public square. The critical task of the church is to unmask the ideologies or expose the fundamental idolatrous assumptions on which the public life

of culture is built (1991h:74-80). Newbigin draws insight from both Walter Wink and the Barmen Declaration. The Barmen declaration affirmed the truth of the gospel, and explicitly condemned the reigning ideology of nation, race, and blood (1991h:74-75). Often the Bible speaks of such creational entities as the state, law, tradition, and religion as the “powers.” While they have been created by Christ and for Christ, and therefore have a role to play in God’s creational order, they have been corrupted by sin and idolatry. “They are corrupted, become demonic, when they are absolutized, given the place which belongs only to God” (1991h:75). Newbigin gives several examples: the good gift of kinship is corrupted into racism when it is absolutized; the good gift of the individual personality is corrupted into individualism when it is absolutized (*ibid*).

The task of the church is to unmask and expose these idolatrous assumptions that give shape to the political and economic order. Newbigin believes that the most formidable power in western culture—the freedom of the individual to do as he or she wishes—has been most fully revealed in the ideology of the free market (1991h:75-81). Both the right and the left stand on the same idolatrous assumptions. Thus “it is not the business of the Church to make an alliance with either the right or the left in the present political scene. It has to unmask the ideologies that permeate them and offer a more rational model for the understanding of the human situation” (1991h:77).

The positive side of the church’s task is broached in the former statement. Pointing to the Barmen Declaration, Newbigin observes that it modelled both an affirmation of the gospel and an anathema on the reigning ideology (1991h:79). How is this constructive side of the task to be accomplished? The conventional reply would be to simply speak of a political or social philosophy that is prescribed for the healthy functioning of society. Newbigin is not averse to this kind of theoretical work. However, the importance of his missionary ecclesiology emerges at just this point. In the church’s life—gathered and scattered—it is to embody and proclaim the sovereign claims of Christ over all of life. A political or social philosophy may aid the task, but for Newbigin ecclesiology is fundamental. The church challenges the idolatry of its culture by a life lived by a different commitment.

#### 9.3.2.2. Reformed and Anabaptist Ecclesiological Elements

Newbigin’s ecclesiological foundation is shaped by both the Reformed and the Anabaptist traditions. In an analogous way David Bosch too develops his views about the church in society around these two ecclesiologies (1982:8). He employs the term ‘alternative community’ that was coined in American Mennonite circles, to unfold the intrinsic similarities between the Reformed and Anabaptist ecclesiologies. Reformed ecclesiology tends to draw a too direct line from the church to the world; Anabaptist ecclesiology tends to reject the world and withdraw into a self-contained entity. This would seem to contrast the two ecclesiologies in basic ways. Yet Bosch believes that a closer look reveals “that the concerns of both groups are intimately related. The more identifiably separate and unique the church is as a community of believers (Anabaptism) the greater the significance it has for the world (Calvinism)” (*ibid*). The church has great significance in society both as a community that is a bridge-head for God’s kingdom in the world and in the various actions of its members as they act in a way consistent with their life in the alternative community. “And so my thesis is this: The church has

tremendous significance for society precisely because it is as a uniquely separate community” (*ibid*).

While Bosch calls for the melding of the strengths of Anabaptist and Calvinist ecclesiologies in the term ‘alternative community,’ it appears that the Anabaptist strain plays the greater role in his thought. Newbigin also wants to bring together these two traditions in his ecclesiology. He differs from Bosch in that he more explicitly emphasizes the calling of believers in the public square—a concern that has been characteristic of the Reformed tradition. The emphasis on the church as an alternative community and the calling of individual believers in the world received sustained emphasis in all his discussions of ecclesiology (1986e:141-144; 1989e:229-231; 1991h:81-85).

In his emphasis on the calling of believers in the world, Newbigin stands against the perpetual protest model that characterized the early church and resurfaced in various models of mission today. He notes that “the predominant note in the contemporary answers to this question is the note of protest”:

The political order, with its entrenched interests and its use of coercion to secure them, is identified as the enemy, the primary locus of evil. The place of the church is thus not in the seats of the establishment but in the camps and marching columns of the protesters.... The protesters contend that as Jesus was crucified outside the wall of the city, so the place of the Christian must always be outside the citadel of the establishment... Attempts of the kind that were often made earlier in this century—to bring together Christians in responsible positions in government, industry, and commerce to discuss the bearing of their faith on their daily practice—they dismiss as elitist and therefore incapable of generating true insights. A person who wields power cannot see truth; that is the privilege of the powerless (1986e:125).

Newbigin recalls that the early church assumed power and responsibility to shape the Roman culture when the opportunity was offered. To decline this opportunity would have been “an act of apostasy” and “an abandonment of the faith of the gospel” (1986e:129). He draws the conclusion for today’s church: “By the same token, the church today cannot without guilt absolve itself from the responsibility, where it sees the possibility, of seeking to shape the public life of nations and the global ordering of industry and commerce in the light of the Christian faith” (*ibid*).

This raises the question of *how* this should be done: “How this is to be done is the question with which we must wrestle; but that it must be done is certain” (*ibid*). Answers to this question range widely. A prominent answer today is that of Bosch’s above, a way consistently followed by Hauerwas and Willimon, Hall, and the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America, for example (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Hall 1997, 1999; Guder 1989). In this model the communal and critical dimensions of the church as a contrast community are emphasized. Newbigin also stresses this, but at the same time he is much more insistent that the individual callings of believers are essential to the mission of the church.

This two-pronged emphasis is evident in the three ecclesiological implications he draws in his lecture of ‘Speaking the Truth to Caesar’ (1991h:65-90). The first two concern the calling of believers in various sectors of public life. His first point is that “it must be the responsibility of the Church to equip its members for active and informed participation in public life in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that

participation” (1991h:81). Each believer is a ‘subversive agent’ that neither attempts to destroy nor preserve the idolatrous cultural forms but “subverts them from within” (1991h:82). Newbigin presses his concern that there is a need for preparation to take place to equip each member for his or her responsibility. Referring to a psychiatrist who believes that it is unprofessional conduct to allow the gospel to inform her work, he asks:

What kind of preparation is needed to enable a psychiatrist to discern the ways in which her profession could be subverted from its allegiance to other principles and become an area where the saving work of Christ is acknowledged? What would be the specific kind of training for a teacher in the public schools, for an executive in a big corporation, for a lawyer or a civil servant? Do we not need to invest much more of the Church’s resources in creating the possibility for such training (1991h:83).

His second point is closely related: if men and women are being trained for informed participation in their public callings in keeping with the gospel, there will be many Christians in responsible positions of leadership within various sectors of public life that could shape the plausibility structures of culture. This model moves beyond both a privatized Christianity and a Muslim style theocracy. Believers shape sectors of public life from within the institution itself. It is not a matter of ecclesial imposition but a matter of professionals who know and participate actively in that area of public life, giving leadership in the light of the gospel. It is a dialogical relationship with other folk who do not share the same faith commitments. The model of committed pluralism is the context; in interaction with others, the believer acts in accordance with his or her belief that the gospel is public truth attempting to persuade others of the plausibility of the gospel for that area of life (1991h:84-85). In these two points Newbigin draws on a Reformed ecclesiology.

In his third point Newbigin picks up the Anabaptist ecclesiology. He writes that “the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order” (1991h:85). Newbigin’s long standing commitment to the local congregation surfaces again. He believes that the local congregation must be “the primal engine of change in society” (*ibid*). Newbigin contrasts his belief with two traditions with which he disagrees on this point: the ecumenical and Kuyperian traditions. In ecumenical circles the local congregation is overshadowed by powerful denominational and interdenominational agencies for social and political action. These bodies are separated from the life of the local congregation. Newbigin critiques the Kuyperian tradition along the same lines. He is concerned about the “anti-ecclesiastic polemic of this neo-Calvinist school” that has possibly arisen from the deep disappointment at earlier failures to reform the established church of the Netherlands (1996c:5). He concludes: “I must therefore totally reject the criticism which was made of my statement that the Church’s first contribution to society is to be itself a true community” (1996c:6).<sup>9</sup> In this criticism we see again Newbigin’s concern to

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<sup>9</sup>This criticism of Newbigin was never made in the papers or the discussions of the conference. Unfortunately, Newbigin did not understand Kuyper’s distinction between the church as an organism and as an institution, according to which the ‘church as an organism,’ acting through “lay” believers, both from within cultural institutions and, more especially, through separate organizations of believers in parliament, the media, trade-unionism, social work, etc., for the purpose of reforming these strategic areas of culture from a position of influence and strength afforded by communal action (Kuyper 1909, III:204; cf. DeGraaf

emphasize the Anabaptist dimension of ecclesiology. Newbigin is concerned that the church exist as, what Stanley Hauerwas calls, a “paradigmatic community” or a “criteriological institution.” Hauerwas defines these terms as follows:

The task of the church [is] to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice.... The church, therefore, must act as a paradigmatic community in the hope of providing some indication of what the world can be but is not.... The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic. That is, she is a social ethic inasmuch as she functions as a criteriological institution—that is, an institution that has learned to embody the form of truth that is charity as revealed in the person and work of Christ (Hauerwas 1977:142-143).

What might this alternative community look like according to Newbigin? Newbigin outlines the salient features of such a community. This ecclesiology is articulated at a number of points; yet their structures are similar. We choose two points where this structure is revealed: first, in his description of the church as a hermeneutic of the gospel (1989e:222-233), and second, in a brief paper entitled ‘Vision for the City’ given at a conference on ‘The Renewal of Social Vision’ sponsored by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at New College in Edinburgh (1989f). The first offers a description while the second suggests a concrete implementation.

Newbigin articulates six characteristics of a church that is a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel in western culture. These six characteristics are not randomly chosen; they flow directly from Newbigin’s understanding of the idolatry of western culture against which the church must stand in its life. These features of a faithful church in the west emphasize countercultural aspects. Yet one of these characteristics is the ministry of the laity in shaping the public life of culture in their individual callings. We find both Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological threads woven together.

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1968:57-88). This Kuyperian ecclesiology, speaking as it does of “organism” and “institution,” is unfortunate in its terminology, and this has perhaps contributed to the misunderstanding. Indeed, Herman Dooyeweerd believes the distinction makes an important point “in a really confusing terminological way” (1984:524). Yet the distinction points to an important ecclesiological issue. Ridderbos writes of the distinction: “It is my conviction that this distinction gives expression to an important truth....” (1965:27). In fact, the ecclesiologies of Newbigin and the neo-Calvinist tradition are similar. Rightfully Newbigin puts more emphasis on the church as alternative community and on the local congregation.

The first characteristic is that the church will be a community of praise and thanksgiving. A communal life of praise stands in contrast to scepticism, doubt, and a hermeneutic of suspicion that characterizes life in western society; a communal life of selfless thanksgiving stands as an alternative to the contemporary society's selfish obsession with rights. The second characteristic is that the church will be a community of truth. Western society lives in the twilight of relativism and uncertainty; a community that joyfully, humbly and boldly affirms and lives by the truth of the gospel offers an attractive rival tradition. The third feature that marks a faithful church in the West is that it will not live for itself but will be deeply involved in the concerns of its neighbourhood. This presents an attractive alternative to a society that lives with a preoccupation with the self; selflessness shines in the darkness of selfishness. The fourth mark of a church which is a hermeneutic of the gospel in western culture is that "it will be a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world (1989e:229). A congregation that presses the claims of Christ in the public square stands in stark contrast to a society that attempts to relegate 'religion' to the private realm. Fifth, a missionary congregation in the West will be a community of mutual responsibility. One of the roots of the contemporary malaise of western culture is an individualism which denies our mutuality and responsibility for one another. A church which manifests such communal life will be a "foretaste of a different social order" (1989e:231). Finally, the congregation will be a community of hope. Newbigin often refers to the widespread pessimism and disappearance of hope that marks western culture. A hopeful community presents an attractive alternative.

While an articulation of these features of a missionary congregation in the West raises many questions about concrete implementation, Newbigin's approach is clear. The church must be a community that embodies an alternative social order *in direct response* to the idolatry and need of the culture. The church is a good news people in a world where bad news thrives. One does wish that Newbigin had offered more guidance on *how* these various marks could be embodied in communal form. Nevertheless a model is offered that invites further cultivation.

Newbigin elaborates his vision of the way the church may communally embody an alternative story in a lecture that flowed from his work as a pastor in Winson Green. It offers a vision for the urban church in Britain (1989f). The paper unfolds in three parts. First, Newbigin unmasks one of the ideological powers at work in British society. Second, he articulates the responsibility of the church in relation to British society. Third, he spells out concretely what it would mean for an inner city church to be a contrast community over against the ideological power he has exposed.

This conference took place in the last couple of years of the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was in office as prime minister. Newbigin contrasts the conservative vision that she advocated with the opposing agenda of the welfare state. Since the establishment of the welfare state many British citizens took it for granted that the state had the responsibility for taking care of them. They spoke of their right to care and many became expert in working the system to attain their rightful share. In critique, Thatcher and many in the 'leafier suburbs' of Birmingham described this state as a 'dependent society' in which people, instead of taking responsibility for their own lives, depended on others to care for them. Newbigin labels Thatcher's view the 'selfish

society.’ Newbiggin tackles the evil in the ideology that grips British public life by exposing the idolatrous foundation that lies at the root of *both* views. Both the advocates of welfare and the conservatives share the view that they have rights without responsibilities. The welfare advocates claim their rights that the government has to provide without any corresponding responsibility. The right-wing reactionaries disavow any responsibility for those in need but claim their right to dispense what they have accumulated in the way they choose. But the problem goes deeper: this view of rights is “a product of the Enlightenment’s exaltation of the autonomous individual with his autonomous reason and conscience, as the centrepiece of our thinking” (1989:40). Community in which rights and responsibilities function in healthy harmony is steadily eroded by an individualist anthropology that exalts autonomy.

What is the church’s task in this setting? Newbiggin answers: “It is not the primary business of the Church to advocate a new social order; it is our primary business to *be* a new social order” (1989:40). The church’s primary calling is to be a sign and foretaste of a new order that is not simply a matter of words but is concretely illustrated in the communal life. Newbiggin points to the black-led churches that live a different story in the midst of the modern British metropolis. They say: “This is our story, and it is the true story. In the end you will all know that it is the true story” (1989:40-41).

In terms of the ideological power that Newbiggin has unmasked, this means that the church must be a contrast community which models a communal life and thereby challenges both the separation of rights and responsibilities and the autonomous independence of the individual that wreck human community. He mentions four characteristics of such a community; each of these characteristics is shaped by the Biblical story and stands in contrast to some dimension of the ideology he has exposed. The church will be a community of praise and love for others; this stands in contrast to a selfish community that seeks its own welfare. The church will be a community of mutual acceptance where each is given the dignity of being a member of the family; this stands in contrast to autonomous individuals who do not know the acceptance of a family. The church will be a community of mutual responsibility “where rights do not have to be claimed because responsibilities are understood.” Finally, the church will be a community of hope in contrast to a society that has lost hope submerged in despair or consumer saturation (1989:41). Here we see some of the characteristics that appear in *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, applied to the more specific context of British political and economic life.

In these characterizations Newbiggin is concerned to nurture a church that stands as an alternative community over against the idolatries that are destroying western culture. Newbiggin concludes:

I realise that I am not offering any recipe for a quick turn-round in national policy at the next general election. But I believe that it is as people are nurtured in local communities which experience and enjoy the life of caring and responsible relationships, and learn to sponsor and sustain all kinds of programmes for the development of their neighbourhoods, the way will be prepared for the extension of this experience to the life of the nation. And I am saying that the primary responsibility of the Church in relation to the renewal of vision for society is to be itself the sign and first fruit of a new order, to offer good news that a different kind of life is possible before it offers advice about how it is to be achieved.... The only plausible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation that believes it and lives by it. When that hermeneutic

is available, people find it possible to have a new vision for society and to know that the vision is more than a dream (1989l:41).

Three observations can be made on Newbigin's approach. First, the church is a community that lives by a different light than the dominant culture. The charge to embody the gospel is a call to live as an attractive alternative. Second, a missiological understanding of culture is essential to this task. Faithfully embodying the gospel requires an understanding of the deep currents of the culture that force the church into its mould. Further, if the church is to *be* good news it must know the bad news of the context. Finally, this call involves both a communal embodiment and individual responsibility of each believer in his or her calling in culture. It is a countercultural stance with responsibility for the development of culture. There is the fusion of an Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiology. The label 'different social order' moves beyond the confines of the gathered church to the scattered church's life in the public square.

Questions remain, however. Has Newbigin sufficiently integrated the emphases of the two ecclesiologies? Does the church as a new social order move beyond the confines of the gathered community? If so, how does this look on Monday morning? Or are we left with a dichotomy between church gathered and individual believers in the world? Has Newbigin offered a sufficient ecclesiological model that can stand against the powerful modern and postmodern of the West? Has he taken sufficient account of the individualism and differentiation of western culture?

Newbigin's image of the church was formed in the undifferentiated societal context of India. He writes about the experience of his first diocese in Madurai: "My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground, with a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around listening, watching, discussing..." (1994k:55). In his exposition of the church Newbigin returns repeatedly to this image (e.g., 1961e:24).<sup>10</sup> In this undifferentiated situation a communal witness would be the most powerful witness the church could give. But even Newbigin recognized during the 1960s that the highly complex and differentiated world of modernity required new structures that would enable the church to engage the public life of Western culture; the communal witness of the village church was inadequate (1966b:100-122). He later writes:

In our complex and highly differentiated society, we have to develop structures of Church life which express the claim of Jesus to rule the whole life of the world, without doing it in a Constantinian way.... Our kind of society is distinguished from earlier kinds by its high degree of differentiation. An Indian village today, like an English village 300 years ago, is one total world which embraces the whole life of its people. But in a modern city each of us lives simultaneously in several different

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<sup>10</sup>Daniel T. Niles writes of the church in the villages of India and Ceylon in words almost identical to Newbigin's. In his well-known book *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches* Niles writes: "It is a common experience in India or Ceylon, when an evangelistic team visits a village, that in the meeting that is organized the small Christian community in the village will be sitting in the middle while the Hindus and Muslims will be standing all around. And, in that situation, the evangelist is aware that whereas he is pointing to Christ, his listeners are looking at that small group sitting in front of them. The message will carry no conviction unless it is being proved in the lives of those who bear the Name that is being declared" (1962:197). Comparing this statement with Newbigin's description in *Is Christ Divided? A Plea for Christian Unity in a Revolutionary Age* (1961e:24) raises an interesting question about the origin of the image.

'worlds.'... But our Church structures remain as they were when the village was the world. It still works well in an Indian village, but not in an English city (1980d:6; cf. 1980f:64-67).

It is also during the 1960s that Newbigin's emphasis on the mission of the laity increased. These themes never disappear from Newbigin's writings. Yet it appears that the Indian image of the village church exerted itself with increasing pressure during the latter decades of his life (1987a:22-23; 1994k:55). It provided a vivid illustration of the missionary church for which he longed. This image stresses the communal witness of the church in the midst of culture. However, this powerful image is simply inadequate for the demands of the highly complex and differentiated culture of the West. The tension between this communal image within an undifferentiated culture and the mission of the scattered laity remains in Newbigin's writing.

George Vandervelde has pressed this concern (1996). Vandervelde notes that "Christian Community is the golden thread throughout all Newbigin's writing" (:10). The church *as community* receives sustained emphasis throughout all his writings. Vandervelde continues: "Reading and listening to Newbigin speak of community in this concentrated way, one knows that he is speaking of something real and concrete. Yet, here problems arise as well, problems that may point to the malaise of the Western church, more than any deficiency in Newbigin's thought" (:12). Vandervelde points to Newbigin's six characteristics of the church that is will be a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel (1989e:227-233). Newbigin begins each characteristic with "The Christian community will be..." and then completes the sentence with various descriptions—a community of praise, a community of truth, and so forth. It is striking, Vandervelde observes, that a *community* is presupposed in each of these descriptions (*ibid*). That presses the urgent question: "Where is this community, especially in a modern urban setting?" (*ibid*). Newbigin uses the word community "as if the individualism and the privatization, that he criticizes so sharply and architectonically in Western culture has not ravaged the church—so much so that many do not experience the 'church' as 'community'" (*ibid*). Newbigin's missionary experience enables him to know the ravages of individualism and it is precisely this that "makes Newbigin's unproblematic treatment of the church as the Christian community surprising" (:13). Vandervelde makes the following critique: "At the most crucial point in his thought, Newbigin fails to be contextual, namely with respect to 'community.'... He does not take into account the effects of Western culture, namely individualism and differentiation" (*ibid*). Vandervelde argues further that "on the crucial matter of Christian community, Neo-Calvinism is far more contextual. It has taken very seriously the differentiation and the structural or associational pluralism that marks Western culture (*ibid*). The church finds expression in various Christian communal organizations that address various spheres of public life. In other words, Newbigin has rightly pointed to the importance of community, the importance of the gathered congregation, and the importance of the calling of believers in culture. However, the individualism and differentiation of western culture require various Christian communal bodies that address the public spheres of culture. Vandervelde goes on to point out many theoretical and practical problems that beset the ecclesiology of the neo-Calvinist tradition and ways that Newbigin's ecclesiology offers insightful critique. Yet Vandervelde's critique demonstrates that Newbigin has not sufficiently integrated the Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological

elements.

### 9.3.2.3. Newbigin's Legacy: The Ecclesiology of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America

In one of the last articles that David Bosch wrote, he distinguishes five different traditions of the relationship of the church to civil authorities (Bosch 1993:89-95): Constantinian, pietist, reformist, liberationist, and anabaptist. He dismisses the first two—Constantinian and pietist—as otherworldly. He interprets the other three as “world-formative” and “much closer to each other than may appear at first glance” (Bosch 1993:94). The scope of these categories can be broadened to assess the relationship of the gospel, not only to civil authorities, but to the whole of culture. In this scheme, it is the anabaptist tradition—which Bosch elsewhere calls the alternative community and countercultural model (Bosch 1982)—that has been gaining ground and begun to function as the dominant model in the North American context among those who, inspired by Newbigin, are calling for a missionary encounter with western culture.

According to Bosch, the anabaptist model emphasizes that “the primary task of the church is simply to *be* the church, the *true* community of committed believers which, by its very existence and example, becomes a challenge to society and the state” (Bosch 1993:92). Mission is the planting and nourishing of ecclesial communities that embrace an alternative pattern of life. There are two important features that characterize this model. First, it emphasizes the *communal* dimensions of the missionary witness of the church. There is a reaction against a reduction of mission to the calling of individuals in culture and against a neglect of the church as a community that embodies the life of the kingdom together. Second, the *critical* side of the church's relationship to its culture dominates. “[T]he church is understood to be an implicit or latent *critical factor* in society.... the church is critical of the status quo, indeed *very* critical of it” (*ibid*). These two factors are combined in the designation ‘alternative community.’ Bosch summarizes:

The church simply exists in society in such a way that people should become aware of the transitoriness, relativity, and fundamental inadequacy of *all* political programs and solutions. The believing community is a kind of antibody in society, in that it lives a life of radical discipleship as an “alternative community” (*ibid*).

These two important features have been developed in critical reaction to the impact of Christendom on the shape of the church: under the Christendom *symphonia* the church lost its sense of being a distinct community embodying an alternative story. Both the communal and the critical dimensions of the church's mission were eclipsed by its established position within culture. This Christendom legacy continues to the present

in the western church.<sup>11</sup>

In the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Guder 1998), an ecclesiology is articulated that is shaped by this countercultural, communal, and anti-Christendom stream. The book arose out of a study and research project inaugurated by the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America (GOCN/NA), a movement which emerged in the late 1980s in response to Newbigin's call for a missionary encounter with western culture. GOCN/NA is an important movement that is pressing the question of what a missionary encounter with North American would look like. The network's activity revolves around three foci: ecclesiology, theology, and cultural analysis. The development of a missionary ecclesiology for North American has been a prominent item on the GOCN/NA agenda. The book *Missional Church* represents, what might be called, an "official" ecclesiology of the GOCN/NA movement. Co-authored by six leaders within the network, it represents an ecclesiology that has become influential within the whole GOCN/NA movement. The book *Missional Church* is clearly indebted to the ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin (Guder 1998:5).

In formulating an ecclesiology for North American culture, the book adopts the centring metaphor of an alternative or contrast community (Guder 1998:9-10). While the six writers of the book come from Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, and Anabaptist traditions, they find a common commitment to the church as an alternative community. They write: "The thrust of the gospel exposition in this book is to define a missionary people whose witness will prophetically challenge precisely those dominant patterns [of oppressive, exclusionary, and racist cultural dynamics] as the church accepts its vocation

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<sup>11</sup>A number of authors associated with the Gospel and Our Culture network in North America pursue this theme (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Hauerwas 1991; Hall 1997; Shenk 1991; 1993; 1995; 1999:118-128; Hunsberger 1995). While all these authors identify the legacy of Christendom as the primary obstacle to a missionary church in the West today, their emphases differ. Hall wants to distinguish himself from Hauerwas because he believes that Hauerwas's "language frequently betrays a not-of-this-world posture so unqualified as to beget the danger of ghettoization" (1997:67). In contrast, he speaks of disengagement for the sake of cultural engagement (:51-66). Shenk has focussed his critique on the impact of Christendom on the mission and self-understanding of the church. This enables him to avoid the sweeping generalizations characteristic of Hall and Hauerwas and to offer a more nuanced critique.

to be an alternative community” (Guder 1998:10). With this fundamental ecclesial designation, the authors of *Missional Church* want to highlight the need for a church that embodies the communal and critical dimensions of the Christian mission over against the individualism and accommodation of Christendom.

While all three of these ecclesiological features are evident throughout the book—anti-Christendom,<sup>12</sup> communal, and countercultural—chapter five develops these features most explicitly. Entitled ‘Missional Witness: The Church as Apostle to the World,’ this chapter concentrates on the relationship of the missionary church to its cultural context. The Christendom legacy continues to be present in the western church. It is this legacy and the threat of a functional Christendom that forms the dark backdrop for the ecclesiological and missional formulations of this chapter. Earlier chapters have defined and highlighted the danger of functional Christendom. The term ‘Christendom’ technically refers to “an official ecclesiastical status through legal establishment” characteristic of European churches. The Christendom of North America is not “official” but “functional”:

“Christendom” also describes the functional reality of what took place specifically in the North American setting. Various churches contributed to the formation of a dominant culture that bore the deep imprint of Christian values, language, and expectations regarding moral behaviors. Other terms like “Christian culture” or “churched culture” might be used to describe this Christian influence on the shape of the broader culture (Guder 1998:48).

Functional Christendom has crippled the church in two ways. First, it has produced a church that has accommodated itself to its culture and has not been sufficiently critical of the idolatrous currents that shape it, causing it to lose its ability to critique the powers

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<sup>12</sup>ÓÙÙ § ÛŸŽ ŸÚ ŁÙ ÛŸŸŞÛ ÍÙ ŽŦÙ ÛŸ Û ÛŦ ÛŸ Ž ÛÙŸÛŸÛŞŸ  
 ̣ ÛŸ Û ŸŽÛ ŞŽŽÛŞŽÛŦ Ÿ Ø ÛÙŦŦ Ÿ ŞÛ Û ŽÛŦÛŞÛÛ ÛÙÛŽÙ Û Ÿ ÛÙ ÛŞŦ  
 ŦÙ Ŧ ÛŽÛÛ Û Û Û Û ÛÙ ÛŸ ÛŽÙ ÛŞÛ ̣ Ā ŦÙŽ ĐĒĒĒĒĒĒĒĒĒĒ Ĵ Û ŸŸ  
 ŽŽŽÛ ÛŸÛ ÛŞ ÛŽÛÛ ŸÚ ÛÙ ÛŸ Ž ŸÙÛÛŞ ŸŸ Û ŦÙ Û ÛÙ ĴŽÙ ÛŦŞÛ  
 ÛŸ ÛŽŽŽÛ § ÛŸŸ ŸÚ ĴŽÛ ÛŸŦŸŦ ÛŸ ÛÙÛŽ ŽÙ ÛŸÛ Ć ÓÙÙ ÛŸ Ž  
 ÛÙŸÛŸÛŞŸ ÛŽÛĒ ĴŸ ŸÛŞ ŦŸŸŸ ĴŞÛĆ ò ŞŸÛÛ ĴŞ ÛŽ § Ć ŦŸŸŸ ĴŸ ŞŦŦ  
 ŐŸŦÛŽĆ ŞŸŦ Ŧ Ÿ ŦŸŸ ŞÛÛ Ć



of society that took place continues as a positive legacy in the West even until today. While Newbigin affirms the importance of the communal witness of the church, he also stresses the calling of individual believers in society. By contrast, the communal dimension of the church's calling is emphasized to the point of neglecting the mission of individuals within culture. The calling of believers in the world is not mentioned in *Missional Church*. While Newbigin accents the critical dimension of the church's witness, he also emphasizes the positive cultural calling of the church in culture. By contrast, the critical dimension of the church's stance toward its culture is stressed in *Missional Church*; all attempts to exercise culturally formative power are dismissed as 'functional Christendom' (Guder 1998:116).

A number of reasons account for this difference of emphasis. Part of the problem is Newbigin's failure to combine the Reformed and Anabaptist emphases into an integrated missionary ecclesiology. Both Newbigin and the GOCN/NA offer important

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cultural order that was on offer to them. Martyrdom is, as the word indicates, witness, pointing to an alternative offer. The witness is vindicated when it is carried through in a positive mode, saying yes as well as saying no, encouraging the acts of repentance and change by which the powers offer homage to Christ (:215).

O'Donovan recognizes that this interpretation of Christendom leads him away from Stanley Hauerwas. While he acknowledges the force of Hauerwas's critique of Christendom, O'Donovan challenges Hauerwas's notion that Christians were attempting to further the kingdom by use of political power. The account of the early church was that those who held power became subject to the rule of Christ and used that power in the service of His kingdom. While this harboured danger and temptation, the early church did not see this as a reason to refuse the triumph Christ had won among the nations. It is "this triumph of Christ among the nations [that] Hauerwas is not prepared to see" (:216). While Newbigin is more aware than O'Donovan of the dangers of Christendom on the mission of the church, there are many points of agreement between them.

contributions to an emerging ecclesiology for postmodern culture; however much more work remains to be done.

#### 9.4. CONCLUSION

Newbigin devoted the latter part of his life to fostering a missionary encounter between the gospel and western culture; this may prove to be, perhaps, his most significant accomplishment. This endeavour can be interpreted as a specific application of his contextualization model articulated in the last chapter. Thus the church plays a central role in Newbigin's 'gospel in western culture' project.

Newbigin is a highly contextualized thinker. A missionary encounter with western culture demands an understanding of the deep currents that shape that culture. It is only as the church recognizes the fundamental assumptions that press its life and understanding into an idolatrous mould that it can begin to struggle against such a syncretistic compromise. According to Newbigin, the idolatrous commitment to reason in the West has fashioned a fact-value dichotomy that forms the central shrine of our culture. This analysis, clearly, is incomplete and inadequate. While it yields much fruitful insight, it leaves many other idols—perhaps some that are even more powerful, such as the idol of consumerism—untouched. It remains for others to continue a 'missiological critique' of other idols.

Newbigin attempts to liberate the deeply compromised western church from its syncretistic accommodation to the fact-value dichotomy by means of retelling the western story, offering an alternative epistemology, and advocating the gospel as public truth. Through a retelling of western history from the standpoint of the gospel, this dichotomy can be recognized as a human construct that is vulnerable. While the main lines of Newbigin's narrative are helpful, he has not taken sufficient account of the powerful humanistic and rationalistic currents that shape Augustine's thought. Consequently, he too easily contrasts Augustine with Descartes and Locke. Augustine and the medieval period are Christian while Descartes, Locke, and the modern period capitulate to rationalistic humanism. Yet Augustine's own synthesis paved the way for Aquinas, and finally Descartes and Locke. Newbigin's ambivalent approach to Christendom can be, in part, attributed to this positive assessment of Augustine.

Through the offer of an alternative epistemology the church can understand the proper creational place of reason and the rightful place of the gospel. Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi and MacIntyre illumine the calling of the church to indwell the fiduciary framework of the gospel. It is unfortunate that Newbigin did not move beyond Polanyi; Newbigin makes exclusive use of Polanyi for missiological purposes. Yet philosophy and history of science have moved on since Polanyi with an even more pronounced accent on the importance of the hermeneutical community. A more wide-ranging dialogue with this tradition would have enriched Newbigin's discussion.

Through a deepened understanding of the gospel as a universal story the church is prepared to embody that gospel faithfully. Newbigin uncovers the foundational assumptions of western culture that have eclipsed Scriptural authority. The church can only be a missionary community when it rightly understands the nature of the gospel and embodies its universal message.

The retelling of the western story, the offer of an alternative theory of knowledge, and a deepened understanding of the gospel as public truth are all a necessary part of the process of revisioning the church as an alternative social order. Newbigin rejects three options for revisioning the church's mission: privatization, Christendom, and perpetual protest. In spite of criticisms to the contrary Newbigin does not advocate a return to Christendom.

As Newbigin formulated his ecclesiological convictions regarding the church in the West, he drew on the Anabaptist tradition that stresses the church as an alternative community and on the Reformed tradition that emphasizes the calling of the scattered church in culture. Newbigin believes that the call of the gospel "will be credible when it comes from the heart of a Christian congregation which is confident in the Gospel, believes it, celebrates it, lives it and carries it into the whole life of the community in which it is set" (1996b:11). Many questions remain as to how this might be implemented in view of the incredibly powerful cultural tradition that shapes the West and is now shaping much of the rest of the world. The differentiation and individualism of the West poses a massive problem for the missionary community. Vandervelde rightly notes that it is precisely at this point—"at the most crucial point in his thought" (Vandervelde 1996:13)—that Newbigin fails to be contextual. He speaks of the importance of community (Anabaptist emphasis) and the importance of participation in cultural development (Reformed emphasis), the importance of antithesis and critique (Anabaptist) and the importance of cultural involvement (Reformed), the importance of community (Anabaptist) and individual callings (Reformed). Yet these emphases are not sufficiently integrated in Newbigin's ecclesiology. Indeed this lack of integration has impacted the Gospel and Our Culture movement in North America. The GOCN/NA has picked up the communal and critical side of Newbigin's ecclesiology, neglecting other equally important elements.

There is a crying need for a missionary ecclesiology of western culture that integrates at least these two concerns. There is, further, a need to develop a 'postmodern understanding of mission in the public square.' Newbigin's emphasis on both cultural development and antithesis, communal embodiment and individual callings, found in the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, offers the rudiments of a faithful ecclesiology for western culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

# 10. THE NATURE AND RELEVANCE OF NEWBIGIN'S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

## 10.1. INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter we summarize and analyze Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. The first part discusses the nature of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology emphasizing both strengths and weaknesses. The second section considers the relevance of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology for two ecclesiological discussions. The first is the ecclesiological tension that remains in the ecumenical tradition. Ecclesiological discussions within the ecumenical tradition are diverse, complex and manifold; thus this concluding chapter cannot enter into the various and sundry streams of the dialogue. However, the debate between Konrad Raiser and Newbigin exemplifies a foundational tension that continues to exist in the WCC. This exchange between Raiser and Newbigin will be explored with a view to articulating the significance of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology for this tension. The second is the discussion on the missionary church taking place in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. A number of leaders of this movement have produced a book that articulates a missionary ecclesiology for North America (Guder 1998). They self-consciously follow the lead of Newbigin. A comparison between this book and Newbigin reveals the relevance of Newbigin's ecclesiology for the North American setting. The conversations of the WCC and the GOCN/NA have been shaped to some degree by Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. He was a major figure in the ecumenical tradition until the end of his life; the GOCN/NA is a direct response to his call for a missionary encounter with western culture.

## 10.2. THE NATURE OF NEWBIGIN'S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

The historical formation of Newbigin's ecclesiology is evident in two basic shifts: the shift from a Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology and the shift from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. Newbigin's first discussion of the church came in 1942 where it finds a minor place. The church is characterized as a fellowship of redeemed individuals who have experienced the new powers of the Spirit. By the next decade, Newbigin articulated a missionary understanding of the church. The verse that captures Newbigin's abiding conviction about the missionary nature of the church is John 20:21: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' This commission gives the church its identity: it is a body chosen and called to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus until His return. The church enjoys a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Thus it is commissioned to witness in its life, words, and deeds to the good news of the kingdom locally and to the ends of the earth. This shift to a missionary ecclesiology was prompted by two important factors: Newbigin's missionary experience in India, and his participation in the ecumenical tradition where a missionary ecclesiology was emerging in the International Missionary Conferences from Tambaram (1938) to Willingen (1952). Indeed Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology during this time

was formed in the mould of the doctrine of the church that developed in the ecumenical missionary tradition and found clear expression at Willingen. This missionary ecclesiology finds detailed elaboration in two of Newbigin's books: *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d) and *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958b).

By the time of the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) Newbigin realized that his understanding of the missionary church articulated in the 1950s was inadequate. He acknowledged two closely-related problems. On the one hand, a Christological basis for ecclesiology was insufficient; this must be expanded into a Trinitarian framework. On the other hand, mission was conceived too narrowly in church-centric terms; a deeper understanding of God's work in the world must be developed. Newbigin's first attempt to articulate a Trinitarian basis for the missionary church is found in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g). While Newbigin further nuanced his ecclesiology, the mission of the Triune God provided the framework in which Newbigin understood the missionary church for the remainder of his life.

This historical sketch shows that Newbigin's ecclesiology can be understood only in the context of the *missio Dei*. Yet the *missio Dei* is understood in different and even conflicting ways. Two theological motifs that shape Newbigin's understanding: a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth (Hoedemaker 1979:455-456). Understanding these two themes and their relationship provides a lens through which to view the theological basis of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, both in its strengths and its weaknesses.

The strongest and most fully developed element of Newbigin's understanding of the *missio Dei* is the Christocentric concentration. Newbigin's consistent ecclesiological starting point is the good news that is revealed in the 'fact of Christ.' More specifically, *in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ has revealed and accomplished the kingdom of God that is the goal of universal history*. There are a number of implications of this statement that Newbigin has elaborated that are significant for his missionary ecclesiology.

Newbigin's Christocentric starting point leads to a certain understanding of Scripture. Christ reveals the end of history; accordingly Scripture is not a local narrative but a story about universal history. The good news is a 'secular announcement' and 'public truth.' That is, the gospel is about the restoration of the reign of God over the entire creation at the end of world history, and therefore cannot be confined to a strand of religious or cultural history. The mission of the Triune God is narrated in the unfolding story of redemption recorded in the Scriptural record. The way we understand the nature of the church depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of the world of which the calling of the church is part? The Bible gives the true story of the world. Accordingly the church must be understood in the context of that story. Newbigin draws out the ecclesiological implications: the church's missionary nature can be discerned by reference to its role and its place in the story of history. In terms of its role, the church has been chosen as the bearer of God's end-time purpose for the sake of all humankind. The logic of mission is that the end of history has been revealed and accomplished, and the church is the community chosen by God to communicate that news in its life, words, and deeds. In terms of its place, the church exists in the already and not yet time of the kingdom of God. The final judgement has

been delayed so that God's purpose for history might be made known in the church. The church functions as a preview of the coming kingdom.

Newbigin's Christocentric focus is also eschatological. The good news announces the arrival of the end-time reign of God present in Jesus Christ; the eschatological power of God through the Holy Spirit to heal and renew the whole creation from sin and its effects is now present in history in the person of Christ. The Spirit is a gift for the end times; He brings the life of the kingdom of God. Newbigin's eschatology is both realized and futurist: the kingdom is already present although it has not yet arrived in fullness. While the redemptive power of God's reign is present in Jesus by the Spirit, it has not yet been consummated. It remains hidden, awaiting its full unveiling in the future. The precise meaning of the delay of the end is mission. Three stages of this provisional time period can be discerned in Newbigin's thought: the mission of Jesus, the central events of Christ's death, resurrection, and Pentecost that enable the church to share the life of the kingdom, and the continuation of the mission of Jesus by the Spirit in the church. Jesus made known the kingdom by embodying it with his life, proclaiming it with his words, and demonstrating it with his deeds. He prayed and suffered for the sake of the kingdom as he encountered the powers of evil. He formed a kingdom community and prepared them to continue his mission. His kingdom mission culminated in his death and resurrection where the victory of God's reign for the entire cosmos was revealed and accomplished. This enabled the community Jesus had formed to begin to share in foretaste the life of the kingdom of God. As such this community was charged to continue the mission of Jesus, making known the life of the age to come in its life, words, and deeds.

The primary ways Newbigin characterizes the nature of the church are shaped by this eschatological context. The church is the *ecclesia tou Theou*—the public assembly called out by God in each place to make known the life of the age to come in each place; the church is the provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ; the church is the sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom. Newbigin's continual emphasis on the organic unity of the church can be understood only in this context. In the end-time reign of God, all people will be ultimately united in Christ. If the church is a sign of the end, then unity must characterize the people of God today.

In Newbigin's thought, the church continues the mission of Jesus and thus participates in the *missio Dei* (Jongeneel 1997:91). The source of the church's mission is found in the love of the Father for the world. The content of the church's mission is found in the mission of Jesus: the church is to continue the mission of Jesus by making known the kingdom in its life, words, and deeds. The power and primary actor in the church's mission is the Holy Spirit who brings the life of the age to come and constitutes the church as a witnessing community. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21-22).

Accordingly, Newbigin emphasizes two poles that define the church's missionary nature: the call of God and the place it is set in the world. Newbigin elaborates the relation of the church to God in the terms of its place and role in the Biblical narrative, its participation in the *missio Dei*, its calling in the kingdom of God, and its election to a task. The church's nature is also circumscribed by its relation to the world: the church is a church for others in the sense that it does not exist for itself but for the sake of the

place in which it has been placed.

This Christocentric starting point defines the church as a missionary community. Newbigin highlights three historical factors that have blurred this missionary identity: the establishment of the church in Christendom, the privatization of the church in modernity, and the separation of mission and church in the missionary movement. In Newbigin's discussion on Christendom a basic tension remains. Newbigin offers the contours of a penetrating critique of the established church of Christendom: it cripples a missionary self-understanding; it shapes the ministry, sacraments, congregational structures, and theology in an unmissionary pattern; it distorts the relationship of the church to culture; it diminishes concern for the unity of the church; and it eclipses the eschatological context of the church. At the same time, Newbigin stresses the positive side of the established church of Christendom. The church was faithful in taking responsibility for the social, cultural, and political life of Europe. The Constantinian settlement represents the faithfulness of the church to bring the universal authority of Christ to bear on politics, culture, and society. The church's faithfulness during this period has left us with a legacy that has lasted to the present. Newbigin is right to stress these two sides of the church of Christendom. The problem is that he has left these two emphases side by side without any attempt to integrate them. Such a framework might be provided by explicitly identifying and explicating the two sides of the church's responsibility towards its host culture. The first is that of cultural responsibility that flows from the creation mandate; the second is that of prophetic critique that is necessitated by the twisting effect of sin on cultural development. In the case of the established church of Christendom the first of these responsibilities is fulfilled but the second is weakened. Newbigin's lack of development of a creational foundation for the church's responsibility in society does not allow him to make this kind of distinction. Consequently, the tension between the positive and negative effects of the Christendom church remain unresolved.

Newbigin's prolific work in the latter decades of his life increased awareness of the privatization of the church in modernity. The church's capitulation to the private realm has been extensively explored by Newbigin with fresh insight. Yet Newbigin does not highlight the important connection between the Christendom and the post-Enlightenment church. For Newbigin, the connection between them is in terms of discontinuity. Newbigin has articulated that discontinuity well: the post-Enlightenment church has moved to the margins of culture while the established church of Christendom held the gospel as public truth. What he has missed is the deep continuity between the church of Christendom and modernity. As Wilbert Shenk has shown, the privatization of the church is the historical outcome of the church of Christendom (Shenk 1995). The church in Christendom learned to take its place in the established political order. The loss of a prophetically critical stance to culture is carried over into the post-Enlightenment church. It is precisely because it accepted its role *within* culture that it accepted its place in the private sector. Today's consumer church is the legacy of Christendom. Newbigin's penetrating critique of modernity would be strengthened significantly by elaborating this connection.

Newbigin's Christocentric focus has been fruitful in elaborating the missionary nature of the church. Yet as we observed in describing the historical formation of Newbigin's ecclesiology, there was a shift to a more Trinitarian framework for his

ecclesiology. Historical developments within the World Council of Churches in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, as well as twenty years of missionary experience challenged Newbigin to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. During the decade of the 1950s the work of the Father received little emphasis, the primary witness of the Spirit was not sufficiently elaborated, and the work of the Spirit outside the bounds of the church received no attention. In the 1960s all three of these issues emerge in Newbigin's writings. He does not move from his earlier commitment to Christocentrism; for Newbigin the Trinitarian breath is an elaboration and explication of his Christocentric focus. To properly understand the mission of Christ, it is necessary to place that mission within the context of the Father's rule over history and the wide-ranging witness of the Spirit. Newbigin develops his Trinitarian foundation for the missionary church out of a commitment to the centrality of Christ. Thus on the one hand, there is a basic continuity between the two periods. Yet on the other hand, there is a fuller development that brings about emphases not seen in his earlier work. Nevertheless, even with this important emphasis on the Trinity, the work of the Father and Spirit in creation, providence, and history remains underdeveloped.

During this time Newbigin began to emphasize the work of the Father as Creator and Upholder, as the Lord of History, and as the One who initiates the end by sending Jesus into the world. Newbigin comments about the importance of the Father's work: "The point has several times been made that a true doctrine of missions must make a large place for the work of the Holy Spirit; but it is equally true that a true doctrine of missions will have much to say of God the Father" (1963g:31). Unfortunately Newbigin's own theological reflection on the Father's work remains in an embryonic state. In an appreciative review of Newbigin's *The Open Secret* Rodney Petersen has rightly pointed out this weakness: "With all of his talk about a trinitarian rather than simply christocentric missiology, what one does look for, but does not always find, is a fuller foundation for mission which reaches beyond an appeal to the person and work of Jesus—as vital as that may be" (Petersen 1979:192). Beyond the Trinitarian foundation "the usefulness of his trinitarian thesis for breaking out of present missiological impasses could be further exploited" (:193). In earlier chapters, the systematic formulation of the work of the Father in Newbigin's theology draws material from different parts of Newbigin's corpus. However, nowhere in Newbigin's writings do we find a sustained discussion of God's creational and providential work and its importance for mission. Newbigin's Christocentric orientation does not allow a full doctrine of creation to emerge and play an important role in providing the setting for the mission of Jesus and the church. When one compares for example, Newbigin's treatment of the Father's creational work with Paul's proclamation in Lystra (Acts 14:14-18) and in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), a contrast in emphasis becomes apparent.

Newbigin also failed to sufficiently elaborate the way in which the Father and Spirit relate to world history outside the bounds of the church. On the one hand, Newbigin rejected the classic tradition that had dominated the WCC from 1938 to 1952 and found no place for God's work outside the community of the church. On the other hand, he dismissed the opposite error prevalent in the 1960s which identified all the dynamic movements of world history with the work of God. God's sovereign governance of all things means that God was at work *in some sense* in movements of national liberation, of scientific discovery, of cultural renaissance, and in the renewal of non-Christian

religions. Newbigin poses the critical question: "In what sense is God at work in these movements in world history?" (1963g:28). In a review of *The Open Secret* Bert Hoedemaker queries whether Newbigin's Christocentric orientation prohibits a specific answer to this question. Hoedemaker notes Newbigin's "Christocentric concentration" and "Trinitarian breadth," a commitment to the central and unique significance of the Christ-event and a genuine openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world (1979:456). For Hoedemaker, it is not clear how, in Newbigin's view, commitment to the Lordship of Christ enables us to speak more specifically of the way in which the Father and Spirit are active in world history (*ibid*). Raiser too questions whether Newbigin has sufficiently accounted for the work of the Spirit. Newbigin "can state his basic Christological and ecclesiological affirmations almost without any reference to the pneumatological dimension" (Raiser 1994a:50).

The shift from Christocentrism to a Trinitarian basis for mission exhibits both continuity and discontinuity. In terms of continuity, Newbigin continues to emphasize the important role of the church in history. He does not follow Johannes Hoekendijk in marginalizing the church in favour of the God's providential work in the world. The discontinuity is found in that the mission of Christ prolonged in the church is now set in a new key: the work of the Father and the Spirit in world history form the broader context.

Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is consistently worked out in his discussion of the church as institution. Newbigin does not often use the word institution in relation to the church; rather I take it from Hendrikus Berkhof's systematic discussion of ecclesiology (Berkhof 1979:339-422). He distinguishes between the church as institution and its orientation to the world. The church is an institution wherein a number of ministries and activities are organized into a societal structure. Those ministries include worship, fellowship, ministerial leadership, and church order. Berkhof believes the church cannot be understood exclusively in terms of its institutional structure. The church exists for the sake of the world. In fact, an orientation toward the world is not an addition to but an essential dimension of the church. Indeed ecclesiology is distorted when this dimension does not pervade the whole. Berkhof believes that this third dimension has not received the attention it deserves in theological discourse. Only since the Second World War, with the unceasing work of Hendrik Kraemer, has this dimension of ecclesiology come to the fore. Jongeneel too draws attention to the central role of Kraemer in advocating the fundamentally missionary nature of the church (Jongeneel 1997:89-90). Accordingly, the whole of ecclesiology needs to be rethought from the standpoint of the church's orientation to the world (Berkhof 1979:345, 411-412). It is precisely this observation that highlights a contribution of Newbigin's ecclesiology. Following Kraemer, Newbigin has taken a lead in rethinking many traditional themes from the standpoint of the church's missionary nature. In particular, we find extensive discussions of ecclesiological structures, ministerial leadership, and worship from the standpoint of the church's orientation to the world. In every case, the missionary nature of the church pervades and shapes his discussion. Newbigin's discussion of each of these aspects of ecclesiology remains partial due to the contextual nature of his writings. Unfortunately many valuable dialogue partners are ignored: authors on Base Ecclesial communities, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox. For all that, Newbigin consistently treats each of these subjects from the standpoint of the

church's orientation to the world.

In Newbigin's writings, there are four aspects of the church's mission in the world that find regular treatment: evangelism, social justice and mercy, calling of the laity, and missions. Two features of his treatment of these tasks are significant. On the one hand, Newbigin insists that each of these tasks is indispensable in the total mission of the church. One can find numerous places where one or another of these tasks have been eclipsed in various traditions. Newbigin's insistence on the importance of each task remains relevant. On the other hand, each of these areas of the church's responsibility in the world is anchored in the local congregation. The abiding separation between missions societies, relief agencies, parachurch evangelistic bodies (to name a few) on the one hand, from the eucharistic community on the other, throws into relief the importance of Newbigin's discussion.

Newbigin emphasizes the church in both its gathered and scattered form. Yet here a basic inconsistency emerges in Newbigin's use of the word church. Newbigin rightly understands that the church is more than a local identifiable congregation gathered for worship, fellowship, and prayer. He places the church in the context of the kingdom; the church is a community that participates in the life of the kingdom. The salvation of the kingdom is comprehensive in scope and restorative in essence. These eschatological and soteriological emphases lead Newbigin to view the church as the new humankind living under the authority of Christ's rule in all of cultural life. However, Newbigin's ecclesiological formulations often refer to the church in a more traditional way that limits the church to its institutional and gathered form. The people of God scattered in the world are mere fragments of the church that are only truly the church when they gather together again on Sunday.

Newbigin's notions of 'missionary encounter' and 'challenging relevance' define the relation of the church to its cultural context. These phrases point to a unique model of contextualization that contributes significantly to the current discussions on gospel and culture. Few other models of contextualization so highlight the importance of the church in the whole contextualization process. Newbigin's understanding of a missionary encounter flows from three commitments. First, there is a religious set of assumptions that lies at the core of culture. These ultimate faith commitments are comprehensive: they shape every aspect of cultural life. Second, the Bible offers an alternative set of religious faith commitments that is equally comprehensive. The story of Scripture and the story of the culture clash at every point. Third, these stories are both socially embodied. On the one hand, the church is part of the cultural community that embodies idolatrous faith commitments. On the other hand, the church is called to be part of new humankind that embodies a different story. These incompatible stories intersect in the life of the church, producing an unbearable tension; the church must separate itself from the idolatrous story that shapes its culture and yet participate in the ongoing development of the cultural community. Living in this tension, the church challenges the idolatrous story of the culture with an alternative way of life shaped by the kingdom. A missionary encounter prohibits the church from either withdrawing into a ghetto or being accommodated to the cultural story. Newbigin resolves the tension with his notion of 'challenging relevance' or 'subversive fulfillment.' The church is called to embody the cultural forms yet at the same time to subvert them and give them new meaning shaped by the gospel. In this way, the church is both for and against its culture: it

identifies with the form of its culture but stands against the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to those forms.

While Newbigin's understanding of contextualization is valuable and calls for further development, he has built this model on a less than solid foundation. First, Newbigin's foundational understanding of culture is inconsistent. Along with Johann Bavinck and Harvie Conn, Newbigin highlights the religious commitments that lie at the core of culture and shape each institution, symbol, and form (Bavinck 1960:172-173; Conn 1980:147-150). Religion is not simply one cultural form but the directing dynamic that lies at the core of a culture. This moves Newbigin beyond cultural theorists like Paul Hiebert and Charles Kraft. Unlike Conn and Bavinck, however, Newbigin is not consistent in his elaboration of this depth dimension of culture, nor is he as clear in articulating its central place. Conn and Bavinck have offered a more consistent and carefully articulated understanding of culture. Newbigin's notions of missionary encounter and challenging relevance stand upon this understanding of culture. Thus a consistent and clear elaboration is essential for Newbigin's theory of contextualization. Moreover, Newbigin has failed to provide a Biblical foundation or theoretical articulation of the church's cultural responsibility. Both Sander Griffioen and Stephen Bevans have rightly called attention to the fact that Newbigin emphasizes the antithetical side of the church's cultural task with little attention to the positive calling of the church in culture (Bevans 1993; Griffioen 1996). Newbigin understands that the church's task involves both separation and solidarity. Unfortunately, he has developed the first of these at the expense of the second. Yet his whole understanding of a missionary encounter stands upon this dual role of the church in culture. Finally, Newbigin is neither clear nor consistent in distinguishing between the creational structure and the religious direction of all cultural forms. The church's stance is not a conservative acquiescence to the status quo nor a revolutionary destruction of contemporary forms. Rather the church subverts the existing forms giving new meaning to them in the light of the gospel. This helpful model depends on a distinction between what is creational in those forms and what has been distorted by sin. Bavinck's *possessio* is very similar to Newbigin's challenging relevance; yet the distinction between religious direction and creational structure is much more clear and consistent (Bavinck 1960:178-179). Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment is quite close to Newbigin's. In fact, it appears that Newbigin's understanding is dependant on Kraemer. Yet Kraemer provides a solid foundation for his notion with a lengthy discussion of creation revelation (Kraemer 1956:235-383). Newbigin rejects common grace and speaks little of creational revelation; yet this is the Biblical teaching that provides the only real foundation for his notion of challenging relevance. In summary, we can say that Newbigin has a weak understanding of the Bible's teaching on creation—creation revelation, creation order, and the creation mandate. This is related to the point articulated above: in Newbigin's thought a full Trinitarian theology does not emerge. Here in his understanding of contextualization we see the fruit of a weak elaboration of the Father's work in creation. Nevertheless, Newbigin's model of contextualization offers important insight for the discussion on contextualization, highlighting as it does the important place of the church.

Later church historians will probably point to Newbigin's role in fostering a missionary encounter with western culture as his most historically significant

achievement. Indeed many know Newbigin only in his role as an author of important books on the relationship between the gospel and western culture. What is often missed in assessments of his mission and western culture project is the central role of the church. The elements of a missionary encounter have been articulated above: a comprehensive and idolatrously shaped cultural story, Scripture as an alternative story, and a simultaneous embodiment of both of these stories in the church. Newbigin's appropriation of the insights of sociology of knowledge and post-empiricist philosophy and history of science highlight the significance of the church. Sociologists of knowledge draw attention to the important role of a community in embodying certain beliefs and making them plausible. Newbigin calls the church an alternative plausibility structure—a community that embodies an alternative set of beliefs. Borrowing insights from Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre who accent the role of the scientific community as it embodies a tradition of scientific practice, Newbigin elaborates an alternative epistemology to challenge the idol of autonomous reason in the West. All rationality works in the context of a socially embodied tradition. The scientific community reasons in the light of basic faith commitments that provide the light for its endeavours. When anomalies threaten the commitments of the scientific community there is a paradigm shift that offers a new tradition in which to work. Here Newbigin sees a parallel between paradigm shifts in science and the mission of the church. As reason, the primary idol of the West, fails and cultural “anomalies” abound, the church is called to be an alternative community that offers a way of life lived in a different light.

The use of sociology of knowledge and philosophy of science to highlight the role of the missionary church as an alternative social order is helpful. However, a concrete elaboration of the ecclesiological implications of this conviction becomes problematic in Newbigin's thought. On the one hand, Newbigin rightly rejects the privatization of the church by modernity, the Christendom model of the medieval period, and the perpetual protest posture of the early church. To do so, his ecclesiological formulations draw on two traditions. The first is the Anabaptist tradition that stresses the church as an alternative community. This ecclesiology emphasizes the communal and critical dimensions of the church's task in culture. The second is the Reformed tradition that highlights the calling of the scattered church as the new humankind in culture. This ecclesiology emphasizes the cultural responsibility of the church and the breadth of its calling. Both themes find frequent expression in Newbigin's work. Yet there is a tension between the two traditions that Newbigin does not completely resolve. The question remains as to how these themes can be integrated and find concrete embodiment over against the powerful tradition that shapes the structures of western culture.

The problem arises because Newbigin's ecclesiology was shaped in the small undifferentiated villages of India. The image of the church as a communal body that incarnated a contrasting story over against the Hindu majority shaped Newbigin's view of the church. Newbigin recognized in the 1960s that the differentiated West presents a very different situation; the structures of the church must account for the complexity and differentiation of western culture. Yet in his later years, Newbigin returned to the vision of the church formed in India in contrast to the individualism and syncretism he found in the western church. In place of the individualism he stressed community; in contrast to the syncretism he stressed the critical task of the church in culture. At the

same time he continued to articulate the calling of believers in the their cultural task. However, these diverse ecclesiological elements are not integrated into a concrete model. Vandervelde rightly observes that “at the most critical point in his thought” Newbigin fails to be contextual (1996:13). The communal and individual witness, and solidarity and separation in relation to culture are not sufficiently integrated to provide a model of the missionary church relevant for western culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; in fact, they stand in tension. Nevertheless, Newbigin has made an important contribution to an ecclesiology for western culture; he has pointed the way ahead by emphasizing the importance of drawing together elements from the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions.

### 10.3. THE RELEVANCE OF NEWBIGIN’S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

This final section will briefly explore the relevance of Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology for two contemporary ecclesiological challenges: first, the tension that remains in the missiological stream of the WCC between two understandings of the missionary church; and second, the discussions in North America surrounding an ecclesiology for mission to North America.

#### 10.3.1. *Relevance in Global Perspective*

David Bosch summarizes an abiding ecclesiological tension that remains within the missionary channel of the ecumenical tradition as one between two irreconcilable views of the church. The tension is the fruit of differing emphases on the locus of God’s work. The first ecclesiology emphasizes the church as the primary place of God’s work. The ecclesial community is “the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly” and mission becomes an activity where converts are transferred into this community (Bosch 1991:381). The second ecclesiology stresses the work of God in the world; the church exists as an example of the way God is at work in the world. The church’s mission contributes to the humanization of society.

Konrad Raiser’s recent books advocate the second ecclesiology (1991a; 1997). In the first of these books, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Raiser portrays a paradigm shift taking place in the ecumenical movement. The ‘Christocentric-universalist’ paradigm shaped the ecumenical movement from the beginning until the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC (1968). Using Willem Visser ’t Hooft as his primary example, Raiser depicts the classical paradigm in terms of four features: its Christocentrism, its concentration on the church, its universal scope, and its emphasis on salvation history. While this paradigm continues to play an important role in the WCC, the paradigm faces a number of problems that have produced a crisis that calls its continued suitability into question. Religious pluralism, burgeoning injustice and oppression, and the ecological threat jeopardize an understanding of the church that views itself as a unique body with a universal mission to the world. Raiser calls for critical revision to the existing ecclesiology and a discussion that will give rise to a “future ecumenical ecclesiology” (1991a:72). He briefly sketches a number of elements of this future ecumenical ecclesiology: the *oikoumene* as the focus of God’s work; a Trinitarian approach that

emphasizes the work of the Spirit in the *oikoumene*; the church as an illustration of God's work in the *oikoumene*; an emphasis on the solidarity of the church with the world that blurs the boundaries between church and world; mission as the contribution to an ethical culture that will address the tensions of religious pluralism, the injustice of economic oppression, and the threat to natural life systems.

To understand Newbigin's relevance for this contemporary debate in the ecumenical tradition, it is necessary to understand where he stands with respect to the classical paradigm represented by Visser 't Hooft and the post-Uppsala paradigm exemplified in Raiser. On the one hand, Newbigin's own intellectual and ecclesiastical formation took place in the early days of the WCC when the Christocentric-universalist paradigm predominated. Many elements of that paradigm remained firmly in place until the end of his life. On the other hand, the events and changes of the 1960s, both in world history and within the ecumenical tradition, brought about a Trinitarian shift in his thinking. In an exchange between Raiser and Newbigin in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Raiser highlights Newbigin's commitment to the classical paradigm. Raiser believes that "Newbigin wants to maintain 'Christo-centric universalism' as a valid model for understanding the ecumenical movement" and that "his entire critical reflection is based on the conviction of the nonnegotiable truth of the earlier paradigm ..." (Raiser 1994a:50). In reply Newbigin emphasizes the shift that took place in his thinking. Newbigin protests that he does not regard the classical paradigm as unalterable. He claims that during the late 1950s and early 1960s a change took place in his thinking in which he accommodated the insights of the time and modified the classical paradigm—a correction that is evident in two books written at the time: in *Trinitarian Faith for Today's Mission* (1963g) he articulated a foundation for mission that expands a Christocentric missionary theology into a more Trinitarian one (1994c:2; 1994f:51); in *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966b) he acknowledged elements of truth in the 1960s turn to the world and revised his missionary ecclesiology accordingly (1994c:5).

Raiser's complaint that Newbigin is an exponent of an obsolete paradigm and Newbigin's protest that he reshaped his views raise the following questions: Does Newbigin take sufficient account of the insights of the cosmocentric-Trinitarian approach in his later ecclesiological formulations so that his ecclesiology remains a valid option today that is both faithful to Scripture and relevant to our time? Or are Newbigin's refinements of the classical ecumenical paradigm simply a matter of internal tinkering with an outdated and irrelevant—and thus unfaithful—way of being church in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Can Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology sufficiently withstand the crisis Raiser has described and thus offer guidance for this time, or do the events from the time of Uppsala to the present invalidate Newbigin's approach? Put another way: does Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology shed any light on the tension between two contrasting understandings of the church that Bosch and Raiser have described? It is my contention that Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is in keeping with Scripture and at the same time addresses the needs of our day. However, I would agree that certain critiques and modifications of Newbigin's ecclesiology are in order. This avowal will be fleshed out by considering three themes: the *missio Dei*, the nature and structure of the church, and the church's mission. Each section will highlight both the continuity and the discontinuity between Newbigin's ecclesiology

and the classical ecumenical paradigm. A critique will also be offered in places where we find Newbigin's ecclesiology inadequately reformulated.

Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology remained rooted in a Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei*. Yet in the 1960s he developed that Christocentrism into a Trinitarianism. The work of the Father in creation and history, the work of the Spirit as the primary witness to the kingdom, and the work of the Father and the Spirit outside the bounds of the church in culture and history are themes that characterize Newbigin's writing from the late 1950s on. However, Newbigin believed that developing a Trinitarian approach did not mean abandoning his Christocentric starting point. A Trinitarian framework is not an alternative set over against Christocentrism. Rather the Trinitarian perspective is an expansion and elaboration of a Christocentric one; it is a theological articulation of what it means for Christ to reveal and accomplish the kingdom of God. Newbigin would agree with Gerrit C. Berkouwer when he says that to understand a shift to a thoroughgoing Trinitarianism as a move away from a rigorous Christocentrism is to misunderstand Christocentricity (Berkouwer 1976:395). For Newbigin, Trinitarian thought is always Christocentric.

Raiser too wants to develop a Trinitarian perspective that is Christological (Raiser 1994a:50). Yet a difference remains between Raiser and Newbigin. Newbigin uses the word 'Christocentric' while Raiser uses the word 'Christological.' The differing terminology points a difference in the place and status of Christ in the two Trinitarian formulations. Moreover, Newbigin rightly notes that while Raiser knows that a Trinitarian confession is the expansion of the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' this truth is obscured in the development of Raiser's thesis (1994c:2). Finally, Raiser's Christology is limited to the historical ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his rightful concern to return to a concrete Christology, the universal Lordship of Christ as well as the universal significance of the atonement are diminished. In fact, any mention of the atonement of Christ is lacking in Raiser's book.

It is precisely at the point of an assessment of the work of Christ that we find the difference between Raiser and Newbigin. Raiser is critical of the cosmocrotor and ontological themes in classical Christology. Emphasis on the universal Lordship of Christ and His divinity supposedly obscure His earthly ministry. Raiser believes that this earthly ministry must be recovered in view of the urgent needs of the day. He calls for a Christology 'from below' rather than a Christology 'from above.' Pluralistic tension, economic oppression, gender and racial strife, and ecological danger all require a servant church that attends to these issues. This kind of mission must be rooted in a "concrete Christology which takes seriously the historical particularity of Jesus" (Raiser 1991:59). Raiser is correct to emphasize the historical mission of Christ that has been obscured by ontological discussion and a triumphalist Christology but the question is whether these two aspects of Christology need to stand over against each other. In Newbigin's theology they do not; it is precisely in the earthly ministry of Jesus and in His suffering death that He revealed and accomplished the end of history. And it is exactly that understanding of Christ that will not allow Newbigin to abandon his Christocentric commitment. If Christ has, in fact, made known and effected the *telos* of universal history, then he cannot merely be a model for the church's mission. Christ must be the starting point and controlling factor for all thinking about the church and its mission.

Nevertheless Newbigin's theological reflection on the work of the Father and the Spirit remain underdeveloped. Raiser believes that Newbigin can state his basic ecclesiological convictions without reference to the Spirit (1994a:50). In addition, Raiser believes that there is a need in the ecumenical tradition for a much more adequate doctrine of creation. He insists that the church must formulate a "deepened understanding of God's creation and of humanity's place within it" (1997:65). The problems facing the world community call for a church that understands its responsibility as members of the human race to contribute to the ongoing development of culture. Newbigin has not articulated the deepened understanding of God's creation and humankind's place in it. While Raiser deserves attention, Newbigin is right to maintain his Christocentrism. If in Jesus Christ God has acted to reveal and accomplish the end of universal history, this cannot be abandoned. Newbigin is correct to articulate a Trinitarian perspective in terms of the expansion and development of his Christological starting point. It is only unfortunate that this theological development is not fully realized in his work.

Raiser's critique of the ecclesiology of the classical paradigm is motivated by an impatience with the introversion and structural rigidity of traditional forms of the institutional church. Raiser emphasizes a church that serves the burning needs of the world and lives in solidarity with the cultural community. He is concerned about a Christian exclusivism that separates the church from the world and calls for an ecclesiogenesis in which "the institutional distinctions between church and world and church and society fall into the background" (Raiser 1991a:73). Flexible structures that will enable involvement and solidarity are the current need. Raiser recognizes the need to maintain the distinct identity of the church. However, in his conception the boundary is blurred between the church and the world of culture.

In line with the classical paradigm Newbigin continues to maintain the importance of characterizing the church as a unique body separated from the world. The church has been formed by Jesus Christ to share in the life of the end-time kingdom of God. Newbigin emphasizes the church as a foretaste and firstfruits of the reign of God, even while maintaining that the church is an instrument of the kingdom. The church cannot be reduced to its functional role as instrument; it is more than an action group within culture. It is the provisional result of the entry of the reign of God into history. Nevertheless, the church is also an agent of the reign of God. This emphasis on the church as both foretaste and instrument enables Newbigin to maintain the distinctiveness and solidarity of the church. The formulation of the church as firstfruits and agent shapes Newbigin's understanding of the relation of the church to the world. The church is both separated from society as a unique body and involved as part of the cultural community.

Once again the difference between Newbigin and Raiser is Christological. If Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of universal history, and if the church has begun to share in the life of the age to come, it cannot be reduced to a mere instrument; it is more than an action group or unique community that contributes to the moral fabric of society and the resolution of global threats. It is a unique community that bears God's purpose for all history.

Newbigin's stress on the church as instrument and on the church's solidarity with its cultural context enables him to address the dangers of introversion and structural

rigidity. During the 1960s the cosmocentric-Trinitarian paradigm made a number of valid criticisms of the self-absorbed, structurally inflexible church. Two important emphases find expression in Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

The first ecclesiological emphasis is the importance of flexible structures that enable and encourage mission. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of factors combined to make the issue of the renewal of Christendom-style ecclesial structures an urgent matter: the increasing recognition of the missionary nature of the church, the social activism of the secular decade, the recognition of a highly differentiated society in the West, and the search for ecumenical structures within the WCC that expressed the unity of the church. In this context, Newbigin became convinced that bold experiments in ecclesial restructuring were urgent if the church was to express and embody its missionary nature. His book *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, written during this period, deals at length with the need for new ecclesial structures (1966b:100-122).

Newbigin took to heart the prophetic criticism of the 1960s that denounced the rigid and inflexible structures which maintained the introversion of the church. Newbigin believed that ecclesial structures must meet two criteria: they must express the nature of the church and be relevant for the time and place in which the church is set. Relevance requires structural flexibility, albeit all adaptation must express the nature of the church as disclosed in the gospel. Moreover, Newbigin opposed any ecclesial structures that absolutized or reified some kind of eternally valid structure, although at the same time he acknowledged that our incorporation into the church means an incorporation *into* an already existing tradition. Therefore, neither a conservatism that maintained the structural *status quo* nor a revolutionary approach that discarded all traditional forms was adequate to the situation. The question was how one could move from within existing traditional structures and reform them according to the demands and needs of the day. Finally, Newbigin referred to many current themes and concrete proposals for structural renewal. These specific recommendations show a clear indebtedness to the discussion taking place about ecclesial structures at the time. Many of its themes appear in Newbigin's elaboration of ecclesial structures: structures that account for the highly differentiated state of western culture; structures that are small and mobile for action in society; and neighbourhood, work, frontier, and action groups. These last examples are termed 'zonal structures' in the *The Church for Others* document (WCC 1967:80ff.).

Raiser's concern for structural flexibility and variety has been well addressed by Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. Yet Newbigin refuses to simply reduce the church to its instrumental and activist role within culture. The structures must reflect the nature of the church; and for that reason many important elements from the traditional structures must be maintained. The church must remain a body centred in the word, sacrament, worship, prayer, and fellowship, and not be reduced to an action group.

A second important ecclesiological emphasis that deepened in response to the discussion of the 1960s was the importance of the mission of believers in culture. The shift from an ecclesiocentric to a cosmocentric approach to mission during the 1960s entailed a renewed interest in the 'laity' as the primary bearer of mission. A strong movement arose during this decade to evaluate all structures—including congregational and leadership structures—according to their ability to equip the laity for their calling in the world. Out of this concern arose the authorization of a comprehensive study on

the “missionary structure of the congregation.”

Since Newbiggin had had a long-standing interest in the mission of the laity, the renewed attention during this period moved him to discuss the issue in his writings in great detail. He states emphatically at this time that “the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ” must be given by the laity (1960b:28). Like many of his contemporaries, Newbiggin stresses that there must be structures that equip and a leadership that enables believers to fulfill their calling in the world.

Newbiggin recognizes that the institutional church does not have the competence needed to address the various social, political, and economic issues that are urgent; it is through the believers’ participation in various zones of society, according to their gifts, opportunities, and expertise, that these issues are to be addressed from the standpoint of the gospel and reign of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Raiser bases much of the argument of his books on the need to address the challenges of the changing world in which we live. Newbiggin’s detailed treatment of the cultural calling of believers offers a way into the missional calling of the church in the light of current issues.

Yet Newbiggin did not believe that the communal and institutional nature of the church should be downplayed to make room for this important aspect of the church’s mission (1963g:60-61). In fact, his concern for the mission of the laity heightened commitment to the importance of the gathered church. The faithful calling of the laity required a fellowship within the congregation that nourishes the life of Christ through the means of grace, that supports believers in their callings through encouragement, financial support, prayer, and insight, and that develops congregational and leadership structures that equip believers for their task. Furthermore, the emphasis on the church as scattered and dispersed did not erode his commitment to the *communal* witness of the church to the kingdom of God.

If the need of the day is a missionary ecclesiology that addresses the many urgent economic, ecological, political, social, and educational problems that threaten our world, Newbiggin’s missionary ecclesiology offers important insight for ways in which the calling of the believers and the communal dimensions of the church may be harmoniously interrelated for mission in the public square.

All the same, two closely related problems obscure Newbiggin’s contribution. His

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<sup>1</sup>T. Watson Street summarizes Newbiggin’s position: “The doctrine of the Trinity will teach us that the spheres of life are to be subject to Christ, not the Church, and that Christ’s Lordship over these spheres is manifested by his Spirit, working often not through the official organs of the church, as clergy and executives, but through lay Christians in the institutions of political, economic, and cultural life” (Street 1963:8; cf. 1963g:52-63).

inconsistent understanding of the church is problematic. Newbiggin often uses the word church to refer to the institutional church organized and gathered for so-called 'religious' activity. Yet Newbiggin's fundamental ecclesiological conviction is that the church is the new humankind and that its witness is as broad as the creation. The term 'church' then should not be reduced to a gathered community that engages in acts of worship, prayer, fellowship, and sacraments. Newbiggin is not consistent. While his discussions on the mission of the laity reveal a broader understanding of the church, his usage of the word 'church' often betrays a reduction of the ecclesial community to the local congregation gathered for worship. Closely related to this, as we noted above, is Newbiggin's failure to integrate the Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological emphases. The Anabaptist emphasis on community and the Reformed emphasis on the cultural calling of believers are insufficiently correlated.

The abiding ecclesiological tension is not only manifest in differing understandings of the *missio Dei* and the nature of the church, it is also found in contrasting understandings of the mission of the church. Bosch characterizes the mission of the church in the cosmocentric paradigm as "a contribution toward the humanization of society," while evangelism and missions, baptism and entry into the church are central to the Christocentric paradigm (Bosch 1991:381).

The debate between Raiser and Newbiggin illustrates this continuing tension. Raiser's understanding of mission is primarily concerned with making a contribution to the *oikoumene* of life in view of the urgent threats that face the world community. Newbiggin's concern is that Raiser ignores the evangelistic task of the church. Commenting on Raiser's book, Newbiggin speaks of the neglect of the missionary and evangelistic task of the church (1994c:5). Newbiggin is concerned that Raiser evidences little concern for the great majority of people in the world who have not confessed Christ, been baptized, and incorporated into the church. Raiser seems to have forgotten that the ecumenical movement finds its historical source in the missionary task of the church. Raiser responds that he is aware that the classical ecumenical paradigm is rooted in a missionary vision of the whole world brought to Christ. Nevertheless there must be a "critical assessment of the universalism of the missionary movement in response to the new challenges of today" (Raiser 1994:50). Specifically, religious pluralism and the threat to all life forms require a "self-critical analysis" (*ibid*). The imperialism of missionary work and the claim for the universal validity of the gospel threaten the unity that is desperately needed in today's world. The urgency of world need demands that the "primary task" of the church be "to further the process of reconstructing sustainable human communities" (Raiser 1997:26). The mission of the church can be captured in terms 'solidarity' and 'dialogue' that contribute "to transformation on the level of systems by changing the cultural consciousness" (Raiser 1997:36, cf. 27). Raiser highlights two ways that the church does this: first, by contributing to "spiritual and moral foundations" for human society (Raiser 1997:18, cf. 26, 31, 36); second, by functioning as salt and light, positively as an illustration of the "household of life" that God wills for society, and negatively as a critical presence (Raiser 1997:45-49).

The contrasting views of mission emerge in the different understandings of dialogue. In his book Raiser labels Newbiggin's understanding of dialogue as "instrumental" and concludes that this clearly demonstrates the limits of the ecumenical movement in

regard to other faiths (Raiser 1991:56). Religious pluralism challenges any “dogmatic judgement” on the place of other religions in God’s saving action in the world that is drawn from a Christocentric position (Raiser 1991:57). The precarious nature of the times requires a dialogue of life rather than Christocentric proclamation. In response, Newbigin understands Raiser’s position to be based on “contemporary talk about the ‘richness of diversity,’ which is proper in respect of some aspects of human life but not proper when it is merely an expression of indifference to truth” (1994c:3). This understanding of dialogue is part of the broader cultural crisis in which modernity is breaking down. The religious pluralism that Raiser describes is the result of the collapse of western self-confidence and the corrosive effects of the acids of modernity (1994f:52). This puts a question mark behind the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. Newbigin labels Raiser’s understanding of dialogue as ‘cocktail party dialogue’ that operates on assumptions other than those revealed in Jesus Christ.

Once again the differences between Raiser and Newbigin spring from differing understandings of Christ. For Newbigin Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of the character of God and His purpose for the world. The incarnation, cross, and resurrection are events of universal significance and validity because Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of world history. The exaltation demonstrates the universality of Christ’s work. If this is true, then the gospel must be proclaimed to all people and to the ends of the earth; evangelism and missions are essential to the mission of the church. By contrast, Raiser’s Christology focusses on the earthly mission of Christ. The atonement is interpreted simply as the price paid for total devotion to God and to the marginalized (Raiser 1991a:59). Over against a Christology “from above” which highlights the divinity of Jesus and his universal significance, Raiser calls for a Christology “from below” that highlights his loving and liberating care for all people. Newbigin stresses both Christ’s universal Lordship and His historical mission; both provide the basis for the mission of the church.

These two elements function ecclesialogically in terms of a twofold connection of the church to Christ. On the one hand, the church is connected to the historical Christ as it is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The title of one of Newbigin’s books, *Mission in Christ’s Way*, summarizes this connection. The verse that captures Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology most effectively also highlights this link: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ The church continues the mission of Jesus in the world. Newbigin highlights the servanthood and suffering involved in following Jesus. Over and over again the centrality of the cross is displayed in Newbigin’s ecclesiology. On the other hand, the church is connected to Christ eschatologically; the church lives in union with the exalted Christ and shares the life of the kingdom. Jesus Christ is *both* an historical figure who is the source of and pattern for the new community *and* the exalted Lord who is alive and the giver of life to the church in the present.

These two elements function missionally in terms of an integrated emphasis on evangelism and missions, on the one hand, and contribution to “humanization” or to the “*oikoumene* of life” on the other. The church is called to continue the mission of Jesus; an important part of that mission is to seek justice and identify with the marginalized (1994k:190-200).<sup>2</sup> The church is also called to bear a universally valid message bound

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<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, in this article entitled *The Ecumenical Future and the WCC: A Missionary’s Dream* Newbigin calls for a missionary encounter with modernity. He highlights two aspects of the church’s mission:

up in the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. If Raiser rejects Christ as the centre of world justice and peace, then he must propose another. The question is a matter of truth. Newbigin believes that in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, God's centre has been revealed. If this is true, evangelism and mission does not stand in tension with addressing issues of religious strife, economic injustice, oppression, and ecological tyranny. In fact, if the gospel is public truth, this provides the only centre. The difference between Raiser and Newbigin is conflicting faith commitments regarding Jesus Christ.

Newbigin's Christological starting point enables him to include *both* missions and evangelism *and* concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. However, a brief critical comment must be registered: once again Newbigin's underdeveloped doctrine of the Father's and Spirit's work in creation—already discussed above—hampers his insights into the church's mission in society.

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'The Calling to Seek Justice' and 'The Calling to Care for the Creation' (1994k:195-200) These are precisely the issues about which Raiser is concerned. In his response to Raiser's critique that the classical ecumenical paradigm cannot deal with these issues adequately, Newbigin states: "If it is true that the missionary movement has been blind to the ecological crisis, that is a grave charge. For myself, I can only say that it has been a constant theme of my speaking and writing, that the world dominance of the idolatry of the free market will, if not reversed, both disintegrate human society and destroy the environment. I regret that the immense labor of the WCC under the banner of 'Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation' has had such meager results, because it has attacked the symptoms and not the cause of the malady.... Idolatry cannot be countered merely by moral protest against its effects. It has to be tackled at its source. That is why I believe the first priority for the churches and for the WCC should be a radically missionary encounter with this ideology.... 'Cocktail-party dialogue' will not do here. We have to find ways of making known the fact that the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus is Lord also of the economic order" (1994f:52).

### 10.3.2. *Relevance in North America*

The book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Guder 1998) presents an opportunity to examine the relevance of Newbigin's ecclesiology in the North American context. The book is clearly indebted to Lesslie Newbigin. The co-ordinator of GOCN/NA and one of the authors of this book, George Hunsberger, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Newbigin (1987). Newbigin's thought is also clearly influential in Darrell Guder's *Be My Witnesses* (1985). The authors of *Missional Church* explicitly acknowledge that debt early in the book (Guder 1998:5). Their ecclesiology can be seen as an attempt to take the insights of Newbigin and formulate them in the North American setting. Moreover, this book represents what might be called an "official ecclesiology" of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. It is co-authored by six leaders of that movement.

Three central features characterize the ecclesiology of this book: it stresses the negative legacy of Christendom, it emphasizes the communal witness of the church, and it accents the critical side of the church's relation to culture. All three of these features are important in Newbigin's writings. Newbigin believes that Christendom is one of the primary factors that cripples a missionary consciousness in the church. He also emphasizes the communal dimension of mission: "The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection" (1989e:137). The importance of a critical stance toward culture is captured by numerous phrases he employs: discriminating non-conformists, radical dissenters, radical critics and misfits with a relationship of conflict, dissenting otherworldliness, and radical discontinuity with its cultural context. Griffioen criticizes Newbigin for his emphasis on the critical role of the church and culture without a corresponding emphasis on the task of cultural development, and Bevans labels Newbigin's contextualization model 'counter-cultural' (Bevans 1993; Griffioen 1996). All of this points to the strong emphasis on the prophetic-critical stance of the church toward its cultural context.

While all three of these ecclesiological features are found within Newbigin's writing, a comparison between Newbigin and *Missional Church* reveals differences at each point. First, Newbigin's analysis of Christendom is much more ambivalent than that of the authors of *Missional Church*. The evaluation of the latter is entirely negative while Newbigin sees many positive features in Christendom. He believes that the Christendom settlement was a worthwhile attempt to translate the universal claims of Christ into social and political terms. Through this thousand-year period the gospel permeated many aspects of social, political, moral, personal, and economic life and western culture continues to live on the capital of that period. Undoubtedly it was his missionary experience in a country where the gospel did not have a lengthy history that enabled Newbigin to evaluate the Christendom experiment much more positively.

For the writers of *Missional Church* Christendom *necessarily* distorts and even eclipses the church's mission. Acceptance of power contradicts the posture to which the church is called. For Newbigin Christendom posed many dangers to the church's mission—dangers that were unfortunately realized. Nevertheless Christendom provided an opportunity for the church to work out the claims of Christ's Lordship in its mission.

He believes that faithfulness to the mission of the church demanded that it not refuse responsibility for the public order. Faithfulness to Jesus who was Lord of history and culture required the church to bring politics under the authority of Christ in spite of the dangers and temptations. Part of the history and legacy of Christendom is what Oliver O'Donovan calls the 'obedience of the rulers', the fruit of which remains in the West to the present day (O'Donovan 1996:212-216). *Missional Church* leans toward an interpretation of Christendom that neglects important emphases in Newbigin's writing.

Second, while Newbigin affirms the importance of the communal witness of the church, he believes that the primary missionary encounter between the church and the world takes place in the callings of individual believers in society. On the one hand, "the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order" (1991h:85). On the other hand, the church must "equip its members for active and informed participation in the public life of society in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that participation" (1991h:81); believers are to act as "subversive agents" in a culture shaped by a story that is in tension with the gospel. Christians ought to seek responsible positions of power and leadership to shape the public life of culture (1991h:84). Newbigin does not contrast the individual and communal dimensions of the church's mission but maintains them with equal emphasis.

The most striking contrast between Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology and the ecclesiology formulated in *The Missional Church* is found at this point. Newbigin believes that the primary way in which the church pursues its missional calling in culture is by "continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens" (1989e:139). Here, in the life of believers in culture, the primary missionary engagement takes place. This insight permeates the rest of his ecclesiology. By contrast, *Missional Church* does not mention the mission of believers in culture. This remarkable difference between Newbigin and the authors of *Missional Church* shows up at other points as well. For Newbigin the importance of the mission of the laity demanded ecclesial structures that would equip them for their task. Yet, in an otherwise helpful discussion in *Missional Church*, there is no mention of ecclesial structures that would prepare the laity for their callings (Guder 1998:221-247). When Newbigin focussed his ministry on training leadership in Madras, a constant refrain was how to find ways to enable the laity in their callings. In *Missional Church* we find an excellent discussion of leadership but, again, no mention of the training of the laity for their callings in public life (Guder 1998:183-220). What burned brightly in the heart of Newbigin and found expression throughout his missionary ecclesiology is noticeably absent from *Missional Church*. There, emphasis on the communal dimension of the church's mission has eclipsed the mission of the laity—the place Newbigin believed the primary missionary encounter takes place.

Newbigin's inconsistent understanding of the church, the absence of a theological articulation of cultural involvement, his lack of integration of the positive and negative features of the church's mission in Christendom, and his inability to sufficiently integrate the communal dimensions of Anabaptist ecclesiology and the cultural dimensions of Reformed ecclesiology, have contributed to this eclipse of the mission of believers in culture in *Missional Church*.

A third difference between GOCN/NA and Newbigin regards the latter's emphasis on the importance of a positive cultural calling of Christians as members of society

along with a critical stance. There are two sides to the calling of the church in its cultural context: solidarity and separation; affirmative involvement and critical challenge; cultural development and antithesis. The authors of *Missional Church* have highlighted the second of these pairs; they tend to label any attempt at exercising culturally formative power as 'functional Christendom' (Guder 1998:116). We find an allusion to "nonconformed engagement" but the fear of cultural power cuts off any development of this topic in terms of responsible involvement (Guder 1998:117). Strong statements on the church as an alternative community highlight the prophetic task of the church but little guidance is offered for the positive participation of the church in cultural development. On the one hand, mission to the culture is not an attempt "to wield power in the dominant culture, but instead to demonstrate by the church's own life together the renewing and healing power of God's new community" (Guder 1998:116). On the other hand, the authors recognize that it is impossible to withdraw from the culture and that the vast majority of the church's life will be lived as part of the dominant culture. Questions arise: What does it mean for the church to be a "distinctive culture" (Guder 1998:114; cf. Clapp 1996)? Clearly the church does not develop its own comprehensive language or begin to develop an alternative economic system. The authors acknowledge that the church participates in the language, economic system, customs, and social arrangements of the dominant culture. How then are individual members of the church to live under the rule of Jesus Christ in their lives that they share with the dominant culture? The authors argue that the "church as an alternative community can make a powerful witness when it chooses to live differently from the dominant society even at just a few key points. An important task of the church is to discern those key points at which to be different from the evil of the world" (Guder 1998:127). While this emphasis on "points of dissent" (Guder 1998:127) or "key points of difference" (Guder 1998:129) is helpful, there is no guidance for the people of God on how they can be an 'alternative community' in the rest of their lives. The formulation that reduces mission to the gathered, communal representation of God's people does not offer any guidance on how they can live under Christ's Lordship in the majority part of their lives that they share with the dominant culture. In fact, Newbigin's unbearable tension is relieved by reducing a missional challenge to a few key points of dissent.

In a sympathetic critique of *Missional Church*, the Roman Catholic William McConville points to the dangers of the formulation of 'alternative community.' He contrasts the views of *Missional Church* with the Catholic tradition, in which there is a more positive stance toward cultural structures within creation. Thus culture is viewed more optimistically; it can be transformed. McConville warns that undue emphasis on *alternative* community can transform the church into a *parallel* community, one that attempts to be a distinct culture and exist alongside of the dominant culture.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>These comments were made in the context of a GOCN/NA meeting on 24 October 1997. For a more critical view of Christendom by a Roman Catholic, see Karl Rahner 1974.

To be sure, none of the authors of *Missional Church* wants this. Yet it is surprising that a book so indebted to Newbigin would lose such an important strain of his missionary ecclesiology and practice.<sup>4</sup> In Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology the importance of involvement in cultural development is manifest. A brief look at the emphasis of his missionary experience confirms this fact. While in India Newbigin continually emphasized the task of the church in the project of nation-building. Upon his return to Britain, his call for the church's involvement in the public square led him to articulate ways the church could be involved in the economic, educational, political, and social life of western countries.

At least two factors account for the neglect on cultural involvement in *Missional Church*. To begin with, the historical situation of the North American church has elicited the needed emphasis on a critical posture toward culture. The authors of *Missional Church* have responded to a crucial need in North American church life. The emphasis on the antithetical side of the church's calling in North America today is entirely understandable and, indeed, strategic. When a fat man is sitting on one side of a seesaw it is necessary to jump very hard on the other end.<sup>5</sup> The weight of the Christendom tradition has led to a loss of distinctive identity in the church and this requires "jumping hard" on the critical and communal aspects of the church's mission in our day.

The problem of a loss of critical tension in the western church emerges in Konrad Raiser's contrast between the missionary situations of the West and the Third World. He distinguishes between two different forms of missionary witness (Raiser 1994b:628-629). There is a difference between the missionary situation in Europe and North America on the one hand, and Africa and Asia on the other. While the central missionary problem of the "younger churches" is the experience of *cultural estrangement*—the gospel is felt to be a foreign element that disturbs cultural traditions—the central missionary problem of the "older churches" is the *cultural captivity* of the gospel. In other words, in Africa and Asia the problem is for the gospel to be at home in culture. In the West the gospel has become absorbed and co-opted into culture. This is the fruit of the Christendom legacy of the West. In this light the emphasis of *Missional Church* is timely.

The danger of *Missional Church* is that it develops a needed emphasis into an entire ecclesiology. This emphasis will, of course, open up many insights crucial for the

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<sup>4</sup>In an article published several years later, George Hunsberger includes this missing ecclesial dimension in a list of features of the missional church. Under the fourth feature he writes: "There is harmony between the missional church's gathered moments (for worship, discernment, and action) and its dispersed life within the wider social fabric" (Hunsberger 1999:4).

<sup>5</sup>I borrow this delightful metaphor from Jack Thompson of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He used this phrase in a lecture at the Overseas Ministries Study Center Student Seminars on World Mission in January 2000.

present, but it risks losing other Scriptural emphases. Newbigin has demonstrated that the critical dimension of the church's cultural task can be emphasized without losing the importance of involvement in the cultural development of a nation.

A second factor that has led to the difference between Newbigin and the authors of *Missional Church* is found in Newbigin's theory of contextualization; his *theoretical* articulation is one-sided. While both involvement and antithesis are found in Newbigin's writing, his theory of contextualization—a theory that has become foundational for the GOCN/NA—highlights the antithetical side of cultural responsibility. A comparison between Griffioen and Hunsberger on their response to the structure of the book *Foolishness to the Greeks* is instructive. Griffioen divides Newbigin's book into two parts: the first part of *Foolishness to the Greeks* he sees as devoted to a critique of idolatry, while the latter part develops the more positive role of cultural development with humanity as manager of creation. Griffioen's complaint is that Newbigin's *theoretical* development of the church's involvement in culture emphasizes exclusively the critical side while his practical proposals for politics bring both the critical and constructive side of cultural participation into view (Griffioen 1996:12, 13). In a similar vein, Hunsberger divides the book between Newbigin's theoretical articulation of contextualization and its concrete outworking. Like Griffioen, Hunsberger sees the first part of the book articulating Newbigin's theory of contextualization and the later chapters elaborating that stance. However, in contrast to Griffioen Hunsberger believes that the concrete elaboration is consistent with the theoretical formulation.

What was especially striking about his beginning point was that in what followed Newbigin worked in terms of the approach he had announced. Brevity about his method at the beginning did not mean for him a failure of memory when he employed the method. Successful or not in the project he was undertaking, he at least was sustaining an effort to be faithful to his beginning principles.... Without appreciating how thoroughly ingrained Newbigin is in the approach announced at the outset, it is impossible to judge him fairly—or to follow his lead genuinely (Hunsberger 1998:2)!

For Griffioen there is a tension between the first and second part. In the first part, the critical stance dominates; only in the second part does the constructive side come into view. For Hunsberger the second part of the book is a consistent elaboration of the method formulated in the first part. It is not surprising, then, that Hunsberger, who wants to follow the lead of Newbigin, will also emphasize the critical dimension of the church's witness in culture.

Much of the ecclesiology in *Missional Church* is attractive and compelling. The image of an 'alternative community' is a timely one that has potential to galvanize the church in North America in its missionary responsibility. The elaboration of the danger of functional Christendom for a missionary church is insightful and important. The emphases on the communal and critical dimensions of the church's calling in the world need to be heard in a church where individualism and conformity to the world is rampant. *Missional Church* has carried forward important emphases of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, contextualizing them for the North American situation. However, equally important emphases within Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology have been neglected—in part because of Newbigin's own inconsistencies. The calling of the laity and the responsibility of the church for cultural development, fuelled by a

recognition of the positive side of mission of the church in Christendom, are themes that also need to be heard. *Missional Church* is a pioneering effort and not a definitive ecclesiology. If the term 'alternative community' could be applied to the church *as the new humankind*, then the image could be employed in working out the neglected dimensions of the church's task that have been highlighted in this section. In other words, alternative community needs to be elaborated also in terms of the calling of believers in the task of cultural development. There is a need for a postmodern model of mission in the public square that moves beyond the contrasting models of the modern period. Perhaps this will come, in the Protestant church at least, from a new model that creatively integrates at least the Scriptural emphases of the Anabaptist and the Reformed understandings of mission while avoiding their corresponding weaknesses. The germ of such an ecclesiological model can be found in Newbigin's writings. But much more work remains to be done.

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