

MISSIONARIES IN OUR OWN BACK YARD:
LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S CONCEPT OF THE MISSIONARY CONGREGATION
AS A PRECURSOR TO THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

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1. Introduction

The term 'missional' has become commonplace in recent ecclesiological literature, both popular and academic, though its meaning is often vague and its history not well understood. This paper examines the roots of the missional church concept in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Particularly relevant are Newbigin's insights regarding Western culture, his understanding of mission, and his vision for a missionary encounter between the gospel and Western culture. I will argue that while the missional church concept continues to develop and gain in popularity (in the writings of the Gospel and Our Culture Network and other authors), Newbigin remains a rich resource and an important potential dialogue partner for this ongoing discussion. Moreover, a fresh interaction with Newbigin's writings can help us recover some important themes and emphases about the nature and mission of the church that are underdeveloped (or even ignored) in much of the present missional church literature. Newbigin can therefore offer a corrective to the movement he inspired.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) was educated at Cambridge University and subsequently commissioned for missionary service by the Church of Scotland in 1936.¹ For the next four decades, Newbigin served as a missionary in India, where he sought to communicate the gospel of Christ faithfully and respectfully within a Hindu setting. He also worked passionately to unify the church, which at the time existed in various scattered groups of

¹ Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology," 523.

Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans.² To this end, Newbigin's work was crucial in the forming of the Church of South India (CSI—a venture that joined the aforementioned groups together), which elected him a bishop in 1947.

Newbigin returned to England in 1974 and for the next two decades he published a number of books and articles dealing with the question of how an authentic encounter between the gospel and Western culture could take place. His extensive experience as a missionary in a non-Western country provided him with keen insights into the way in which the gospel had become assimilated into the Western worldview, so that it was read and proclaimed as determined by modern Western assumptions. As Lamin Sanneh writes:

Newbigin's theological critique drew its power from his own rootedness in English life and culture and his own experience of having lived for a long time in another culture, learned its language, expressed his faith in that new medium, and subsequently reflected on its implications for other cradle Christians in the West.³

Particularly, Newbigin noticed immediately upon his return to England the seeming inability of Christians to avoid accommodating the reigning assumptions of “rational objectivity” and “personal choice.”⁴ Thus, Newbigin began his project of exposing the underlying presuppositions of modern Western culture, many of which rested on ultimate assumptions or faith commitments that were incompatible with the biblical worldview. In so doing, he encouraged Christians to live out their faith in confident humility, knowing that there could be no other ultimate authority but Jesus Christ himself.

² Hunsberger, “Biography as Missiology,” 523.

³ Sanneh, “Lesslie Newbigin,” 278.

⁴ Hunsberger, “Biography as Missiology,” 527.

2. Key Ideas Regarding Culture

The Private-Public Dichotomy

According to Lesslie Newbigin, one of the fundamental characteristics of modern Western culture is the separation of public and private spheres of life, and, corresponding with this, the separation of facts and values.⁵ The public world, which includes among other things the workplace or professional setting, the legislature, and the educational system, operates with what we call facts or truth claims. There is an assumption that decisions in the public realm are made reasonably in accordance with verifiable evidence. Truth claims can be proven right or wrong, true or false, by examining the facts. It is inappropriate to appeal to religious values or beliefs in the public arena, because such appeals cannot be validated scientifically. Conversely, the private world of values, opinions, and beliefs is governed by personal choice or desire. Just as it is considered inappropriate to apply personal categories of values and beliefs to the public realm, so is it unacceptable to apply public categories of truth or fact to the private realm. The implication of this public-private dichotomy is that religious claims are divorced from truth claims. Consequently, it is perceived as improper or even offensive to evaluate as right or wrong, true or false, the values and religious beliefs of others. Whereas for public life the ruling principle is truth, for private life “the operative principle is pluralism.”⁶ Newbigin writes:

It is one of the key features of our culture, and one that we shall have to examine in some depth, that we make a sharp distinction between a world of what we call ‘values’ and a world of what we call ‘facts’. In the former world we are pluralists; values are a matter of personal choice. In the latter we are not; facts are facts, whether you like them or not.⁷

⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 14.

⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 17.

⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 7.

This public-private dichotomy is inherited from Enlightenment thought, as typified in Immanuel Kant's separation of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds,⁸ and is ultimately rooted in classical Greek thought, which "for all its splendid achievements, had been unable to overcome dichotomies between being and becoming, between reason and will, between the intelligible or spiritual world and the material world known by the senses."⁹

According to Kant (1724-1804), we have no way of accessing the noumenal realm (the unseen world, beyond sensual perception), which is to say that we have no means for gaining direct knowledge about the essence of something (i.e., a *thing in itself*). We have access only to our perception of it, which is mediated to us by our senses. Thus, the perceptual world as we experience it is a mediated world, which has been re-created for us by our senses. Kant calls it the phenomenal realm.¹⁰ Since knowledge of this realm is derived from sensual perception, each individual, using her or his innate capacity for reason, plays a crucial role in discovering and determining truth. Kant's insight provided individuals with a new sense of intellectual freedom and autonomy. One no longer needed to rely on intermediaries, such as tradition or revelation in order to know what and how to think and believe. Indeed, each person has the responsibility to discover the truth for herself and to heed Kant's exhortation, "Dare to know!"¹¹ Our only measure for determining whether or not our perceptions of this world are accurate is to verify them with the perceptions of others. Such interaction guards us against a radical subjectivism, in which each of us constructs our own truth based on our own sensual interpretations without regard for the observations of others. The necessity of perceivable and repeatable observations for the discerning of truth is, of course, a fundamental insight upon which the scientific method

⁸ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 77.

⁹ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 15-16.

¹⁰ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 77.

¹¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 25.

is based. It also accords well with Western democratic ideals for the governance of public life. However, there is a problem when attempting to employ such criteria to values, opinions, and beliefs. Since these belong to the world of ideas, the realm of the noumenal, they cannot be observed or perceived scientifically with the senses and, therefore, cannot be verified or agreed upon publicly. Rather, they are relegated to the sphere of private choice—hence the great divide between public facts and private values.

Abandonment of Teleology

Newbigin's second observation in his analysis is that modern Western culture has abandoned notions of teleology or purpose, which dominated the medieval worldview, and focuses instead on cause and effect relationships. Newbigin describes this feature as the “central citadel of our culture” and explains it as follows:

...the belief that the real world, the reality with which we have to do, is a world that is to be understood in terms of efficient causes and not of final causes, a world that is not governed by an intelligible purpose, and thus a world in which the answer to the question of what is good has to be left to the private opinion of each individual and cannot be included in the body of accepted facts that control public life.¹²

This movement away from teleology also has roots in the Enlightenment. Since efficient causes can be observed with the senses while final causes cannot, the former belongs to the phenomenal world while the latter belongs to the noumenal world. Thus, the public-private dichotomy and the abandonment of teleology go hand in hand, as both are rooted in the phenomenal-noumenal dichotomy. Newbigin also notes that the ideas of Isaac Newton (1642-1747) fueled the abandonment of teleology in Enlightenment thought. Newton viewed the universe as a machine with consistent and observable laws and mechanisms that could be discovered through human investigation.¹³ By discovering the immediate cause of something,

¹² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 79.

¹³ Grenz, “Postmodernism and the Future,” 324.

one could sufficiently explain it. Newbigin explains, “All causes, therefore, are adequate to the effects they produce, and all things can be in principle adequately explained by the causes that produce them.”¹⁴

The movement away from teleology provided the modern world with a number of benefits, as Newbigin admits: “The breakthrough in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that gave birth to modern science would have been impossible without the methodological elimination of purpose from the study of physics and astronomy.”¹⁵ This is particularly true with regards to Greek teleology, which was infused with Platonic ideals and the notion of fate. For example, motion could be explained only with reference to purpose, as “a movement from the less good to the good.”¹⁶ From a scientific standpoint, such an explanation is obviously inadequate. Instead, we are required to identify the immediate cause that produced the effect in question, for if we are successful in finding direct causes we can then reproduce their effects upon demand. This has obvious implications for the area of medicine. Rather than attempting to postulate the ultimate purpose for a sickness (i.e., it is the curse of God, demonic activity, etc.), which is not observable, one should attempt to isolate a direct causal link through trial-and-error observation. Likewise, rather than attempting to find a cure through speculative or superstitious means, which are devised in order to respond to non-observable purposes, one should search methodically and empirically for treatments that produce direct positive results. Thus, one makes the transition from medieval medicine to modern medicine.

However, Newbigin points out that a complete abandonment of teleology is not only inaccurate but also detrimental. First of all, to explain something solely in terms of direct causal relationships is insufficient. For example, while one could describe a lecture solely in terms of

¹⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 24.

¹⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 35.

¹⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 35.

vocal function, explaining the biomechanics of speech, muscular changes, and the physics of sound, Newbigin asserts that “no intelligent person would accept it as the explanation of what was happening.”¹⁷ A meaningful explanation would have to include a discussion of the purpose or intention of the speaker to communicate something to an audience. Similarly, after listening to a great pianist one could intelligibly describe the event “simply as an example of the operation of mechanical, chemical, and electrical principles,” but surely something would be missing! Indeed, such a description could even be given “by a person who is tone-deaf and for whom a Mozart sonata is merely a jumble of noises.”¹⁸ Again, one must refer to purpose (not to mention such intangible or non-empirical effects like the moving of one’s affections or spirit) in order for the recounting to be complete. As a final example, proper functioning of machines or tools cannot be identified, nor can we ascertain whether a device is working properly, without referring to purpose. Thus, Newbigin makes the following remark:

From the factual statement ‘this watch has lost only five seconds in two years’, it is proper to move to a judgment of value: ‘this is a good watch;’ provided—and only provided—that the word ‘watch’ defines an object whose purpose is to keep time and not a collection of pieces of metal to be used for any purpose its owner as a private person may care to entertain, such as decorating the living room or throwing at the cat.¹⁹

Newbigin goes on to expose a disturbing implication of the abandonment of purpose, namely, that without reference to purpose, value judgments cannot be explicated from facts.²⁰ If this is true, Newbigin argues, values are necessarily driven out of the public sphere. Each person has the freedom to define purpose in his or her own way. Ethical decisions in various areas—bioethics, sexual conduct, family values, and the development of new technologies, to name a few—are reduced to an egocentric pragmatism, whether individually or corporately. Consequently, we create methods for reaching our goals simply because we *can*, and because we

¹⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 34.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 57.

¹⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 37.

²⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 37.

stand to make a profit. Newbigin remarks, “We display astounding brilliance in devising means for any end we desire, but we have no rational way of choosing what ends are worth desiring.”²¹

We become specialists in answering how-to? questions, but rarely ask the question why?

A second problem associated with the loss of teleology, and the mechanistic world corresponding with it, is the increasing fragmentation of life.²² Newbigin remarks:

Western European civilization has witnessed a sort of atomising process, in which the individual is more and more set free from his natural setting in family and neighbourhood, and becomes a sort of replaceable unit in the social machine....He is in every context a more and more anonymous and replaceable part, the perfect incarnation of the rationalist conception of man.²³

A typical example of this in the industrial age is the factory worker who is removed from larger questions of purpose and must focus on some particular task, which is usually menial and sometimes even dangerous. In addition, the modern worker spends most of his or her time removed from home, family, and local community.²⁴ This, in turn, has implications for gender roles, parental responsibility, and the division of labour in the home. One might ask whether this mechanistic view of work is effective or desirable. However, the answer to this question depends upon how one defines the end or purpose of work.

A third problem with dismissing questions of purpose as irrelevant or unnecessary is that it leads to the belief that life ultimately has no meaning and is not directed toward a final goal. Prior to the modern era there was a widespread belief in the provision of God and the eventual consummation and perfection of all things according to God’s design. In other words, eschatologically speaking, there was an expectation that God would bring the world to an end, at which time humanity would realize its final destiny in heaven. However, in the mechanistic world, which is devoid of purpose and beyond the direct intervention of God, the importance of

²¹ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

²² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 29.

²³ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 13.

²⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 32.

human action in the present life is conclusive. The Enlightenment's confidence in humanity's ability to employ reason (apart from tradition and religion) in accomplishing its own ends has led to the modern doctrine of progress, the belief that human mastery of the world will eventually conquer all forms of evil.²⁵ Rather than placing its hope in a future heaven, humankind is deemed capable of achieving a present heaven on earth. "No longer would it be a gift of God from heaven; it would be the final triumph of the science and skill of the enlightened peoples of the earth."²⁶ This belief became particularly dangerous when the hopes of a heaven on earth, combined with the doctrine of progress, were vested in the modern nation-state. Such an expectation placed upon a corporate entity, which could take on its own personality and outlive its human inhabitants, "opens the way for the kind of totalitarian ideologies that use the power of the state to extinguish the rights of the living for the sake of the supposed happiness of those yet unborn."²⁷ Thus, the twentieth century witnessed some of the worst atrocities imaginable, including oppressive regimes, devastating world wars, and the creation of weapons of mass destruction.

Captivity to Western Culture

Newbigin's third observation of the modern Western world is that its understanding of Christianity and the nature and function of the church are shaped, even determined, by its own cultural assumptions. To illustrate his point he invokes Peter Berger's concept of a plausibility structure, which is defined as "a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question."²⁸ In other words, a plausibility structure is a network of basic assumptions upon which a society builds its view of

²⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 32.

²⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 28.

²⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 28.

²⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 10.

reality. These assumptions have been enshrined within a culture through its history and traditions, and continue to govern what is acceptable in the present. Presently in the West, the reigning plausibility structure for public life is the modern scientific worldview, while for private life the reigning plausibility structure is *that there is no plausibility structure* (i.e., no guiding system to evaluate claims of values, opinion, and beliefs). Newbigin clarifies: “. . .not that there is no plausibility structure and thus we make our own choices. This *is* the ruling plausibility structure, and we make our choices within its parameters.”²⁹ Typically, the church’s response has been to adapt its witness of the gospel in light of these plausibility structures. One tendency is to accept the public-private dichotomy and, consequently, to retreat into the private sphere of life. One of the most influential advocates of this position was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who sought to protect private religious affections from the critical and empirical questions of “the objective consciousness.”³⁰ For him, statements made about the “attributes and acts of God or about the constitution of the world” do not properly belong to theology, but to metaphysics and the natural sciences.³¹ The other tendency is to attempt to explain or defend the gospel in terms acceptable to the dominant culture. Here, an attempt is made to show how unexplained facts of the Christian faith (those which seem to be at odds with the culture) actually fit into the culture’s worldview.³² For example, many attempts have been made to demonstrate how miraculous events that are recorded in the Bible may be explained scientifically.³³

For Newbigin, the problem with the two aforementioned responses is that not only do they fail to address the foundational assumptions of our culture, they even reinforce them. Yet, this error seems somewhat inevitable. We are predisposed to bringing our own questions and

²⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 14.

³⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 44.

³¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 44.

³² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 22.

³³ See, for example, Stephen Jay Gould’s discussion of Creationism in his essay, “Creationism: Genesis vs. Geology,” 126-35.

issues to the gospel, and these predispositions have been shaped by our culture and the reigning plausibility structures operative within it. Therefore, our interpretation and presentation of the gospel is predetermined by the terms and conditions of our culture and by the kinds of questions it deems acceptable. But what if it is precisely these terms, conditions, and questions that are being called into question? Is it possible to speak of a genuine encounter between the gospel and our culture?³⁴ Newbigin asks, “The Bible and the church are part of our culture. How shall a part of our culture make claims against our culture?”³⁵ His response to these questions lays the foundation for his concept of the missionary congregation (a precursor to the missional church). In order to comprehend his response, and subsequently his depiction of the church, it is necessary first to examine his understanding of mission.

3. *Newbigin’s Understanding of Mission*

When the Christian church engages in mission, according to Newbigin, it is not merely following a command (though mission is imperative, i.e., the Great Commission in Mt 28:16-20). Such a narrow view of mission “tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel.”³⁶ Primarily, mission results from an explosion of joy in the church community, which overflows into the world.³⁷ It is the manifestation of the church’s experience of the presence and empowering of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, it is a natural response to the supernatural activity of God. When the church has been granted a taste of God’s presence, God’s power, God’s grace, and God’s reconciliatory and unifying love, it is transformed into a living testimony to the gospel. When it exhibits the selfless and sacrificial love of Christ, living not for itself but for the sake of its neighbours, it lives provocatively as a

³⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 43.

³⁵ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 43-44.

³⁶ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116.

³⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116.

sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.³⁸ When God makes God's presence known in this manner people start asking questions, and Newbigin finds it striking "that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church."³⁹

There are a number of components to Newbigin's missiology. Crucial among them are his views concerning the doctrine of election, the nature of conversion, the distinction between the agent and the locus of mission, and the place of discipleship. I will now examine each of these in turn.

The Significance of Election

For Newbigin, election is at the core of the biblical story.⁴⁰ According to George Hunsberger, there are three reasons why election is necessary in Newbigin's missiology. The first reason is that the nature and destiny of humanity is relational. "Human nature is by nature historical and social, each person intimately connected to each 'other.'"⁴¹ The goal of election, therefore, is not to preserve a concept or system of ideals, but to create a holy community. This community is not a human-made group of individuals, in which each has chosen to associate with other like-minded people, but is the result of the gracious and sovereign act of God. As such, it is a foretaste of the world to come, in which people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9 NIV) will be gathered together as a community of perfect love.

Newbigin is insistent on this point:

The thread which binds the whole Bible story together is emphatically not the history of an idea but the history of a people. Let me put this sharply by saying that, in the Bible,

³⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229. Elsewhere, Newbigin writes, "The life of the Church is a real participation in the life of the Triune God, wherein all life and all glory consist in self-giving, a *koinonia* wherein no one will ever say that aught of the things which he possesses is his own. The ultimate mystery of the Church's being is the mystery of love, and love 'seeketh not its own'" (*Household of God*, 129).

³⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116.

⁴⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 27.

⁴¹ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 103.

the people of God is at no time conceived of as a voluntary association of those who have agreed with one another in accepting and carrying out certain convictions about God. It is conceived of as something which has been constituted by the mighty act of God, an act springing from His pure grace, and preceding the first dawns of man's understanding of it and acceptance of its implications.⁴²

The second reason for the necessity of election is that the nature and character of God is relational. As a personal being, God can be known only in a manner conducive with personal knowing, which “comes by the free choice to entrust such knowledge of oneself to another.”⁴³ Since God is a person, we cannot come to know God simply by reading books, by conjecturing and philosophizing, or even by searching for and praying to God. All of these may be fruitful if—and only if—God makes God's self known to us, which is a choice that God alone can make. God is not an object to be studied, quantified, and manipulated, but the divine Subject, the One who calls all things into being. For support of this relational view of God, Newbigin appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity. He notes that God is not understood as “a timeless, passionless monad beyond all human knowing, but as a trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit.”⁴⁴ Further, “this understanding is not the result of speculative thought. It has been given by revelation in the actual historical life and work of the Son.”⁴⁵ Thus, in reflecting upon the personal nature of God, Newbigin weaves together the themes of mission, election, and Trinity, such that his missiology becomes, in the words of Hunsberger, “virtually an exposition of election.”⁴⁶

The third reason for the necessity of election is that the nature of salvation, according to God's intention, is relational. In Newbigin's writings, “salvation means ‘wholeness,’ which must include the restoration of social justice and interpersonal relationships.”⁴⁷ Unfortunately, in the West, the way in which the gospel is often conceived and portrayed betrays a form of

⁴² Newbigin, *Household of God*, 62.

⁴³ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 103.

⁴⁴ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 26.

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 26.

⁴⁶ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 67.

⁴⁷ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 103.

reductionism. For example, Western Evangelicalism has been inclined to reduce the gospel to the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the soul. Conversely, Newbigin asserts that the gospel is *personal* in nature, a revelation of God Himself, not “the revelation of a timeless truth, namely, that God forgives sin.”⁴⁸ The popular interpretation of the gospel tends also to be individualistic, emphasizing one’s relationship with God as the crux of the gospel, while considering relationships with others and action for social justice as being of secondary importance or even superfluous. Such a narrow emphasis results from an unbiblical view of humanity, in which “each human being is to be ultimately understood as an independent spiritual monad....”⁴⁹ In addition, it neglects the corporate nature of both Fall (i.e., alienation from God and others) and redemption (i.e., restoration to wholeness).⁵⁰ If such an individualistic view of humanity were true, election would not be necessary. God would then approach each person as an isolated individual outside of a community context to reconcile that individual to God’s self.

However, as Newbigin reminds us, we must recognize “...that Christianity is, in its very heart and essence, not a disembodied spirituality, but life in a visible fellowship...nothing less than the closest and most binding association of men with one another....”⁵¹ In a relational view of humanity, election is intrinsic to the transmission of the gospel. Hunsberger points out that this is Newbigin’s “inner logic of salvation,” in which “by the very transmission of [the gospel] from one person to another, reconciliation between the partners in communication takes place.”⁵² For Newbigin, the purpose of election is that those who are chosen are called to be a blessing to others,⁵³ to make God’s saving intentions known to all, but “the blessing itself would be negated

⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 48.

⁴⁹ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 70.

⁵⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 140-41.

⁵¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 72-73.

⁵² Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 50.

⁵³ A consistent theme in Newbigin’s works is that the purpose of election is for service, not for privilege (*Household of God*, 101). It is the process of choosing and narrowing, of calling a particular people, to be a blessing to all and not to be exclusive

if it were not given and received in a way that binds each to the other.”⁵⁴ Thus, for Newbigin, election plays both a reconciliatory and a constitutive role in the creation of the church, and is “at the heart of his ecclesiology.”⁵⁵

The Nature of Conversion

Although Newbigin is cautious of overly individualistic interpretations of the gospel, he nevertheless believes that personal conversion is a crucial component of mission. He writes, “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.”⁵⁶ Thus, his understanding of conversion plays an important part in his formulation of the missionary congregation concept. This understanding has three major components. First, conversion is a radical shift in a person’s mindset or understanding. It is not merely turning away from the things that a society regards as evil (these views are founded on society’s values and plausibility structures), but reveals a new vantage point, which proves “that the world’s idea of what is sin and what is righteousness is wrong (John 16:8).”⁵⁷ This new vantage point rests on an entirely different foundation (Christ) than that of the world. Therefore, there is no way to traverse reasonably from the old worldview to the new by means of logical deduction, because the two worldviews rest on entirely different commitments and ultimate assumptions. By way of illustration, Newbigin likens conversion to a paradigm shift (terminology borrowed from Thomas Kuhn⁵⁸) similar to the movement in physics from Newton to Einstein. He explains:

beneficiaries. It is a particular act with universal intentions (*Open Secret*, 31-32, 68-71). Whenever the doctrine of election has been misused, having been interpreted as granting exclusive benefits and privileges to the elect, it has fallen into disrepute (*Open Secret*, 17). Newbigin notes that the Old Testament prophets were constantly chastising the people of Israel for holding such a view (*Open Secret*, 32-33, 73).

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 71.

⁵⁵ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 50.

⁵⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 121.

⁵⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

⁵⁸ Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

My point here is simply this: while there is a radical discontinuity in the sense that the new theory is not reached by any process of logical reasoning from the old, there is also a continuity in the sense that the old can be rationally understood from the point of view of the new.⁵⁹

While it is impossible to make sense of Einstein's physics within the framework of Newtonian assumptions, the newer, "more inclusive rationality" of Einstein is capable of accounting for the observations and theories of Newton.⁶⁰ Similarly, Newbigin argues that, through a radical conversion of the mind, the gospel provides a "more inclusive rationality," which can make sense of the world but cannot be deduced from the world's assumptions.⁶¹ Ultimately this radical shift amounts to a revolutionary change in a person's loyalty or allegiance. For the believer, Jesus is the ultimate or foundational commitment; his claim upon the believer cannot be validated by appealing to some other authority.⁶² One does not reason oneself toward Christ, but from and through him one uses reason to make sense of the world. Newbigin asserts, "Indeed, the simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point."⁶³ Yet, it is easy for the church to forget "how strange, and even repelling, the Gospel is to the ordinary common sense of the world,"⁶⁴ to forget that it is indeed "foolishness to the Greeks," and to presume that its methods and efforts can bring about the conversion of others. Such forgetting commonly takes place in the Western church.

How then is conversion accomplished? According to Newbigin, "it is primarily and essentially a personal event in which a human person is laid hold of by the living Lord Jesus Christ at the very center of the person's being and turned toward him in loving trust and

⁵⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 52.

⁶⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53.

⁶¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 53.

⁶² Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 15.

⁶³ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 11.

⁶⁴ Newbigin, "Context and Conversion," 301.

obedience.”⁶⁵ Thus, a second major component of Newbigin’s understanding of conversion is that it is achieved by the revealing action of God. Accordingly, Newbigin underscores the importance of two factors, namely, revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶

John Williams notes that “Newbigin’s proposals rely heavily on an understanding of biblical revelation as an interpretive key to all of experience and to the meaning and purpose of history.”⁶⁷ I agree with this assessment, and would further point out that his view of conversion is very much interrelated with his elucidation of the doctrine of election and the personal nature of God. Since God is a personal being, God must provide us with the means, the content, and the context for knowing him. And since the nature of humanity and salvation is communal and relational, knowledge of God comes to us from other people through whom God has chosen to reveal God’s self. Furthermore, it is *biblical* revelation that Newbigin emphasizes (though he avoids fundamentalist-liberal debates over inerrancy, which he feels are overly rationalistic), as opposed to various forms of natural religion. His disdain for natural religion reveals similarities to Hume’s attack on arguments for the existence of God based on analogy or design.⁶⁸ Newbigin writes:

There is a very long history to remind us of what happens when nature is our ultimate point of reference, from the Ba’al worshippers of the Old Testament to the worshippers of blood and soil in Nazi Germany. Nature knows no ethics. There is no right and wrong in nature; the controlling realities are power and fertility. Nature sometimes has a charming smile, but her teeth are terrible.⁶⁹

The decisive prominence Newbigin gives to revelation does not imply on his part a naïve stance against reason, nor does it negate the necessity of logical argument. “It is not (as so often said) a question of reason versus revelation. It is a question of the data upon which reason has to

⁶⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 139.

⁶⁶ For Newbigin, the Holy Spirit is intimately involved as the means through which a person is laid hold of by the living Christ. He writes, “It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ” (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 118-19).

⁶⁷ Williams, “Gospel as Public Truth,” 371.

⁶⁸ Hume, *Dialogues*, 77, 88-91.

⁶⁹ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 62.

work.”⁷⁰ Indeed, “reason can only work with the data that it is given.”⁷¹ It is a means, not an end; it is a tool, not a final product.

Moreover, Newbigin argues that the work of the Holy Spirit is essential in conversion. “It is the Spirit who brings about conversion, the Spirit who equips those who are called with the gifts needed for all the varied forms of ministry, and the Spirit who guides the church into all the truth.”⁷² The Spirit is the agent of God’s electing, calling, and revealing. Therefore, conversion is a supernatural work and not a human accomplishment, always involving an element of mystery and a taste of the miraculous.⁷³ It is the Spirit who creates the church, indwells it, builds it up and knits it together, and sends it into the world as a witness for Christ.⁷⁴ Consequently, the Holy Spirit has a fundamental place in Newbigin’s missiology.⁷⁵ For Newbigin, mission is not primarily something the church does, rather “it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey.”⁷⁶

A third major component of Newbigin’s view of conversion is that it should be understood holistically, affecting the whole person. As mentioned previously, salvation for Newbigin is a “making whole, a healing, the summing up of all things in Christ.”⁷⁷ This has a number of implications. First, conversion affects both soul and body. Christian mission, therefore, must be committed to caring for both spiritual and physical needs. There is no biblical warrant for endorsing a Gnostic dichotomy between body and spirit, and Christian mission is undermined whenever these are separated, and special (or even exclusive) emphasis is given to

⁷⁰ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

⁷¹ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 20.

⁷² Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 130.

⁷³ Newbigin, “*Context and Conversion*,” 304, 306.

⁷⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 99, 104.

⁷⁵ “The Spirit has a decisive place in the doctrine of the church” (*Household of God*, 92).

⁷⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 56.

⁷⁷ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 140.

one over against the other (i.e., the soul-saving versus social justice conflict is a form of this fallacy). Second, conversion encompasses both belief and obedience. “It is a total change of direction, which includes both the inner reorientation of the heart and mind and the outward reorientation of conduct in all areas of life.”⁷⁸ Not that Newbigin prioritizes obedience over belief or espouses a type of salvation by works. Rather, for him, faith incorporates both believing and obeying simultaneously. There is “no limiting of its range, no offer of a ‘cheap grace’ which promises security without commitment to that mission for which Jesus went to the cross.”⁷⁹ It must be remembered that, in Newbigin’s understanding, conversion leading to salvation is the result of election, which is never intended merely to grant security and privileges but also a costly and sacrificial responsibility to be bearers of Christ’s blessing to others. What is given to the believer upon conversion is the call to follow Jesus, and this call “is spelled out in his teaching and example.”⁸⁰ Third, conversion includes both personal and corporate dimensions. It “embraces within its scope the restoration of the harmony between man and God, between man and man and between man and nature....”⁸¹ It requires committing oneself to Christ, but also to his visible fellowship on earth—his body, the church. Furthermore, it entails a reorientation with regards to all of God’s creation, a realization that Christ has reconciled all things to himself through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:20). In this sense there is an eschatological dimension to conversion, in which believers must live in tension between the ‘already’ of the present and the ‘not yet’ of the *eschaton* when all things will be brought under the Lordship of Christ.

The Agent and Locus of Mission

As previously mentioned, Newbigin argues that the agent of God’s electing, calling, and

⁷⁸ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 135.

⁷⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 239.

⁸⁰ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 135.

⁸¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 140.

revealing is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who accomplishes the will of the Father in the hearts and actions of humanity, the Spirit who affects conversion, who creates, indwells, builds up, and sends the church into the world as a witness for Christ. As the *firstfruit*, who assures the church that the full harvest is still to come (Ro 8:22-24), the Spirit is a taste and guarantee of the present-yet-coming kingdom of God. As Newbigin notes, the Spirit brings the church into an eschatological reality, making manifest the new world-to-come in the midst of the old world-that-is.⁸² So, for Newbigin, mission is first and foremost an action of the Triune God, in which the Holy Spirit carries out the will of the Father in drawing people to the Son. In fact, in his book, *The Open Secret* (which he describes as an introduction to missiology), Newbigin depicts the nature of mission in threefold Trinitarian terms, as follows: mission is proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son, and bearing the witness of the Spirit.⁸³ This Trinitarian portrayal is no mere homiletic device, nor is it a convenient philosophical package, but is rather the foundation of Newbigin's understanding and experience of God, who is revealed in Scripture as a relational being who reaches out in love to creatures who have alienated themselves from God. As Philip Butin comments:

Every facet of Newbigin's theology is suffused with a personal sense of connectedness with the Triune God, whom we sense he knew by direct pastoral experience as living and active in every individual life and in every corner of the world. When Lesslie Newbigin's writings speak of the Trinity, we are in the realm, not primarily of ideas, but of the living, tripersonal God who stands above, comes within, and goes before the people of God as the purpose, pattern, and power of their shared life and mission.⁸⁴

This Trinitarian basis means that mission is not ultimately a project of the church. Success in mission does not depend upon human effort, nor can it be measured by human standards. In an age that specializes in efficient problem solving, that shows brilliance "in

⁸² Newbigin, *Household of God*, 140.

⁸³ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 29.

⁸⁴ Butin, "Is Jesus Still Lord?," 201.

devising means for any end we desire,” Newbigin’s emphasis here is particularly relevant.⁸⁵ He urges:

It seems to me to be of great importance to insist that mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the Triune God—of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings whether they acknowledge him or not, graciously guiding history toward its true end; of God the Son who has become part of this created history in the incarnation; and of God the Holy Spirit who is given as a foretaste of the end to empower and teach the Church and to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.⁸⁶

Thus, the church’s role in mission must not be reduced to human efforts of designing campaigns, marketing strategies, or attractive packaging for its worship services. Primarily, it must be understood that, in mission, the church is granted the privilege and responsibility of participating in the action and life of the present, living, triune God. In Newbigin’s words, mission is “the whole way of living, acting, and speaking . . .” that results from having received the *firstfruit* of the Spirit, and is thereby characterized by the Spirit’s life-giving power and presence.⁸⁷ In this manner, the church is not the *agent* of mission but its *locus*. It does not have the responsibility of *achieving* mission or of *actualizing* conversion (these things belong to the Spirit), nor should it take responsibility for defending its faith on terms set by the world. Newbigin warns, “The world’s questions are not the questions which lead to life. 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 people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer.”⁸⁸ The church must exist as an authentic community of Christ, which proclaims and embodies the gospel in its life, actions, and words through the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. As such, the church is the *locus* of mission because within it resides the Spirit, who is the *agent* of mission.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24.

⁸⁶ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 134-35.

⁸⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 63.

⁸⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

⁸⁹ Newbigin, “Context and Conversion,” 304.

The fact that the church is the *locus* of mission, not its *agent*, has a further implication. Since the Holy Spirit stands over both the church and its converts, both of these are affected and experience change in the conversion process. Mission is, therefore, a two-way encounter between the church and a particular culture (especially foreign cultures). As experienced Christians and new converts learn to dialogue with each other, approaching the Bible together under the guidance of the Spirit, the preunderstandings, prejudices, and plausibility structures of *both* cultures become manifest. This leads to a deeper understanding of the gospel, a “more inclusive rationality,” in which affirmation and negation of elements *in both cultures* takes place. Thus, a three-way dialogue occurs between church, culture, and God’s Word/Spirit such that the missionary action of the church becomes “the exegesis of the gospel.”⁹⁰ Hunsberger summarizes this process as follows:

By conversion, persons of the new culture join the same reciprocal relation to the Bible that other Christians have held. They bring new pre-understandings to the interpretation and ‘hearing’ of the Bible, while they also join the whole community as those under the Bible’s authority and determined by it....This leads to the conclusion that the church’s missionary witness can never rightly be a one-way conversation. It is always dialogic, including both the church’s inner dialogue with its own culture and its outward dialogue with all others and their respective cultures.⁹¹

An implication of this dialogical relationship between the church and culture under the Word is that domination of one culture by another is prohibited. The church is required to reject as false all notions of ethnocentrism and colonialism; such ideologies are contrary to the diversity and depth of the kingdom of God. To ensure that this takes place, missionaries must be willing to entrust newly formed churches into the care and providence of God. As Hunsberger comments, “the gospel, in this understanding, must be *given into* another culture with the trust that the Holy Spirit will fashion the form which both conversion and the church must take.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 35.

⁹¹ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 270.

⁹² Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 170 (italics original).

Mission as Discipleship

“Mission is not just church extension.”⁹³ Newbigin points out that while growth is certainly desirable, as we see in the book of Acts, there is a deep concern in the New Testament (particularly the epistles) for the integrity and authenticity of the Christian witness.⁹⁴ Furthermore, anxiety and enthusiasm for rapid growth is not a biblical outlook. “In no sense does the triumph of God’s reign seem to depend upon the growth of the church.”⁹⁵ In fact, such an emphasis can even be dangerous: “When numerical growth is taken as the criterion of judgment on the church, we are transported with alarming ease into the world of the military campaign or the commercial sales drive.”⁹⁶ In such cases we forget that the church is not the agent of mission and regress back to our own efforts. Such a movement away from the personal reality and presence of God renders mission functional, rather than relational, and leads us to focus on methods and techniques for reaching our goal of making converts. Success becomes defined by the ‘bottom-line’ of numbers and statistics.

For Newbigin, mission is primarily the work of God and “ministerial leadership is, first and finally, discipleship.”⁹⁷ Indeed, Christ did not send out the church to make converts in the narrow sense of the term, but disciples—followers of Jesus! (Mt 28:19). Of course, true conversion embraces discipleship and requires a radical shift in one’s life, which is accomplished and applied holistically by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is not merely a private act of the soul in relation to God but extends to every sphere of one’s life. The church’s mission, therefore, includes leading people into a deeper relationship with God, teaching them the Scriptures, and equipping them to be witnesses of the gospel and bearers of the Spirit in their own spheres of

⁹³ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 59.

⁹⁴ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 125.

⁹⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 125.

⁹⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 127.

⁹⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 241.

influence—their neighbourhoods, workplaces, and extra-curricular activities in the greater community. Newbigin remarks, “A preaching of the gospel that calls men and women to accept Jesus as Savior but does not make it clear that discipleship means commitment to a vision of society radically different from that which controls our public life today must be condemned as false.”⁹⁸

Discipleship is costly because it embraces a public way of life that challenges the reigning plausibility structures of culture. Accepting Christ’s call to be his witnesses is not a guarantee of strength and privilege, but of weakness and suffering. It means proclaiming and living out a different set of priorities, ethics, and convictions about the way society should be. Sometimes this will involve confronting oppressive elements in culture, whether these are laws, institutions, or powerful leaders. As Newbigin reminds us:

[Jesus’] 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.⁹⁹

4. *A Missionary Encounter Between Gospel and Culture*

Having identified some of the key elements in Newbigin’s analysis of Western culture and explained Newbigin’s understanding of mission, we can now inquire: what would a missionary encounter with our culture look like? Or, to pose the question differently, what must the church be in order to proclaim the gospel faithfully in the present context? A preliminary answer is that the church must exist as a public assembly, which seeks both to relate to the world and to confront it. Newbigin points out that in the New Testament the word used for ‘church’ is *ecclesia*, which is commonly used to refer to an assembly attended by all citizens to deal with

⁹⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 132.

⁹⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 220.

public affairs.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the *ecclesia theou* (God's assembly) is the assembly of all God's people and implies the public commitment "to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all."¹⁰¹ It must do this in such a way that avoids the two extremes of syncretism and irrelevance. In the former the church embodies the gospel in the language, forms, and trends of culture but fails to challenge it, while in the latter the church challenges culture without sufficient embodiment or communication in ways the culture can understand.¹⁰² Thus, the people of God must live authentically before God and others in loving outreach to the world; in short, it must be a *missionary or missional* church.

*The Missionary Congregation and the Beginnings of the Missional Church Concept*¹⁰³

There are a number of aspects to Newbigin's conception of the missionary church. Primary among these is the relational character of the church, which is based on the nature of God, humanity, and salvation. "Humans reach their true end in such relatedness, in bonds of mutual love and obedience that reflect the mutual relatedness in love in the being of the Triune God himself."¹⁰⁴ This mutual relatedness, moreover, is not "merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself."¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the Christian church is not a collection of self-sufficient individuals, each one embarking on his or her quest for spiritual enlightenment. If this were the case, there would be no real purpose for the church, since each person could pursue God in isolated fashion. The church is about a relationship with God *and*

¹⁰⁰ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 16. We need not accept the lexical and etiological basis of Newbigin's argument to grant on other grounds (perhaps on the depiction of the church in books like Ephesians and 1 Peter) his larger point that the church is a called-out kingdom community, one both gathered together as Christ's body in worship and edification and scattered into the world as Christ's ambassadors.

¹⁰¹ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 17.

¹⁰² Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, 240.

¹⁰³ While Newbigin employed the terminology of 'missionary congregation' or the church's 'missionary encounter with culture' (e.g., *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 234-241), the Gospel and Our Culture Network reshaped and developed Newbigin's ideas and formulated the term 'missional church' (see esp. Guder, *Missional Church*).

¹⁰⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 118-19.

¹⁰⁵ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 82.

others; it is about spiritual *and* physical realities; it is concerned with individuality *and* togetherness, private *and* public life. Along these lines, Newbigin notes that the vision of the *eschaton* given in the book of Revelation is not that of a purely ‘spiritual’ existence, but that of a city.¹⁰⁶ In addition, he writes, “In the final consummation of God’s loving purpose we and all creation will be caught up into the perfect rapture of that mutual love which is the life of God Himself. What is given to us now can only be a foretaste, for none of us can be made whole till we are made whole together.”¹⁰⁷

Relatedness is fundamental to the Christian church also because the life of Christ is evident in it or, as Newbigin puts it, “Christ is the life of believers.”¹⁰⁸ Christ is present with and in his people, and he reveals himself to the world through them.¹⁰⁹ Through the Spirit, Christ binds his people together with the same love shared by the Trinity, and this foretaste of the divine life among God’s people is a sign and evidence of the gospel to the world. For this reason, Newbigin strongly stresses the importance of unity in the church and argues for the expansion of the ecumenical movement.¹¹⁰ He states, “These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with another.”¹¹¹ For, “The Church’s unity is the sign and the instrument of the salvation which Christ has wrought and whose final fruition is the summing-up of all things in Christ.”¹¹² This is in keeping with Christ’s words, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35).

Another aspect of the missionary church is that it is called to announce the kingdom, reign, and sovereignty of God. Both the content and the mode of this announcement are

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 130.

¹⁰⁸ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 52.

¹¹⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 149-52.

¹¹¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 152.

¹¹² Newbigin, *Household of God*, 149.

important to Newbigin. Its content involves calling men and women to repent of false loyalties to all other powers, to recognize Christ as the only ultimate authority, and to become corporately a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the coming kingdom.¹¹³ The form the announcement takes is that of personal and corporate testimony. The church exists to testify that God is a reality and that we can know God and direct our lives according to God's purposes.¹¹⁴ As a testimony, or witness, the message is born out of the church's lived experience of the power and presence of God in its midst. The church does not 'market' the gospel in the manner of a common sales pitch, nor uses modern means of propaganda, manipulation, and pressure tactics to win people over.¹¹⁵ Its role is to announce the coming kingdom, not to establish it (this is done by the Holy Spirit). Furthermore, the announcement of the gospel must not be confined to the private sphere—it is to be presented in public like all other truth claims and evaluated as such. At many points in history, carrying out this public ministry has been a dangerous calling for the church, however it is a responsibility that cannot be avoided. The church is not permitted to retreat to the private sphere. As Newbigin often remarks,

[T]he earliest church never availed itself of the protection it could have had under Roman law as a *cultus privatus* dedicated to the pursuit of a purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members...It knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations.¹¹⁶

To summarize what he means by a missionary encounter between gospel and culture, Newbigin posits seven essentials for the missionary church. We will observe these briefly, for the preceding analysis has already anticipated most of them.

First, there must be a recovery and firm grasp of a true doctrine of eschatology.¹¹⁷ Having a clear sense of direction, and being guided by a sure goal and future, the church lives in

¹¹³ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 124.

¹¹⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 94.

¹¹⁵ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 99-100.

¹¹⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 134.

contradiction to the purposelessness and aimlessness of the world. By their witness, Christians proclaim the gospel with a confident humility, aware of the fact that they live in a time period caught between the tension of ‘already’ but ‘not yet’. While the church is not permitted to retreat into the private sphere, it also must avoid being egotistical or forceful, expecting to establish the fullness of the kingdom in the present.¹¹⁸ Second, we must articulate a Christian doctrine of freedom, which is capable of distinguishing tolerance from indifference.¹¹⁹ Such a doctrine would help the church to transcend the public-private dichotomy by making universal claims for truth while simultaneously listening to and respecting the views of others. Third, Newbigin argues for a “declericalized” theology.¹²⁰ The church must discard the notion that mission is the work of professionals that are paid to care for souls. While pastors are necessary for equipping the church, ministry must be given back into the hands of lay people, who can subsequently bring the gospel to their respective spheres of influence.

Fourth, there must be a radical critique of the theory and practice of denominationalism.¹²¹ This relates very closely to Newbigin’s emphasis on the importance of church unity and the integrity of the gospel. Furthermore, Newbigin argues that the concept and practice of denominationalism is “the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed.”¹²² The existence of denominations reinforces the view that the church is merely an association of individuals who share the same private opinions.¹²³ At the very least, denominations should begin to engage in joint ministry and ecumenical discussion. Fifth, there is a necessity for hearing feedback regarding our own culture from Christians whose minds have

¹¹⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 137.

¹¹⁹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 137.

¹²⁰ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 141.

¹²¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 144.

¹²² Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 145.

¹²³ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 146.

been shaped by other cultures.¹²⁴ Such a dialogical relationship with other cultures would help to safeguard the multiculturalism envisioned in the bible (i.e., passages like Rev 5:9) and protect us from naïve idiosyncratic or ethnocentric interpretations of the gospel.¹²⁵ Thus, intercultural dialogue would be fruitful in freeing the church and the Bible from captivity to Western culture and allowing the gospel to confront culture afresh. Sixth, the missionary church must have the courage to hold to and proclaim a belief that cannot be proven in the terms set out by our culture.¹²⁶ It must remember that conversion is a radical paradigm shift, which can only be accomplished by the Spirit. Finally, the church's mission must be the "spontaneous overflow of a community of praise."¹²⁷

The Congregation as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel

The congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' is an important image in Newbigin's conception of the missionary church. The congregation is the place where believers rehearse the words, deeds, and sacraments of Christ. By constantly envisioning, reenacting, and proclaiming the gospel, the people of God are placed within the plausibility structure of a biblical worldview. When the church does this faithfully, people find that the gospel gives them "the framework for understanding, the 'lenses' through which they are able to understand and cope with the world."¹²⁸ The gospel is God's answer to the human condition of being alienated from God, from one another, and from Creation. Through it, humanity comes to know and realize its purpose and destination. However, the gospel is not merely a collection of facts, ideas, or eternal truths. It is much more than this—it is the personal revelation of a relational God. Thus, it must be embodied

¹²⁴ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 146.

¹²⁵ Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love," 485, 483.

¹²⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 148.

¹²⁷ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 149.

¹²⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227. On a similar note, Newbigin writes, ". . . our use of the Bible is analogous to our use of language. We indwell it rather than looking at it from outside . . . But for this to happen it is clear that this 'indwelling' must mean being part of the community whose life is shaped by the story which the Bible tells" (*Truth to Tell*, 47).

and lived out in a living community, indwelled and enacted, not simply spoken or understood. This is what it means for the church to exist as Christ's body on earth. As Newbigin is fond of pointing out:

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community....It was not that a community gathered round an idea, so that the idea was primary and the community secondary. It was that a community called together by the deliberate choice of the Lord Himself, and re-created in Him, gradually sought—and is seeking—to make explicit who He is and what He has done. The actual community is primary: the understanding of what it is comes second.¹²⁹

In addition, the congregation as the 'hermeneutic of the gospel' becomes an important sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God for the surrounding unbelieving culture. Since most people in Western culture today possess very little knowledge of the Bible and of basic Christian doctrines, their only experience of Christianity is likely to be their encounters with Christians from a local congregation. Thus, a congregation of men and women, who believe, embody, and enact the gospel in their everyday lives, provides culture with the lens through which it interprets and understands the message of Christ. In this manner, the church becomes the "living epistle."¹³⁰ James Brownson points out that Newbigin intends his 'hermeneutic of the gospel' concept to transcend the public-private dichotomy and provide a way for the gospel to become public truth. It thereby overcomes our culture's relativism, which espouses that "religious speech can never be true, but only 'true for you.'"¹³¹ He provides an excellent summary of Newbigin's vision, as follows:

How we speak is as important to our missional vocation as *what* we speak. In this sense, Newbigin is quite right to speak of the local congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel. It is ultimately through our lives, in all of their contingency and local particularity, that the universal claims of the gospel will find a credible voice in the midst of our fragmented and suspicious world. It is only when the announcement "Jesus is Lord" is spoken by someone who takes the posture of a servant that it can ever be heard as the gospel. It is only through the convergence of word

¹²⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 27. See also *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

¹³⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 51.

¹³¹ Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love," 503.

and deed that the fragmented suspicion of our postmodern world will be able to discover a new Way that is also Truth and Life.¹³²

There are six main characteristics of the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel. First, such a congregation will be a community of praise and thanksgiving, rather than of doubt and suspicion.¹³³ This will occur as the congregation learns to embody and ‘indwell’ the gospel, and to see the world through it.¹³⁴ Second, it will be a community of truth governed by a plausibility structure shaped according to the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny.¹³⁵ It will not speak this truth forcefully or through modern means of propaganda, but with the “modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus.”¹³⁶ Third, it will be a community that lives not for itself but is deeply concerned for its neighbours.¹³⁷ Fourth, it will be a place where men and women are equipped and disciplined to be ministers of the gospel, making full use of the multiplicity of gifts God has given to the church.¹³⁸ For, “the exercise of priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world.”¹³⁹ Fifth, it will be a community of mutual responsibility. Resisting the individualism of the surrounding culture, its people will enter into a committed, loving relationship with one another. Thus, the community will not be primarily the promoter of programs, but the foretaste of a new social order.¹⁴⁰ Finally, in contrast to the pessimism, hopelessness, and aimlessness of modern Western culture, it will be a community characterized

¹³² Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love,” 503-504.

¹³³ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

¹³⁴ Newbiggin (*Truth to Tell*, 45-47) borrows the term ‘indwelling’ from the philosopher Michael Polanyi. Polanyi uses the term to explain the function of tacit knowledge. We come to grasp something by turning from subsidiary clues to the reality we are exploring. As an example, when we first learn to read and write we focus on individual letters and sounds in order to recognise and assemble words and sentences. Eventually this primary skill becomes part of our make-up, our tacit knowledge, and we no longer devote our attention to the preliminary details. Rather, we work through them, placing our focus on the meaning or reality to which they point. Thus, we *indwell* the clues rather than focus on them. Similarly, Christians do not primarily look *at* the gospel but understand themselves and the world *through* it.

¹³⁵ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 228-229.

¹³⁶ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229.

¹³⁷ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229.

¹³⁸ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 230.

¹³⁹ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 230.

¹⁴⁰ Newbiggin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 231.

by the hope of the gospel of Christ, which it indwells and lives out.¹⁴¹

5. *The Missional Church Movement*

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) Introduced

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) emerged in North America in the late 1980s as the continuation of the Gospel and Our Culture discussion, which originated in Great Britain under the influence of Lesslie Newbigin.¹⁴² The membership of the American branch consists largely of Protestants of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, but also includes a minority of Mennonites, Episcopalians, Lutherans, non-denominational Christians, and others.¹⁴³ The GOCN has continued Newbigin's assessment of modern Western culture, particularly his insights regarding the private-public dichotomy and the captivity of the gospel to the Western worldview, and has sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of North American cultural trends and characteristics. Moreover, in an attempt to construct a missional ecclesiology, the GOCN has built upon a number of Newbigin's themes regarding the church, including the following: the church is the *locus* of mission; the church should embody the gospel and form personal relationships with unbelievers; the church's role is to announce the kingdom, reign, and sovereignty of God; and, the church must engage in a missionary encounter with our culture, existing as the hermeneutic of the gospel in the North American setting. However, generally speaking, the GOCN has not incorporated deeply into its understanding of the church

¹⁴¹ Newbigin cites the Carver Yu's observation that Western culture is characterized by "technological optimism and literary despair." He explains, "On the one hand he sees the unstoppable dynamism of our technology, always forging ahead with new means to achieve whatever ends—wise or foolish—we may desire. On the other hand he looks at our literature and sees only scepticism, nihilism, and despair. Life has no point. Nothing is sacred. Reverence is an unworthy relic of past times. Everything is a potential target for mockery" (*Truth to Tell*, 19; see also *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 232).

¹⁴² Guder, *Missional Church*, 3.

¹⁴³ Mills, "The Devil is a Good Sociologist," 1.

Newbigin's emphases on election, conversion, and discipleship.¹⁴⁴

The Aim of the GOCN

According to George Hunsberger, the aim of the GOCN is as follows:

The GOCN is a collaborative effort that focuses on three things: (1) a cultural and social analysis of our North American setting; (2) theological reflection on the question, What is the gospel that addresses us in our setting? And (3) the renewal of the church and its missional identity in our setting.¹⁴⁵

Thus, the GOCN's methodology is to engage in an analysis of North American culture in order to understand its trends and characteristics, subsequently, to read the gospel in light of these discoveries, and finally, to build an ecclesiology for the missional church upon the preceding analyses of culture and gospel. Darrell Guder argues that such a missional ecclesiology would be biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological, and translated into practice.¹⁴⁶ For Hunsberger, such study is undertaken so that the gospel "becomes a lived transformation within our culture's terms" showing that "life can be lived out this way in our culture's context."¹⁴⁷ This methodology shapes the development of the missional church movement, and is evident generally in the GOCN writings and particularly in the book entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.

Foundational Themes

Since its inception, the missional church movement has made two foundational assumptions, which have influenced its development. First, the Christendom era is over and the post-Christendom or post-Christian age has begun. Darrell Guder defines Christendom as, "the system of church-state partnership and cultural hegemony in which the Christian religion was the

¹⁴⁴ An exception to this statement is George Hunsberger's book, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, in which he exposites Newbigin's understanding of both election and conversion. Strangely though, Hunsberger's insights into these matters do not seem to influence the ecclesiology of the GOCN generally.

¹⁴⁵ Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 290.

¹⁴⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 11-12.

¹⁴⁷ Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 296.

protected and privileged religion of society and the church its legally established institutional form.”¹⁴⁸ Under Christendom, North America was assumed to be a Christian continent, with the majority of its inhabitants adhering to the Christian faith. Most people had, at the very least, a tentative acceptance of the deity of Christ and the trustworthiness of the Bible. They also were likely to have had a positive view of the church and its leaders, some degree of church background, and would feel a sense of guilt or conviction when they violated the basic rules of the Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁴⁹ The church in this era was viewed as playing a significant role in the ordering and maintenance of society, and in defining and shaping its laws, values, and goals. Thus, the church played a guardian or caretaker role. It “came to be conceived of as a ‘chapel’ providing religious chaplaincy services for what was assumed to be an essentially Christianized society.”¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, mission came to be seen as bringing the gospel to foreign countries, thus expanding Christendom into un-reached lands throughout the world.

However, in the post-Christendom or post-Christian era it cannot be assumed that most people are Christians, or that society is governed by Christian values. Rather, North Americans live in a multicultural and multi-faith setting, encountering radically different religious claims and moral views. To deal with this, contemporary culture has separated facts from values, restricting the former to the public sphere of life and the latter to the private sphere. Thus, the church has been pushed increasingly out of public life; the status and privileges it once enjoyed under Christendom are now gone.¹⁵¹ North America is not a Christian culture, but a mission field.¹⁵² Therefore, it is inappropriate to conceive of the church as a spiritual or social caretaker and guardian. It must be envisioned as a missional church, its members as missionaries *in their*

¹⁴⁸ Guder, *Missional Church*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ White, “Evangelism in a Postmodern World,” 364.

¹⁵⁰ Hunsberger, “Features of the Missional Church,” 5.

¹⁵¹ Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 2.

¹⁵² For Craig Van Gelder, North America as a mission field is “a great new fact of our day” (Hunsberger and Van Gelder, *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 57-68).

own land, giving public witness to the reality of the gospel in their lives. Mission is no longer something done ‘out there’ in another country; North America is in need of missionaries. Thus, the GOCN is committed to the task of helping the church to become missional. As Guder explains:

The Gospel and Culture discussion of the last ten years is developing constructive ways to move beyond critique to re-emboldened public witness. The goal is not to return to Christendom. It is to become again a church whose witness is public, whose voice challenges the context through its faithful communication of the gospel, and whose practice reveals that all the other idols have been displaced by Jesus Christ, who is Lord and Sovereign....The missional re-orientation of theology must serve the missional renewal of the churches.¹⁵³

The second foundational assumption for the missional church movement is that mission is not merely a project of the church, but is initiated by God—it is *God’s* mission, not ours. “It is not about what ventures the church sends out, but about how the church itself is a ‘sent’ community.”¹⁵⁴ As such, there is a great emphasis upon the *missio Dei*, the ‘mission of God’.¹⁵⁵ “We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”¹⁵⁶ The concept of the missional church, therefore, is based on the missionary nature of God. Just as God exists, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in loving outreach to an alienated humanity, so the church exists in loving outreach to the world. Just as the Father has sent the Son and the Spirit into the world on humanity’s behalf, so God sends the church to accomplish God’s missionary purposes. “A ‘missional church’, then, recognizes that part of its essence is that it has been sent by the missionary God into society as both the instrument and witness of the gospel.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Guder, “Missional Theology,” 8.

¹⁵⁴ Hunsberger, “Features of the Missional Church,” 5.

¹⁵⁵ Guder, “Missional Theology,” 5.

¹⁵⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Raiter, review of *Missional Church*, 50.

6. *Themes in Newbigin Deserving More Attention and Further Development*
[DRAFT: still in formulation]

I began this paper with an overview of Lesslie Newbigin's insights regarding modern Western culture, followed by an exposition of his understanding of mission. We then discovered how these initial observations and ideas influenced the formulation and development of the missionary church concept. Following Newbigin, the GOCN employed a similar analysis within the cultural context of North America, seeking to rethink the gospel and the nature and function of the church in light of its observations. However, the GOCN and other authors writing about the missional church have not sufficiently accounted for and developed some of Newbigin's important theological themes. I suggest that contemporary reflection and writing on the missional church needs to devote more attention and further to and development of the following themes:

1. A trinitarian and eschatological theology of the church.
2. A trinitarian and pneumatological theology of mission.
3. A trinitarian and missional doctrine of election.
4. A trinitarian theology of biblical revelation.

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