

# The Church and Its Vocation

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S  
MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

MICHAEL W. GOHEEN

Foreword by N. T. Wright

  
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To Marnie, Erin, Ben, Brittany, and Brielle  
with affection and gratitude

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# Foreword

N. T. WRIGHT

Like many, I have personal reasons to be grateful to God for Lesslie Newbigin. I don't remember which occasion it was when I first met him, but he was already a legend in his own lifetime; I was like a teenager suddenly meeting a rock star. He had, after all, been a missionary in India, working through all the issues of missionary theology and praxis, and had been secretary of the body that drew up the founding charters of the famous ecumenical experiment we know as the Church of South India. I think Lesslie quietly relished the fact that he, a lifelong Presbyterian, was called to be a bishop: God's sense of humor, he might have said, or (perhaps better) the way in which the sovereign grace of God overrules our small human attempts at organization. He had been involved in the founding of the World Council of Churches (in the heady days after the Second World War when people were looking for signs of new hope) and had sat around the table with Karl Barth and others. And, being Lesslie, he was completely unaffected by it all. Quite short in stature, but with a strikingly handsome face and a quiet composure and poise, he was the very antithesis of the highly strung, self-promoting rock star. He gave every impression, not that he had gotten life figured out, but that he knew God had it figured out and that he was totally content just to trust him.

Mike Goheen, in this fine study that opens up the heart and breadth of Lesslie's thought, has told the story of how I had invited Lesslie to preach in Worcester College Chapel, Oxford, and how his mere arrival that evening

transformed my mood from one of nervous anticipation of the new academic term to one of readiness for the challenges and possibilities that would come. I remember telling that story to a friend who had worked in India, in the area where Lesslie had served as bishop. My friend at once told me that in that part of India one could go from town to town and admire a school, a hospital, a church building, only to be told, “Bishop Newbigin encouraged us to build this, and told us who we should employ to get it done.” Lesslie was, in other words, a walking model of the theological truth that lay behind all he did: a quiet confidence in the sovereignty and loving purposes of God, not such as might make you sit back and shrug your shoulders, but such as would make you think that it was therefore going to be a good idea to discern your own vocation within that purpose and steadily set about whatever tasks such a vocation might entail.

This same doctrine of divine sovereignty undergirded Lesslie’s sense (strongly reinforced by his reading of Michael Polanyi) that if all truth was God’s truth, then there was no area of life over which human research could claim absolute rights; in other words, there was no such thing as neutrality or “objectivity,” no such thing as a God’s-eye view of reality available to us. All the truth we see, in whatever sphere, comes with strings attached: world-view strings having to do with our own motivations and mind-sets, and not least with our wider culture. In the wrong hands, this might have meant the collapse of all truth statements into a subjective morass. But with Lesslie’s strong view of the world as God’s creation and all human vocations as located within God’s purposes, it meant that all human research would ultimately belong within the celebration of God’s good creation and the humble obedience to his redeeming purposes. I well remember the anger expressed by one chemistry professor who heard Lesslie preach on that occasion in Worcester College Chapel and felt that his own professional integrity as an “objective” scientist was being undermined. Interestingly, it was his fellow scientists, atheists all, who put him right. Yes, the experiments can be repeated on the other side of the world; but, excuse me, why were we doing *these* experiments in the first place? It doesn’t take long to get back to the culture-conditioned human motivations behind all our apparently “neutral” observations. That is important, as Lesslie saw very well, for our reading of the Gospels as history, as part of God’s true history: skeptical historiography put on a pose of neutral objectivity that needed to be unmasked. Lesslie helped many of us not only to glimpse a bigger vision of God and God’s creation but also to reflect on the epistemology required for that glimpse to become a grasp.

Within all that, Lesslie taught a generation of us that a primary task of the Christian in any culture was *engagement*. He had, after all, sat on the floor of

his local ashram with Hindu teachers, getting inside their worldview, not in order to work toward some fashionable relativistic synthesis, but to discern (much like Paul in Athens) points of contact and points of radical disagreement. If all truth was God's truth, then one might well expect many happy surprises as well as many moments of courteous challenge. This was quite different, in the 1980s, from what many Christians (British Christians at least) had supposed, poised as we were between a liberal "affirmation" and a conservative "rejection" of this or that aspect of "culture." Indeed, Lesslie taught us what he himself had discovered on his return to live in Britain after so many years in India: to look at British culture itself with a critical discernment, to stop taking things for granted, and to inquire of this or that cultural development whether it was honoring to God the Creator. Lesslie, after all, had not come back to Britain to retire: he just translated his missionary vocation into a sequence of different modes.

What was more, Lesslie had been through a period of radical exploration and had come out the other side. He had, by his own admission, walked down the path toward a more liberal or relativistic view of gospel and culture, had seen where it led, and had firmly turned around again—not, being Lesslie, to any kind of closed-in conservatism, but to the larger world, the fresh outside air, the fully biblical vision of the creation and redemption of the world. I remember being at one or two conferences with him in the early 1990s where some young would-be radicals were trying to argue for relativistic positions and Lesslie, kindly and courteously, would argue a biblical case for the massive and all-embracing truth of the gospel: for, in the phrase he made his own, the gospel as "public truth." (This is all the more important given the way in which some followers of Karl Barth appear to argue for a distinct sphere of Christian "truth.") He carried conviction as few others could have done. This was reinforced, in terms of his rhetorical style, by his unnerving ability, being almost blind, to give a perfect lecture, laying out a large theme with its many interlocking parts and bringing it all in to land just under the hour without a glance at notes or a watch. He was the kind of consummate professional who made it all look easy.

I was especially fortunate to have met Lesslie and been captivated by his vision of Jesus and the kingdom just before I set about writing my own big book *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Many strands come together in a project like that, but Lesslie's vision, expounded and also exemplified, helped give me the courage to shape the argument. But that wasn't the end of it. The year after it was published I was startled to pick up the phone one day and hear Lesslie's voice on the other end. Being far too blind to be able to read for himself, he made a virtue of necessity—perhaps I should say a seminar

of necessity—by calling a team of students from King’s College in London to come and read to him. They had been reading *Jesus and the Victory of God* out loud, footnotes and all; and he was phoning to tell me which chapter they had just finished and how excited they had been by it. I was overwhelmed with gratitude, especially since the debt was much more in the other direction. Lesslie was, after all—as Mike’s book bears out again and again—a *biblical* theologian of the church’s mission. It was that deep, lifelong engagement with Scripture that undergirded all he did. The phone call was then followed up with letters; unable to see, Lesslie would use an old typewriter and bash away at where he remembered the keys ought to be, producing masterpieces of impressionistic writing whose overall impact was of the excitement still motivating this old man, increasingly frail in physique, to relish Scripture, to celebrate God’s kingdom, and to encourage relative youngsters like myself in our work.

It was only later, after Lesslie’s death, that I began to discover more of his earlier writings. We had all read *Foolishness to the Greeks*; indeed, it was like a second Bible to some of us. But there was so much more. Lesslie had thought his way into, and then through, most if not all of the great theological issues of the day, reflecting on them with his own mixture of prayerful humility and missionary strategy. Because his life didn’t fit into the normal academic pattern, I suspect that many of his profound and original books have mostly been ignored by professors who review books by other professors and engage with them in their footnotes. I hope that this book will go a long way toward turning that around. I have often reflected that, like some musical composers, Lesslie may in fact have his greatest impact generations after his death, and my prayer is that Mike’s work will play a role in that process. Certainly, as I reflect on the beliefs about the church’s vocation that I have come to hold over the years, and then as I look at the vast sweep of Lesslie’s work surveyed here in *The Church and Its Vocation*, I begin to realize that at my best I have simply been thinking Lesslie’s thoughts after him. I thank God for Lesslie Newbigin and for books like this present one that introduce him powerfully to a new generation.

# Preface

It is a delight to return to the subject of Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. It was the theme of my doctoral dissertation almost two decades ago. I spent a number of years reading all of Newbigin's writings chronologically more than once while attempting to understand his historical context. I also tried to read the books he read. It was a rich exercise. And I have my wife, Marnie, to thank for it. She kept me from pursuing a more thematic dissertation and encouraged me to soak in Newbigin so I could be disciplined by him through his life and writing. The resulting published dissertation was well over 250,000 words. No doubt the length should have been trimmed, the focus sharpened, and the argument made much tighter. Someone once suggested to me in jest that it should have been titled *Everything You Wanted to Know about Newbigin but Were Afraid to Ask*. One of my promoters, George Vandervelde, insisted on excluding a long chapter on a missionary encounter with world religions that would have made it even longer. But I have heard from many since then that the abundance of material on Newbigin in his historical context has been helpful in a variety of ways. And so, in spite of its sprawling nature, it seems to have served purposes I did not originally intend.

In the two decades since my dissertation was published, I have had opportunity to immerse myself even more in Newbigin's insights and have gained a clearer understanding of his thought. This has come for a number of reasons. First, I have taught and lectured on this material in a variety of institutions and venues within North America and throughout the world. The questions and discussions, perhaps especially coming from those outside the West, have sharpened my thinking on the subject and made me all the more aware of its relevance. I write this preface on an overnight flight home

from Brazil, where I have just finished presenting much of the material in this book over the past three weeks to students, pastors, and scholars from various confessional backgrounds in four different cities. Those rich interactions have convinced me that with the spread of Western globalization as a missionary religion into all the urban parts of the world, Newbigin's insights continue to be relevant and important—and will be for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, I have had opportunity to wrestle with Newbigin's teaching on a missionary church as I have worked in more than one local congregation in a part-time pastoral capacity with fellow pastors to implement his insights. I have also had the occasion to read a number of dissertations and other secondary literature on Newbigin as well as more of his unpublished archived material that was unavailable to me twenty years ago. And finally, the process of reworking theological education in Phoenix has been heavily dependent on my immersion in Newbigin's work. The close relationships I have developed there with pastors who have wrestled to work out the material of this book, along with the attempt to design and implement a missional curriculum, have deepened my understanding of various areas of Newbigin's work. Through all of this, my thinking on his missionary ecclesiology has become clearer and more focused.

This book is the first of two that are planned. In this first volume I sketch Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology in a relatively brief and systematic way within the context of the central dynamic of his thought. In the second book Tim Sheridan and I will trace Newbigin's ecclesiological heirs—missional church, emerging and emergent church, deep church, and center church—in light of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. The two books began as one, but it became clear that we needed more space on Newbigin to accomplish our goal of evaluating other ecclesial movements in light of his work.

And so this book sketches Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology in a systematic way within the central dynamic of his theological vision. It is meant to be a more popular summary for a wide readership. To keep its lines of argument clear I will not interact extensively with other authors, nor will I deal much with historical background or engage some of the controversial issues raised by his thought. For those who are interested, I footnote where you can go to further pursue these kinds of things. I have also totally reworked my website [www.missionworldview.com](http://www.missionworldview.com) and have added many more resources, including many of my articles on Newbigin, both published and unpublished.

A couple of other explanatory notes may be helpful. First, in the last couple of decades the term "missional" has become a common word to distinguish the identity and nature of the church beyond an understanding of mission as cross-cultural or as an activity of the church. I have embraced the word

“missional” in my writing and continue to use it even though it sometimes falls prey to being used in ways that are trendy or superficial. In this book I stick with Newbigin’s original language of a *missionary* church. And second, much of Newbigin’s writing was done before our culture became sensitive to the sexist overtones in the exclusive use of masculine pronouns. Rather than engage in the creative and sometimes tricky project of “correcting” his work, I have kept intact his original language.

I thank Thomas West for providing me with electronic copies of numerous documents from the Newbigin archives in Selly Oak. As I was finishing the last chapter, a new website with much of Newbigin’s work appeared online: <http://newbiginresources.org/>. This is a happy development. I only wish it had appeared months earlier; it would have made my job much easier. But it raises an issue about pagination: some of the unpublished documents I quote appear on that website. The page numbers of those online documents sometimes differ from those of the archived originals from which I worked.

I am thankful for Jim Kinney’s patience; this book, originally a joint project with Tim Sheridan on Newbigin and his theological heirs, is years overdue. When I signed the contract I had no idea that so much of my time would be given in the next five years to developing some creative initiatives in theological education. So this book has had to wait. I am also thankful for my colleagues in leadership in Phoenix—Tyler Johnson, Chris Gonzalez, and Jim Mullins—who have encouraged me, as Missional Training Center has become more established, to return to making writing a priority. I also thank two of my sons-in-law, Mark Glanville and Dave Groen, who read portions of this book and gave helpful feedback.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Marnie, and our four adult children, Erin, Ben, Brittany, and Brielle. They have been on this “Newbigin journey” with me for over two decades. They have all read and engaged Newbigin’s writing to some degree. My last memory of Newbigin is of him sitting at a table in a restaurant telling jokes to my wife and my kids, who were between eleven and seventeen at the time. My oldest two, Erin and Ben, were paranymphs at my doctoral dissertation defense at the University of Utrecht almost two decades ago when they were in their late teens. I am thankful that all of them, along with their spouses, continue to live out—as academics, pastors, musicians, and parents—much of what I have written in this book. Marnie encouraged me to study Newbigin’s life carefully, which has borne more fruit than either of us could have imagined.

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# Introduction

Ecclesiology is first of all about the church's identity—who we are and who we serve. And if the biblical story is not the place where our identity is forged, then by default this place will be somewhere else, almost certainly in our cultural story and social location. That will mean we are no longer the people we are called to be and will be serving the wrong master. So the choice for the church in every age will always be, Will our identity be shaped by Scripture or by our culture—by the biblical story or the cultural story? This is why ecclesiology is so important: it demands that we return to the Bible to find out who we are and whom we are meant to serve.

Consider the case of the German church under Nazism. The Protestant “German Christians” embraced the nationalism and racism of the Nazi Party. Roman Catholics, originally more suspicious of German Socialism, dropped their resistance and became complicit with the same German gods when Hitler described Christianity as the foundation of German values. There was resistance to the Nazi program from some, such as the Confessing Church, and this resistance grew as the true colors of Nazi ideology were exposed. But generally a good majority of the church had forgotten who they were and who they were supposed to be serving. They were shaped by the German story of National Socialism, and they served the gods of racism and nationalism. Think also of the South African church under apartheid or of the church in Russia and Eastern Europe under Communism. These are all rather glaring examples of churches that have lost their way. Their identity and, consequently, the gods they served were determined by the reigning idolatrous story and ideologies of the culture in which they were set. But sometimes

mistaken identity and false gods, even if they are dangerous, do not seem to be so apparent—at least not until we gain some historical distance.

Ecclesiology is not simply an academic exercise to get our doctrine of the church correct for the sake of orthodox theology. It is the hard work of returning to the Scriptures and asking the deepest foundational questions: Who are we? What is our role in the biblical story? What is our vocation? What does it mean to be the faithful people of God? How are we called to serve God's purposes? How do we fulfill that calling at our particular time and in our particular context? How is that context forming us in ways contrary to our identity? It is not saying too much to insist that ecclesiological reflection is a matter of life and death for the church.

Imagine a Christian entering Germany or South Africa or Russia and finding the church in that place utterly compromised to the reigning public doctrine of its day. If that person were to challenge the church to reflect deeply on who they were and whom they were serving, it would not be an invitation to a leisurely academic theological exercise. It would be an urgent matter with the goal of restoring the church to the vocation God had given them in the scriptural story. Ecclesiology would not be just a head of doctrine in systematic theology but a pressing imperative to get the church back on track. This is how we need to understand Lesslie Newbigin.

Newbigin returned to Britain with new eyes after almost four decades of missionary service in India. He found a church that had been accommodated to the modern scientific worldview. Many had lost confidence in the gospel and had tailored their own ecclesial identity to fit the reigning idolatrous ideology of the day. The church was content to be relegated to the private realm of life, far removed from having any influence over the majority of human life. They allowed the gospel and the biblical story to be confined to the status of subjective values and personal preferences. Europe had become a pagan society shaped by an idolatrous public doctrine. It had reconfigured the gospel and the church, and the church—tragically—instead of resisting had simply capitulated. For Newbigin, ecclesiology was thus a pressing imperative, an urgent task that might enable the church to extract itself from captivity to the powers of Western culture.

Ecclesiology for Newbigin was about much more than simply the internal life of the institutional church. It went much deeper than worship, preaching, sacraments, leadership, church order, ecclesial structures, and the like. It was a matter of recovering our missionary identity. And reclaiming our missionary identity was not simply about doing more evangelism, or a more extensive engagement with social and political issues in the public life, or even increased programs of mercy and justice. It was much deeper than all of this.

A concern for this depth dimension led to the rise of the Gospel and Our Culture movement in Britain. While this movement started off as preparation for a conference designed to address many social, political, economic, and cultural issues of the day, Newbigin saw that the discussion had to go deeper and address the “underlying issues.”<sup>1</sup> How the church should respond to these issues went beyond social ethics. It was a matter of retrieving the comprehensive and public truth of the gospel, the Bible as the true interpretation of universal history, the role of the people of God in embodying and telling that story, and a proper understanding of and missionary relationship between God’s people and their culture. All of this must undergird faithful social engagement. And it was precisely because Newbigin did probe deeper that his little book *The Other Side of 1984*, drafted for the conference, dropped like a bombshell in the midst of the British church and has had ripple effects around the world.

To be sure, Newbigin never discarded the traditional concerns of ecclesiology—worship and liturgy, preaching and teaching, leadership and church order. To the contrary, he wanted to see each of these areas of the internal life of the church serve the vocation and role God had given the people of God. Neither did he neglect the traditional concerns of mission—evangelism and church planting, mercy and justice, social ethics and political engagement. Rather, he wanted to place them within a broader vision of the missionary vocation of the church. Ecclesiology was relating our identity to all these things and reshaping them in light of the role that God called his people to play in the biblical drama.

It is this combination of characteristics that makes Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology still so important for our day. First, he is driven not by any academic agenda but by the urgency of recovering our true identity so that we may truly serve God’s purpose. Second, he drives much deeper than most ecclesiological reflection by laying bare the foundational issues involved in determining the role of God’s people in the biblical story. Third, he does not disregard centuries of reflection on the church and on mission but reframes them in a missionary ecclesiology.

This book is a basic and popular introduction to Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology. But as will quickly become evident, his ecclesiology involves much more than is normally associated with that word. Probing ecclesiology means asking foundational questions: What is the gospel? What is the Bible? What is the Christian faith? As we inquire more deeply into Newbigin’s

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993), 252.

missionary ecclesiology, we begin to see a central dynamic that is shaping his thought. It is a dynamic driven by his understanding of the gospel and, we might even say, a dynamic that leads us to the very heart of the Christian faith. So this book will articulate Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology but in the process will also uncover the core dynamic that shapes his understanding of the Christian faith and his theological vision.

### Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology

The twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in ecclesiology. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan states, "The doctrine of the church became, as it had never quite been before, the bearer of the whole Christian message for the twentieth century, as well as the recapitulation of the entire doctrinal tradition from preceding centuries."<sup>2</sup> We are well into the twenty-first century, and interest in ecclesiology shows no signs of letting up. Every imaginable adjective has been used to describe ever-new visions of the church.

Jürgen Moltmann puts his finger on one of the primary reasons ecclesiology has become such an urgent issue. The church for many years took its bearings from the *corpus Christianum*. Its identity and vocation were defined by its location and its role within the culture and society of the Christian West. But today we can no longer think of the West as Christian. It is becoming increasingly secularized, and any Christian influence on the West is disintegrating. In this new situation it is essential that the church reflect anew on its identity. From whence will fresh ecclesiological reflection take its cue?

From mission, Moltmann believes. The disintegration of Christendom means the church must embrace their new missionary situation and recover their "missionary initiative and their own particular missionary charge."<sup>3</sup> This new missionary setting may then be a source of ecclesiological renewal. And so, says Moltmann, "One of the strongest impulses toward the renewal of the theological concept of the church comes from the theology of mission."<sup>4</sup> Yet the problem remains that "up to now the European churches have found it hard to discover Europe as a missionary field or to see themselves as

2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 282.

3. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (1977; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 8.

4. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 7.

missionary churches.”<sup>5</sup> It is difficult for the church to reimagine its identity because it has been shaped for so long by its role and place in a Christian culture.

But if we are to be true to Scripture, then a “theological interpretation of the churches today must absorb these germs of a missionary church in the decay of the *corpus Christianum*. What we have to learn from them is not that the church ‘has’ a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the church has to be understood.”<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiology will have to reflect on its identity and calling, not in light of its social and cultural role in Europe but in terms of God’s mission narrated in Scripture. “To grasp the missionary church theologically in a world-wide context means understanding it in the context of the *missio Dei*. . . . If the church sees itself to be sent in the same framework as the Father’s sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, then it also sees itself in the framework of God’s history with the world and discovers its place and function within this history.”<sup>7</sup> The church’s identity must be shaped by understanding its place in God’s mission and purpose for the world.

This shifts ecclesiological reflection from issues concerning the inner institutional life of the church to its role in the midst of world history. A question then arises: What does this new approach to ecclesiology do with centuries of reflection on the church that considered the church primarily as an institution? Hendrikus Berkhof—another theologian who, like Newbigin and Moltmann, believes mission must be a source to revitalize ecclesiology—addresses that question. There is a “necessity of re-studying ecclesiology,” he says, “in fact all of theology, from the standpoint of the [church’s] relationship to the world.”<sup>8</sup> He sets out to rethink ecclesiology from the standpoint of mission.

Traditionally, ecclesiological reflection has been tied to the study of the institutional church—that is, to preaching and teaching, sacraments and worship, leadership and church order. Berkhof divides his doctrine of the church into three main parts: institution, community, and mission. The church as institution is concerned with a totality of activities organized to be a means of grace. He treats the traditional themes of instruction, baptism, preaching, the Lord’s Supper, leadership, and the gathering, among others. The church

5. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 8.

6. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.

7. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10–11.

8. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 411.

as community deals with the totality of personal relationships within the fellowship of congregations. And finally, he considers the church as mission: here Berkhof treats the role of the church in the midst of the world in all the ways it functions as salt and light. While the institutional church had been the primary focus of ecclesiology from the early days of the church, the church as community had developed since the Reformation. As for the church as mission, only since World War II had this notion slowly begun to take hold under the influence of people such as Hendrik Kraemer.<sup>9</sup>

The order of Berkhof's ecclesiology—treating the church first as institution, then as community, and finally as mission—is important. The section on the church's mission in the world comes last and begins in this way: "As the institute mediates Christ to the congregation, so the congregation in turn mediates him 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."<sup>10</sup> All that is done in the gathering of congregations—the means of grace, leadership, spiritual gifts, and relationships—forms God's people for their missionary calling in the midst of the world. "Around the institution a congregation is being gathered, which subsequently is scattered among the peoples of the world as God's people. Whatever comes before, this final development is the goal. But without all the preceding the latter lacks roots, drive, and force."<sup>11</sup> The church as institution and community serves the church's mission in the world.

Defining the relationship of the church in terms of its calling in the world raises an urgent issue: What is the relationship of the church to the culture in which it is set? As Berkhof speaks of it, once we have established "the fact of the church's orientation to the world, we now face the question of the how."<sup>12</sup> Our missional identity not only establishes that the church is called for the sake of the world; it also must ask what that looks like. More specifically, an urgent *ecclesiological* question is, What is the relationship of the church to culture?

Berkhof argues that the only faithful stance includes both "antithesis toward" and "solidarity with."<sup>13</sup> There must be solidarity with our culture as well as separation from its idolatry. The church may betray its identity in

9. Kraemer probably influenced Newbigin more than any other person. When I first met Newbigin at his home in London, he showed me a picture of Kraemer he kept on his shelf. He asked me whether I knew who it was, and I said I did. He then spent quite a bit of time talking about Kraemer's influence on his thinking.

10. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 410.

11. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 411.

12. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 413.

13. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 415.

two ways. The first is “churchism” or “sacralization.” This is when the church forgets its solidarity with its culture and “turns in upon herself as a bulwark in an evil world or, less aggressively, as an introverted, self-sufficient group, which is content with her own rites, language and connections.” The second is “worldliness” or “secularism.” Here the church abandons its antithesis toward culture and becomes “as much as possible assimilated and conformed to the world.” In both cases, the church “does essentially the same thing: she avoids the clash and the offense.”<sup>14</sup> A true encounter with culture demands identification and rejection, yes and no, participation and withdrawal. Loss of either one is a recipe for unfaithfulness.

Reference to Moltmann and Berkhof opens the way to understand Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology and what will follow in this book. Like Moltmann, Newbigin believes that the church may only be understood in terms of *God’s mission unfolded in the biblical story* and its role in that history. It is not culture that gives the church its marching orders but God and what he is doing for the sake of the whole world. For Newbigin this means reading the Bible as the story of God’s mighty deeds to restore the whole creation with Jesus as the center point of that story. The church finds its identity by participating in what he is doing in redemptive history according to his command and invitation. Thus we begin in chapters 1 and 2 with Newbigin’s understanding of the Bible as universal history and the gospel of the kingdom as the center point and clue to interpreting the whole story. It is in this context that we may understand the proper identity of the church.

Like Berkhof, Newbigin believes that ecclesiology means looking at the vocation of the church in the world but also at the inner institutional and communal life of the church. Thus, chapters 3 and 4 take up the church’s calling in the world and the importance of its communal life together. Both are important for the missionary church. But also, like Berkhof, defining the church in the midst of the world leads to the burning question of the relationship of the church to its culture. If the church’s identity is established by its relationship to the world, it is necessary to understand how the church relates to its cultural context precisely because another vision of life prevails there. And so in chapters 5 and 6 we will turn to an important aspect of Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology—a missionary encounter with culture. Finally, in the last chapter I will offer some reflections on the significance of Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology for today.

14. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 421.

## The Central Dynamic of Newbigin's Thought

As we approach Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, we have to reset our minds to think beyond the "churchly" issues we normally associate with ecclesiology. To penetrate to his understanding of the church, we will need to accompany him as he asks deeper and more foundational questions about the gospel, Scripture, and even the nature of the Christian faith. When one follows Newbigin along this path, a central dynamic of his thought becomes clear. Although he never called it this, I call it his "gospel dynamic." By "dynamic" I mean a basic, powerful force that drives his thought. But I also want to communicate the idea, as the word "dynamic" is used in psychology, that this basic force is an interactive combination of factors: the gospel, the biblical story, the mission of the church, and a missionary encounter with culture. This dynamic can be briefly sketched as follows.

Newbigin believes that all thought must begin with the gospel—that is, the central events of the biblical story associated with Jesus Christ: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the Spirit. The good news is that in Jesus, God is acting through these events to bring the kingdom of God into the midst of history. Jesus does not need to stop and define the kingdom because the Jews are already primed and ready for its arrival. They know that the kingdom is the climactic moment toward which the whole Bible had been moving; it is the goal of universal history, the cosmic renewal of the whole creation from the power and effects of sin. The good news is that the end of universal history is now present in the middle of history in Jesus and by the Spirit.

The good news of the kingdom necessarily sets us in the middle of a story that claims to be the true story of the world. The gospel is a message about the *end* of universal history—the restoration of creation from sin. The biblical story *begins* with the creation of the whole world. Thus, the gospel places us between creation and consummation, the beginning and end of cosmic history. Moreover, the good news is the climactic moment of a long story of what God the Creator is doing in and with the nation of Israel to direct history to its goal. Thus, the gospel requires us to read the Bible as a cosmic story that begins in creation and ends with the renewal of creation. But it is also a story of what God is doing through Israel, Jesus, and the church. The gospel demands we see the Bible as a true story of God's redemptive work that gives us the meaning of history.

A central thread of this story is God's chosen people. The biblical story is a narrative of God's dealing with an elect people in whom and through

whom he will accomplish his purpose for the world. They are to be a people who bear in their lives the goal of universal history: the reconciliation and renewal God intends for all. They are a people who are blessed; they are being restored to the original blessing of what it means to be truly human. They are also a people who are to be a blessing; they are chosen for the sake of the world to be a means of blessing to all. They are first of all the place where God brings about his purpose. Then they are a channel of God's renewing work to the world. It is this outward orientation—"for the sake of the world"—that makes God's people missional by their very nature. Their identity is found in the role they play in universal history.

This people is set in the midst of the world to be a sign and preview of where God is taking all of history. They do not exist in a religious vacuum but live out their calling in the midst of a world that serves other gods. After Jesus, God's people are sent to live out their vocation in the midst of all the cultures of the world. Thus, the church will always embody and announce the gospel within some cultural context. From the beginning, the primary threat to Israel's vocation was the idolatry of the nations around them. The problem only becomes more intense as the church is sent as a nongeographical and multiethnic people to live as part of all the cultures of the world. Thus, the embodiment of God's purposes for creation will always involve a missionary encounter with the cultures of the world.

This is the fourfold dynamic that drives Newbigin's thought: gospel, story, missional people, and missionary encounter with culture. These are not four discrete pieces of his theological vision. Rather, they are closely intertwined, and each requires the others in order to be properly understood. Put another way, if we start with the gospel, we find ourselves in the middle of the Bible as one story whose central thread is the missional vocation of God's people, a people who necessarily live out their calling in a missionary encounter with culture. This dynamic expresses something intrinsic to the Christian faith. It also shows how central a missionary ecclesiology is to Scripture. In the chapters that follow, we will find ourselves face-to-face with this "gospel dynamic" of gospel, biblical story, missionary church, and missionary encounter with culture.

## **Why Newbigin?**

I have found that, even though Newbigin was one of the most influential Christian leaders and thinkers in the twentieth century—perhaps reaching the pinnacle of his global influence in the 1980s—many people still don't

really know him. And so a legitimate question might be, Why Newbigin?<sup>15</sup> My first response would be that I have studied Newbigin all my life and been deeply shaped by his thought. But that can't stand as the only reason. I would then point to a large number of other people who have been deeply impacted by this thinking.<sup>16</sup> But the larger question is why Newbigin had this kind of influence.

When introducing Newbigin to deliver the Hickman Lectures at Duke Divinity School in 1994, American church historian Geoffrey Wainwright remarked that when the history of the church in the twentieth century comes to be written—if the church historians know their job—Newbigin will have to be considered one of the top ten or twelve theological figures of the century. In Wainwright's book about Newbigin, he honors Newbigin's significant contribution by portraying him in patristic terms as a "Father of the Church."<sup>17</sup> Wainwright offers five reasons he deserves such a designation: Newbigin's broad range of ministry was constantly nourished by Holy Scripture; he carried out his work with a commitment to the early ecumenical creeds; he always worked to build up the church as a visible social community; he exercised a comprehensive ministry; and "there was the sheer stature of Newbigin as a man of God."<sup>18</sup> Those are words of high praise! And these reasons alone would be sufficient to justify a focus on Newbigin. But I want to add a further response to the question of why Newbigin.

Alan Neely comments that Newbigin's ministry experience has been "scarcely paralleled."<sup>19</sup> Newbigin spent almost forty years in India as a missionary. As one reads about his work in India, the sheer range of his ministry is remarkable.<sup>20</sup> This breadth of experience provides a rich resource for theological reflection. His ministry runs the gamut from street evangelism to becoming the patron saint of and advocate for a leper community to deep theological discussions on the Hindu Upanishads and the Gospel of John with

15. See Michael W. Goheen, "The Legacy of Lesslie Newbigin for Mission in the 21st Century," *Trinity Journal for Theology and Ministry* 4, no. 2 (2010): 8–21 (special issue, "The Gospel in the Public Square: Essays by and in Honor of Lesslie Newbigin").

16. For a sampling of testimonies to his influence on the centenary of his birth, see Fellowship of Saint Thomas, "Lesslie Newbigin Centenary," [www.fost.org.uk/bigincnt.htm](http://www.fost.org.uk/bigincnt.htm).

17. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), v; see also 390–93.

18. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 392.

19. Alan Neely, review of *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography*, by Lesslie Newbigin, *Faith and Mission* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 106.

20. See Lesslie Newbigin, *A South India Diary* (London: SCM, 1951); American edition: *That All May Be One: A South India Diary—the Story of an Experiment in Christian Unity* (New York: Association Press, 1952). This book offers a window into the pastoral life of Newbigin in his early years as a missionary. See also Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*.

learned Hindu monks to spending days evangelizing primitive cave dwellers on the furthest margins of Indian society to a powerful bishopric in one of the most significant cities in India. He was also a significant ecumenical figure who led the International Missionary Council, edited the most important missions journal of the time, and took a high position of leadership within the World Council of Churches. He was deeply involved in many theological struggles of the ecumenical tradition during the twentieth century, always maintaining a deeply orthodox Christian position through it all. During this time he traveled and spent significant time in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This, together with his lengthy ministry in India, allowed him to experience the global church on a scale that few people ever have. Upon his return from India he taught mission theology at a graduate level at Selly Oaks College and pastored a small inner-city church in the poor and multiracial context of Winson Green. He was the elected moderator of the United Reformed Church, and he also launched the Gospel and Our Culture movement, which for many people worldwide raised the question of the gospel and Western culture and ultimately had a far-reaching impact. This brief overview indicates something of the breadth and wealth of Newbigin's ministry experience that funded his ecclesiological reflection.

Wainwright notes the wide-ranging nature of his ministry in another way—in terms of the many roles he played throughout his life: confident believer, direct evangelist, ecumenical advocate, pastoral bishop, missionary strategist, religious interlocutor, social visionary, liturgical preacher, scriptural teacher, and Christian apologist. Each of these could be explored both in Newbigin's writings, as Wainwright himself does, and also in terms of his ministry experience. And it would all underline the truth of Neely's assessment that few people have paralleled Newbigin's experience.

With his broad and diverse ministry, Newbigin combined deep theological reflection on what he was doing. He was a doer—that is clear—but he was also a thinker. He reflected often and deeply on his ministry praxis in the light of Scripture. Wainwright comments that one of the reasons he dares to designate Newbigin as a "Father of the Church" is that he combined rich ministry experience with profound theological reflection. He describes it: "Right practice demands, of course, critical and constructive reflection, and the best Christian theology takes place in the interplay between reflection and practice."<sup>21</sup> And this is what Newbigin embodies—the wide-ranging experience and the accompanying deep theological reflection of the early church fathers. And, to our benefit, he often put his reflection into writing,

21. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, v.

leaving behind scores of books, journal articles, book reviews, speeches, sermons, and Bible studies.<sup>22</sup>

There are a number of characteristics of Newbigin's theological reflection that make his writing relevant and helpful even now, two decades after his death. He was able to drive to the foundational and fundamental issues that were at stake. His thinking consistently started and continued in light of the gospel as he thought from the ground up to the various issues he engaged. He never ignored theology, tradition, or confessions—nor did he allow these to replace the gospel or the Bible's teaching as the final authority. He was a good biblical exegete who returned to the fountain of the Scriptures again and again. For example, on an overnight flight from Bombay to Rome to speak on the mission of the church in the contemporary world, he spent the whole flight reading through the entire New Testament and noting every reference to the word "world."<sup>23</sup> Nourished by the Scriptures and guided by the creeds and confessions of the church, he maintained an orthodoxy that shaped his engagement with many theological as well as social, political, educational, and economic themes.

Moreover, this theological reflection was always in service of the church. He could not have been further from an ivory-tower academic shielded from the messiness of church life. The problems the church was facing in its mission set the agenda for Newbigin's theology. The majority of his writings were occasional and contextual, shaped by the burning issues and needs of the day. His theology was a dialogue between Scripture and the urgent concerns of the church. But surprisingly, as one reads his work decades later, it doesn't feel outdated. One might think that the seeming ad hoc nature of his theology would lead to rapid irrelevance. But such is not the case. Wilbert Shenk commented to me that his students are always surprised by the freshness of Newbigin's writing and its "contemporary quality" that resonates with their experience decades later.<sup>24</sup> I have found the same thing with my students. This is largely because of what has already been mentioned above: Newbigin treated an issue by driving to its heart and shining the light of Scripture on it. While the issues may change, the theological struggle with foundational issues remains relevant and alive.

Furthermore, Newbigin's theological work is characterized by a clarity of thought and of communication that is rare. "Throughout his life, his analytic penetration, his conceptual power, and his mental agility ensured the

22. The bibliography assembled at the end of my dissertation runs more than 8,000 words and includes just over 350 entries. There is much more in several Newbigin archives.

23. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 144.

24. Personal communication via telephone, July 27, 2017.

intellectual quality of his practical wisdom.”<sup>25</sup> But the intellectual quality of his theology is coupled with an ability to speak and write with unusual clarity. He was able, often, to make very complex and difficult issues understandable. Tim Stafford compares Newbigin to C. S. Lewis, “who seems to know everything, and write about it with effortless erudition.”<sup>26</sup>

In the context of this book, a response to the question of why Newbigin must be the important role he played in the development of a missionary ecclesiology in the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> This is clear in two books Newbigin authored in the 1950s. Both books played an important role in articulating a consensus on the missionary ecclesiology at the time but also in contributing to its ongoing development. In 1952 a new framework for the missionary church was formulated at the important meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany. There the missionary nature of the church was sharply articulated in the context of the mission of the Triune God. Newbigin played a significant role in formulating the final statement of the conference. The next year Newbigin wrote *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, based on his Kerr Lectures at Trinity College, Glasgow. He believed the ecumenical movement lacked an adequate ecclesiology, and this was his attempt to provide one. Many continue to believe this is one of his most important books. Then in 1958 he wrote *One Gospel, One Body, One World*, about which David Bosch comments, “It summarized a consensus that had now been reached.”<sup>28</sup> That consensus was (1) the church is mission; (2) the home base is everywhere; and (3) mission in partnership. Newbigin’s later books popularized this ecclesiological consensus and expanded its reach, especially as he posed the question of what this ecclesiology would look like in Western culture. Today it is widely recognized that Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology is the source and inspiration of many ecclesiological movements in North America.

A final response to the question of why Newbigin is to underline Wainwright’s comment about the sheer stature of Newbigin as a man of God. In our culture, theological reflection is often judged only by academic standards, and a person’s godliness and character is considered irrelevant. However, I believe the latter to be a critical and essential dimension to good theologizing.

25. Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, vi.

26. Tim Stafford, “God’s Missionary to Us,” *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1996, 28.

27. See Michael W. Goheen, “Historical Perspectives on the Missional Church Movement: Probing Lesslie Newbigin’s Formative Influence,” *Trinity Journal for Theology and Ministry* 4, no. 2 (2010): 62–84 (special issue, “The Gospel in the Public Square: Essays by and in Honor of Lesslie Newbigin”).

28. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 370.

Newbigin's devotional life was deeply rooted in Christ, and his life displayed a joy and humility that was deeply attractive. In a time when academic life, book publishing, and lecture circuits have become an opportunity for celebrity status and for various other self-serving benefits, Newbigin's life stands as an example of self-giving and humble service for the sake of the church as well as for those outside the church. His life was a model to be emulated. I find Stafford's words about Newbigin to the point: "He does not act like a great man. In fact, it is not entirely clear that he realizes he is a great man. If he does, he does not seem to consider it important."<sup>29</sup> This humble service to the church and the world, but first of all to his Lord, gives weight to Newbigin's words. We are wise to attend to them.

29. Stafford, "God's Missionary to Us," 33.