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Missionaries in Our Own **Back Yard: Missional Community** as Cultural and Political **Engagement in the Writings of** Lesslie Newbigin

Patrick S. Franklin Providence Theological Seminary

Introduction

The previous two articles in this journal issue explore the idea that the church is a political entity. Buttrey, Eaton, and Olkovich engage the political ecclesiology of William Cavanaugh, who rejects what he calls "politically indirect ecclesiologies" in favour of "politically direct ecclesiologies." Politically indirect ecclsiologies are those in which "the church influences the state only through the activities of Christian citizens, and its theology is understood to need translation into a 'more publicly accessible form of discourse' to influence society." In contrast, in direct ecclesiologies, such as that of Stanley Hauerwas, the church is inherently (hence directly) a political entity, although - and this is crucial - one that embodies a different politics than that of the world and thus exists as a contrast community. Robert Dean, in his contribution, unpacks Hauerwas's conception of preaching within the context of his broader theological politics.² For Hauerwas, preaching is as an intensely political activity practiced within the church as an inherently political community (in the sense of Cavanaugh's notion of politically direct ecclesiology). In this article, I want to extend this discussion by considering the church's direct political nature from another angle: the church as missional community.

¹ Buttrey, Eaton, and Olkovich, "Politicizing Religion Cavanaugh, Levinas and Lonergan in Dialogue"

² Robert Dean, "Unapologetically (A)Political Stanley Hauerwas and the Practice of Preaching"

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.3 While the term, as it originally developed, fits more naturally into Cavanaugh's category of 'direct ecclesiologies,' many who have joined the missional bandwagon have assimilated 'missional' as a trendy buzzword to support their already entrenched 'indirect ecclesiologies.'4 As a result, those claiming to advocate a missional model have sometimes promoted an ecclesiology that is overly pragmatic and functional.⁵ This paper examines the roots of the missional church concept in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, in order to draw out fundamental dynamics of his missional theo-logic that are biblically grounded, theologically robust, and contextually engaged. While the missional church concept has continued to develop and expand, both conceptually and geographically (e.g., in the writings of the Gospel and Our Culture Network and other authors),6 Newbigin remains a rich resource and an im-

³ See Todd J. Billings, "What Makes a Church Missional? Freedom From Cultural Captivity Does Not Mean Freedom From Tradition," *Christianity Today* 52, no. 3 (Mar. 2008), 56-59; and Alan Hirsch, "Defining Missional: The Word Is Everywhere, But Where Did It Come From And What Does It Really Mean?," *Leadership*, 29 no 4 (Fall 2008): 20-22.

⁴ For example, 'missional' should not be confused with 'emerging church,' 'evange-listic' or 'seeker-sensitive' approaches to church, the church growth movement, the practice of formulating mission statements, an unbalanced focus on social justice, or a form of consumer ecclesiology In fact, missional ecclesiology arose, in part, as a critique of such church models. See Billings, "What Makes a Church Missional?" and Hirsch, "Defining Missional."

⁵ See Patrick Franklin, "Bonhoeffer's Missional Ecclesiology," McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry 9 (2007–2008): 118-25.

⁶ See, for example, Lois Y. Barret, ed. Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, Prodigal Christianity: Ten Signposts into the Missional Frontier (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013); Michael Frost, Exiles. Living Intentionally In A Post-Christian Culture (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006); Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, The Shape of Things to Come. Innovation and Mimstry for the Twenty First Century Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); Michael W. Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You". J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000) and A Light to the Nations The Missional Church and the Biblical Story (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011); Darrell L. Guder, Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) and The Continuing Conversion of the Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Roger Helland, and Len Hjal-

portant dialogue partner for this ongoing discussion.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) was educated at Cambridge University and subsequently commissioned for missionary service by the Church of Scotland in 1936.⁷ Por 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 Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans.⁸ 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.⁹

marson, Missional Spirituality Embodying God's Love from the Inside Out (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011); George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., The Church Between Gospel and Culture The Emerging Mission in North America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Len Hjalmarson, Text & Context Church Planting in Canada in Post-Christendom (Portland, OR. Urban Loft, 2013); Craig Van Gelder, ed. Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1999); Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006)

⁷ George R Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology: The Case of Lesslie Newbigin," *Missiology* 27, no 4 (October 1999). 523.

⁸ Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology," 523

⁹ Lamin Sanneh, "Lesslie Newbigin, 1909-1998: Mission to the West," Christian

Particularly, Newbigin noticed the seeming inability of Christians to avoid accommodating the reigning assumptions of "rational objectivity" and "personal choice." 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.

Key Ideas Regarding Culture

I. The Private-Public Dichotomy

According to 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.11 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 considered 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."12 Newbigin writes:

Century 115, no. 8 (March 11, 1998): 278.

¹⁰ Hunsberger, "Biography as Missiology," 527

¹¹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 14.

¹² Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 17.

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.13

Newbigin argues that this public-private dichotomy is inherited from the Enlightenment (i.e., Kant's separation of the noumenal and phenomenal spheres),14 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."15 In contemporary twenty-first century western societies, the public/private and facts/values split is intensified by the influence of scientism (or scientific reductionism), 16 which restricts questions of truth to what can be tested by scientific (or social scientific) methods, and by the postmodern rejection of the universality of the moral law.17

¹³ Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, Geneva WCC Publications, 1989), 7

¹⁴ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 25

¹⁵ Newbigin, Truth to Tell The Gospel as Public Truth (London SPCK, 1991), 15 16

¹⁶ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 14 On the problem of scientific reduction ism, see also Donald M. MacKay, Human Science and Human Dignity (Downers Grove IVP, 1979), 27, 48, Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1989), 21 22, and Christian Smith, What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 2010), 29-40

¹⁷ While in a certain sense, Kant's moral philosophy separated private values and beliefs (especially those based on particular appeals to divine revelation or church tradition) from public ethics (grounded in practical reason), his insistence on the universality of the moral law, and its universal accessibility through rational thought, ruled out moral relativism. Postmodern culture pushes the division further by rejecting as morally binding not only claims based on revelation and tradition but also those based on a (purportedly) universal moral law

2. Abandonment of Teleology

Newbigin's second observation 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.¹⁹

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 (empirical) world while the latter belongs to the noumenal (metaphysical) 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.²⁰ By discovering the immediate cause of something, 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."²¹

¹⁸ See also Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 9-14.

¹⁹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 79.

²⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, "Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology Star Trek and the Next Generation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18, no. 4 (1994): 324.

²¹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 24.

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."22 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."23 From a scientific standpoint, such an explanation is 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. Think, for example, of the implications for medicine. Rather than attempting to diagnose and treat through speculation and superstition the ultimate purpose for a sickness (e.g., a divine curse, demonic activity, karma), which is not observable, one should attempt to isolate a direct causal link though observation and experimentation and then devise treatments that produce direct positive results.

However, Newbigin points out that a complete abandonment of teleology is both inaccurate and insufficient. For example, while one could describe a lecture solely in terms of 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."24 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."25 As

²² Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 35

²³ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 35

²⁴ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 34

²⁵ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 57

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. Drawing an example from Alasdair MacInyre, Newbigin writes:

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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

Associated with the loss of teleology and the resulting mechanistic worldview is the increasing fragmentation of life.²⁹ 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

²⁶ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 37

²⁷ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 37 Without recourse to purpose, we cannot refute Hume's argument that 'ought' statements cannot rationally be derived from 'is' statements

²⁸ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, 24 Consequently, as a society 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"

²⁹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 29

and more anonymous and replaceable part, the perfect incarnation of the rationalist conception of man.30

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. Moreover, the modern worker spends most of his or her time removed from home, family, and local community.³¹ This, in turn, has implications for gender roles, parental responsibility, and the division of labour in the home.

Even worse, dismissing questions of purpose leads to the belief that life ultimately has no meaning and is not directed toward a final goal. 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.³² Rather than placing its hope in a future heaven (or better, the new creation), 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."33 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."34

³⁰ Newbigin, The Household of God Lectures on the Nature of the Church (London SCM, 1957), 13

³¹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 32

³² Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 32

³³ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 28

³⁴ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 28

3. 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." Currently, the reigning plausibility structure for public life in post-Christian societies 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."

Typically, the church's response has been to adapt its witness of the gospel in light of these plausibility structures, attempting to show how aspects of the Christian faith (those which seem to be at odds with the culture) actually fit into the culture's worldview.³⁷ But what if it is precisely the culture's terms, conditions, and questions that are being called into question?³⁸ Is it possible to speak of a genuine encounter between the gospel and our culture?³⁹ Newbigin asks, "The Bible and the church are part of our culture. How shall a part of our culture make claims against our culture?"⁴⁰ In order to comprehend his response, and correspondingly his depiction of the church as a

³⁵ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 10

³⁶ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 14

³⁷ One thinks, for example, of the modern seeker sensitive movement, historically, this calls to mind Schleiermacher's speeches to the modern cultured despisers of religion (Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, trans John Oman, Westminster John Knox, 1994)

³⁸ 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" (Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 134-35)

³⁹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 43

⁴⁰ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 43-44

'missionary congregation,' it is necessary first to examine his theology of mission.

Newbigin's Theology of Mission

When the Christian church engages in mission, according to Newbigin, it is not merely following a command; such a narrow view "tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel."41 Instead, mission results from an explosion of joy in the church community, which overflows into the world.⁴² 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, power, grace, and 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 sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.⁴³ When God's presence manifests 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."44

There are a number of components to Newbigin's missiology. Crucial among them are the significance of election, the nature of conversion, the distinction between the agent and the locus of mission, and the centrality of discipleship.

⁴¹ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 116

⁴² Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 116

⁴³ 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)

⁴⁴ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 116

1. The Significance of Election

For Newbigin, election is at the core of the biblical story. According to George Hunsberger, there are three reasons why election is necessary in Newbigin's missiology. First, it befits the relational and historical nature of human beings. "Human nature is by nature historical and social, each person intimately connected to each 'other." For Newbigin, God's electing activity aims not simply 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 in perfect love. Newbigin insists:

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, 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 dawnings of man's understanding of it and acceptance of its implications.⁴⁷

Second, election befits God's nature as relational, and more specifically personal. 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." Since God is personal, one cannot come to know God simply by reading

⁴⁵ Newbigin, Household of God, 27

⁴⁶ George R Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness of the Spirit Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1998), 103

⁴⁷ Newbigin, Household of God, 62

⁴⁸ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 103

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 Himself known, in a personal act of self-disclosure that God alone can initiate. 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." 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." 50

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."51 Unfortunately, in the West, the way in which the gospel is often conceived and portrayed betrays a form of reductionism. For example, conservative evangelicals have sometimes been inclined to reduce the gospel to the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the soul.⁵² 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."53 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

⁴⁹ Leslie Newbigin, The Open Secret An Introduction to the Theology of Mission (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1995), 26

⁵⁰ Newbigin, Open Secret, 26

⁵¹ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 103

⁵² Dallas Willard calls this the "gospel of sin management" and refers to the church's focus on this as the "great omission" See his books *The Divine Conspiracy Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Fiancisco HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) and *The Great Omission Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

⁵³ Newbigin, Open Secret, 48

as an independent spiritual monad...."⁵⁴ It neglects the corporate nature of both human falleness (i.e., alienation from God and others) and redemption (i.e., restoration to wholeness).⁵⁵ 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 Himself. However, 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..."⁵⁶ In a relational view of salvation, election is intrinsic to the transmission of the gospel. Hunsberger refers to this as 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."⁵⁷

It is important to point out that Newbigin understands election primarily in light of the biblical narrative of God's calling of Abraham (then Israel, then the church) to be a blessing to the nations. He does not begin his thinking by grounding his doctrine of election in fourth century or sixteenth century debates about the freedom of the will and the nature of grace. For Newbigin, the overarching purpose of election is to make God's saving intentions known to all.⁵⁸ Election is the process of choosing and narrowing, of calling a particular people, to be a blessing to all and not to be exclusive beneficiaries. It is a particular act with universal intentions.⁵⁹ Moreover, "the blessing itself would be negated if it were not given and received in a way that binds

⁵⁴ Newbigin, Open Secret, 70

⁵⁵ Newbigin, Household of God, 140-41

⁵⁶ Newbigin, Household of God, 72-73

⁵⁷ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 50

⁵⁸ A consistent theme in Newbigin's works is that the purpose of election is for service, not for privilege (*Household of God*, 101)

⁵⁹ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 31-32, 68 71 Whenever the doctrine of election has been misused, 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)

each to the other."60 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."61

2. The Nature of Conversion

Although Newbigin is cautious of overly individualistic interpretations of the gospel, he nevertheless believes that personal conversion is crucial. 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."62 Newbigin's understanding of conversion 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)."63 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 Kuhn⁶⁴) similar to the movement in physics from Newton to Einstein. He explains:

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.65

⁶⁰ Newbigin, Open Secret, 71

⁶¹ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 50

⁶² Newbigin, Open Secret, 121

⁶³ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 239

⁶⁴ Thomas S Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago Chicago University Press 1970)

⁶⁵ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 52

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. 66 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. 67 Ultimately this radical shift amounts to a revolutionary change in a person's loyalty or allegiance.

Eor the believer, Jesus is the ultimate or foundational commitment; his claim upon the believer cannot be validated by appealing to some other authority.⁶⁸ 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."⁶⁹ 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,"⁷⁰ 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.

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 their being and turned toward him in loving trust and obedience." 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 revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit. 72 John Williams notes that "Newbigin's

⁶⁶ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 53

⁶⁷ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 53

⁶⁸ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 11

⁶⁹ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 11

⁷⁰ Newbigin, "Context and Conversion," International Review of Mission 68 (July 1979) 301

⁷¹ Newbigin, Open Secret, 139

⁷² 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

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."⁷³ However, the decisive prominence he gives to revelation does not imply a naïve stance against reason, nor does it negate the necessity of logical argument. As Newbigin asserts, "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 work."74 Indeed, "reason can only work with the data that it is given."75 It is a means, not an end; it is a tool, not a final product.

A third major component of Newbigin's view of conversion is that it should be understood holistically, affecting the whole person. 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 one over against the other (e.g., the soul-saving versus social justice conflict is a form of this fallacy). Moreover, 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."⁷⁶ 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."77 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

in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ" (Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 118-19)

⁷³ John Williams, "The Gospel as Public Truth: A Critical Appreciation of the Theological Programme of Lesslie Newbigin," Evangelical Review of Theology 18, no 4 (October 1994): 371.

⁷⁴ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 24.

⁷⁵ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 20.

⁷⁶ Newbigin, Open Secret, 135

⁷⁷ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 239

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." Finally, 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..." It requires committing oneself to Christ, but also to his visible fellowship on earth—his body, the church. It entails a reorientation with regards to all of God's creation, in light of the realization that Christ has reconciled all things to himself through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:20).

3. The Agent and Locus of Mission

The agent of God's electing, calling, and 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.80 As the firstfruit, who assures the church that the full harvest is still to come (Rom 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.81 Accordingly, mission "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."82 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 proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son, and bearing the witness of the Spirit. This trinitarian portrayal is no mere homiletic

⁷⁸ Newbigin, Open Secret, 135

⁷⁹ Newbigin, Household of God, 140

⁸⁰ Newbigin, Household of God, 99, 104

⁸¹ Newbigin, Household of God, 140

⁸² Newbigin, Open Secret, 56

device; it is foundational for and pervasive in Newbigin's theology.⁸³

An implication of this framework is that mission is not ultimately a project of the church but a work of the triune God. 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 devising means for any end we desire," Newbigin's emphasis here is particularly relevant.84 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 Pather 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.85

Thus, 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. Mission is "the

⁸³ As Philip W 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" Philip W Butin, "Is Jesus Still Lord? Lesslie Newbigin on the Place of Christ in Trinitarian Ecclesiology," In Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday, ed David S Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1999), 201

⁸⁴ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 24

⁸⁵ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 134-35

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.⁸⁶ The church 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. Rather, as a community of the triune God, the church exists to proclaim and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in its life, actions, and words through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The church is the *locus* of mission because within it resides the Spirit, who is the *agent* of mission.⁸⁷

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. 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 parties 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."88 So the church's missionary witness "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."89

4. Mission as Discipleship

"Mission is not just church extension." Newbigin points out that while church growth is desirable, there is a deeper concern in the New Testament (particularly the epistles) for the integrity and

⁸⁶ Newbigin, Open Secret, 63

⁸⁷ Newbigin, "Context and Conversion," 304

⁸⁸ Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 35

⁸⁹ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 270

⁹⁰ Newbigin, Open Secret, 59

authenticity of Christian witness.91 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."92 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."93 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 and pragmatic, leading us to focus on methods and techniques for 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."94 True conversion embraces discipleship and requires a radical shift in one's life, which is accomplished and applied holistically by the Holy Spirit. 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 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."95

Discipleship is costly because it embraces a public way of life that challenges the reigning plausibility structures of the surrounding culture. Accepting Christ's call to be his witnesses means living according to a different set of priorities, ethics, and convictions about the way society should be. Sometimes this will involve confronting sinful and oppressive elements in culture, whether these are laws,

⁹¹ Newbigin, Open Secret, 125

⁹² Newbigin, Open Secret, 125

⁹³ Newbigin, Open Secret, 127

⁹⁴ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 241

⁹⁵ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 132

institutions, or powerful leaders. Such a call to witness promises not worldly power and privilege but cruciform weakness and suffering. 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.⁹⁶

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,97 which God has called out to demonstrate "in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all."98 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. 99 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.

⁹⁶ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 220

⁹⁷ We need not accept the lexical and etiological basis of Newbigin's argument (re *ecclesia*) 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

⁹⁸ Newbigin, Open Secret, 16-17

⁹⁹ Hunsberger, Bearing the Witness, 240

1. The Missionary Congregation and the Beginnings of the Missional Church Concept¹⁰⁰

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."101 This mutual relatedness, moreover, is not "merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself."102 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 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.¹⁰³ Summing up, 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."104

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

¹⁰⁰ While Newbigin employed the terminology of 'missionary congregation' or the church's 'missionary encounter with culture' (e g, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 234-41), the Gospel and Our Culture Network reshaped and developed Newbigin's ideas and formulated the term 'missional church' See especially Darrell L Guder, Missional Church A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Grand Rapids, Cambridge Ferdmans, 1998)

¹⁰¹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 118-19

¹⁰² Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 82

¹⁰³ Newbigin, Open Secret, 69 70

¹⁰⁴ Newbigin, Household of God, 130

life of believers."¹⁰⁵ Christ is present with and in his people, and he reveals himself to the world through them.¹⁰⁶ 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 ecumenical partnership.¹⁰⁷ He states, "These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with another."¹⁰⁸ 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."¹⁰⁹

Another aspect of the missionary congregation is that it is called to announce the kingdom, reign, and sovereignty of God. Both the content and the mode of this announcement are 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. 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. 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. This 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. The church is not permitted to retreat to the private sphere. As Newbigin often remarks,

¹⁰⁵ Newbigin, Household of God, 69

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin, Household of God, 52

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin, Household of God, 149 52

¹⁰⁸ Newbigin, Household of God, 152

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, 149 This is in keeping with Christ's words, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13 35)

¹¹⁰ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 124

¹¹¹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 94

[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. 112

To summarize what he means by a missionary encounter between gospel and culture, Newbigin posits seven essentials for the missionary church. First, we must recover a robust biblical and pnuematological eschatology.¹¹³ Having a clear sense of direction, and being guided by a sure goal and future, the church lives in contradiction to the purposelessness and aimlessness of the world. By their witness, Christians proclaim the gospel with confident humility, aware of the fact that they live in a time period caught between the tension of 'already' and '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.¹¹⁴ Second, we must articulate a Christian doctrine of freedom, which is capable of distinguishing tolerance from indifference. 115 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.116 The church must discard fhe 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.¹¹⁷ This relates very closely to Newbigin's

¹¹² Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 99 100

¹¹³ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 134

¹¹⁴ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 137

¹¹⁵ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 137 See also Hilliei's suggestive article on Zizek's critique of western liberalism's doctrine of tolerance

¹¹⁶ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 141

¹¹⁷ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 144

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."118 The existence of denominations reinforces the view that the church is merely an association of individuals who share the same private opinions. 119 At the very least, denominations should begin to engage in joint ministry and ecumenical discussion. Fifth, the missionary church seeks dialogue with and feedback from Christians whose minds have been shaped by other cultures. ¹²⁰ Such intercultural dialogue could help to safeguard the Christotelic multiculturalism envisioned in the Bible (i.e., in passages like Rev 5:9) and protect us from naïve idiosyncratic or ethnocentric interpretations of the gospel.¹²¹ Thus, intercultural dialogue would be fruitful in freeing the church and the Bible from captivity to western culture and allowing the gospel to confront it 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. 122 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."123

2. 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, re-enacting, 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

¹¹⁸ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 145.

¹¹⁹ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 146.

¹²⁰ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 146

¹²¹ Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic," *International Review of Mission* 83 (July 1994): 485, 483

¹²² Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 148.

¹²³ Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, 149.

for understanding, the 'lenses' through which they are able to understand and cope with the world."124 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 narrated, indwelled, enacted, proclaimed in a living community. 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. 125

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 contemporary post-Christian cultures 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 its surrounding neighbourhoods and communities with the

¹²⁴ 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)

¹²⁵ Newbigin, Household of God, 27 See also Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 227

lens though which they can begin to interpret and understand the message of Christ. In this manner, the church becomes a "living epistle." Iames 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." 127

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.¹²⁸ This will occur as the congregation learns to 'indwell' the gospel, thereby narrating its own life in light of it and seeing the world through it.¹²⁹ Second, it will be a community of truth governed by a plausibility structure shaped according to the Christian understanding of human nature and destiny.¹³⁰ 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

¹²⁶ Newbigin, Household of God, 51

¹²⁷ Brownson 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 and deed that the fragmented suspicion of our postmodern world will be able to discover a new Way that is also Truth and Life" (Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love," 503-4)

¹²⁸ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 227

¹²⁹ Newbigin (*Truth to Tell*, 45-47) borrows the term 'indwelling' from the philoso pher 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

¹³⁰ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 228 229

of Iesus."131 Third, it will be a community that lives not for itself but is deeply concerned for its neighbours. 132 As a missionary people created and commissioned by the triune, missionary God, it will be a church that exists for God and for others.¹³³ Fourth, it will be a place where men and women are equipped and discipled to be ministers of the gospel, making full use of the multiplicity of gifts God has given to the church.¹³⁴ For, "the exercise of priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world."135 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. 136 Finally, in contrast to the pessimism, hopelessness, and aimlessness of modern western culture, it will be a community characterized by the hope of the gospel of Christ, which it indwells and lives out.137

Conclusion

In the thought of Lesslie Newbigin the church engages its surrounding culture, both culturally and politically, as a missional community. In so doing, the church embodies a different way of life, one narrated by Scripture and oriented to the kingdom of God. In the context of western, post-Christian societies, this way of life will expose and confront unexamined assumptions that undergird the

¹³¹ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 229

¹³² Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 229

¹³³ See Franklin, "Bonhoeffer's Missional Ecclesiology," 115-17.

¹³⁴ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 230

¹³⁵ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 230

¹³⁶ Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 231.

¹³⁷ 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).

cultural plausibility structures and social imaginaries that set the terms for how people think about religion and public life. Particularly problematic assumptions include the separation of facts / public life from values / private life, the bracketing out of purpose questions (teleology) in public discourse, and (on the part of the church) a Christendom mindset that fails to recognize and address the captivity of the gospel to western culture. To cultivate this kind of life, the church needs to regain a robust theology of mission, one which understands the significance of election in the mission of God to save the world, has a holistic doctrine of conversion, is thoroughly pneumatological and trinitarian in its self-understanding and practice, and emphasizes the centrality of discipleship for genuine Christian witness in fhe world. A church formed by a missional theology such as this will humbly and faithfully live its life as an embodied proclamation, a "living epistle" and "hermeneutic of the gospel," within the concrete cultural space that God has placed and commissioned it.