

10. THE NATURE AND RELEVANCE OF NEWBIGIN'S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

10.1. INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter we summarize and analyze Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. The first part discusses the nature of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology emphasizing both strengths and weaknesses. The second section considers the relevance of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology for two ecclesiological discussions. The first is the ecclesiological tension that remains in the ecumenical tradition. Ecclesiological discussions within the ecumenical tradition are diverse, complex and manifold; thus this concluding chapter cannot enter into the various and sundry streams of the dialogue. However, the debate between Konrad Raiser and Newbigin exemplifies a foundational tension that continues to exist in the WCC. This exchange between Raiser and Newbigin will be explored with a view to articulating the significance of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology for this tension. The second is the discussion on the missionary church taking place in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. A number of leaders of this movement have produced a book that articulates a missionary ecclesiology for North America (Guder 1998). They self-consciously follow the lead of Newbigin. A comparison between this book and Newbigin reveals the relevance of Newbigin's ecclesiology for the North American setting. The conversations of the WCC and the GOCN/NA have been shaped to some degree by Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. He was a major figure in the ecumenical tradition until the end of his life; the GOCN/NA is a direct response to his call for a missionary encounter with western culture.

10.2. THE NATURE OF NEWBIGIN'S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

The historical formation of Newbigin's ecclesiology is evident in two basic shifts: the shift from a Christendom to a missionary ecclesiology and the shift from a Christocentric to a Christocentric-Trinitarian ecclesiology. Newbigin's first discussion of the church came in 1942 where it finds a minor place. The church is characterized as a fellowship of redeemed individuals who have experienced the new powers of the Spirit. By the next decade, Newbigin articulated a missionary understanding of the church. The verse that captures Newbigin's abiding conviction about the missionary nature of the church is John 20:21: 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' This commission gives the church its identity: it is a body chosen and called to continue the kingdom mission of Jesus until His return. The church enjoys a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Thus it is commissioned to witness in its life, words, and deeds to the good news of the kingdom locally and to the ends of the earth. This shift to a missionary ecclesiology was prompted by two important factors: Newbigin's missionary experience in India, and his participation in the ecumenical tradition where a missionary ecclesiology was emerging in the International Missionary Conferences from Tambaram (1938) to Willingen (1952). Indeed Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology during this time

was formed in the mould of the doctrine of the church that developed in the ecumenical missionary tradition and found clear expression at Willingen. This missionary ecclesiology finds detailed elaboration in two of Newbigin's books: *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953d) and *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (1958b).

By the time of the New Delhi Assembly of the WCC (1961) Newbigin realized that his understanding of the missionary church articulated in the 1950s was inadequate. He acknowledged two closely-related problems. On the one hand, a Christological basis for ecclesiology was insufficient; this must be expanded into a Trinitarian framework. On the other hand, mission was conceived too narrowly in church-centric terms; a deeper understanding of God's work in the world must be developed. Newbigin's first attempt to articulate a Trinitarian basis for the missionary church is found in *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963g). While Newbigin further nuanced his ecclesiology, the mission of the Triune God provided the framework in which Newbigin understood the missionary church for the remainder of his life.

This historical sketch shows that Newbigin's ecclesiology can be understood only in the context of the *missio Dei*. Yet the *missio Dei* is understood in different and even conflicting ways. Two theological motifs that shape Newbigin's understanding: a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth (Hoedemaker 1979:455-456). Understanding these two themes and their relationship provides a lens through which to view the theological basis of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, both in its strengths and its weaknesses.

The strongest and most fully developed element of Newbigin's understanding of the *missio Dei* is the Christocentric concentration. Newbigin's consistent ecclesiological starting point is the good news that is revealed in the 'fact of Christ.' More specifically, *in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ has revealed and accomplished the kingdom of God that is the goal of universal history*. There are a number of implications of this statement that Newbigin has elaborated that are significant for his missionary ecclesiology.

Newbigin's Christocentric starting point leads to a certain understanding of Scripture. Christ reveals the end of history; accordingly Scripture is not a local narrative but a story about universal history. The good news is a 'secular announcement' and 'public truth.' That is, the gospel is about the restoration of the reign of God over the entire creation at the end of world history, and therefore cannot be confined to a strand of religious or cultural history. The mission of the Triune God is narrated in the unfolding story of redemption recorded in the Scriptural record. The way we understand the nature of the church depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of the world of which the calling of the church is part? The Bible gives the true story of the world. Accordingly the church must be understood in the context of that story. Newbigin draws out the ecclesiological implications: the church's missionary nature can be discerned by reference to its role and its place in the story of history. In terms of its role, the church has been chosen as the bearer of God's end-time purpose for the sake of all humankind. The logic of mission is that the end of history has been revealed and accomplished, and the church is the community chosen by God to communicate that news in its life, words, and deeds. In terms of its place, the church exists in the already and not yet time of the kingdom of God. The final judgement has

been delayed so that God's purpose for history might be made known in the church. The church functions as a preview of the coming kingdom.

Newbigin's Christocentric focus is also eschatological. The good news announces the arrival of the end-time reign of God present in Jesus Christ; the eschatological power of God through the Holy Spirit to heal and renew the whole creation from sin and its effects is now present in history in the person of Christ. The Spirit is a gift for the end times; He brings the life of the kingdom of God. Newbigin's eschatology is both realized and futurist: the kingdom is already present although it has not yet arrived in fullness. While the redemptive power of God's reign is present in Jesus by the Spirit, it has not yet been consummated. It remains hidden, awaiting its full unveiling in the future. The precise meaning of the delay of the end is mission. Three stages of this provisional time period can be discerned in Newbigin's thought: the mission of Jesus, the central events of Christ's death, resurrection, and Pentecost that enable the church to share the life of the kingdom, and the continuation of the mission of Jesus by the Spirit in the church. Jesus made known the kingdom by embodying it with his life, proclaiming it with his words, and demonstrating it with his deeds. He prayed and suffered for the sake of the kingdom as he encountered the powers of evil. He formed a kingdom community and prepared them to continue his mission. His kingdom mission culminated in his death and resurrection where the victory of God's reign for the entire cosmos was revealed and accomplished. This enabled the community Jesus had formed to begin to share in foretaste the life of the kingdom of God. As such this community was charged to continue the mission of Jesus, making known the life of the age to come in its life, words, and deeds.

The primary ways Newbigin characterizes the nature of the church are shaped by this eschatological context. The church is the *ecclesia tou Theou*—the public assembly called out by God in each place to make known the life of the age to come in each place; the church is the provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ; the church is the sign, foretaste, and instrument of the kingdom. Newbigin's continual emphasis on the organic unity of the church can be understood only in this context. In the end-time reign of God, all people will be ultimately united in Christ. If the church is a sign of the end, then unity must characterize the people of God today.

In Newbigin's thought, the church continues the mission of Jesus and thus participates in the *missio Dei* (Jongeneel 1997:91). The source of the church's mission is found in the love of the Father for the world. The content of the church's mission is found in the mission of Jesus: the church is to continue the mission of Jesus by making known the kingdom in its life, words, and deeds. The power and primary actor in the church's mission is the Holy Spirit who brings the life of the age to come and constitutes the church as a witnessing community. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21-22).

Accordingly, Newbigin emphasizes two poles that define the church's missionary nature: the call of God and the place it is set in the world. Newbigin elaborates the relation of the church to God in the terms of its place and role in the Biblical narrative, its participation in the *missio Dei*, its calling in the kingdom of God, and its election to a task. The church's nature is also circumscribed by its relation to the world: the church is a church for others in the sense that it does not exist for itself but for the sake of the

place in which it has been placed.

This Christocentric starting point defines the church as a missionary community. Newbigin highlights three historical factors that have blurred this missionary identity: the establishment of the church in Christendom, the privatization of the church in modernity, and the separation of mission and church in the missionary movement. In Newbigin's discussion on Christendom a basic tension remains. Newbigin offers the contours of a penetrating critique of the established church of Christendom: it cripples a missionary self-understanding; it shapes the ministry, sacraments, congregational structures, and theology in an unmissionary pattern; it distorts the relationship of the church to culture; it diminishes concern for the unity of the church; and it eclipses the eschatological context of the church. At the same time, Newbigin stresses the positive side of the established church of Christendom. The church was faithful in taking responsibility for the social, cultural, and political life of Europe. The Constantinian settlement represents the faithfulness of the church to bring the universal authority of Christ to bear on politics, culture, and society. The church's faithfulness during this period has left us with a legacy that has lasted to the present. Newbigin is right to stress these two sides of the church of Christendom. The problem is that he has left these two emphases side by side without any attempt to integrate them. Such a framework might be provided by explicitly identifying and explicating the two sides of the church's responsibility towards its host culture. The first is that of cultural responsibility that flows from the creation mandate; the second is that of prophetic critique that is necessitated by the twisting effect of sin on cultural development. In the case of the established church of Christendom the first of these responsibilities is fulfilled but the second is weakened. Newbigin's lack of development of a creational foundation for the church's responsibility in society does not allow him to make this kind of distinction. Consequently, the tension between the positive and negative effects of the Christendom church remain unresolved.

Newbigin's prolific work in the latter decades of his life increased awareness of the privatization of the church in modernity. The church's capitulation to the private realm has been extensively explored by Newbigin with fresh insight. Yet Newbigin does not highlight the important connection between the Christendom and the post-Enlightenment church. For Newbigin, the connection between them is in terms of discontinuity. Newbigin has articulated that discontinuity well: the post-Enlightenment church has moved to the margins of culture while the established church of Christendom held the gospel as public truth. What he has missed is the deep continuity between the church of Christendom and modernity. As Wilbert Shenk has shown, the privatization of the church is the historical outcome of the church of Christendom (Shenk 1995). The church in Christendom learned to take its place in the established political order. The loss of a prophetically critical stance to culture is carried over into the post-Enlightenment church. It is precisely because it accepted its role *within* culture that it accepted its place in the private sector. Today's consumer church is the legacy of Christendom. Newbigin's penetrating critique of modernity would be strengthened significantly by elaborating this connection.

Newbigin's Christocentric focus has been fruitful in elaborating the missionary nature of the church. Yet as we observed in describing the historical formation of Newbigin's ecclesiology, there was a shift to a more Trinitarian framework for his

ecclesiology. Historical developments within the World Council of Churches in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, as well as twenty years of missionary experience challenged Newbigin to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. During the decade of the 1950s the work of the Father received little emphasis, the primary witness of the Spirit was not sufficiently elaborated, and the work of the Spirit outside the bounds of the church received no attention. In the 1960s all three of these issues emerge in Newbigin's writings. He does not move from his earlier commitment to Christocentrism; for Newbigin the Trinitarian breath is an elaboration and explication of his Christocentric focus. To properly understand the mission of Christ, it is necessary to place that mission within the context of the Father's rule over history and the wide-ranging witness of the Spirit. Newbigin develops his Trinitarian foundation for the missionary church out of a commitment to the centrality of Christ. Thus on the one hand, there is a basic continuity between the two periods. Yet on the other hand, there is a fuller development that brings about emphases not seen in his earlier work. Nevertheless, even with this important emphasis on the Trinity, the work of the Father and Spirit in creation, providence, and history remains underdeveloped.

During this time Newbigin began to emphasize the work of the Father as Creator and Upholder, as the Lord of History, and as the One who initiates the end by sending Jesus into the world. Newbigin comments about the importance of the Father's work: "The point has several times been made that a true doctrine of missions must make a large place for the work of the Holy Spirit; but it is equally true that a true doctrine of missions will have much to say of God the Father" (1963g:31). Unfortunately Newbigin's own theological reflection on the Father's work remains in an embryonic state. In an appreciative review of Newbigin's *The Open Secret* Rodney Petersen has rightly pointed out this weakness: "With all of his talk about a trinitarian rather than simply christocentric missiology, what one does look for, but does not always find, is a fuller foundation for mission which reaches beyond an appeal to the person and work of Jesus—as vital as that may be" (Petersen 1979:192). Beyond the Trinitarian foundation "the usefulness of his trinitarian thesis for breaking out of present missiological impasses could be further exploited" (:193). In earlier chapters, the systematic formulation of the work of the Father in Newbigin's theology draws material from different parts of Newbigin's corpus. However, nowhere in Newbigin's writings do we find a sustained discussion of God's creational and providential work and its importance for mission. Newbigin's Christocentric orientation does not allow a full doctrine of creation to emerge and play an important role in providing the setting for the mission of Jesus and the church. When one compares for example, Newbigin's treatment of the Father's creational work with Paul's proclamation in Lystra (Acts 14:14-18) and in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), a contrast in emphasis becomes apparent.

Newbigin also failed to sufficiently elaborate the way in which the Father and Spirit relate to world history outside the bounds of the church. On the one hand, Newbigin rejected the classic tradition that had dominated the WCC from 1938 to 1952 and found no place for God's work outside the community of the church. On the other hand, he dismissed the opposite error prevalent in the 1960s which identified all the dynamic movements of world history with the work of God. God's sovereign governance of all things means that God was at work *in some sense* in movements of national liberation, of scientific discovery, of cultural renaissance, and in the renewal of non-Christian

religions. Newbigin poses the critical question: "In what sense is God at work in these movements in world history?" (1963g:28). In a review of *The Open Secret* Bert Hoedemaker queries whether Newbigin's Christocentric orientation prohibits a specific answer to this question. Hoedemaker notes Newbigin's "Christocentric concentration" and "Trinitarian breadth," a commitment to the central and unique significance of the Christ-event and a genuine openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world (1979:456). For Hoedemaker, it is not clear how, in Newbigin's view, commitment to the Lordship of Christ enables us to speak more specifically of the way in which the Father and Spirit are active in world history (*ibid*). Raiser too questions whether Newbigin has sufficiently accounted for the work of the Spirit. Newbigin "can state his basic Christological and ecclesiological affirmations almost without any reference to the pneumatological dimension" (Raiser 1994a:50).

The shift from Christocentrism to a Trinitarian basis for mission exhibits both continuity and discontinuity. In terms of continuity, Newbigin continues to emphasize the important role of the church in history. He does not follow Johannes Hoekendijk in marginalizing the church in favour of the God's providential work in the world. The discontinuity is found in that the mission of Christ prolonged in the church is now set in a new key: the work of the Father and the Spirit in world history form the broader context.

Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is consistently worked out in his discussion of the church as institution. Newbigin does not often use the word institution in relation to the church; rather I take it from Hendrikus Berkhof's systematic discussion of ecclesiology (Berkhof 1979:339-422). He distinguishes between the church as institution and its orientation to the world. The church is an institution wherein a number of ministries and activities are organized into a societal structure. Those ministries include worship, fellowship, ministerial leadership, and church order. Berkhof believes the church cannot be understood exclusively in terms of its institutional structure. The church exists for the sake of the world. In fact, an orientation toward the world is not an addition to but an essential dimension of the church. Indeed ecclesiology is distorted when this dimension does not pervade the whole. Berkhof believes that this third dimension has not received the attention it deserves in theological discourse. Only since the Second World War, with the unceasing work of Hendrik Kraemer, has this dimension of ecclesiology come to the fore. Jongeneel too draws attention to the central role of Kraemer in advocating the fundamentally missionary nature of the church (Jongeneel 1997:89-90). Accordingly, the whole of ecclesiology needs to be rethought from the standpoint of the church's orientation to the world (Berkhof 1979:345, 411-412). It is precisely this observation that highlights a contribution of Newbigin's ecclesiology. Following Kraemer, Newbigin has taken a lead in rethinking many traditional themes from the standpoint of the church's missionary nature. In particular, we find extensive discussions of ecclesiological structures, ministerial leadership, and worship from the standpoint of the church's orientation to the world. In every case, the missionary nature of the church pervades and shapes his discussion. Newbigin's discussion of each of these aspects of ecclesiology remains partial due to the contextual nature of his writings. Unfortunately many valuable dialogue partners are ignored: authors on Base Ecclesial communities, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox. For all that, Newbigin consistently treats each of these subjects from the standpoint of the

church's orientation to the world.

In Newbigin's writings, there are four aspects of the church's mission in the world that find regular treatment: evangelism, social justice and mercy, calling of the laity, and missions. Two features of his treatment of these tasks are significant. On the one hand, Newbigin insists that each of these tasks is indispensable in the total mission of the church. One can find numerous places where one or another of these tasks have been eclipsed in various traditions. Newbigin's insistence on the importance of each task remains relevant. On the other hand, each of these areas of the church's responsibility in the world is anchored in the local congregation. The abiding separation between missions societies, relief agencies, parachurch evangelistic bodies (to name a few) on the one hand, from the eucharistic community on the other, throws into relief the importance of Newbigin's discussion.

Newbigin emphasizes the church in both its gathered and scattered form. Yet here a basic inconsistency emerges in Newbigin's use of the word church. Newbigin rightly understands that the church is more than a local identifiable congregation gathered for worship, fellowship, and prayer. He places the church in the context of the kingdom; the church is a community that participates in the life of the kingdom. The salvation of the kingdom is comprehensive in scope and restorative in essence. These eschatological and soteriological emphases lead Newbigin to view the church as the new humankind living under the authority of Christ's rule in all of cultural life. However, Newbigin's ecclesiological formulations often refer to the church in a more traditional way that limits the church to its institutional and gathered form. The people of God scattered in the world are mere fragments of the church that are only truly the church when they gather together again on Sunday.

Newbigin's notions of 'missionary encounter' and 'challenging relevance' define the relation of the church to its cultural context. These phrases point to a unique model of contextualization that contributes significantly to the current discussions on gospel and culture. Few other models of contextualization so highlight the importance of the church in the whole contextualization process. Newbigin's understanding of a missionary encounter flows from three commitments. First, there is a religious set of assumptions that lies at the core of culture. These ultimate faith commitments are comprehensive: they shape every aspect of cultural life. Second, the Bible offers an alternative set of religious faith commitments that is equally comprehensive. The story of Scripture and the story of the culture clash at every point. Third, these stories are both socially embodied. On the one hand, the church is part of the cultural community that embodies idolatrous faith commitments. On the other hand, the church is called to be part of new humankind that embodies a different story. These incompatible stories intersect in the life of the church, producing an unbearable tension; the church must separate itself from the idolatrous story that shapes its culture and yet participate in the ongoing development of the cultural community. Living in this tension, the church challenges the idolatrous story of the culture with an alternative way of life shaped by the kingdom. A missionary encounter prohibits the church from either withdrawing into a ghetto or being accommodated to the cultural story. Newbigin resolves the tension with his notion of 'challenging relevance' or 'subversive fulfillment.' The church is called to embody the cultural forms yet at the same time to subvert them and give them new meaning shaped by the gospel. In this way, the church is both for and against its culture: it

identifies with the form of its culture but stands against the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to those forms.

While Newbigin's understanding of contextualization is valuable and calls for further development, he has built this model on a less than solid foundation. First, Newbigin's foundational understanding of culture is inconsistent. Along with Johann Bavinck and Harvie Conn, Newbigin highlights the religious commitments that lie at the core of culture and shape each institution, symbol, and form (Bavinck 1960:172-173; Conn 1980:147-150). Religion is not simply one cultural form but the directing dynamic that lies at the core of a culture. This moves Newbigin beyond cultural theorists like Paul Hiebert and Charles Kraft. Unlike Conn and Bavinck, however, Newbigin is not consistent in his elaboration of this depth dimension of culture, nor is he as clear in articulating its central place. Conn and Bavinck have offered a more consistent and carefully articulated understanding of culture. Newbigin's notions of missionary encounter and challenging relevance stand upon this understanding of culture. Thus a consistent and clear elaboration is essential for Newbigin's theory of contextualization. Moreover, Newbigin has failed to provide a Biblical foundation or theoretical articulation of the church's cultural responsibility. Both Sander Griffioen and Stephen Bevans have rightly called attention to the fact that Newbigin emphasizes the antithetical side of the church's cultural task with little attention to the positive calling of the church in culture (Bevans 1993; Griffioen 1996). Newbigin understands that the church's task involves both separation and solidarity. Unfortunately, he has developed the first of these at the expense of the second. Yet his whole understanding of a missionary encounter stands upon this dual role of the church in culture. Finally, Newbigin is neither clear nor consistent in distinguishing between the creational structure and the religious direction of all cultural forms. The church's stance is not a conservative acquiescence to the status quo nor a revolutionary destruction of contemporary forms. Rather the church subverts the existing forms giving new meaning to them in the light of the gospel. This helpful model depends on a distinction between what is creational in those forms and what has been distorted by sin. Bavinck's *possessio* is very similar to Newbigin's challenging relevance; yet the distinction between religious direction and creational structure is much more clear and consistent (Bavinck 1960:178-179). Kraemer's notion of subversive fulfillment is quite close to Newbigin's. In fact, it appears that Newbigin's understanding is dependant on Kraemer. Yet Kraemer provides a solid foundation for his notion with a lengthy discussion of creation revelation (Kraemer 1956:235-383). Newbigin rejects common grace and speaks little of creational revelation; yet this is the Biblical teaching that provides the only real foundation for his notion of challenging relevance. In summary, we can say that Newbigin has a weak understanding of the Bible's teaching on creation—creation revelation, creation order, and the creation mandate. This is related to the point articulated above: in Newbigin's thought a full Trinitarian theology does not emerge. Here in his understanding of contextualization we see the fruit of a weak elaboration of the Father's work in creation. Nevertheless, Newbigin's model of contextualization offers important insight for the discussion on contextualization, highlighting as it does the important place of the church.

Later church historians will probably point to Newbigin's role in fostering a missionary encounter with western culture as his most historically significant

achievement. Indeed many know Newbigin only in his role as an author of important books on the relationship between the gospel and western culture. What is often missed in assessments of his mission and western culture project is the central role of the church. The elements of a missionary encounter have been articulated above: a comprehensive and idolatrously shaped cultural story, Scripture as an alternative story, and a simultaneous embodiment of both of these stories in the church. Newbigin's appropriation of the insights of sociology of knowledge and post-empiricist philosophy and history of science highlight the significance of the church. Sociologists of knowledge draw attention to the important role of a community in embodying certain beliefs and making them plausible. Newbigin calls the church an alternative plausibility structure—a community that embodies an alternative set of beliefs. Borrowing insights from Michael Polanyi and Alasdair MacIntyre who accent the role of the scientific community as it embodies a tradition of scientific practice, Newbigin elaborates an alternative epistemology to challenge the idol of autonomous reason in the West. All rationality works in the context of a socially embodied tradition. The scientific community reasons in the light of basic faith commitments that provide the light for its endeavours. When anomalies threaten the commitments of the scientific community there is a paradigm shift that offers a new tradition in which to work. Here Newbigin sees a parallel between paradigm shifts in science and the mission of the church. As reason, the primary idol of the West, fails and cultural “anomalies” abound, the church is called to be an alternative community that offers a way of life lived in a different light.

The use of sociology of knowledge and philosophy of science to highlight the role of the missionary church as an alternative social order is helpful. However, a concrete elaboration of the ecclesiological implications of this conviction becomes problematic in Newbigin's thought. On the one hand, Newbigin rightly rejects the privatization of the church by modernity, the Christendom model of the medieval period, and the perpetual protest posture of the early church. To do so, his ecclesiological formulations draw on two traditions. The first is the Anabaptist tradition that stresses the church as an alternative community. This ecclesiology emphasizes the communal and critical dimensions of the church's task in culture. The second is the Reformed tradition that highlights the calling of the scattered church as the new humankind in culture. This ecclesiology emphasizes the cultural responsibility of the church and the breadth of its calling. Both themes find frequent expression in Newbigin's work. Yet there is a tension between the two traditions that Newbigin does not completely resolve. The question remains as to how these themes can be integrated and find concrete embodiment over against the powerful tradition that shapes the structures of western culture.

The problem arises because Newbigin's ecclesiology was shaped in the small undifferentiated villages of India. The image of the church as a communal body that incarnated a contrasting story over against the Hindu majority shaped Newbigin's view of the church. Newbigin recognized in the 1960s that the differentiated West presents a very different situation; the structures of the church must account for the complexity and differentiation of western culture. Yet in his later years, Newbigin returned to the vision of the church formed in India in contrast to the individualism and syncretism he found in the western church. In place of the individualism he stressed community; in contrast to the syncretism he stressed the critical task of the church in culture. At the

same time he continued to articulate the calling of believers in the their cultural task. However, these diverse ecclesiological elements are not integrated into a concrete model. Vandervelde rightly observes that “at the most critical point in his thought” Newbigin fails to be contextual (1996:13). The communal and individual witness, and solidarity and separation in relation to culture are not sufficiently integrated to provide a model of the missionary church relevant for western culture in the late 20th century; in fact, they stand in tension. Nevertheless, Newbigin has made an important contribution to an ecclesiology for western culture; he has pointed the way ahead by emphasizing the importance of drawing together elements from the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions.

10.3. THE RELEVANCE OF NEWBIGIN’S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY

This final section will briefly explore the relevance of Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology for two contemporary ecclesiological challenges: first, the tension that remains in the missiological stream of the WCC between two understandings of the missionary church; and second, the discussions in North America surrounding an ecclesiology for mission to North America.

10.3.1. *Relevance in Global Perspective*

David Bosch summarizes an abiding ecclesiological tension that remains within the missionary channel of the ecumenical tradition as one between two irreconcilable views of the church. The tension is the fruit of differing emphases on the locus of God’s work. The first ecclesiology emphasizes the church as the primary place of God’s work. The ecclesial community is “the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly” and mission becomes an activity where converts are transferred into this community (Bosch 1991:381). The second ecclesiology stresses the work of God in the world; the church exists as an example of the way God is at work in the world. The church’s mission contributes to the humanization of society.

Konrad Raiser’s recent books advocate the second ecclesiology (1991a; 1997). In the first of these books, *Ecumenism in Transition*, Raiser portrays a paradigm shift taking place in the ecumenical movement. The ‘Christocentric-universalist’ paradigm shaped the ecumenical movement from the beginning until the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC (1968). Using Willem Visser ’t Hooft as his primary example, Raiser depicts the classical paradigm in terms of four features: its Christocentrism, its concentration on the church, its universal scope, and its emphasis on salvation history. While this paradigm continues to play an important role in the WCC, the paradigm faces a number of problems that have produced a crisis that calls its continued suitability into question. Religious pluralism, burgeoning injustice and oppression, and the ecological threat jeopardize an understanding of the church that views itself as a unique body with a universal mission to the world. Raiser calls for critical revision to the existing ecclesiology and a discussion that will give rise to a “future ecumenical ecclesiology” (1991a:72). He briefly sketches a number of elements of this future ecumenical ecclesiology: the *oikoumene* as the focus of God’s work; a Trinitarian approach that

emphasizes the work of the Spirit in the *oikoumene*; the church as an illustration of God's work in the *oikoumene*; an emphasis on the solidarity of the church with the world that blurs the boundaries between church and world; mission as the contribution to an ethical culture that will address the tensions of religious pluralism, the injustice of economic oppression, and the threat to natural life systems.

To understand Newbigin's relevance for this contemporary debate in the ecumenical tradition, it is necessary to understand where he stands with respect to the classical paradigm represented by Visser 't Hooft and the post-Uppsala paradigm exemplified in Raiser. On the one hand, Newbigin's own intellectual and ecclesiastical formation took place in the early days of the WCC when the Christocentric-universalist paradigm predominated. Many elements of that paradigm remained firmly in place until the end of his life. On the other hand, the events and changes of the 1960s, both in world history and within the ecumenical tradition, brought about a Trinitarian shift in his thinking. In an exchange between Raiser and Newbigin in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Raiser highlights Newbigin's commitment to the classical paradigm. Raiser believes that "Newbigin wants to maintain 'Christo-centric universalism' as a valid model for understanding the ecumenical movement" and that "his entire critical reflection is based on the conviction of the nonnegotiable truth of the earlier paradigm ..." (Raiser 1994a:50). In reply Newbigin emphasizes the shift that took place in his thinking. Newbigin protests that he does not regard the classical paradigm as unalterable. He claims that during the late 1950s and early 1960s a change took place in his thinking in which he accommodated the insights of the time and modified the classical paradigm—a correction that is evident in two books written at the time: in *Trinitarian Faith for Today's Mission* (1963g) he articulated a foundation for mission that expands a Christocentric missionary theology into a more Trinitarian one (1994c:2; 1994f:51); in *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966b) he acknowledged elements of truth in the 1960s turn to the world and revised his missionary ecclesiology accordingly (1994c:5).

Raiser's complaint that Newbigin is an exponent of an obsolete paradigm and Newbigin's protest that he reshaped his views raise the following questions: Does Newbigin take sufficient account of the insights of the cosmocentric-Trinitarian approach in his later ecclesiological formulations so that his ecclesiology remains a valid option today that is both faithful to Scripture and relevant to our time? Or are Newbigin's refinements of the classical ecumenical paradigm simply a matter of internal tinkering with an outdated and irrelevant—and thus unfaithful—way of being church in the latter part of the 20th century? Can Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology sufficiently withstand the crisis Raiser has described and thus offer guidance for this time, or do the events from the time of Uppsala to the present invalidate Newbigin's approach? Put another way: does Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology shed any light on the tension between two contrasting understandings of the church that Bosch and Raiser have described? It is my contention that Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology is in keeping with Scripture and at the same time addresses the needs of our day. However, I would agree that certain critiques and modifications of Newbigin's ecclesiology are in order. This avowal will be fleshed out by considering three themes: the *missio Dei*, the nature and structure of the church, and the church's mission. Each section will highlight both the continuity and the discontinuity between Newbigin's ecclesiology

and the classical ecumenical paradigm. A critique will also be offered in places where we find Newbigin's ecclesiology inadequately reformulated.

Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology remained rooted in a Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei*. Yet in the 1960s he developed that Christocentrism into a Trinitarianism. The work of the Father in creation and history, the work of the Spirit as the primary witness to the kingdom, and the work of the Father and the Spirit outside the bounds of the church in culture and history are themes that characterize Newbigin's writing from the late 1950s on. However, Newbigin believed that developing a Trinitarian approach did not mean abandoning his Christocentric starting point. A Trinitarian framework is not an alternative set over against Christocentrism. Rather the Trinitarian perspective is an expansion and elaboration of a Christocentric one; it is a theological articulation of what it means for Christ to reveal and accomplish the kingdom of God. Newbigin would agree with Gerrit C. Berkouwer when he says that to understand a shift to a thoroughgoing Trinitarianism as a move away from a rigorous Christocentrism is to misunderstand Christocentricity (Berkouwer 1976:395). For Newbigin, Trinitarian thought is always Christocentric.

Raiser too wants to develop a Trinitarian perspective that is Christological (Raiser 1994a:50). Yet a difference remains between Raiser and Newbigin. Newbigin uses the word 'Christocentric' while Raiser uses the word 'Christological.' The differing terminology points a difference in the place and status of Christ in the two Trinitarian formulations. Moreover, Newbigin rightly notes that while Raiser knows that a Trinitarian confession is the expansion of the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' this truth is obscured in the development of Raiser's thesis (1994c:2). Finally, Raiser's Christology is limited to the historical ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his rightful concern to return to a concrete Christology, the universal Lordship of Christ as well as the universal significance of the atonement are diminished. In fact, any mention of the atonement of Christ is lacking in Raiser's book.

It is precisely at the point of an assessment of the work of Christ that we find the difference between Raiser and Newbigin. Raiser is critical of the cosmocrotor and ontological themes in classical Christology. Emphasis on the universal Lordship of Christ and His divinity supposedly obscure His earthly ministry. Raiser believes that this earthly ministry must be recovered in view of the urgent needs of the day. He calls for a Christology 'from below' rather than a Christology 'from above.' Pluralistic tension, economic oppression, gender and racial strife, and ecological danger all require a servant church that attends to these issues. This kind of mission must be rooted in a "concrete Christology which takes seriously the historical particularity of Jesus" (Raiser 1991:59). Raiser is correct to emphasize the historical mission of Christ that has been obscured by ontological discussion and a triumphalist Christology but the question is whether these two aspects of Christology need to stand over against each other. In Newbigin's theology they do not; it is precisely in the earthly ministry of Jesus and in His suffering death that He revealed and accomplished the end of history. And it is exactly that understanding of Christ that will not allow Newbigin to abandon his Christocentric commitment. If Christ has, in fact, made known and effected the *telos* of universal history, then he cannot merely be a model for the church's mission. Christ must be the starting point and controlling factor for all thinking about the church and its mission.

Nevertheless Newbigin's theological reflection on the work of the Father and the Spirit remain underdeveloped. Raiser believes that Newbigin can state his basic ecclesiological convictions without reference to the Spirit (1994a:50). In addition, Raiser believes that there is a need in the ecumenical tradition for a much more adequate doctrine of creation. He insists that the church must formulate a "deepened understanding of God's creation and of humanity's place within it" (1997:65). The problems facing the world community call for a church that understands its responsibility as members of the human race to contribute to the ongoing development of culture. Newbigin has not articulated the deepened understanding of God's creation and humankind's place in it. While Raiser deserves attention, Newbigin is right to maintain his Christocentrism. If in Jesus Christ God has acted to reveal and accomplish the end of universal history, this cannot be abandoned. Newbigin is correct to articulate a Trinitarian perspective in terms of the expansion and development of his Christological starting point. It is only unfortunate that this theological development is not fully realized in his work.

Raiser's critique of the ecclesiology of the classical paradigm is motivated by an impatience with the introversion and structural rigidity of traditional forms of the institutional church. Raiser emphasizes a church that serves the burning needs of the world and lives in solidarity with the cultural community. He is concerned about a Christian exclusivism that separates the church from the world and calls for an ecclesiogenesis in which "the institutional distinctions between church and world and church and society fall into the background" (Raiser 1991a:73). Flexible structures that will enable involvement and solidarity are the current need. Raiser recognizes the need to maintain the distinct identity of the church. However, in his conception the boundary is blurred between the church and the world of culture.

In line with the classical paradigm Newbigin continues to maintain the importance of characterizing the church as a unique body separated from the world. The church has been formed by Jesus Christ to share in the life of the end-time kingdom of God. Newbigin emphasizes the church as a foretaste and firstfruits of the reign of God, even while maintaining that the church is an instrument of the kingdom. The church cannot be reduced to its functional role as instrument; it is more than an action group within culture. It is the provisional result of the entry of the reign of God into history. Nevertheless, the church is also an agent of the reign of God. This emphasis on the church as both foretaste and instrument enables Newbigin to maintain the distinctiveness and solidarity of the church. The formulation of the church as firstfruits and agent shapes Newbigin's understanding of the relation of the church to the world. The church is both separated from society as a unique body and involved as part of the cultural community.

Once again the difference between Newbigin and Raiser is Christological. If Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of universal history, and if the church has begun to share in the life of the age to come, it cannot be reduced to a mere instrument; it is more than an action group or unique community that contributes to the moral fabric of society and the resolution of global threats. It is a unique community that bears God's purpose for all history.

Newbigin's stress on the church as instrument and on the church's solidarity with its cultural context enables him to address the dangers of introversion and structural

rigidity. During the 1960s the cosmocentric-Trinitarian paradigm made a number of valid criticisms of the self-absorbed, structurally inflexible church. Two important emphases find expression in Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

The first ecclesiological emphasis is the importance of flexible structures that enable and encourage mission. During the 20th century a number of factors combined to make the issue of the renewal of Christendom-style ecclesial structures an urgent matter: the increasing recognition of the missionary nature of the church, the social activism of the secular decade, the recognition of a highly differentiated society in the West, and the search for ecumenical structures within the WCC that expressed the unity of the church. In this context, Newbigin became convinced that bold experiments in ecclesial restructuring were urgent if the church was to express and embody its missionary nature. His book *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, written during this period, deals at length with the need for new ecclesial structures (1966b:100-122).

Newbigin took to heart the prophetic criticism of the 1960s that denounced the rigid and inflexible structures which maintained the introversion of the church. Newbigin believed that ecclesial structures must meet two criteria: they must express the nature of the church and be relevant for the time and place in which the church is set. Relevance requires structural flexibility, albeit all adaptation must express the nature of the church as disclosed in the gospel. Moreover, Newbigin opposed any ecclesial structures that absolutized or reified some kind of eternally valid structure, although at the same time he acknowledged that our incorporation into the church means an incorporation *into* an already existing tradition. Therefore, neither a conservatism that maintained the structural *status quo* nor a revolutionary approach that discarded all traditional forms was adequate to the situation. The question was how one could move from within existing traditional structures and reform them according to the demands and needs of the day. Finally, Newbigin referred to many current themes and concrete proposals for structural renewal. These specific recommendations show a clear indebtedness to the discussion taking place about ecclesial structures at the time. Many of its themes appear in Newbigin's elaboration of ecclesial structures: structures that account for the highly differentiated state of western culture; structures that are small and mobile for action in society; and neighbourhood, work, frontier, and action groups. These last examples are termed 'zonal structures' in the *The Church for Others* document (WCC 1967:80ff.).

Raiser's concern for structural flexibility and variety has been well addressed by Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. Yet Newbigin refuses to simply reduce the church to its instrumental and activist role within culture. The structures must reflect the nature of the church; and for that reason many important elements from the traditional structures must be maintained. The church must remain a body centred in the word, sacrament, worship, prayer, and fellowship, and not be reduced to an action group.

A second important ecclesiological emphasis that deepened in response to the discussion of the 1960s was the importance of the mission of believers in culture. The shift from an ecclesiocentric to a cosmocentric approach to mission during the 1960s entailed a renewed interest in the 'laity' as the primary bearer of mission. A strong movement arose during this decade to evaluate all structures—including congregational and leadership structures—according to their ability to equip the laity for their calling in the world. Out of this concern arose the authorization of a comprehensive study on

the “missionary structure of the congregation.”

Since Newbigin had had a long-standing interest in the mission of the laity, the renewed attention during this period moved him to discuss the issue in his writings in great detail. He states emphatically at this time that “the primary witness to the sovereignty of Christ” must be given by the laity (1960b:28). Like many of his contemporaries, Newbigin stresses that there must be structures that equip and a leadership that enables believers to fulfill their calling in the world.

Newbigin recognizes that the institutional church does not have the competence needed to address the various social, political, and economic issues that are urgent; it is through the believers’ participation in various zones of society, according to their gifts, opportunities, and expertise, that these issues are to be addressed from the standpoint of the gospel and reign of Jesus Christ.¹ Raiser bases much of the argument of his books on the need to address the challenges of the changing world in which we live. Newbigin’s detailed treatment of the cultural calling of believers offers a way into the missional calling of the church in the light of current issues.

Yet Newbigin did not believe that the communal and institutional nature of the church should be downplayed to make room for this important aspect of the church’s mission (1963g:60-61). In fact, his concern for the mission of the laity heightened commitment to the importance of the gathered church. The faithful calling of the laity required a fellowship within the congregation that nourishes the life of Christ through the means of grace, that supports believers in their callings through encouragement, financial support, prayer, and insight, and that develops congregational and leadership structures that equip believers for their task. Furthermore, the emphasis on the church as scattered and dispersed did not erode his commitment to the *communal* witness of the church to the kingdom of God.

If the need of the day is a missionary ecclesiology that addresses the many urgent economic, ecological, political, social, and educational problems that threaten our world, Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology offers important insight for ways in which the calling of the believers and the communal dimensions of the church may be harmoniously interrelated for mission in the public square.

All the same, two closely related problems obscure Newbigin’s contribution. His

¹T. Watson Street summarizes Newbigin’s position: “The doctrine of the Trinity will teach us that the spheres of life are to be subject to Christ, not the Church, and that Christ’s Lordship over these spheres is manifested by his Spirit, working often not through the official organs of the church, as clergy and executives, but through lay Christians in the institutions of political, economic, and cultural life” (Street 1963:8; cf. 1963g:52-63).

inconsistent understanding of the church is problematic. Newbiggin often uses the word church to refer to the institutional church organized and gathered for so-called 'religious' activity. Yet Newbiggin's fundamental ecclesiological conviction is that the church is the new humankind and that its witness is as broad as the creation. The term 'church' then should not be reduced to a gathered community that engages in acts of worship, prayer, fellowship, and sacraments. Newbiggin is not consistent. While his discussions on the mission of the laity reveal a broader understanding of the church, his usage of the word 'church' often betrays a reduction of the ecclesial community to the local congregation gathered for worship. Closely related to this, as we noted above, is Newbiggin's failure to integrate the Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological emphases. The Anabaptist emphasis on community and the Reformed emphasis on the cultural calling of believers are insufficiently correlated.

The abiding ecclesiological tension is not only manifest in differing understandings of the *missio Dei* and the nature of the church, it is also found in contrasting understandings of the mission of the church. Bosch characterizes the mission of the church in the cosmocentric paradigm as "a contribution toward the humanization of society," while evangelism and missions, baptism and entry into the church are central to the Christocentric paradigm (Bosch 1991:381).

The debate between Raiser and Newbiggin illustrates this continuing tension. Raiser's understanding of mission is primarily concerned with making a contribution to the *oikoumene* of life in view of the urgent threats that face the world community. Newbiggin's concern is that Raiser ignores the evangelistic task of the church. Commenting on Raiser's book, Newbiggin speaks of the neglect of the missionary and evangelistic task of the church (1994c:5). Newbiggin is concerned that Raiser evidences little concern for the great majority of people in the world who have not confessed Christ, been baptized, and incorporated into the church. Raiser seems to have forgotten that the ecumenical movement finds its historical source in the missionary task of the church. Raiser responds that he is aware that the classical ecumenical paradigm is rooted in a missionary vision of the whole world brought to Christ. Nevertheless there must be a "critical assessment of the universalism of the missionary movement in response to the new challenges of today" (Raiser 1994:50). Specifically, religious pluralism and the threat to all life forms require a "self-critical analysis" (*ibid*). The imperialism of missionary work and the claim for the universal validity of the gospel threaten the unity that is desperately needed in today's world. The urgency of world need demands that the "primary task" of the church be "to further the process of reconstructing sustainable human communities" (Raiser 1997:26). The mission of the church can be captured in terms 'solidarity' and 'dialogue' that contribute "to transformation on the level of systems by changing the cultural consciousness" (Raiser 1997:36, cf. 27). Raiser highlights two ways that the church does this: first, by contributing to "spiritual and moral foundations" for human society (Raiser 1997:18, cf. 26, 31, 36); second, by functioning as salt and light, positively as an illustration of the "household of life" that God wills for society, and negatively as a critical presence (Raiser 1997:45-49).

The contrasting views of mission emerge in the different understandings of dialogue. In his book Raiser labels Newbiggin's understanding of dialogue as "instrumental" and concludes that this clearly demonstrates the limits of the ecumenical movement in

regard to other faiths (Raiser 1991:56). Religious pluralism challenges any “dogmatic judgement” on the place of other religions in God’s saving action in the world that is drawn from a Christocentric position (Raiser 1991:57). The precarious nature of the times requires a dialogue of life rather than Christocentric proclamation. In response, Newbigin understands Raiser’s position to be based on “contemporary talk about the ‘richness of diversity,’ which is proper in respect of some aspects of human life but not proper when it is merely an expression of indifference to truth” (1994c:3). This understanding of dialogue is part of the broader cultural crisis in which modernity is breaking down. The religious pluralism that Raiser describes is the result of the collapse of western self-confidence and the corrosive effects of the acids of modernity (1994f:52). This puts a question mark behind the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. Newbigin labels Raiser’s understanding of dialogue as ‘cocktail party dialogue’ that operates on assumptions other than those revealed in Jesus Christ.

Once again the differences between Raiser and Newbigin spring from differing understandings of Christ. For Newbigin Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of the character of God and His purpose for the world. The incarnation, cross, and resurrection are events of universal significance and validity because Christ has revealed and accomplished the end of world history. The exaltation demonstrates the universality of Christ’s work. If this is true, then the gospel must be proclaimed to all people and to the ends of the earth; evangelism and missions are essential to the mission of the church. By contrast, Raiser’s Christology focusses on the earthly mission of Christ. The atonement is interpreted simply as the price paid for total devotion to God and to the marginalized (Raiser 1991a:59). Over against a Christology “from above” which highlights the divinity of Jesus and his universal significance, Raiser calls for a Christology “from below” that highlights his loving and liberating care for all people. Newbigin stresses both Christ’s universal Lordship and His historical mission; both provide the basis for the mission of the church.

These two elements function ecclesialogically in terms of a twofold connection of the church to Christ. On the one hand, the church is connected to the historical Christ as it is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The title of one of Newbigin’s books, *Mission in Christ’s Way*, summarizes this connection. The verse that captures Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology most effectively also highlights this link: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ The church continues the mission of Jesus in the world. Newbigin highlights the servanthood and suffering involved in following Jesus. Over and over again the centrality of the cross is displayed in Newbigin’s ecclesiology. On the other hand, the church is connected to Christ eschatologically; the church lives in union with the exalted Christ and shares the life of the kingdom. Jesus Christ is *both* an historical figure who is the source of and pattern for the new community *and* the exalted Lord who is alive and the giver of life to the church in the present.

These two elements function missionally in terms of an integrated emphasis on evangelism and missions, on the one hand, and contribution to “humanization” or to the “*oikoumene* of life” on the other. The church is called to continue the mission of Jesus; an important part of that mission is to seek justice and identify with the marginalized (1994k:190-200).² The church is also called to bear a universally valid message bound

²Interestingly, in this article entitled *The Ecumenical Future and the WCC: A Missionary’s Dream* Newbigin calls for a missionary encounter with modernity. He highlights two aspects of the church’s mission:

up in the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. If Raiser rejects Christ as the centre of world justice and peace, then he must propose another. The question is a matter of truth. Newbigin believes that in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, God's centre has been revealed. If this is true, evangelism and mission does not stand in tension with addressing issues of religious strife, economic injustice, oppression, and ecological tyranny. In fact, if the gospel is public truth, this provides the only centre. The difference between Raiser and Newbigin is conflicting faith commitments regarding Jesus Christ.

Newbigin's Christological starting point enables him to include *both* missions and evangelism *and* concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. However, a brief critical comment must be registered: once again Newbigin's underdeveloped doctrine of the Father's and Spirit's work in creation—already discussed above—hampers his insights into the church's mission in society.

'The Calling to Seek Justice' and 'The Calling to Care for the Creation' (1994k:195-200) These are precisely the issues about which Raiser is concerned. In his response to Raiser's critique that the classical ecumenical paradigm cannot deal with these issues adequately, Newbigin states: "If it is true that the missionary movement has been blind to the ecological crisis, that is a grave charge. For myself, I can only say that it has been a constant theme of my speaking and writing, that the world dominance of the idolatry of the free market will, if not reversed, both disintegrate human society and destroy the environment. I regret that the immense labor of the WCC under the banner of 'Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation' has had such meager results, because it has attacked the symptoms and not the cause of the malady.... Idolatry cannot be countered merely by moral protest against its effects. It has to be tackled at its source. That is why I believe the first priority for the churches and for the WCC should be a radically missionary encounter with this ideology.... 'Cocktail-party dialogue' will not do here. We have to find ways of making known the fact that the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus is Lord also of the economic order" (1994f:52).

10.3.2. *Relevance in North America*

The book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Guder 1998) presents an opportunity to examine the relevance of Newbigin's ecclesiology in the North American context. The book is clearly indebted to Lesslie Newbigin. The co-ordinator of GOCN/NA and one of the authors of this book, George Hunsberger, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Newbigin (1987). Newbigin's thought is also clearly influential in Darrell Guder's *Be My Witnesses* (1985). The authors of *Missional Church* explicitly acknowledge that debt early in the book (Guder 1998:5). Their ecclesiology can be seen as an attempt to take the insights of Newbigin and formulate them in the North American setting. Moreover, this book represents what might be called an "official ecclesiology" of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. It is co-authored by six leaders of that movement.

Three central features characterize the ecclesiology of this book: it stresses the negative legacy of Christendom, it emphasizes the communal witness of the church, and it accents the critical side of the church's relation to culture. All three of these features are important in Newbigin's writings. Newbigin believes that Christendom is one of the primary factors that cripples a missionary consciousness in the church. He also emphasizes the communal dimension of mission: "The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection" (1989e:137). The importance of a critical stance toward culture is captured by numerous phrases he employs: discriminating non-conformists, radical dissenters, radical critics and misfits with a relationship of conflict, dissenting otherworldliness, and radical discontinuity with its cultural context. Griffioen criticizes Newbigin for his emphasis on the critical role of the church and culture without a corresponding emphasis on the task of cultural development, and Bevans labels Newbigin's contextualization model 'counter-cultural' (Bevans 1993; Griffioen 1996). All of this points to the strong emphasis on the prophetic-critical stance of the church toward its cultural context.

While all three of these ecclesiological features are found within Newbigin's writing, a comparison between Newbigin and *Missional Church* reveals differences at each point. First, Newbigin's analysis of Christendom is much more ambivalent than that of the authors of *Missional Church*. The evaluation of the latter is entirely negative while Newbigin sees many positive features in Christendom. He believes that the Christendom settlement was a worthwhile attempt to translate the universal claims of Christ into social and political terms. Through this thousand-year period the gospel permeated many aspects of social, political, moral, personal, and economic life and western culture continues to live on the capital of that period. Undoubtedly it was his missionary experience in a country where the gospel did not have a lengthy history that enabled Newbigin to evaluate the Christendom experiment much more positively.

For the writers of *Missional Church* Christendom *necessarily* distorts and even eclipses the church's mission. Acceptance of power contradicts the posture to which the church is called. For Newbigin Christendom posed many dangers to the church's mission—dangers that were unfortunately realized. Nevertheless Christendom provided an opportunity for the church to work out the claims of Christ's Lordship in its mission.

He believes that faithfulness to the mission of the church demanded that it not refuse responsibility for the public order. Faithfulness to Jesus who was Lord of history and culture required the church to bring politics under the authority of Christ in spite of the dangers and temptations. Part of the history and legacy of Christendom is what Oliver O'Donovan calls the 'obedience of the rulers', the fruit of which remains in the West to the present day (O'Donovan 1996:212-216). *Missional Church* leans toward an interpretation of Christendom that neglects important emphases in Newbigin's writing.

Second, while Newbigin affirms the importance of the communal witness of the church, he believes that the primary missionary encounter between the church and the world takes place in the callings of individual believers in society. On the one hand, "the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order" (1991h:85). On the other hand, the church must "equip its members for active and informed participation in the public life of society in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that participation" (1991h:81); believers are to act as "subversive agents" in a culture shaped by a story that is in tension with the gospel. Christians ought to seek responsible positions of power and leadership to shape the public life of culture (1991h:84). Newbigin does not contrast the individual and communal dimensions of the church's mission but maintains them with equal emphasis.

The most striking contrast between Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology and the ecclesiology formulated in *The Missional Church* is found at this point. Newbigin believes that the primary way in which the church pursues its missional calling in culture is by "continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens" (1989e:139). Here, in the life of believers in culture, the primary missionary engagement takes place. This insight permeates the rest of his ecclesiology. By contrast, *Missional Church* does not mention the mission of believers in culture. This remarkable difference between Newbigin and the authors of *Missional Church* shows up at other points as well. For Newbigin the importance of the mission of the laity demanded ecclesial structures that would equip them for their task. Yet, in an otherwise helpful discussion in *Missional Church*, there is no mention of ecclesial structures that would prepare the laity for their callings (Guder 1998:221-247). When Newbigin focussed his ministry on training leadership in Madras, a constant refrain was how to find ways to enable the laity in their callings. In *Missional Church* we find an excellent discussion of leadership but, again, no mention of the training of the laity for their callings in public life (Guder 1998:183-220). What burned brightly in the heart of Newbigin and found expression throughout his missionary ecclesiology is noticeably absent from *Missional Church*. There, emphasis on the communal dimension of the church's mission has eclipsed the mission of the laity—the place Newbigin believed the primary missionary encounter takes place.

Newbigin's inconsistent understanding of the church, the absence of a theological articulation of cultural involvement, his lack of integration of the positive and negative features of the church's mission in Christendom, and his inability to sufficiently integrate the communal dimensions of Anabaptist ecclesiology and the cultural dimensions of Reformed ecclesiology, have contributed to this eclipse of the mission of believers in culture in *Missional Church*.

A third difference between GOCN/NA and Newbigin regards the latter's emphasis on the importance of a positive cultural calling of Christians as members of society

along with a critical stance. There are two sides to the calling of the church in its cultural context: solidarity and separation; affirmative involvement and critical challenge; cultural development and antithesis. The authors of *Missional Church* have highlighted the second of these pairs; they tend to label any attempt at exercising culturally formative power as 'functional Christendom' (Guder 1998:116). We find an allusion to "nonconformed engagement" but the fear of cultural power cuts off any development of this topic in terms of responsible involvement (Guder 1998:117). Strong statements on the church as an alternative community highlight the prophetic task of the church but little guidance is offered for the positive participation of the church in cultural development. On the one hand, mission to the culture is not an attempt "to wield power in the dominant culture, but instead to demonstrate by the church's own life together the renewing and healing power of God's new community" (Guder 1998:116). On the other hand, the authors recognize that it is impossible to withdraw from the culture and that the vast majority of the church's life will be lived as part of the dominant culture. Questions arise: What does it mean for the church to be a "distinctive culture" (Guder 1998:114; cf. Clapp 1996)? Clearly the church does not develop its own comprehensive language or begin to develop an alternative economic system. The authors acknowledge that the church participates in the language, economic system, customs, and social arrangements of the dominant culture. How then are individual members of the church to live under the rule of Jesus Christ in their lives that they share with the dominant culture? The authors argue that the "church as an alternative community can make a powerful witness when it chooses to live differently from the dominant society even at just a few key points. An important task of the church is to discern those key points at which to be different from the evil of the world" (Guder 1998:127). While this emphasis on "points of dissent" (Guder 1998:127) or "key points of difference" (Guder 1998:129) is helpful, there is no guidance for the people of God on how they can be an 'alternative community' in the rest of their lives. The formulation that reduces mission to the gathered, communal representation of God's people does not offer any guidance on how they can live under Christ's Lordship in the majority part of their lives that they share with the dominant culture. In fact, Newbigin's unbearable tension is relieved by reducing a missional challenge to a few key points of dissent.

In a sympathetic critique of *Missional Church*, the Roman Catholic William McConville points to the dangers of the formulation of 'alternative community.' He contrasts the views of *Missional Church* with the Catholic tradition, in which there is a more positive stance toward cultural structures within creation. Thus culture is viewed more optimistically; it can be transformed. McConville warns that undue emphasis on *alternative* community can transform the church into a *parallel* community, one that attempts to be a distinct culture and exist alongside of the dominant culture.³

³These comments were made in the context of a GOCN/NA meeting on 24 October 1997. For a more critical view of Christendom by a Roman Catholic, see Karl Rahner 1974.

To be sure, none of the authors of *Missional Church* wants this. Yet it is surprising that a book so indebted to Newbigin would lose such an important strain of his missionary ecclesiology and practice.⁴ In Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology the importance of involvement in cultural development is manifest. A brief look at the emphasis of his missionary experience confirms this fact. While in India Newbigin continually emphasized the task of the church in the project of nation-building. Upon his return to Britain, his call for the church's involvement in the public square led him to articulate ways the church could be involved in the economic, educational, political, and social life of western countries.

At least two factors account for the neglect on cultural involvement in *Missional Church*. To begin with, the historical situation of the North American church has elicited the needed emphasis on a critical posture toward culture. The authors of *Missional Church* have responded to a crucial need in North American church life. The emphasis on the antithetical side of the church's calling in North America today is entirely understandable and, indeed, strategic. When a fat man is sitting on one side of a seesaw it is necessary to jump very hard on the other end.⁵ The weight of the Christendom tradition has led to a loss of distinctive identity in the church and this requires "jumping hard" on the critical and communal aspects of the church's mission in our day.

The problem of a loss of critical tension in the western church emerges in Konrad Raiser's contrast between the missionary situations of the West and the Third World. He distinguishes between two different forms of missionary witness (Raiser 1994b:628-629). There is a difference between the missionary situation in Europe and North America on the one hand, and Africa and Asia on the other. While the central missionary problem of the "younger churches" is the experience of *cultural estrangement*—the gospel is felt to be a foreign element that disturbs cultural traditions—the central missionary problem of the "older churches" is the *cultural captivity* of the gospel. In other words, in Africa and Asia the problem is for the gospel to be at home in culture. In the West the gospel has become absorbed and co-opted into culture. This is the fruit of the Christendom legacy of the West. In this light the emphasis of *Missional Church* is timely.

The danger of *Missional Church* is that it develops a needed emphasis into an entire ecclesiology. This emphasis will, of course, open up many insights crucial for the

⁴In an article published several years later, George Hunsberger includes this missing ecclesial dimension in a list of features of the missional church. Under the fourth feature he writes: "There is harmony between the missional church's gathered moments (for worship, discernment, and action) and its dispersed life within the wider social fabric" (Hunsberger 1999:4).

⁵I borrow this delightful metaphor from Jack Thompson of the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He used this phrase in a lecture at the Overseas Ministries Study Center Student Seminars on World Mission in January 2000.

present, but it risks losing other Scriptural emphases. Newbigin has demonstrated that the critical dimension of the church's cultural task can be emphasized without losing the importance of involvement in the cultural development of a nation.

A second factor that has led to the difference between Newbigin and the authors of *Missional Church* is found in Newbigin's theory of contextualization; his *theoretical* articulation is one-sided. While both involvement and antithesis are found in Newbigin's writing, his theory of contextualization—a theory that has become foundational for the GOCN/NA—highlights the antithetical side of cultural responsibility. A comparison between Griffioen and Hunsberger on their response to the structure of the book *Foolishness to the Greeks* is instructive. Griffioen divides Newbigin's book into two parts: the first part of *Foolishness to the Greeks* he sees as devoted to a critique of idolatry, while the latter part develops the more positive role of cultural development with humanity as manager of creation. Griffioen's complaint is that Newbigin's *theoretical* development of the church's involvement in culture emphasizes exclusively the critical side while his practical proposals for politics bring both the critical and constructive side of cultural participation into view (Griffioen 1996:12, 13). In a similar vein, Hunsberger divides the book between Newbigin's theoretical articulation of contextualization and its concrete outworking. Like Griffioen, Hunsberger sees the first part of the book articulating Newbigin's theory of contextualization and the later chapters elaborating that stance. However, in contrast to Griffioen Hunsberger believes that the concrete elaboration is consistent with the theoretical formulation.

What was especially striking about his beginning point was that in what followed Newbigin worked in terms of the approach he had announced. Brevity about his method at the beginning did not mean for him a failure of memory when he employed the method. Successful or not in the project he was undertaking, he at least was sustaining an effort to be faithful to his beginning principles.... Without appreciating how thoroughly ingrained Newbigin is in the approach announced at the outset, it is impossible to judge him fairly—or to follow his lead genuinely (Hunsberger 1998:2)!

For Griffioen there is a tension between the first and second part. In the first part, the critical stance dominates; only in the second part does the constructive side come into view. For Hunsberger the second part of the book is a consistent elaboration of the method formulated in the first part. It is not surprising, then, that Hunsberger, who wants to follow the lead of Newbigin, will also emphasize the critical dimension of the church's witness in culture.

Much of the ecclesiology in *Missional Church* is attractive and compelling. The image of an 'alternative community' is a timely one that has potential to galvanize the church in North America in its missionary responsibility. The elaboration of the danger of functional Christendom for a missionary church is insightful and important. The emphases on the communal and critical dimensions of the church's calling in the world need to be heard in a church where individualism and conformity to the world is rampant. *Missional Church* has carried forward important emphases of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, contextualizing them for the North American situation. However, equally important emphases within Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology have been neglected—in part because of Newbigin's own inconsistencies. The calling of the laity and the responsibility of the church for cultural development, fuelled by a

recognition of the positive side of mission of the church in Christendom, are themes that also need to be heard. *Missional Church* is a pioneering effort and not a definitive ecclesiology. If the term 'alternative community' could be applied to the church *as the new humankind*, then the image could be employed in working out the neglected dimensions of the church's task that have been highlighted in this section. In other words, alternative community needs to be elaborated also in terms of the calling of believers in the task of cultural development. There is a need for a postmodern model of mission in the public square that moves beyond the contrasting models of the modern period. Perhaps this will come, in the Protestant church at least, from a new model that creatively integrates at least the Scriptural emphases of the Anabaptist and the Reformed understandings of mission while avoiding their corresponding weaknesses. The germ of such an ecclesiological model can be found in Newbigin's writings. But much more work remains to be done.