

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

### 4.1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

### 4.2. THE MISSION OF THE TRIUNE GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

is going.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second, these historical events form a narrative unity. The gospel does not stand alone as a disconnected message but is part of a long history of God’s redemptive work in Israel. Newbigin says: “I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives—both personal and public” (1991e:3). The narrative unity of Scripture increasingly occupies Newbigin’s attention in the latter decades of his life. There are two sides to this affirmation. On the one hand, Scriptural truth is found in a story and not in timeless propositions or principles (1995h:72). He makes frequent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 4.3. THE KINGDOM OF THE FATHER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the first five decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, debates raged over Jesus' message of the kingdom (Cullman 1967:32-40; Ladd 1964:3-38). The "consistent eschatology" of Albert Schweitzer portrayed Jesus as expecting an entirely future kingdom. The futurist eschatology of Schweitzer and others was countered by a realized (Charles H. Dodd), inaugurated (George Florovsky), actualized (Paul Altuaus), or proleptic (John A. T. Robinson) eschatology that stressed the presence of the kingdom. Others scholars emerged offering a mediating position that stressed both present and future (Oscar Cullman, Werner G. Kummel).

David Bosch describes four eschatological schools that emerged from this debate in European Protestantism that shaped missiological thinking: the dialectical eschatology of Karl Barth, the existential eschatology of Rudolf Bultmann, the actualized eschatology of Althaus and Dodd, and the salvation-historical eschatology of Oscar Cullman (Bosch 1991:502-503). Following Wiedenmann, Bosch judges the first three models to be ahistorical eschatologies, while the fourth is the only one to take history seriously (Bosch 1991:503). Newbigin's eschatology stands firmly in the salvation-historical eschatology.

Hans Jochen Margull has shown that eschatology made its entrance into ecumenical discussions in the early 1950s and was followed shortly thereafter by the development of an eschatological foundation for mission (Margull 1962:13-37). A group of twenty-five theologians<sup>4</sup> was appointed to prepare for the Evanston Assembly of the WCC held in 1954 with the mandate to "clarify the nature of our hope for human history as distinct both from the nineteenth-century idea of progress and the popular religious idea of personal immortality" (1993h:124). Newbigin was appointed chairman of this group. There was a tension between the European and American delegation on the relationship between a future hope in the consummation and the present experience of the powers of the coming age. The European churches were more futurist in their eschatological orientation while the American stressed a realized eschatology. It is this fundamental problem that shapes Newbigin's reflections in four papers (one of which was a major plenary address delivered at Willingen) that he wrote on the topic during this time (1952b, 1953c, 1954c, 1959a).

Continuous with his Bangalore lectures Newbigin occupied a position between the Europeans and Americans (1993h:124), stressing both the present and future dimensions of the kingdom. Newbigin refined his views as he wrestled with the relationship between the present and future stages of the kingdom. He tries to put full weight on both the present and future stage of the kingdom. This is how he reacted to the debates prompted by the first report released by the commission:

The debate suggests that we are compelled to choose between present realisation and future hope; that too much future hope means too little present realisation, and vice versa.... I cannot think that the Christian faith is this sort of "balance of power" between the present and the future. It is surely absurd that one group of Christians should be afraid of too much hope for the future, and another group afraid of too much manifestation of the power of Christ in the present! (1952b:282)

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<sup>4</sup>Newbigin protested that the label "twenty-five odd theologians" given to this group was unfair because there were twenty-nine members and because not all of them were theologians!

In the life of Jesus the power of the future flowed into the present; by His death and resurrection the victory over sin was accomplished and demonstrated; the outpouring of the Spirit enables the people of God to enjoy a foretaste of the power of the coming age. Newbigin's typical formulation of the relation of the present to the future is found in the words 'hidden' and 'visible' victory. The victory over sin has been accomplished on the cross; that victory will be fully manifest in the future at his return; since it is a victory of love it will remain a hidden victory until that time (1953c:113; 1954c:118-123). Newbigin formulates this Christologically: Christ has come; Christ is with us; Christ will come. Christ has come and taken on himself the full measure of evil and defeated it; Christ is with us as the present and living Lord who sustains our hope even when sin and death appear to be as victorious as ever; Christ will return and his victory over all powers will be unveiled to all men everywhere. This means that the mission of the church remains—in the way of Jesus—mission under the cross. Since the victory of Christ remains hidden until his return, our mission is not one of a triumphalistic march. Rather the church, which already shares in that victory, confidently points to that hope in life, word, and deed.

One further emphasis that is important for our purpose appears in Newbigin's writings at this time: the purpose for which the victory remains hidden is the church's mission.

The very reason for which the full unveiling of His victory is delayed is that He wills to give time to all men everywhere to acknowledge Him and accept freely His rule. The time that is given to us is a time in which His victory is to be proclaimed and acknowledged in every corner of the earth and in every sphere of human life. And we are to carry out that task in complete confidence and eager hope, because we know that the final issue is not at all in doubt (1954c:120f.; cf.1953d:127, 153-154).

The eschatological position that Newbigin developed during his Westminster days, in his Bangalore lectures, in the midst of debates in New Testament scholarship, and in the context of the ecumenical recovery of eschatology remained firmly in place for the remainder of his life. Its powerful shaping effect for his ecclesiology is best seen by noting its central place in *The Household of God* (1953d:123-152).

In the latter part of the 1960s Newbigin focussed more sharply his understanding of the relationship between the present and the future. He believed that the recovery of the eschatological element in Jesus' teaching in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a positive development. Its weakness, however, was that while the church had much to say about the ultimate hope, it had comparatively little to say about penultimate concerns. Referring to his participation in the Preparatory Commission of the Evanston Assembly he observes that the commission had much to say about the 'Great Hope' but were almost silent on the 'lesser hopes' (1974c:24). This challenged Newbigin to examine again the New Testament's teaching on the continuity and discontinuity between the last things and next-to-last things. Until the late 1960s, death and resurrection provided the fundamental metaphor for his understanding of continuity and discontinuity. In Bible studies given in 1967 he develops three further Biblical images to illustrate more exactly the continuity and the discontinuity between this life and the age to come: the travail of childbirth in Romans 8:19-25, the germination of a seed in I Corinthians 15:35-57, and the refiner's fire of I Corinthians 3:10-15 (1968c:181-184). In the germination of a seed there is discontinuity as the seed falls to the ground and dies but continuity in the new and more glorious harvest that comes precisely from the seed. The continuity between what is now and what will be is also indicated by the image of a new world struggling to be born. Finally, the fires of judgement will purge all human endeavours and only what is fit for the kingdom of God will find a place in the new order. Understanding this

continuity summons the church to participation in cultural, social, and political endeavours. These illustrations became stock-in-trade for Newbigin from this time on.

In his later years Newbigin returned to the theme of the kingdom of God. In light of the ongoing discussions about the kingdom of God in Biblical scholarship Newbigin articulated three Biblical tensions important for the mission of the church. First, Jesus speaks of the kingdom as already present but also as future. Second, Jesus speaks of the kingdom as imminent but he also implies that there will be a considerable period of time before the coming of the kingdom. Third, the coming of the kingdom will be preceded by recognizable signs but the time of that coming is unknown (1993d:6f.). Holding these tensions will keep the church from misunderstanding the relation of present history to its future goal.

#### *4.4.2. The Kingdom of God and the Mission of Jesus in History*

We can summarize Newbigin's understanding of the relation God's kingdom to history by noting five consistent themes in his writing.

First, Jesus announces the arrival and presence of the kingdom of God in history (1989e:105). It is an announcement that God's reign is confronting all people as a present reality. There is an insistence in Newbigin's writings on the fact that this is an announcement of an event. There are two senses, however, in which he speaks of this event. At times Newbigin presents this event as an announcement of God's reign (a common Old Testament theme) historically present in the person of Jesus. The newness of the event is simply the presence of God's rule in the person of Jesus (e.g., 1987a:1f.; 1980g:24f.). At other times, Newbigin elaborates the newness in terms of the redemptive power of the coming age present in history (e.g., 1989e:119ff.). The kingdom is "among you" (Luke 17:21); the power of that reign is at work in the midst of history. "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Of course person and power cannot be separated. However, there are times when the person is emphasized so that the power is minimized. One then gets the sense that it is the same rule of God over history present in the Old Testament that is now present in Jesus rather than the entry into the world of the redemptive power of the coming age representing something radically new in history.

Second, the presence of the kingdom is hidden and not obvious to all people. If God was to reveal fully the end-time kingdom of God then history would have reached its end. Since the kingdom has not been fully manifested, many cannot see the kingdom of God because they are facing the wrong way. The call is to repent, make a U-turn, be converted in order to believe the good news that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus. The relationship of the present to the future is that of a hidden reality that will be fully manifest in the future. The kingdom remains veiled during this era but will be completely revealed when Christ returns in glory (1989e:105).

Third, the presence of the power of the kingdom creates crisis and conflict. The parable of the tares makes clear that the presence of the kingdom of God precipitates an encounter with the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). "The powers that be, both in their outward forms as the established religious and cultural and political structures, and in their inward reality as the principalities and powers of this age, are challenged and fight back" (1989e:105). This brings suffering. The antithetical encounter intensifies until it reaches its climax on the cross. Thus the cross casts its shadow over this entire historical time period. The kingdom is not a smooth, continuous movement of progress toward a final realization of God's purposes. History "between the times" is characterized by

conflict, struggle, and suffering. Newbigin uses the image of the birth pangs necessary for the new creation to be born.

Fourthly, the relation of the kingdom to history is not one of total continuity or discontinuity. The kingdom is not a future state unrelated to present history nor is it something that will arrive by way of a smooth historical transition. All of creation and human history is polluted by sin and therefore must be subjected to death and the fire of judgement. However, that which has been accomplished in the way of God's kingdom will be purified by that fire and find its place in the new creation. All that is done in human history must die; yet that which is in keeping with the kingdom of God will be raised to the renewed life of the age to come (1989e:114).

Finally, the meaning of this transitional time between the times can be precisely designated with the word mission. "There is a precise meaning to this gap which opens up between the coming of the kingdom veiled in the vulnerable and powerless Jesus, and the coming of the kingdom in manifest power. That meaning is to be found in the mission of the church to the nations" (1989e:106). The mercy of God holds back the final revelation of his power so that all nations may be given opportunity to repent. 'The gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come' (Matthew 24:14). In this time there will be signs of the kingdom that show that God's healing power is present. The mission of Jesus and the church will be carried out in the context of the clash between the powers of the coming age in Jesus and the Spirit and the powers of darkness. Therefore, suffering will be the normal mode of the kingdom mission of Jesus and the church.

Newbigin's eschatological position incorporates the present and future dimensions of the kingdom of God. His understanding of the kingdom challenges any evolutionary, progress-oriented understanding of the kingdom or any privatization of the Christian faith. Contempt for this world or an immanentist view that does not see beyond history is equally ruled out by this eschatology. The emphasis on the antithesis prohibits triumphalism yet the presence of the kingdom enables the church erect signs to its coming. Newbigin's eschatology forms the firm basis for his missionary ecclesiology.

#### *4.4.3. Elements of the Kingdom Mission of Jesus During His Public Ministry*

"The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology" (1953d:153-154) This is because "the meaning and purpose of this present time, between Christ's coming and His coming again, is that in it the Church is to prosecute its apostolic mission of witness to the world" (1953d:157). The mission of the church is governed by the mission of Jesus. That which Jesus began to do must go on in the life of the church. Precisely what are the elements of Jesus' mission? Newbigin highlights five aspects of the mission of Jesus.

First, the mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was a gift promised by the prophets for the last days (1972e:4). The intertestamental period was a long period of waiting and hoping when the Spirit was not yet given. John appeared in this context of expectation announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand. This announcement was accompanied by a vivid and expressive prophetic action—baptism. Baptism in water was a sign of the coming of the kingdom and its gifts—cleansing and the coming of the Holy Spirit. John's testimony was: "I am baptising you with water. This is only a sign. There is one to come who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit—not just a sign, but the real thing" (1972e:5-6). Jesus identified himself with the crowd who came as sinners to receive the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. When he was baptized in water, he was also baptized in the Spirit. The sign

and that which it signified merged. The coming of the Spirit came with a vision of a dove and an interpretive word. “In this vision and this word we learn the character of the Spirit given to Jesus: he is the Spirit of sacrifice, the Spirit of humble service, the Spirit who will lead Jesus by the way of the Cross to be the Saviour of the world” (1972e:7). While the Spirit was given in the Old Testament, the Spirit is now given to Jesus permanently (John 1:33) and thus a new chapter opens in the work of the Spirit. It is no longer a temporary gift but is given forever to Jesus to be given to those who follow him.

The Spirit immediately led him into the desert to be tempted. This temptation has important significance for our topic. The “tremendous question” that arises at this point in the gospels is: “How will the mission of Jesus by the power of the Spirit be carried out?” (1972e:8; 1972g:52). Satan’s temptations aim to move Jesus down the wrong path.

Will it be by miracles which dazzle men and compel their allegiance by the sheer sense of marvel? Will it be by meeting all their physical needs? Will it be by creating a great political movement and becoming the kind of Messiah that many of the Jews dreamed of?... These are the questions that the tempter puts to Jesus as he wrestles alone with his tremendous calling in the solitude of the desert. The three temptations described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke express in a vivid form the answers to these questions which Jesus rejected (1972e:8).

Jesus emerged from the desert unarmed, stripped of what people call power and wisdom. How would he fulfill the role of Messiah? How would he carry out his kingdom mission? “Quite simply, by being the son of his Father, by doing the works of his Father. His deeds and words are the deeds and words of God” (1972g:52).

The writings of Luke confirm this. Luke places at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry his manifesto (Luke 4:18). The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus to enable him to do deeds of love and justice and speak a message of hope. “These words of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, standing at the very outset of his ministry, constitute one of the fundamental statements of what it means to be filled by the Spirit” (1972e:9). This is also expressed in Acts 10:38: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.... he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil.”

As for the second aspect of Jesus’ ministry common in Newbigin’s work, we have already broached it. Jesus made the kingdom of God known in his *life*, *words*, and *deeds* (1972g:56). He embodied the life of the kingdom in his whole existence; he displayed the power of the kingdom with his deeds; he announced the presence of the kingdom with his words. Newbigin’s frequent analysis of the church in terms of her mission in word and deed rooted in the corporate life of the Spirit finds its source here in the mission of Jesus.

The kingdom of God is made known in Jesus’ *life*. Central to this life of the Spirit was Jesus’ unique sense of Sonship (1972g:43). Of all the names for God in the Old Testament ‘Abba’ was the one that Jesus took upon his lips. Jesus displayed an intimacy with God that no Jew dared to assume before his time as evidenced in the prayerbooks and liturgies before the days of Jesus. Another “very striking” (1972g:40) feature of Jesus’ life was his love for the marginalized. At numerous points Newbigin stands against a Marxist-liberationist interpretation of this dimension of Jesus’ mission. The scandalous dimension of Jesus’ ministry was the fact that he ignored all the lines that society drew to separate the good from the bad. He freely accepted into his company all those on the wrong side of the line. He met everyone with the same unconditional demand for repentance and conversion (1980f:31). Newbigin further frequently points

to the love, justice, and joy of Jesus that exhibited the life of the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is made known in the Jesus' *words*. The gospel records open with Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. The proclamation of the kingdom was constitutive to Jesus' mission (1987a:1). This announcement was urgent; the kingdom of God was a pressing and immediate reality that called for decisive action immediately, leaving no room for procrastination or indecision (1978e:44). The good news offered the blessings of the kingdom—righteousness, peace with God, reconciliation, life (1958b:19) forgiveness, sonship, freedom, and hope (1972g:75)—along with the demands of the kingdom including a participation in the kingdom mission of Jesus. The urgent invitation to repent, be converted, and enter the kingdom accompanied this announcement. Jesus also made known the kingdom of God with his parables. In his brief treatments of the parables (e.g., 1987a:3, 4), Newbigin stresses their ambiguous nature: they are riddles, strange sayings that are nonsensical, scandalous, hard to understand even for the disciples. He points to Jesus' answer to the disciples question (Mark 4:10-12) taken from Isaiah 6:9f. that highlight the blinding nature of the parables as well as their explanatory power. Unfortunately, he does not stress or elaborate how the parables explained the nature of the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is made known in Jesus' *deeds*. Joined to the announcement of and teaching about the kingdom were the deeds or mighty works of Jesus as signs of the presence of the kingdom. Jesus' response to the question of John the Baptizer is to recite his mighty works as signs of the kingdom (Luke 7:22): the blind see, the lame walk, the leper is cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, good news is preached to the poor (1987a:4; 1978e:41). These signs are not unambiguous; the kingdom is revealed but also remains hidden and so these signs can be the occasion of blessing or stumbling (1978e:42). Therefore, these signs can be misinterpreted as works of the devil and as the satisfaction of people's needs as well as signs of the redemptive power of the kingdom (1987a:4-5). Over against the tendency to separate words from deeds that he confronted throughout his life Newbigin continually insisted that the words and deeds of Jesus belonged together. The words explained the deeds; the deeds authenticated the words.

Based on this threefold witness to the kingdom in the life, words, and deeds of Jesus, Newbigin draws the conclusion for the mission of the church:

We can describe that mission in a three-fold way. Jesus embodied the presence of the kingdom in his own life and death; the Church is called in the power of the Spirit to do the same. Jesus did mighty works of healing and deliverance; the Church, in the power of the Spirit is to do the same. Jesus announced the kingdom and taught people its ways; the Church must preach and teach because even the best of good works and good examples do not explain themselves. We have to point to the source from which they come (1990:6).

The third element of Jesus' kingdom mission highlighted by Newbigin is the life of prayer that undergirds his words and deeds. This feature of the ministry of Jesus is not highlighted as often as the life, words, and deeds of Jesus. However, the prayer life of the church in its mission is built squarely on Newbigin's understanding of prayer as central to the life of Jesus.

When Jesus launched his disciples into the world to continue his mission, he did not give them a hand-book of instructions. He did not write a book. He gathered a company 'to be with him and to be sent out' (Mk.3:14). The essential thing was to be with him, to hear his words, watch his deeds, learn from him to pray (1990u:18).

It is unfortunate that Newbigin did not develop this line of thought. The importance he

attached to prayer for the whole mission of Jesus and the church, as it follows Jesus faithfully, is captured in the following quote.

His cross, his final offering up of his life to the Father, is the focus and climax of his whole ministry. But Jesus did not go directly from his baptism to the cross. The cross is indeed the completion of his baptism. But in between them there are those crowded months and years of his ministry in which he labored, agonized, and prayed that his people might recognize the presence of the Kingdom of God in their midst, and might accept their vocations to be its agents and messengers (1972g:121).

The ambiguity of words and deeds as a witness to the kingdom demanded a working of the Spirit to make them effectual for blessing. Jesus prayed that this might happen and taught those who were to continue his mission to do likewise.

Fourth, Jesus' kingdom mission was carried on in weakness and suffering. The Old Testament pictured the Messiah with a number of images: military hero, wise ruler, son of David. But it also pictured the Messiah with the mysterious image of a suffering servant (1972g:47-51). Newbigin stresses the image of a suffering servant. Perhaps this is the most characteristic feature of Newbigin's Christology. Jesus ushers in the kingdom by way of the cross. That is, he does not overpower the forces that oppose the kingdom with brute force but by absorbing their full force in his being. Suffering is not a by-product of faithful mission but the very mode of Jesus' mission:

In what way has the coming of Jesus brought the reign of God near? What is the relation of Jesus to the reign? Is it that he now, as God's anointed, takes control of world events and shapes them to God's will? Does he become the master and manager of the world's affairs on behalf of God? Certainly the "powers of the kingdom" are manifest in him. He does mighty works, which to the eyes of faith are signs of the presence of the reign of God (Luke 11:14-22). Yet, paradoxically, his calling is to the way of suffering, rejection, and death—to the way of the cross. He bears witness to the presence and reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil, but by taking their full weight upon himself. Yet it is in that seeming defeat that victory is won.... The reign of God is present under the form not of power, but of weakness (1978e:34f.).

It is precisely because the kingdom is present in weakness that the characteristic way the kingdom is made known is by parables and works that have a two-edged character. They can be the occasion of stumbling or faith. Since the kingdom is not revealed in power, people are not overwhelmed by the force of the miracles. They are signs of the kingdom to faith. People, similarly, are not forced to recognize the kingdom by the force of the argument of the parable. Both the word and work can be rejected and misunderstood, which leads to suffering for Jesus and judgement for the hearer. These words and works can also be the occasion of faith.

One final important feature of Jesus' kingdom mission, in Newbigin's view, was the formation of a people to embody the life of the kingdom. This aspect of Jesus' ministry has been widely questioned. Three lines of evidence have led many New Testament scholars to reject any intention on Jesus' part to form a people to carry on his mission: the scarcity of material in the gospels that refer to the church as a body to continue the mission of Jesus after His death; the questionable value of the material that does exist; and Jesus' expectation of an immediate advent of the kingdom—all this precludes His intention to form an ongoing institution. Yet Newbigin believed that the formation of a community to carry on the work Jesus had begun through history was essential to Jesus' kingdom mission. Newbigin responds to the criticisms with four lines of argument (1978e:44-49). First, although it is unquestionable that Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was an immediate and pressing reality, the view that the existence of the church is a contradiction of this immediacy of the end is a failure to understand the

nature of last things: the immediacy of the kingdom does not mean it will arrive within a very short period of time; it means that the arrival of the kingdom in history is urgent, pressing and demands decisive action now. Second, the earliest documents of the New Testament already show a church existing with an ordered and continuous life. There is no hint that the “church is the result of an improvisation undertaken to repair the breach made by the collapse of the original expectation” (1978e:45). Third, Newbigin points to “one of the most ancient and impregnable elements of the tradition of his [Jesus’] words and deeds”, namely the constitution of the Lord’s Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-26). These words show Jesus looking forward to the future of the community of disciples. They will share in this common meal and thereby continually renew their participation in the death and risen life of Jesus. The long discourses of John 13-16 fill out Jesus’ intention (1978e:46-47). This community will be launched into the life of the world as a continuance of his mission to make the presence of the kingdom known. “These Johannine discourses are the fullest exposition we have of Jesus’ intention regarding the future of the cause he entrusted to his disciples and for which he prepared and consecrated them.... This is an exposition of the meaning of the supper, and it is upon the institution of the supper itself that we can most surely ground our certainty about Jesus’ intention for the future of his cause” (1978e:47). Fourth, the words of Jesus in John 20:21 launch the church on its mission. Again these words indicate the intention of Jesus with respect to the future of his kingdom mission. “The disciples are now taken up into that saving mission for which Jesus was anointed and sent in the power of the Spirit.... It is sent, therefore, not only to proclaim the kingdom but to bear in its own life the presence of the kingdom” (1978e:48-49).

Mission in Christ’s way for the church will mean the presence of all these dimensions: the power of the Spirit, word, deeds, and a life that points to the kingdom, prayer, weakness and suffering, and contribution to the formation of a community that embodies the kingdom.

#### *4.4.4. The Kingdom Revealed and Accomplished in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus*

On the one hand, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the culmination of Jesus’ kingdom mission. On the other hand, the kingdom mission of the church cannot begin until Jesus has defeated the powers that oppose the reign of God. Together, the death and resurrection of Jesus stand at the centre of redemptive history.

Brief consideration of a curious paradox surrounding Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement may be a helpful way into this topic. On the one side, Newbigin speaks of the cross as the centre of the Christian faith. His conversion cemented in his mind that the cross must be the fundamental clue to understanding the world (1993d:11f.). A few years later, the study of Romans initiated another turning point in his theological journey. Upon reading James Denney’s commentary (1976), he ended his study of Romans “with a strong conviction about ‘the finished work of Christ’, about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary” (1993d:29). He developed his ideas on the atonement further during the same period in an Old Testament paper and a paper given to the College Theological Society (*ibid*). Throughout his life Newbigin attempted to make the atonement central to his life and thought, criticizing any Christian tradition that did not treat the atonement with sufficient seriousness (e.g., 1996b:9). An anonymous reviewer of *Unfinished Agenda* says of Newbigin’s life: “From first to last the cross is central” (“Presbuteros” 1985:32) and then quotes from the paragraph that closes Newbigin’s original autobiography:

But for now I return to the beginning, to the vision which was given me during that stressing night in the miners' camp in South Wales. I can still see the cross of Jesus as the one place in all the history of human culture where there is a final dealing with the ultimate mysteries of sin and forgiveness, of bondage and freedom, of conflict and peace, of death and life. Although there is so much that is puzzling, so much that I simply do not understand and so much that is unpredictable, I find here—as I have again and again found during the past fifty years—a point from which one can take one's bearings and a light in which one can walk, however, stumblingly. I know that that guiding star will remain and that that light will shine till death and in the end. And that is enough (1993h:241).

And yet there is another side. Perhaps surprisingly, some assert that Newbigin's development of the doctrine of atonement is inadequate. In a review of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Peter Forster comments: "What I missed at this point was an adequate—or, indeed, any—discussion of the atonement, and without this I found Newbigin's assertions about the importance of the historical event in the story of Christ less than fully convincing, and needing further development" (Forster 1991:35). How can two such contradictory understandings exist?

Consideration of John Driver's book *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, provides a helpful perspective for struggling with this question. Driver has analyzed the atonement in the light of the missionary context of the New Testament (1986:29-35). He believes that Constantinian presuppositions have dominated classical theories of the atonement. The missionary context of the New Testament has been eclipsed and the Biblical understanding of the atonement distorted. He helpfully articulates ten principal images employed by authors of the New Testament to unfold the significance of the cross: the conflict-victory-liberation motif; the vicarious suffering motif; archetypal images; the martyr motif; the sacrifice motif; expiation and the wrath of God; the redemption-purchase motif; the reconciliation image; the justification image; and adoption-family images.

Driver argues that a number of distortions to this Biblical understanding have taken place as a result of the impact of Christendom on theology. Two of his critiques are important for grasping Newbigin's understanding of the atonement. First, the atonement has been individualized. While the New Testament understanding of the atonement was an event that created a new people, under the influence of a Roman understanding of law, the cross has been reduced to the propitiation of individual guilt in classical theories of the atonement. J. Denny Weaver has stated this well: "The satisfaction or substitutionary theory of Anselm defines the problem of the sinner in inherently individual terms.... The social component... is logically an afterthought, something to consider *after* one has dealt with the prior, fundamental and individualistic problem of personal guilt and penalty" (Weaver 1990:315). Second, the atonement has lost the New Testament emphasis on its transforming power (Driver 1987:30f.). Classical theories place the emphasis on the removal of legal guilt: the product of the cross is a justified individual rather than a transformed community. In his preface to Driver's book, Rene Padilla summarizes this criticism as follows:

At the very center of the Christian faith is Jesus, a crucified Messiah. All the wisdom and the power of God have been revealed in him. Apart from such wisdom and power no genuine Christian experience is possible. Unfortunately, Western Christianity has been so conditioned by Constantinian presuppositions that it has failed to take into account the centrality of the crucified Messiah.... It has concentrated on the salvation of the individual soul but has frequently disregarded God's purpose to create a new humanity by sacrificial love and justice for the poor.... In classical theories of the atonement, the work of Christ was unrelated to God's intention to create a new humanity. Driver here demonstrates that the covenanted community of God's people is the essential context for understanding the atonement.... Driver's book is an

invitation to look at the cross, not merely as the source for individual salvation, but as the place wherein begins the renewal of the creation—the new heavens and the new earth that God has promised and that the messianic community anticipates (Padilla, in Driver 1986:9-10).

Nestled in the language of Padilla above is a third way that a Constantinian interpretation has reshaped the Biblical doctrine of the atonement. Noting this distortion is important for understanding Newbigin. Padilla refers to the cross as the place where the new creation begins: the cross must be understood in its eschatological significance. In a Christendom interpretation, the atonement has been taken out of its eschatological context.

This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of Driver's thesis. Even if one believes that there may be some false contrasts, it would appear that he is pointing to some real distortions that have taken place in classical theories of the atonement. Perhaps the above paradox is the result of a natural inclination of Newbigin's critics to look for elements of a classical theory of the atonement and not ask how his missionary experience challenged him to formulate his understanding with different emphases. While Newbigin's critics look for an understanding shaped by Christendom, Newbigin offers a view of the atonement shaped by his missionary experience.

How does Newbigin formulate his understanding of the atonement? Negatively, the atonement is an historical event that sets the direction of history but cannot be fully captured by any particular theory. "We are speaking about a *happening*, an event that can never be fully grasped by our intellectual powers and translated into a theory or doctrine. We are in the presence of a reality full of mystery, which challenges but exceeds our grasp" (1978e:49, his emphasis). There have been many images that have been used to explain this event but none of them is able to fathom the depth of mystery bound up in the cross.

Down the centuries, from the first witness until today, the church has sought and used innumerable symbols to express the inexpressible mystery of the event that is the center, the crisis of all cosmic history, the hinge upon which all happenings turn. Christ the sacrifice offered for our sin, Christ the substitute standing in our place, Christ the ransom paid for our redemption, Christ the conqueror casting out the prince of the world—these and other symbols have been used to point to the heart of the mystery. None can fully express it. It is that happening in which the reign of God is present (1978e:50).

About twenty years into his missionary experience, Newbigin opens up a number of these images in the fullest treatment he gives of the atonement (1956c:56-90). He divides his theological reflection into two categories: first, the teaching of Jesus about his death and second, Biblical images that express the significance of his crucifixion. In the first section he articulates eight themes that expose Jesus' own understanding about his death: his death is necessary; his death is the will of the Father; his death arises from the identification of Himself with sinners; his death is God's judgement of the world; his death is a ransom; his death is a sacrifice; his death is the means of life to the world; his death is not to be an isolated event, but others are to follow it and share it (1956c:62-70). In the second section Newbigin elaborates five images of Christ's death: the death of Jesus is a revelation of God's love, a judgement, a ransom, a sacrifice, and a victory (1956c:70-90).<sup>5</sup> In the next chapter two conclusions follow that Newbigin attributes to his missionary experience. First, the cross is an event that creates

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<sup>5</sup>These five images remain foundational to Newbigin's understanding of the atonement for the remainder of his life. See 1990r:4 where these five images are expressed again in a series he calls "My nearest approach to a 'Dogmatics'".

a people. Second, the cross has transformed these people so that they now share Christ's life. "When we look at the record, what strikes us is that the story of Jesus has reached us through a group of men and women who were so closely bound to Him that their life could almost be spoken of as an extension of His life" (1956c:92). This community shares in the accomplishment of this event. Others can share in this event when they "become part of this society, this fellowship, He left behind Him to be the continuation of His life on earth" (1956c:93).

In this treatment of the atonement in 1956, the classical theories that he embraced in 1936 are given expression but also given a new twist as the corporate and transformative effect of the cross is drawn out. In other words, the fruit of the atonement is not first a justified individual but a transformed community that shares in the life of the kingdom. Newbigin would not contrast these two things, of course, as his following discussion of justification shows. The justification of the individual is one the benefits of the life of the kingdom that the transformed community shares. Newbigin attributes to his missionary experience this stress on the church as a community created by the transforming power of the cross (1993d:137f.; 1956c:8f.). This community is "left behind" to continue Christ's life in the midst of the world.

The missionary and corporate understanding of the atonement remains foundational for Newbigin's understanding of the church and mission throughout the remainder of his life. However, the eschatological context of the atonement becomes stronger (e.g., 1970a:207f.). Indeed, in the last three decades of Newbigin's life it is the eschatological context that dominates his understanding of the atonement.

The understanding of the atonement that undergirds Newbigin's theology can be outlined in three points. First, Newbigin stresses over and over again the historicity, the "happenedness" of the crucifixion. Indeed, "the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history but stories told to illustrate truths which are valid apart from these happenings" (1989e:66). This statement stands at the beginning of a chapter entitled 'Revelation in History' where Newbigin begins to develop a missionary theology for a pluralist society. The Hindu, Pietist, or higher critic who undervalues the historical nature of the Christ event have misunderstood the nature of the gospel completely.

Second, these events are decisive and central to the whole of cosmic history (1968c:73). Newbigin uses many different images to picture the decisive and final nature of these historical events. He refers to the cross as "an unrepeatable event which we believe gives the irreversible movement of history its meaning and direction" (1970a:198). It is an "act of obedience by which the whole cosmic course of things is given its direction" (1970a:201). The atonement is 'the event that is the centre, the crisis of cosmic history', 'the hinge upon which all happenings turn' and 'the turning point in history (1978e:50; 1967a:11; 1990:4). He constantly emphasizes that "our faith is that this historic event is decisive for all history.... At the centre of history, which is both the history of man and the history of nature, stands the pivotal, critical, once-for-all event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. By this event the human situation is irreversibly changed" (1968c:9f.). In short, as he puts it elsewhere, the cross is "the decisive event by which all things were changed" (1978e:50).

Third, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has acted to reveal and accomplish his end-time purposes for all of history. Both of those words are important—reveal and accomplish. In the cross and resurrection God has revealed the end of history. God has made his purposes known in some, not all, events. The Christ event is the central place where his purposes for history have been revealed. In the death of Christ, God's judgement on sin has been made known. Death is the only fitting way to deal with that which sin has corrupted. Since sin has infested the entire creation,

death is the fitting end for this sin-polluted world. God's judgement must fall on sin, burying all traces of sin's contamination. The wages of sin are death. The resurrection reveals God's loving purposes for the creation. God will give life to the new creation. While Christ's death reveals God's judgement on the entire sinful creation, Christ's resurrection reveals God's love and intention to renew the entire creation. However, these events are more than simply a revelation of judgement and renewal; they accomplish what they reveal. Jesus has taken on himself the sin of the world and God's final judgement of death on that sin at the cross and has actualized and initiated the end in that event. Likewise his resurrection is not simply an individual affair but embodies the renewal of the creation that will take place in the end. It is precisely the fact that Jesus has accomplished the end in his death and resurrection that paved the way for the outpouring of the Spirit as an eschatological gift.

Scattered throughout Newbigin's writings are references to various images of the atonement (e.g., 1990r:4). Using Driver's categories, there are two images that are most prominent in Newbigin. Perhaps the most prominent is Driver's third image, which is, in fact, a cluster of Biblical images that he refers to as 'archetypal images.' Driver groups together the images of representative man, pioneer, forerunner, and firstborn. He notes that these have not been related to the atonement in recent theological discourse. However, they did play a significant role in the early church's understanding of the Christ's saving work on the cross (Driver 1986:101). Behind the vision of Christ as the representative man or the last Adam is the Hebrew concept of the corporate personality. Christ is the bearer of the destiny of all humankind. He represents all humanity in his death and resurrection. The Christ event creates a new humanity that participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We participate in Christ's death as he receives God's judgement on our old humanity. In our participation in the death of Jesus our old humanity is put to death. We participate in Christ's resurrection as we are conformed to the image of the new humanity realized in the resurrection. The images of pioneer, forerunner, and firstborn point to the same reality. Christ is the representative and bearer of the destiny of the whole creation.

Newbigin articulates this theme in two ways. First, this theme is clearly evident in the way he structures four Bible studies he gave in 1967 (1968c) and 1970 (1970a). In 1967, his first study examines the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The three studies that follow are entitled 'The Dying and Rising of the Christian', 'The Dying and Rising of the Church', and 'The Dying and Rising of the World.' The Christian, the church, and the world all participate in the events of Christ's death and resurrection. "The cross is the end not only of that road but of every road" (1968c:73). (We might add that the resurrection is the new beginning not only of Christ's life but of all who are in Christ.) In 1970 the first study centres on the dying and rising of Jesus. Since "everything in the church is determined by the dying and rising of the Lord Jesus Christ" this pattern of death and resurrection is brought to bear on the life of the church, on the church's action in the world, and on the lives of believers in three subsequent studies.<sup>6</sup> In both series of Bible studies the argument is that the cross and resurrection are decisive for human history because God has revealed and accomplished his final judgement and salvation for the whole cosmos in the cross. "The pattern of the cross and resurrection is projected in the Bible, not only on to the personal life, and not only

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<sup>6</sup>Note the change in 1970 from the order in 1968. In 1968 the order of the four studies is Christ, the individual believer, the church, and the world. In 1970 the order his four Bible studies more consistently places the community first: Christ, the church, the world, the individual believer. He writes: "The theme of these studies is the pattern of cross and resurrection, the pattern of dying and rising, in the life of our Lord himself, of the Church, of the world, and of the believer" (1970a:203).

on to the life of the Church, but also on to the life of the cosmos" (1970a:215). The end comes in three stages: Christ's death and resurrection are the first fruits of the end. "His dying and rising constitute the point from which the new creation begins." The second stage is the church's share in that renewal. The third "involves nothing less than the re-ordering of the whole cosmos" in which there is the judgement of the cross and the renewal of the resurrection (1970a:224). This understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus is eschatological through and through. The church and eventually the whole cosmos participates in the pioneering accomplishments of this representative man at the cross.

Closely tied to this is Newbigin's frequent reference to the cross as the ultimate act of identification or solidarity with the world and at the same time the ultimate act of rejection of or separation from the world (1970a:202).

One could go into a whole theology of the atonement if one were to develop this, but obviously Christ on his cross is in one sense totally identified with the world, but in another sense totally separated from the world. The cross is the total identification of Jesus with the world in all its sin, but in that identification the cross is the judgement of the world, that which shows the gulf between God and his world (1994k:54).

This identification and separation at the cross actually accomplishes the redemption of the world because at the cross Jesus exposes and destroys the world's sin (1974b:98). The cross reveals God's rejection of the world as corrupted and polluted by sin; but the cross is also an act that accomplishes God's judgement on sin. The cross reveals God's solidarity and identification with the world as good creation; but the cross is also an act that accomplishes its redemption.

A second image that is common in Newbigin's writings is that of victory. Driver refers to this as the conflict-victory-liberation motif (Driver 1986:71-86; cf. Weaver 1990) and notes that this image is the oldest theory of the atonement developed in the Christian church (Driver 1986:39; Weaver 1990:307). Driver's label highlights not only the victory but the conflict that precedes it and the liberation that follows. This is exactly what we find in Newbigin. "It is there, on Calvary, that the kingdom, the kingly rule of God, won its decisive victory over all the powers that contradict it... For the cross is not a defeat reversed by the resurrection; it is a victory proclaimed (to chosen witnesses) by the resurrection. And so the risen Lord gathers together his defeated and despairing disciples and sends them out to be the witnesses of the victory of the kingdom, to embody and proclaim the rule of God" (1987a:6). Later he writes: "The cross... is the price paid for a victorious challenge to the powers of evil" (:25; cf. 1978e:36; 1989). The cross is the place where Christ met and mastered the powers of evil. There is, however, one strong strain in Newbigin's understanding of the cross as victory that is not present in Driver. Newbigin's constantly stresses that the victory is a *hidden* victory gained by suffering, weakness, and seeming defeat (1987a:5f.). Before the resurrection the cross was perceived by the disciples to be a meaningless disaster. After the resurrection their understanding changed: the power of God is revealed in weakness; the wisdom of God is revealed in foolishness; the victory of the cross is revealed in defeat; the glory of God is revealed in humiliation; the purpose of God is revealed in a meaningless execution (1974b:64f.). The victory is gained not by a show of force but by taking the full force of the power of evil on Himself, bearing it for the sake of the world. "From the record it is clear that what happened on Calvary was this: the one and only man who has ever lived in total fellowship, trust, and obedience towards God, met the concentrated power of human sin, and in committing everything totally and simply into his Father's hands, bore it all to the end... (1972g:55). In the cross the victory of the kingdom is revealed. "Yet, paradoxically, his calling is to the

way of suffering, rejection, and death—to the way of the cross. He bears witness to the presence of the reign of God not by overpowering the forces of evil, but by taking their full weight upon himself. Yet it is in that seeming defeat that victory is won” (1978e:35). The liberation that flows from this victory cannot be interpreted in a triumphalist way. The liberated community remains under the cross; their mission is also a victorious challenge to evil that results in suffering, seeming defeat, and sometimes death (1974b:89, 99). The kingdom of God, therefore, is both hidden and revealed in the cross of Christ. It is revealed because that is where the victory over evil was accomplished; it is hidden because that victory has not been publicly demonstrated (1978e:52).

It must be stressed that this understanding of the atonement is not something that is expressed in just a few places and has been gathered together in this section for systematic purposes. This understanding of the cross permeates and undergirds every part of Newbigin’s work. Indeed, without this understanding of the cross much of his theology, missiology, and ecclesiology is simply incomprehensible.

If this is true, why have some readers missed the centrality of the atonement in Newbigin’s theology? To begin, when one compares Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement with classical theories it is clear that he has moved some of the familiar landmarks that make recognition immediately clear. An individual notion has been replaced by a corporate and cosmic understanding; a legal framework has been replaced by an eschatological and historical setting; the cross is the starting point for discussion and not simply a part of a larger system. Moreover, as Driver points out, the “archetypal images” of the Bible have not been related to the atonement in recent theology. Complicating this problem is the fact that Newbigin rarely uses the Biblical images of first Adam, representative man, pioneer, forerunner, or firstborn (but see 1972g:55). If one looks for a familiar theory of the atonement or familiar terminology, that person will miss Newbigin’s understanding of the cross. Newbigin’s understanding of the centrality of the cross for universal history is a theory of the atonement but is unfamiliar and therefore is not recognized. As well, there is indeed no extended systematic treatment of the atonement in some of Newbigin’s major works—especially books on mission in western culture that are most familiar to many readers. Perhaps this is unfortunate; however, it is quite typical of Newbigin. His theological work—including his systematic missiological works—are *ad hoc* and contextual in nature. He is constantly assuming a theological foundation and bringing that to bear on the issues with which he is dealing. One often has to dig below the surface to expose this theological foundation on which Newbigin builds his missiology. When one is alerted to the centrality of the atonement understood as the revelation and accomplishment of God’s purposes for universal history, its foundational importance will be quite unmistakable. Finally, theories of the atonement are typically touchstones for orthodoxy. Newbigin’s ecumenical sensitivities often led him to frame controversial theological issues in terms that would challenge familiar divergences between traditions. For example, the importance of the Lord’s Supper and baptism in Newbigin’s life and thought is beyond doubt. Yet one will search in vain for Newbigin’s advocacy of a particular theory within the familiar debates.<sup>7</sup> Newbigin’s understanding of the atonement deals with much that is important to both liberal and evangelical traditions in their understanding of the cross. Perhaps this is part of his broad appeal—for better or for worse.

We have already entered into Newbigin’s understanding of the resurrection of Jesus. Here the picture is much clearer. Newbigin points to the significance of the resurrection

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<sup>7</sup>A good example of this is Newbigin’s treatment of the sacraments and ministry in an address given to the Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1983c).

with two images. First, the resurrection is the manifestation of the victory gained on the cross. “The resurrection is not the reversal of a defeat but the manifestation of a victory” (1978e:36; 1987a:6). While the cross was a public event for all to see, the risen Christ appeared only to those who were chosen to be witnesses to the hidden victory of the cross (*ibid*). The resurrection is the standpoint from which the cross can be truly understood. Second, the resurrection was the firstfruits of the harvest that is still to come. This is the consistent teaching of the gospels and the epistles about the resurrection of Christ (1978e:36).

#### 4.5. THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM IN JESUS

In his fine book *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* Hendrikus Berkhof (1964) departs from the normal practice of “official theology” in the way that the doctrine of the Spirit is treated. The first chapter is on ‘The Spirit and Christ.’ The usual order of dogmatics would follow with a second chapter on ‘Word and Spirit’ or ‘The Spirit and the Individual’ in Protestant theologies or ‘The Spirit and the Church’ in Roman Catholic ones (Berkhof 1964:30). Instead, Berkhof’s second chapter is on ‘The Spirit and the Mission.’ He defends his approach by saying that Christ’s mission precedes the church or the salvation of the individual. The creative missionary action of the Spirit flows from the sending action of Christ. The church is the result of this mission of the Spirit (Berkhof 1964:30-31). He complains that the treatment of the Holy Spirit has suffered from the theological neglect of mission (Berkhof 1964:32-34). In fact, the detrimental consequences of neglecting mission in theology is “most keenly felt in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit” (Berkhof 1964:33). In Roman Catholic theology the Spirit is imprisoned in the institutional church while in Protestant theology His work is reduced to the spiritual life of the individual. “And both of these opposite approaches are conceived in a common pattern of an introverted and static pneumatology. The Spirit in this way is the builder of the church and the edifier of the faithful, but not the great mover and driving power on the way from the One to the many, from Christ to the world” (*ibid*). Today, however, we are beginning to understand “that mission belongs to the very essence of the church and that a theology which would speak about God’s revelation, apart from the fact that this revelation is a movement of sendings, would not speak about biblical revelation” (Berkhof 1964:32). The result is a deepening understanding of the Spirit’s missionary work witnessed to in Scripture (cf. Jongeneel 1997:77-81).

Two dimensions of this fresh articulation of pneumatology are helpful for illuminating Newbigin’s thought. First, the Spirit must be understood in a Christological-eschatological context. Christ is the inaugurator and first fruits of the eschaton. He has poured out His Spirit at Pentecost and with that action the last days have dawned. Those last days will not be complete until the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations. The Spirit “forms the unity of the christological and the eschatological pole of God’s saving work” (Berkhof 1964:35). Second, mission does not belong first to the church but to the Spirit; mission is first of all a work of the Spirit and the church is taken up into that work. Put another way, mission is not a mere instrument by which the mighty acts of God in the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection are transmitted by the church through time and space. Rather mission itself is a mighty act of the Spirit and all of God’s acts in Christ would not be known without this one last mighty act. And we are witnesses to this mighty act.

This brief reference to Berkhof summarizes succinctly three important elements that

we find in Newbigin's missionary pneumatology. First, it was Newbigin's missionary experience that moved him to place a much higher priority on the work of the Spirit. In his initial pneumatological reflections, he gives a very paltry place to the work of the Spirit and he fails to place the Spirit in a missionary context. The Spirit is the power that brings the gifts of freedom, good works, and fellowship to individual believers (1942:15-18). This changes rather dramatically over the next decade. He testified in 1960 that it was his missionary experience that moved him to place the Spirit at the centre of his missiology (1994k:22-23). An indication of the growing importance of pneumatology for Newbigin can be seen in the important place given to the Spirit in both *The Reunion of the Church* (1948d:98-103) and *Household of God* (1953d). In the latter book, he devotes an entire chapter to 'The Community of the Spirit.'

Second, the Christological-eschatological context is the fundamental way that Newbigin approaches pneumatology. This means that the kingdom mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Spirit. It means also that the Spirit is a gift for the last days, the powers of the coming age flowing into the present (1948d:98f.). From the outset of the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus in his words and works are directly connected with the power of the Spirit. He is anointed by the Spirit at His baptism to carry out his kingdom mission (Luke 4:18). It is by the Spirit that the powers of the end-time kingdom are in evidence in the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 12:28; Acts 10:38). However, the Spirit is not yet given to the disciples. That awaited the completion of Jesus' baptism at the cross when he would take upon Himself the sin of the world. Just before Pentecost the disciples expected that the full baptism of the Spirit would occur. "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6). Then the consummation of the kingdom would have arrived in fullness. Jesus promised the gift of the Spirit as a foretaste, pledge, or first fruit of the kingdom. These three images point to the already-not yet nature of the kingdom. The Spirit is the real presence of the kingdom *and* the promise of more in the future (1978e:57-58).

Third, the Spirit is the fundamental witness and the church's witness is derivative. Mission first of all belongs to the Spirit who is sent by Jesus and the church is taken up into that work. A threefold historical development can be observed in Newbigin's thought concerning the relation of the Spirit to mission. At the first stage, the Spirit was not connected to the mission of the church at all. The Spirit brings certain benefits to individual believers. At the next stage the Spirit was connected to the mission of the church. However, during this Christocentric stage the Spirit equips and empowers the church in its mission. Mission flows in the following way: the Father sends the Son; the Son sends the Church and equips it with the Spirit to enable it to carry out its mission. In the final stage Newbigin stresses the work of the Spirit as the primary witness. God does not cease to participate in the missionary enterprise with the sending of Jesus. He does not initiate mission with the sending of Jesus and then leave the missionary work to be carried on by a human institution that followed the pattern of Christ with the help of the Spirit. Rather it belongs to "the very central teaching of the New Testament, that properly speaking the mission is the mission of the Holy Spirit.... The witness of man is secondary to the witness of the Holy Spirit.... Over and over again we find that it is taken for granted that witness is essentially a witness borne to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and that the part that the Church plays is a secondary instrumental part" (1994k:21f.). Or as he put it later: "The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God. Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness..." (1978e:56; cf. 1989e:119). This insight emerges slowly throughout the 1950s. However, by the time of his retirement years it is one of the primary strains of his missionary theology and ecclesiology. Undoubtedly his

missionary experience contributed to this growing conviction; yet his involvement in the ecumenical tradition strengthened this conviction as well since a similar emphasis emerged in ecumenical theology at Willingen (Andersen 1955:47) and continued to be a central item of its agenda.

The focus on the witness of the Spirit as the primary witness opened the way for the insight to emerge that the Spirit's work cannot be confined within the limits of the church: "The Spirit who thus bears witness in the life of the Church to the purpose of the Father is not confined within the limits of the Church" (1963g:53). Fifteen years earlier he could state emphatically that the "sphere of the Spirit's working is the Church" (1948d:99; cf. 123). Now in the decade when the redemptive work of God flowing outside of the church has become a primary theme in mission theology, Newbigin affirms that the Spirit's work moves beyond the church to the world. In contrast to much mission theology of the time that stressed the work of the Spirit beyond the church to the point of underplaying the role of the church, Newbigin makes clear his understanding of the Spirit's work in the world: "But—because the Spirit and the Father are one—this work of the Spirit is not in any sense an alternative way to God apart from the church; it is the preparation for the coming of the Church which means that the Church must be ever ready to follow where the Spirit leads" (1963g:53-54).

In *The Open Secret*, Newbigin expands this fundamental conviction. While the Spirit indwells the church he insists that the Spirit is not the property of the church and is not domesticated within it (1978e:56). This would present a caricature of mission as the self-propagation of its own institutional power. Mission then resembles more of a sales campaign or military operation. Rather, "the active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God" (*ibid*). Mission is first of all the work of the Spirit who changes both the world and the church and who goes ahead of the church as it continues on its missionary journey. It is this stress on the fundamental primacy of the witness of the Spirit and His prevenient work ahead of the church that characterizes Newbigin's discussion of the Spirit's work outside the church.

In sober truth the Spirit is himself the witness who goes before the church in its missionary journey. The church's witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads (1978e:61).

Newbigin's characteristic Biblical paradigm for this work of the Spirit is that of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. This story shows that the Spirit works outside the church in sovereign freedom and this work will have a transforming effect on the church. However, it also shows that the work of the Spirit outside the church cannot be separated from the church: there would be no story of conversion if Peter had not gone to Cornelius' home and proclaimed the gospel (1978e:59)!

While the insights that Newbigin develops along this line are significant, the promise of a fuller pneumatology that opens up the work of the Spirit outside the church never materializes. As with the work of the Father, it remains significantly underdeveloped. If one feels dissatisfied with the separation of the work of the Spirit from Christ and the church in the prevailing mission theologies of the 1960s, one feels a similar dissatisfaction with Newbigin's understanding of the work of the Spirit beyond the confines of the church.

It is was precisely this dissatisfaction that led M. M. Thomas to critique Newbigin. For Thomas *koinonia* in the New Testament does not refer primarily to the work of the Spirit in the church but is a manifestation of the reality of the kingdom at work in the world of men in world history (1971c:72). Nowhere in Newbigin's writings does

Thomas find him addressing the question of the work of the Spirit or the evidence of the new humanity in Christ outside the church (1974c:113). Thomas believed that Newbigin is forced to recognize the work of God outside the church in forming a new humanity that is wider than and transcending the work of the Spirit in the church; however, Newbigin never takes this wider work seriously in his theology (*ibid*).

Newbigin countered Thomas' claim that the word *koinonia* can refer to the new reality of the kingdom outside the life of the church. Never does Newbigin find the word so used in the New Testament. However, this does not mean that Newbigin does not acknowledge God's work outside the church, as Thomas alleges. In answer to the question of where God is at work outside the church in human history, Newbigin says:

Wherever the Christian sees men being set free for responsible sonship of God; wherever he sees the growth of mutual responsibility of man for man and of people for people; wherever he sees evidence of the character of Jesus Christ being reflected in the lives of men; there he will conclude that God is at work and that he is summoned to be God's fellow worker, even when the Name of Christ is not acknowledged (1969c:83f.).

While one may find M. M. Thomas' position unsatisfactory and Newbigin's critique convincing, Thomas has put his finger on a weakness in Newbigin's pneumatology—indeed, his whole understanding of the a Trinitarian context for mission. While Newbigin's intention is to develop his Christocentric understanding of the missionary church into a more Trinitarian form, the promise remains unfulfilled. While much valuable insight accrues, the work of the Spirit—as we have seen in the work of the Father—remains underdeveloped. As long as Newbigin and other advocates of a Christocentric-Trinitarian position do not develop the work of the Father and the Spirit in relation to the pressing issues of the day—non-Christian religions, the ecological crisis, growing poverty—their position will not command assent.

#### 4.6. DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS OF THE *MISSIO DEI*: CONTRASTING NEWBIGIN AND RAISER

There are is an abiding tension between two differing ecclesiologies in the ecumenical tradition (Bosch 1991:368-389). The tension between these two competing ecclesiologies is the result of differing understandings of the *missio Dei*. The term *missio Dei* was initially intended to move beyond an ecclesiocentric basis for mission by placing the church's calling within the context of the mission of the Triune God. Originally the *missio Dei* was interpreted Christologically: the Father sends the Son who in turn sends the church in the power of the Spirit. The church participates in the mission of God by continuing the mission of Christ. However, after Willingen the *missio Dei* concept gradually underwent modification (Rosin 1972; Bosch 1991:391-392). The *missio Dei* is God's work that embraces both the church and the world. The focus of the *missio Dei* moved from Christ to the Spirit: "this wider understanding of mission is expounded *pneumatologically* rather than christologically" (Bosch 1991:391). In this understanding, the church participates in God's mission by participating in what God is doing through the Spirit in the world. These different understandings of the *missio Dei* continue to inform the contrasting ecclesiologies of the ecumenical tradition.

Reference to a debate between Newbigin and Konrad Raiser on the pages of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* is helpful in clarifying Newbigin's understanding of the *missio Dei*. In 1991 Raiser's book *Ecumenism in Transition: A*

*Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* appeared in English. In that book Raiser discerns a decisive change taking place within the ecumenical movement. Raiser believes that the “Christocentric-universalist” paradigm that shaped the ecumenical movement from its inception until the Uppsala Assembly (1968) is in trouble. Today a second paradigm is emerging that more faithfully reflects the current situation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newbigin offered a rather harsh review of Raiser’s book (1994c). Raiser responded to Newbigin’s review and, in turn, Newbigin responded to Raiser (Raiser 1994a; 1994f).

One of the many issues upon which Raiser and Newbigin differed was the notion of the mission of God. Raiser charges that Newbigin advocates a Christocentrism that is characteristic of the classical ecumenical paradigm: “Newbigin wants to maintain ‘Christo-centric universalism’ as a valid model for understanding the ecumenical movement.... his entire critical reflection is based on the conviction of the nonnegotiable truth of the earlier paradigm” (Raiser 1994a:50). Newbigin’s response demonstrates his commitment to a Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei*: “I do not regard the ‘classical’ paradigm as nonnegotiable.... But I do regard as nonnegotiable the affirmation that in Jesus the Word was made flesh; there can be no relativizing of this, the central and decisive event of universal history” (1994f:51). Raiser believes that such a Christocentrism is insufficient to meet the demands of the contemporary world. Religious pluralism, injustice and oppression, and the ecological threat all demand that the church shift attention from the work of God through Christ and in the church to the work of God by the Spirit in the *oikoumene*. God’s mission is to be perceived primarily in terms of the Spirit’s work in the world enabling men and women to become what they were meant to be in God’s purpose. Raiser formulates this in terms of a shift from Christocentrism to Trinitarianism.

It may be asked whether or not this is an accurate way to describe the shift. Hendrikus Berkhof has contrasted the two ecclesiologies in a way that better captures their difference. There are two factors that distinguish a missionary ecclesiology: first, the church finds its identity and purpose through participation in the mission of the Triune God; second, the church does not exist for itself but is oriented toward the world. Both ecclesiologies find their source in the work of the Trinity and both find their end in service to the world. Berkhof describes this with the metaphor of a bridge; the church is a bridge between two shores—the covenant-keeping God and the world. Berkhof contrasts the two ecclesiologies in terms of their starting point for theoretical formulation. One starts with the work of God in Jesus Christ and finds in Christ the clue for its mission in the world. The other starts with the work of the Spirit in the world and finds in the needs of the world its clue for the church’s mission. Like Newbigin, Berkhof represents the classical paradigm; he argues for the first option. The church cannot be a bridge between God and the world unless it keeps a firm footing on the first shore. The church’s “first relationship” is to the Lord and it is this relationship which gives the “content as well as the standard for her directedness to the world” (Berkhof 1979:414). He calls attention to one of the dangers that emerges when ecclesiological reflection begins with the world.

If the reflection on the church starts from her mission to the world, the danger is that all these things are more or less taken for granted as self-evident postulates and as such are not really taken into account; while if the reflection starts from the other end and takes its inception in God, Christ, and the covenant, we cannot stop there but are inexorably sent on to the world (1979:414).

This was the precise point of disagreement between Hendrikus Berkhof and M. M. Thomas in their debate at the Mexico meeting of the CWME (1963). Thomas believed

that the task of mission was to discern, to bear witness to, and to participate in God's work of humanization and nation-building. Berkhof believed that taking our clue from the events of history rather than what God has done in Jesus Christ could lead to serious misunderstanding (Loffler 1968; 1993h:195).

A similar disagreement exists between Raiser and Newbigin. The issues have changed; for Raiser it is no longer humanization and nation-building but the *oikoumene* as one household of life in view of pluralism, violence, oppression, and the ecological threat. Raiser's ecclesiological starting point remains the work of the Spirit in the *oikoumene* as one household of life while Newbigin orients the church's mission to Jesus Christ (Raiser 1991a:84-91; 1997:19-26). Both are Trinitarian; and both are oriented to the world. Raiser is cosmocentric as he takes his clue from needs in the world; Newbigin is Christocentric as he takes his clue from the mission of Christ.

Raiser charges that the Christocentricity of the classical paradigm faces two problems. First, Christocentrism tends toward Christomonism; it does not open up into a full Trinitarian vision (1991a:91). Second, a Christocentric position eclipses meaningful dialogue with neighbours from other faiths and inhibits the church from participating in and contributing to the one household of life which is facing grave dangers (1991a:58). The first question that Raiser poses is relevant to the content of this chapter: Does Newbigin's Christocentric understanding of the *missio Dei* tend toward Christomonism? Does it open up into a full Trinitarian formulation?

A response to this critique can be expressed in three points. First, Newbigin did develop his earlier Christocentric position into a much more fully Trinitarian understanding of the mission of God. Second, Newbigin's commitment to Christocentrism is in keeping with his Christological starting point. To depart from the centrality of Christ issues in problems in the church's mission. Third, Newbigin's Trinitarian formulations remain inadequate; there is a need for a much fuller development of the work of the Father and Spirit.

Newbigin developed and expanded his Christocentric position into a more comprehensive Trinitarian framework as a result of the stress on God's work in the world and the corresponding Trinitarian development characteristic of the middle of the century. This chapter has analyzed Newbigin's shift from a Christocentric to a Trinitarian ecclesiology. Like Gerrit C. Berkouwer, Newbigin was convinced that the taking account of the emphasis on the work of the Father and the Spirit in the world, so prevalent during the 1960s, did not mean moving away from a Christocentric approach.<sup>8</sup> In response to Raiser he summarizes his position in these words: "a Trinitarian perspective can be only an enlargement and development of a Christo-centric one and not an alternative set over against it, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the theological articulation of what it means to say that Jesus is the unique Word of God incarnate in world history" (1994c:2; cf. 1977d:214). During the secular decade he recognized that both the work of the Father and the Spirit had received little emphasis in his thought.

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<sup>8</sup>G. C. Berkouwer comments on the misconception involved in understanding the *missio Dei* in the history of missions as a shift from a Christocentrism to a Trinitarianism: "... the characterization 'from rigorous Christo-centricity to thoroughgoing trinitarianism' as 'the direction of missionary theology' is meaningful only starting from a wrongly understood Christocentrism" (Berkouwer 1976:395). For Berkouwer, like Newbigin, Trinitarian thought is always Christocentric.

Further, the work of Father and Spirit *outside the bounds of the church* had not been given sufficient attention. In subsequent writings we see him trying to correct this deficiency. Newbigin always believed, however, that the explication of the work of the Father and the Spirit is making explicit the Trinitarian context of the mission of Jesus. Jesus' mission and the gospel remain at the centre and continue as the starting point for any Trinitarian development. This is the pattern of the early church. The development of a Trinitarian framework is, for Newbigin, both missionary and Christocentric.

This commitment to Christ is not to be judged unfortunate. Rather it is in keeping with his understanding that in Christ God has revealed and accomplished the end of history. If this is true, then Christocentrism is faithfulness to Scripture. Further, when the development of Trinitarian doctrine is not Christocentric problems emerge. First, if Jesus Christ is not the centre of the one household of life then another centre must be proposed. Responding to Raiser, Newbigin writes: "This is precisely the issue now to be faced: Do we look for the ultimate unity of the human family as the fruit of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, or do we have some other center to propose?" (1994f:52). Newbigin does not dispute the need for global unity; he recognizes clearly all the problems to which Raiser points. However, Newbigin believes God has revealed the gospel of Jesus Christ as the one place where that unity can be found. While Raiser finds this Christocentrism too confining, it is clear he has indeed proposed a centre for global unity: a life-centred vision (1991a:84-91; 1997:19-21). Raiser believes that a life-centred spirituality and ethic is needed to which all the various cultural and religious traditions can contribute (1997:19). Newbigin does not dispute the need for a life-centredness which requires us "to learn a relationship of caring for all living beings and for all processes which sustain life" (*ibid*). The question is how such life can be achieved. For Newbigin, God has set the cross in the middle of human history as the place where human sin, pride, and selfishness can be forgiven and defeated; this is the prerequisite for life. Newbigin observes that in *Ecumenism in Transition* "Raiser speaks often about the incarnation but not about the atonement" (1994c:3); the same observation can be made about his second book, *To Be the Church* (Raiser 1997). Newbigin poses questions to other pluralist authors that remain relevant here. Does a formal concept such as 'life' have the power to unite the human race? When 'life' is proposed as the centre, the question arises "whose life?" How can such an abstract concept break down the pride, selfish ambition, and imperialisms that have wracked the human race? Newbigin proposes the cross as the one place where human sin has been judged and forgiven.

Second, a Trinitarianism which is not Christocentric poses problems for the mission of the church. The work of the Father and the Spirit is separated from the work of Christ. Newbigin argues on the basis of Scripture's witness that Jesus is the fullest revelation of the Father's character and purposes and that the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus given to lead humanity to Christ. To separate the work of the Father and Spirit from Christ is to fundamentally misunderstand the Father's and the Spirit's work. This leads to a serious problem for the mission of the church: when the work of the Spirit and the Father is cut loose from the mission of Jesus there are no criteria to assess and evaluate where God is at work. To put it another way: the cosmocentric-Trinitarian position provides no standard for understanding the signs of the times. Bosch points to numerous times when the current movements have simply been identified with the work of God: western colonialism; apartheid; National Socialism in Germany; secularism in the 1960s; political developments in the Soviet Union; revolutions in South and Central America (1991:428-430). There is a tendency to sacralize "the sociological forces of history that are dominant at any particular time, regarding them as inexorable works of providence and even of redemption" (Knapp 1977:161, quoted in Bosch 1991:429).

Newbiggin makes a similar point in response to Raiser: "... there are many spirits abroad, and when they are invoked, we are handed over to other powers. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, is known by the confession that Jesus alone is Lord" (1994f:52).

These problems challenge a Trinitarian theology that is not fully Christocentric. By contrast, Newbiggin has maintained the Christocentricity of the classical paradigm, but has expanded and deepened it into a Trinitarian theology.

Raiser is aware that the classical paradigm is Trinitarian:

Formal acknowledgment of belief in the Trinity has, of course, never been a problem in the ecumenical movement, particularly since the basis was expanded at the New Delhi assembly to include the Trinity. But the Trinitarian doxology does not yet necessarily progress beyond an understanding of the Trinity as a formal principle of salvation history, which remains none the less unchanged in its Christocentric orientation (1991a:91).

In this statement Raiser associates Christocentrism with a doctrine of the Trinity that is simply a formal principle of salvation history. It is precisely this problem that Newbiggin addresses in the years following 1961. He remains Christocentric but expands his understanding of the Trinity to be more than a "formal principle of salvation history." Newbiggin argues that the mission of Jesus and, likewise, the mission of the church are to be carried out in the context of the work of the Father and the Spirit beyond the bounds of the church. Newbiggin opens a way for the church to participate vigorously in the Spirit's work in the world and at the same time to engage in dialogue with adherents of other faiths, a way that remains Christocentric.

Yet Newbiggin's own theological reflection on the work of the Father and the Spirit remains underdeveloped. We have noted the critiques of various authors who observe that Newbiggin's Christocentric orientation has not allowed a full Trinitarian theology to develop (Petersen 1979:192; Hoedemaker 1979:456). Raiser believes that Newbiggin "can state his basic Christological and ecclesiological affirmations almost without any reference to the pneumatological dimension" (1994a:50). While some of these critiques proceed from an inadequate doctrine of the Trinity that is not Christocentric, it remains true that Newbiggin does not work out his insights on the activity of the Father and the Spirit in the world with enough detail to enable us to "speak more specifically of the way in which the Triune God is present and active in history" (Hoedemaker 1979:456).

Specifically this deficiency is revealed in Newbiggin's underdeveloped doctrine of creation and the work of God in world history. Raiser's books again highlight the weakness that remains in Newbiggin's Trinitarian reformulation of the *missio Dei*: it is in need of a much more adequate doctrine of creation.<sup>9</sup> Raiser points to religious pluralism, an oppressive 'global system', and the ecological threat as indications that the classical ecumenical paradigm is inadequate (1991a:54-78; 1997:19-26). The Christocentrism, the emphasis on salvation-history and on the church in the classical paradigm do not provide an adequate basis for handling the numerous issues that have arisen within the world of culture. The problems in the world of culture and in the global intertwinement of cultures calls for a more adequate Biblical perspective on creation. In Raiser's reflection on the Biblical understanding of Jubilee, he insists that

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<sup>9</sup>The reference to a 'doctrine of creation' entails such themes as creation revelation, creation law and order, creation mandate and cultural development, and the goodness of creation (cf. Wolters 1985:12-43; Walsh and Middleton 1984; Schrotenboer et. al. 1995; Chaplin et. al. 1986:32-60; Spykman 1992:139-297; Goheen 1996). While there is much confusion and misunderstanding that surrounds this topic, it is essential for the mission of the church.

“an ecumenical jubilee would mean accepting a new form of life which reflects a deepened understanding of God’s creation and of humanity’s place within it” (1997:65). Indeed Newbigin’s understanding of the mission of the Triune God would benefit from this emphasis.

Theologians within the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions have developed the Bible’s teaching on creation without moving from a Christocentrism. Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology would be enriched by a fuller appropriation of the insights of these traditions on the doctrine of creation. This will not be worked out here; a brief reference to one issue will suffice. In 1996 Newbigin engaged in a three-day dialogue with twenty-five leading scholars within the Kuyperian tradition on the topic ‘A Christian Society? Witnessing to the Gospel of the Kingdom in the Public Life of Western Culture.’ Newbigin commented at the end of that colloquium that “the Gospel and Our Culture network has hardly begun to answer the questions of mission in the public square” and that the “Reformational, Kuyperian tradition has obviously been at work long ago spelling out concretely in the various spheres of society what it means to say ‘Jesus is Lord.’” He went on to express his “fervent wish” that this tradition “would become a powerful voice in the life of British Christianity” (Newbigin 1996e). Differences remained between Newbigin and others within the Reformational tradition (Newbigin 1996c). One difference the discussions brought to light was that, while the Reformational tradition stresses the doctrine of creation in its understanding of the social witness of the church, Newbigin emphasizes the cross and eschatology. The emphasis on creation in the Reformational tradition can diminish the eschatological thrust of Scripture. At the same time, the doctrine of creation has fostered the development of a more positive and defined agenda in politics, education, and other areas of public life (Goheen 1999:6-8). Similar observations could be made about the Roman Catholic tradition.<sup>10</sup> If Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology is to address adequately the numerous cultural, economic, political, social, and ecological issues of the day, his thought needs to be developed within the framework of a more nuanced understanding of the work of the Triune God in creation.

The way beyond the abiding tension that exists between missionary ecclesiologies based on two different understandings of the *missio Dei* is to maintain a Christocentrism but to further elaborate Scripture’s teaching on the work of the Triune God in creation. Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology has pointed the way but there is more work to be done.

#### 4.7. CONCLUSION

For Newbigin, the very being of the church is constituted by Christ’s commission: ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (John 20:21). The church’s nature and identity is given in its role to continue the mission of Jesus. Newbigin unfolds Christ’s mission in terms of the Father’s reign, Jesus’ inauguration of this reign, and the Spirit’s

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<sup>10</sup>See the discussion between (primarily but not only) the Kuyperian and Roman Catholic traditions in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Cromartie 1997).

witness to its presence.

According to Newbigin, the mission of Jesus can only be understood in the context of the reign of the Father. The mission of Jesus does not stand alone; He is sent by the Father to announce and embody His rule over history. There are at least two sides to this. On the one hand, the mission of Jesus must be understood in the setting of the *Biblical story* that narrates God's reign over history. The Bible tells the story of God's mighty acts for the redemption of the cosmos that culminate in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, His mission must also be understood in the context of the rule of the Father over *world history*. The witness of the Son is set in the context of the Father's sovereign reign over all the nations.

Moreover, Newbigin believes that the mission of Jesus must be understood in its eschatological context. In Jesus, the end-time reign of God has flowed into history. It has been revealed and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, it has not come in fullness. While the redemptive power of God's reign is present in Jesus, it has not yet been consummated. It remains hidden, awaiting its full unveiling in the future. This opens up a time for humankind to repent and believe the good news; this is the precise meaning of the delay of God's final judgement. In this provisional time period Jesus has made known the kingdom by embodying it with his life, proclaiming it with his words, and demonstrating it with his deeds. He prayed for it and suffered as He encountered the powers of evil. He formed a kingdom community and prepared them to continue his kingdom mission. His kingdom mission culminated in his death and resurrection whereby the victory of the kingdom for the entire cosmos was revealed and accomplished.

Furthermore, Newbigin highlights the work of the Spirit; the mission of Jesus was carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was a gift for the end times; He brings the life of the kingdom of God. He was poured out on Jesus to equip Him for his mission. By the power of the Spirit Jesus witnessed to the kingdom in life, word, and deed.

This summary of Newbigin's position exhibits a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth. The strength of Newbigin's Trinitarian articulation is the Christocentric focus. Newbigin's Trinitarian position faithfully reflects the teaching of Scripture in maintaining a Christocentric and eschatological understanding of the *missio Dei*. This is most precisely formulated by stating that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has been revealed and accomplished. The revelation of God's purpose for history in Jesus gives the church its compass-direction; the actual accomplishment of this end-time reign enables the church to participate in the salvation that is now present in history. This provides a rich Christological basis for Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology.

Newbigin develops this Christocentric focus within the context of the work of the Triune God. Yet Newbigin's theological formulations do not issue in a robust Trinitarian doctrine; he does not fully account for the work of the Father and the Spirit. Historical developments within the World Council of Churches in the 1960s challenged Newbigin to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. During the decade of the 1950s the work of the Father received little emphasis, the primary witness of the Spirit was eclipsed, and the work of the Father and the Spirit outside the bounds of the church received no attention. In the 1960s we see all three of these issues emerge in Newbigin's writings; yet Newbigin's articulation of the work of the Father and Spirit remained underdeveloped.

The underdevelopment of a Trinitarian basis for the missionary church is evident in two areas. In the first place, Newbigin's theological reflection on the work of the Father remains in a rudimentary state. We do not find a sustained discussion of the Father's

creational and providential work and its significance for mission in Newbigin's writings. Our elaboration of the Father's work in Newbigin's understanding has had to collect more or less isolated references from various places in his writing. This weakness has consequences for various aspects of Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology that will be elaborated in later chapters.

The second area in which Newbigin's Trinitarian foundation for mission remains incomplete is his discussion of the work of the Father and Spirit outside the bounds of the church. During the church-centric period of the ecumenical movement (1938-1952), discussion of the Father and Spirit limited their work to the church. After Willingen, a reaction within the ecumenical tradition accented the work of the Father and Spirit outside the church, identifying all dynamic movements in culture as the work of God. Newbigin attempted to move beyond the pre-Willingen church-centric position and at the same time avoid the radical position taken by Hoekendijk and others that limited the work of the Father and Spirit to the world. While Newbigin was able to avoid both extremes, he never developed his position in a satisfactory way. Numerous questions remain.

Newbigin's theology manifests both a Christocentric focus and a Trinitarian breadth. His Christocentric orientation allows him to remain faithful to Scripture and open up fresh into the context of the *missio Dei* for the church. At the same time it also restricts a full development of the work of the Father and Holy Spirit. Newbigin's missionary experience and work in the context of the ecumenical movement enabled him to expand his understanding of the work of the Father and the Spirit. However, there remains a need for a fuller Trinitarian development of the *missio Dei*, especially as regards the work of the Father and the Spirit in the world.