

1 The Open Secret

Lesslie Newbigin, 1995, 250pp.

A review

“There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world.”

In *The Open Secret* Lesslie Newbigin, missionary statesman and much loved former Bishop of South India, sets out his theology of mission, in two complementary phases. In the first phase, he discusses mission in three perspectives:

1. Kingdom — Father — faith in action;
2. Life — Son — love in action;
3. Spirit — witness — hope in action.

This lays a foundational hermeneutic (perspective or mode of interpretation) for the second phase, wherein Newbigin places the gospel and Christian mission in the context of **world history**, insisting *the biblical story is not a.....special history...apart from human history as a whole (:87)*. This leads to a reappraisal of the concept of election (the calling of a set-apart people) in terms of *the few for the sake of the many (Latin: pars pro toto) (:68)*—a community that is chosen to be the bearers of God’s saving purpose, not for their own sakes, but for the sake of all peoples and all creation.

On this basis, Newbigin explicitly contrasts the religious idealism of individualistically-attained redemption (“salvation”) from ordinary human existence, with an insistence that *the really human life (is) the life of mutual responsibility for the created world (:70)*. Salvation, in this schema, is effectively **co-option into shared responsibility within God’s mission**: reconciliation with God, leading to action for real-world reconciliation, justice and relationship; ultimately, *the completing of his purpose of creation in Christ (:77)*.

Newbigin utilises this hermeneutic to specifically refute a number of theologies and philosophies, including the modern scientific myth of **modernism** and its promise of perpetual progress, as well as one of its effective off-shoots, Latin American **liberation theology**, with its Marxist assumptions. He does this by identifying the biblical claim of Christ’s universal lordship as an expression of supreme ‘ultimate authority,’ declaring that the Christian message is simply that in the story of Christ lies the clue to the purpose behind all human history. The gospel is thus, inevitably, a public truth, with a bearing upon all aspects of public life.

Secondarily, Newbigin builds a missiological apologetic by insisting upon the need to hold three complementary elements in appropriate tension (*note parallel with 'trialogues' of mission, church, world or theology, missiology, anthropology*):

1. faithful Biblical witness;
2. ecumenical fellowship with the whole Christian tradition;
3. dialogue with other cultures.

He advances from this, into a thoughtful and provocative critique of the **Church Growth** movement, contrasting it with emphases advanced by Roland Allen. I particularly appreciated his inclusion of an extract from Kane's *Theology in an Industrial Society*, contrasting two crucially different ways of understanding the church's mission (:132), and the relation of this to issue of cultural contextuality.

Newbigin uses this critique to illustrate how the long history of **Western European Christianity** and its theological articulation have taken place *only* within the strict and limited boundaries of language, thought, study and artistic interpretation that are rooted in Western European cultural history. This has led to the utter dominance of a singular set of cultural patterns being employed even in Majority World contexts and church movements. Newbigin condemns this, calling for the ecumenical movement to embrace a radical re-appraisal of and liberation from this dominating pattern (:159).

Finally, Newbigin brings home his wide-ranging apologetic to posit several important missiological implications for mission within the West, wherein Newbigin identifies *the most aggressive paganism... (as) the ideology that now controls the 'developed world.'* He highlights the irony of how the **modern scientific worldview** remains utterly closed to *radical challenge from the standpoint of another faith*—i.e. to true, open dialogue with 'the Other'. He notes the irony of this, at just the time when that worldview is itself crumbling, with the *culture of the Western white man... sink(s) into nihilism* (:167-8).

Newbigin's summary challenge is based upon **the cross of Christ**. Newbigin suggests the cross is (metaphorically) located at the bottom of a set of stairs. People of every ethnicity, religion, faith and philosophy, *including, Christianity*, are all called to descend towards it. He describes this downwards descent as the process of *kenosis*: a form of vulnerable, self-emptying stewardship, for the sake of serving God's eternal purpose, the *open secret* of the Ages: the uniting of all things in Christ. The role of Christ's followers is to lead the way in taking this downwards journey.

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