

# Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology

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## Abstract

Lesslie Newbigin is an inspirational figure whose theological legacy should be considered carefully. Using a new book by Michael Goheen as guideline (*The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*), this article focuses on Newbigin's views regarding the identity and mandate of the church. Two aspects are noted with appreciation: Newbigin's defense of the uniqueness of Christ and his critique of Western culture. There are concerns, however, with respect to three aspects of Newbigin's ecclesiology: his views of salvation, election, and the mandate of the church. The common thread in Newbigin's approach appears to be his aversion and over-reaction against what he deemed to be an individualistic view of salvation.

## Keywords

*Lesslie Newbigin, Michael Goheen, missional church, ecclesiology, election, salvation*

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**L**esslie Newbigin (1909–1998) is well known to a broad spectrum of Christians as an ecumenical churchman who was the inspiration behind the contemporary missional movement. He worked as a missionary and bishop in India for almost forty years. During that time, he played a role in the unification of various denominations that resulted in the formation of the Church of South India in 1947.

At the international level, he was active in the World Council of Churches. After retiring and returning to the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Newbigin started a second career as a lecturer and writer. He became known as a critic of modern Western culture and a prophetic voice that encouraged the church to stand firm and live up to its missionary calling.

Even before Newbigin's death in 1998, people were writing books and dissertations about him, and during the last few decades, many more have been published. Michael Goheen published his doctoral dissertation on Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology in 2000. Goheen has since written and spoken on Newbigin on many occasions. Recently he returned to his subject again with his new book, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

For this article, I am using Goheen's book as a window into the theological views of Newbigin, especially his missionary ecclesiology. Apart from Goheen's book, I have also used two books by Newbigin himself *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

## I. Uniqueness of Christ

An aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his defense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Savior of humankind as, for example, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, where he describes his position as "exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182). He rejected the kind of inclusivism that regards non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation, a position that required courage on Newbigin's part. It must not have been easy to defend the uniqueness of Jesus Christ within World Council of Churches circles at a time when pluralism was gaining the upper hand. Although Newbigin's struggle in the World Council of Churches did not have the desired effect, we appreciate that he spoke up against the views of pluralists like John Hick and Paul Knitter.

## II. Western Culture

Another aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his ability to analyze modern Western culture as he did, for example, in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986). Goheen summarizes this in chapter 6, "A Missionary Encounter with Western Culture." Having lived and worked in India for close to forty years, Newbigin was able to see Western culture with the eyes



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of a foreign missionary. He considered Western culture to be the most dangerous foe the church has ever faced (*Church and Vocation*, 164). He also judged Western culture to be more resistant to the gospel than any other culture in the world (165). In his judgment, the church in the West had become syncretistic: “Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture” (167). Newbigin offered a penetrating analysis of modern Western culture: how it has been influenced by the Enlightenment, how it has relegated religion to the category of values (not facts), and how Western culture is based on hidden faith assumptions even though it claims to be neutral and objective. In sum, Newbigin did a good job of unmasking Western culture as idolatry.

### III. *Salvation*

This brings us to a key aspect of Newbigin’s theology: his view of the identity and mandate of the church (ecclesiology). To get a handle on this, a good place to start is where Goheen starts as well: Newbigin’s view of salvation. Goheen observes that Newbigin wanted to stay away from an individualistic understanding of salvation that views salvation as limited to the personal salvation of individual people. Newbigin would not deny that there is “some truth in this” (according to Goheen), but he would insist that “this is an entirely too reductionistic view of the gospel” (41).

Newbigin describes the gospel message in much broader terms. In his view, it is a message “about the fullest revelation and the final accomplishment of the end of universal history—the comprehensive restoration of all creation and the whole of human life in the kingdom of God—present and coming in history in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit’s power” (quoted in *Church and Vocation*, 42). The biblical support for this view is taken from Jesus’s announcement at the outset of his public ministry: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14–15). But what is the kingdom of God? In Newbigin’s view, the kingdom of God consists of *corporate and cosmic renewal*. In Newbigin’s own words, the very essence of salvation is “that it is corporate and cosmic, the restoration of the broken harmony between all men and between man and God and man and nature” (59).

Newbigin’s view of salvation contains important biblical aspects, but in my estimation the emphasis is problematic. It appears that Newbigin’s aversion to an individualistic understanding of salvation has caused him to be one-sided. He focuses on Christ’s announcement of the kingdom but says little about the atonement, the need for personal faith in Christ, the

promise of forgiveness of sin and guilt, the promise of indwelling by the Spirit, and the coming wrath of God on those individuals who do not repent. I am aware that one should be careful with criticizing a theologian for what he is *not* saying. At the same time, however, when certain aspects are always highlighted and other aspects largely ignored, things get out of sync. In this regard, I find Goheen's observation to be revealing: "Newbigin does *not* move from Christ to the application of Christ's work and the distribution of various salvific benefits to individuals" (54, emphasis added).

Newbigin's discussion of the work of the Spirit illustrates this principle. Goheen observes that Newbigin describes the work of the Spirit in eschatological, missional, and communal terms. While Newbigin acknowledges that Christ's work brings benefits to individual people, Goheen nevertheless feels that Newbigin's references to the Spirit's work in individuals are "infrequent" at best (54).

#### **IV. Election**

Another important aspect of Newbigin's theology is his understanding of election. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he entitles the chapter on this theme "The Logic of Election," and he is at pains to point out that the doctrine of election should not be understood as some people having a privileged status before God while others do not have that status: "To be chosen, to be elect, does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86). One wonders how Newbigin felt about the confessional statements in the Westminster Confession of Faith (ch. 3) and the Canons of Dort (ch. 1) that God has predestinated and foreordained to everlasting life a definite number of specific persons. Once again, Newbigin seems to be fighting against what he considers to be an individualistic view of salvation.

What, then, is Newbigin's understanding of election? In his view, "to be elect in Christ Jesus means to be incorporated into his mission to the world" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 86–87). It seems that this is a reductionist view of election. To be God's elect means more than being sent on a mission. It means to be adopted as sons of God through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5), and this sets the elect apart from the lost. Our Lord himself, in the prayer that is recorded by the apostle John, said that the Father had given him authority "to give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (John 17:2).

## V. Church

Newbigin's views of salvation and election influence his understanding of the nature of the church and its calling in the world. Goheen quotes Newbigin to the effect that the church "does not exist for itself or for what it can offer its members" (*Church and Vocation*, 122); rather, the church exists to carry out God's mission in the particular place in which it is set (123). When the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth or Ephesus, Newbigin takes this to imply that the church exists *for* Corinth, *for* Ephesus. The church must be the church "for its particular place" (123). This does not mean that the church simply goes along with the world. Rather, the church will live in a painful tension (145): the church is *for* the world and identifies with the world; at the same time, the church is *against* the world and confronts its idolatry. Newbigin has a high view of the calling of the church: The church has to claim the high ground of public truth. It is called to represent the kingdom of God in the life of society (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222, 226). To do this, the church will be "a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood" (229).

We can appreciate Newbigin's call to the church to be relevant and active and to confront the world. At the same time, he is overstating the case when he says that the church exists "for" the place where it is planted. The church exists for God and her Savior, and therefore it is called to build herself up to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). The church should not feel guilty when lots of time and energy are invested in the edification of her members, worship, pastoral work, and diaconal work. After all, the church is the bride of Christ. He gave himself up for her so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27). In other words, the church is not merely an instrument in the hands of the Lord to reach the world! God gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22–23).

## Conclusion

In sum, I appreciate the fact that Newbigin defended the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior of humankind. I also appreciate his efforts to unmask the idolatrous nature of Western culture and the task of the church to take a firm stand on this. There is a lot that is good about his call to the church to reclaim its missionary calling. At the same time, his views of salvation and election are lacking in biblical balance. His aversion to a so-called

“individualistic” view of salvation goes hand in hand with a view of the church that sees its *raison d’être* mainly in what it does for the world. The church fathers and the Reformers were more balanced and emphasized that the church is called to be the “mother of believers” (see John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.4). She is called to nurture her children! As a result, we cannot but conclude that there are significant weaknesses in Newbigin’s ecclesiology.