

Newbiggin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995. Kindle E-book.

In *The Open Secret*, Lesslie Newbiggin's proposal takes a unique perspective that distinctly improves upon other treatments on the topic. Though a "theology of mission," the book is less centered on exegesis compared to similar works; rather, it largely teases out the philosophical and practical implications of a Trinitarian theology as it relates to ever-globalizing contexts. At the same time, Newbiggin offers a missiology that is humble enough to question conventional ways on conceiving of mission.

One of most helpful aspects of Newbiggin's thought is his consistent disregard for traditional dichotomies and formulations. From the very beginning, he unites Christian identity with mission, such that "there is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world," (Kindle 35; all citations refer to Kindle location). He elaborates upon this unity most clearly when talking about the doctrine of election. For instance, he counters the prevailing tendency to think the doctrine regards the "exclusive beneficiaries" of God's salvation (246). Instead, he emphatically and repeatedly explains that Christians are elected to vocation, a mission, "for responsibility, not for privilege" (438). This calling corresponds to "God's purpose of blessing for all the nations. It is concerned with the completion of God's purpose in the creation of the world and of man within the world. It is not—to put it crudely—concerned with offering a way of escape for the redeemed soul out of history" (459). Hence, we see Newbiggin begin to bridge the old divide between spirit/flesh and the world/heaven. His refusal to accept this chasm shapes his entire approach. So, for example, he ultimately dismisses much of western theology as religion that "looks for a 'salvation' that is outside of history" (1399–1400). At the same time, this does not lead to a total embrace of liberation theologies that place all hope in

present politics (cf. 1422ff). Rather, he argues, “The gospel releases us from this dilemma . . .” between finding meaning for human life or in history because Jesus has defeated death, thus allowing someone “to live fully the life of a real person, part of the real world of society, history, and nature, and know that, because Christ is risen, my labor in the Lord is not futile” (1436–54).

As a result, mission should concern the “sum total of ways of living” (1939), including communities, since “The human in the bible exists only in relationship to other persons and only as part of the created world” (948). This precludes a single focus on *merely* getting individual into heaven. He adds, “. . . there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness” (963). This view is rooted in Christ’s being Lord (not simply Savior), who inaugurates God’s kingdom, thus demanding “a commitment that replaces all other commitments” (204). As a result, Newbigin’s Christology compels the Church, after Christ, “not only to proclaim the kingdom of God but also to embody the presence of the kingdom of God . . .” (564). Succinctly, he exclaims, “The Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all” (220). The incarnation testifies to the value of “particular” people, places, and events within the cosmic redemption (cf. Ch. 5), since “Real human beings cannot be understood apart from their place in the public history of their times” (1504).

Because Newbigin is acutely aware of such existential tensions, he is able to develop a humble missiology that is both sober and practical. “Mission involves learning as well as teaching, receiving as well as giving” (1896). Missiologists and theologians would for example do well to concede the need for “Christians of other cultures to correct our culturally conditions understanding of Scripture” (2040). This admonition comes from his admission that many western “theologies have been the result of a failure to challenge assumptions of their own culture” (2080). One interestingly application one could learn from this book therefore is the use

of story when theologizing rather than only propositions (not to exclude the latter). He extensively urges readers to reorient themselves to the Scripture *as* narrative (cf. 1139–1246). Story, he suggests, captures the diverse perspectives of human experience, with its ambiguity and various contingencies. The Christian story, as “a way of understanding world history . . . challenges and relatives all other models by which the meaning of history is interpreted” (1230). In this sort of collective narrative, the lone individual as well rejoins the historical and global community in dialogue over meaning of life and Christian mission.

In *The Open Secret* we see openness to interreligious and ecumenical dialogue that is largely absent in typical evangelical missiological theologies. He sets an example in how to avoid noncommittal, religious relativism without scorning the views of the non-Christian religions. His acknowledgement that we *all* have limited experiences and perspectives beckons missionaries to listen to the ideas and charges spoken by non-Christians; indeed, they may give insights that have escaped attention due to cultural blind spots. This is in addition to the fact that such dialogue is simply humble. On the other hand, Newbigin emboldens missionaries to remind those from other religious viewpoint (especially Hindus) that they too have cultural and experiential boundaries that must be taken seriously (for example, the elephant story, 2200ff). However, Newbigin demonstrates how missionaries do not need to follow pluralists, like John Hick, in separating a “confessional” from “truth-seeking” stance (2259ff). Rather, Newbigin frees missionaries from contemporary social correctness by reminding readers that genuine dialogue requires commitment, not impassionate chitchat (2292–94). Here again, we see the value of his stress upon the gospel confession “Jesus is Lord” (not just Savior); after all, “The Christian commitment is distinguished in that it is a commitment to a belief about the meaning of

the whole of human experience in its entirety—namely, the belief that this meaning is to be found only in the person of Jesus” (218).

Naturally, according to Newbigin, these considerations should affect the way missionaries understand the church. Being anything but an abstraction, “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God” (1522). He does not identify the Church as kingdom itself, so as to avoid the idea that she is merely to reduplicate herself. This would suggest however that mission practice must not stop at church planting. Intentional effort must be made to publically identify with the God of justice, rather than ideological campaigns that do not reflect God’s own revelation and mission in the world (1523). Accordingly, Newbigin is again consistent, calling Christians to bring together daily life and practice with their professed gospel, which tends to get spiritualized with their faith. After all, “. . . in Jesus the meaning of the whole history is revealed. Within this perspective the Jesus of history *is* the Christ of faith” (2151; his emphasis).

At this point, one can well understand Newbigin’s interaction with Roland Allen and Donald McGavran regarding church growth (Ch 9). He sets an example for contemporary missiologists by shrewdly sorting through each man’s view, not dismissing either out of hand. For instance, he can affirm McGavran’s criticism that mission stations had been isolating local Christians from their own culture; at the same time, he finds “no shred of evidence in Paul’s letters” to support McGavran’s key idea that one should “[judge] the churches by the measure of their success in rapid numerical growth . . . ” (1719). Every generation of missionaries should heed the warning that a stress upon numbers tends towards separating discipleship into conversion and “perfecting,” isolating homogeneity, a monocultural gospel message, if not a militaristic mentality (cf. 1732–38). In some regard, Newbigin’s comments are echoed in the

more recent book by Chuck Lawless *Disciplined Warriors*, in that Christians must concern themselves with healthy churches, not only numerically large churches (or similarly, a large number of small churches).

By its very nature, Newbigin's book has certain expected limitations. It is not intended to be an all-encompassing exegetical, theological, and practical treatment on how one is to think about and do missions. In this respect, George Peter's *A Biblical Theology of Missions* and J. H. Bavinck's *Introduction to the Science of Missions* supplement what Newbigin's theology of mission lacks. Most evident is the fact that Newbigin's work is short on exegesis and any extensive biblical theology (for instance, a missional theology of the OT/NT/Paul or the like). While one strength of the book is its Trinitarian missiology, nevertheless most of his theological principles are presumed without much elaboration. A fair response however would simply be that this would not have suited his purpose and audience. Given his emphasis on theological-missiological principles, it is not surprising that his book gives very little practical advice or tips as to *how* to apply this vision. This is why it was previously asserted that *The Open Secret* is highly concerned with the philosophical framework of mission, thus bridging the divide between theoretical and applied theology. Yet, the reader would greatly benefit from a more extensive discussion on practice. How for example might the strategies in India be developed in other contexts like the West?

Another quite relevant theme is the distinction between mission and missions, including some explanation as to its practical implications. This is marginally addressed (42), where the latter is a sub branch of the former. However, the importance of highlighting "mission" does not excuse the neglect of a defense of the dichotomy or of expositing its effect on praxis. This charge could be laid against Bavinck as well. For instance, while one may heartedly agree the Church

should take up issues of justice and become more holistic in its ministry, this does not answer the question about the daily and yearly tasks of the missionary. Is the missionary, who is crossing cultures to spread the gospel and start churches where Christ is little named to intensively incorporate social justice initiatives into his ministry plans or are those task (of “mission”) meant to primarily be taken up by local churches? While there is no need for a rigid either-or, nevertheless, one must ask how the missions vs. mission distinction bears upon the church vs. individual-missionary? Does a missionary have any specialization that would not be true of other individual Christians or churches on the whole?

*The Open Secret* has a unique and needed role within missiological literature. Newbigin reminds readers of the influence of cultural worldviews and individual perspectives in the formation of our theologies and mission strategies. He helpfully *complicates* the way people typically think about mission(s). That is, his stresses how missiology must serious account for the holistic nature of the gospel, the complexity of global cultures, and the ambiguities of human existence human beings. Accordingly, Newbigin’s treatment is valuable across the spectrum of contexts. Mission minded Christians would do well to adopt the humble visions presented in this book when interpreting the biblical text and their local context. As a result, one could expect a fresh (re)discovery of insights both exegetical and anthropological which would further the work of God’s kingdom in all the world.