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Life in the Spirit: An Overview of Lesslie Newbigin's Pneumatology of Mission

Abstract

British missionary Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998) was a highly influential missionary theologian, a bishop in the Church of South India, and a leader in the twentieth century ecumenical movement. His writings regarding the missionary nature of the church, the engagement of the post-Christendom West as a mission field, and the theological understanding of mission from a Trinitarian perspective have been foundational for both the missional and emerging church movements. This article presents an overview of one aspect of Newbigin's thought, which, though constituting a key element of his Trinitarian theology of mission, has often been overlooked—his grasp of the role of the Holy Spirit in mission. This author asserts that Newbigin's pneumatology of mission can help the church, particularly in the West, to understand more clearly how it is to relate to the Holy Spirit as it seeks to participate with God in His mission.

Keywords: Newbigin, Holy Spirit, mission, church, witness

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Newbigin opens his 1972 book *The Holy Spirit and the Church* by making the following assertion:

There are three great festivals in the Christian year, three occasions when we are invited to celebrate the great events of our salvation. They are Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. At the first we celebrate the birth of our Saviour; at the second his death and resurrection; at the third we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church. But we all know very well that it is only the first two of these festivals which are celebrated with real joy and enthusiasm in our churches. Christmas and Easter are great occasions when even the most careless Christian feels an obligation to come to church, and when there is joy and happiness in every Christian home. But the feast of Pentecost passes almost unnoticed. The outside observer of our churches would surely conclude that while it means a great deal to us that Jesus was born for us and died and rose again, the coming of the Spirit means very little or nothing. (Newbigin 1972: iii)

Newbigin adds that such an “outside observer” would in fact be assessing the situation correctly as “for many members of our churches the reference to the Holy Spirit means very little. They know that our Pentecostal brothers speak much of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. They conclude that the Holy Spirit is what the Pentecostals speak about and know about. And for practical purposes they leave the matter there. Why should this be so?” (Newbigin 1972: iii).

In contrast to this hesitation regarding the incorporation of the Spirit’s role into the life of the church, Newbigin paints a theology of mission which views the Holy Spirit as fully central, the member of the Trinity upon which the church most relies in mission, and, in fact, the primary agent in mission itself. In a 1990 lecture given at Selly Oak, Newbigin states:

[T]he essential witness to Jesus, according to the New Testament, is not our witness, nor the witness of the Church, it is the witness of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the Father, the Spirit of Jesus. The words and actions of the Church are secondary to this primary witness, which is the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit goes ahead of the Church; the Spirit is not the property of the Church; the Spirit is not domesticated within the Church. And therefore it is in the sense in which the Spirit is promised to the Church, not to be domesticated within the Church, but to lead the Church, which is so vital for our understanding of Jesus. (Newbigin 1990: 3)

Regarding the ramifications of such an understanding, Newbigin's challenge nearly thirty years' prior in a sermon delivered at a Church of South India synod sheds light:

If this is true, if it is true that the real witness is the Spirit Himself pointing always to Christ and that we are ourselves only witnesses in a secondary sense as being caught up into the Spirit life, then the primary need for our Churches if we are to present Christ to India to-day is the recovery of the fullness of life in the Spirit. But do we really believe this? Do we, do those of our members; who are taking the Gospel seriously, live under grace or under law? Do our Churches understand that Church life is nothing but life in the Spirit? Or do we leave that entirely to the Pentecostals? Very deliberately I would say that the first requirement for presenting Christ to India to-day is not a new programme of evangelism (though we need that), and not even a new theological clarity (though God knows we need that); but a rediscovery of the truth that Church life is life in the Spirit. That rediscovery will mean that both in word and in deed we point away from ourselves to Him, that we make no claim for ourselves, but a total claim for Him. (Newbigin 1956: 60)

Newbigin thus argues for the church's need to come to a full grasp of the centrality of the Spirit in its life and purposes, and he calls for a consequent radical-reorienting of its mode of operation, one which he refers to elsewhere as a "bold experiment in regard to the forms of the ministry" (Newbigin 1961: 30).

Newbigin discusses the centrality of the Spirit within the church's life and mission in many of his writings. Two key selections within the Newbigin corpus which focus on this topic, as aptly highlighted by Dale William Little in his 2000 dissertation on Newbigin's and Clark Pinnock's pneumatologies, are Newbigin's chapters "The Logic of Mission" from *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and "Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Mission as Hope in Action" from *The Open Secret* (Little 2000: 12).

Also significant is Newbigin's discussion of the biblical basis of such centrality found in "the Community of the Holy Spirit" from *The Household of God*, a chapter which provides four pages of Scripture passages in support of "the decisive place given in the New Testament doctrine of the church to this experienced reality of the Holy Spirit's presence" (Newbigin 1953: 87-98). Newbigin's conviction of the biblical nature of this understanding is further attested to by his description of these pages which states, "The biblical evidence which can be adduced in support of the position which we are now to examine is so abundant that I cannot do more than remind you of a few

outstanding groups of passages” (Newbigin 1953: 88). That is, Newbigin views these four pages of texts as merely a taste of the full gamut of Scripture that supports the Holy Spirit’s centrality in the life of the church. In these pages, Newbigin draws upon the book of Acts (as one would expect), but also deeply upon the Pauline literature and the gospels (Newbigin 1953: 88-93). As a caution for the Pentecostal understanding of Christianity, though, Newbigin writes in *The Mission of the Triune God* as follows:

There are movements in our time which lay such exclusive emphasis on the Work of the Holy Spirit that they appear to be in danger of distorting their witness by a failure to recognise that the mission is the mission of the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit. There can be a kind of monism of the Spirit which is not the faith of the New Testament. The recovery within the missionary movement of faith in, and experience of, the centrality of the Spirit in missions will be distorted if it is not within the context of the full Trinitarian faith. (Newbigin 1962: ch. 8)

Thus, Christian faith and Christian missions are to be fully Trinitarian, even if the Spirit is given a central, primary role in the act of mission.

The Open Secret

What is the essence of Newbigin’s theology of the Spirit’s role in mission? Little, drawing on *The Open Secret*, writes, “In Newbigin’s theology of mission the Spirit is the one who leads the Church not only as its guide in mission but also as the powerful divine witness who purposed to change the world and the Church” (Little 2000: 98). He then cites Newbigin as such:

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, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey. (Newbigin 1995: 56)

As such, mission is the Spirit’s activity as “the prime mover and agent, for the Spirit who rules the Church is also its guide in mission and precedes the Church in mission. The Spirit brings unbelievers to the point of believing the confession that Jesus is Lord, the confession upon which the Church is founded” (Little 2000: 98). Scripturally, this theology draws upon John 16:8-15, where Jesus states:

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because

I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (NIV)

Based upon this text and upon the verses that precede it, Newbigin writes, “Mission is not just church extension. It is the action of the Holy Spirit, who in his sovereign freedom both convicts the world (John 16:8-11) and leads the church toward the fullness of truth that it has not yet grasped (John 16:12-15)” (Newbigin 1995: 59). Newbigin affirms the significant role of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus, as “it is by the Spirit that Jesus is conceived, by the Spirit that he is anointed at his baptism, by the Spirit that he is driven into the desert for his encounter with Satan. It is in the power of the Spirit that he enters upon his ministry of teaching and healing (Luke 4:14, 18; Matt. 12:18)” (Newbigin 1995: 57). Jesus’ baptism ushered in a baptism that was in “water and the Spirit,” a foretaste of the kingdom of God that will come in its fullness. (Newbigin 1995: 58, cf. Acts 1:8, 2 Cor. 1:22, and Eph 1:14). Regarding the full impact of the Spirit on the disciples and ultimately on the church, Newbigin adds:

The disciples are not promised the full victory of God’s kingdom now; they *are* promised immediately the *arrabon*—the advance installment that will make them the living evidences of the reality that is promised. The real presence of God’s own life lived in their common life will be the evidence, the witness to all the nations, that the full reality of God’s victorious reign is on the way. What is given here (and this is vital for true missionary thinking) is not a command, but a promise. The presence of the Spirit will make them witnesses.

This promise is fulfilled at Pentecost. The disciples are now given the same anointing that Jesus received at his baptism. And the disciples know that this is indeed the “Day of the Lord” to which the prophets had looked forward. “The last days” have dawned (Acts 2:17). The curse of Babel is being removed. The blessings of God promised to all nations in the primal covenant with Noah are now available to all (2:21). People of every nation are able to hear in their own tongues the

mighty works of God (2:11). The gathering of all the nations to be the people of the Lord and his Messiah has begun.

It is thus by an action of the sovereign Spirit of God that the church is launched on its mission. And it remains the mission of the Spirit. He is central. (Newbigin 1995: 58)

The picture that Newbigin paints is one of mission being clearly the work of God, primarily of the Spirit, in which the church assumes a secondary role as following the Spirit's lead—a posture that was evident even at the day of Pentecost. Newbigin asserts, “Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to its completion” (Newbigin 1995: 59-60). Newbigin cites the account in Acts 15:12 which reveals the church’s response to testimony of the Spirit’s unexpected work among Gentiles. The text reads, “All the assembly kept silence” as they “listened to the story of God’s mighty works among the uncircumcised heathen through the preaching of the gospel” (Newbigin 1995: 60-61). From this narrative, which violates the early Christians’ understanding of the works of God, Newbigin draws the following principle:

At this point the church has to keep silence. It is not in control of the mission. Another is in control, and his fresh works will repeatedly surprise the church, compelling it to stop talking and to listen. Because the Spirit himself is sovereign over the mission, the church can only be the attentive servant. In sober truth the Spirit is himself the witness who goes before the church on its missionary journey. The church’s witness is secondary and derivative. The church is witness insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads. (Newbigin 1995: 61)

The church may not understand where the Spirit leads, and may not even initially agree with that direction, but the mission does not belong to the church—it is the Spirit’s, and the church’s role, when it is faithful, is to be that of the “attentive servant” following the Spirit’s lead as the Spirit carries out the mission (Newbigin 1995: 61). Newbigin contrasts this view with what is often today’s temptation, writing:

This picture of the mission is as remote as possible from the picture of the church as a powerful body putting forth its strength and wisdom to master the strength and wisdom of the world. The case is exactly the opposite. The church is weak. It is under trial. It does not know exactly what to say. It has no arguments to confute its persecutors. But exactly in this situation it can be calmly confident. It does not have to conduct its own defense. There is an advocate who is more than adequate for

the task. It is his work—and he is quite capable of it—to take the weakness and foolishness of the cross, mirrored in the life of the community, and make it the witness that turns the world upside down and refutes its most fundamental notions. Because he knows this, Paul can exult in the assurance that “when I am weak, then I am strong” (I Cor. 12:1-10). (Newbigin 1995: 62)

If the witness of the church is one borne of weakness, of the attentive servant who does not have strength in his or her self but in the leading and power of the Spirit, then the church is free to rely on the Spirit to provide all that is needed for the mission’s fulfillment. Because of this reliance, the church can respond in the assurance that “the witness that confutes the world is not ours; it is that of one greater than ourselves who goes before us. Our task is simply to follow faithfully” (Newbigin 1995: 62). This act of following is not necessarily easy for the church; it will involve risks and suffering, just as the earthly life of Jesus did, “but follow it must if it is to be faithful” (Newbigin 1995: 63-64). As the church carries out this witness, however, it sees its task as a joy, rather than a burden. Newbigin writes, “The witness of which the New Testament passages speak is God’s gift, not our accomplishment. It is not a light that we kindle and carry, shielding its flame from the winds; it is the light that shines on us because our faces are turned toward the radiance that is already lighting up the eastern sky with the promise of a new day” (Newbigin 1995: 63-64).

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society

From this focus on the joy and privilege of Christian witness, Newbigin’s discussion of “The Logic of Mission” in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* explores further the rationale behind one’s motivation for mission. He asserts that the “long tradition” of viewing mission as obedience to a mandate, while somewhat justified, “misses the point” (Newbigin 1989: 116). He writes:

It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving. One searches in vain through the letters of St. Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his readers that they ought to be active in mission. (Newbigin 1989: 116)

The mission of the church, then, flows from the natural sense of wonder that comes from the overwhelming goodness of the message of Jesus' death and resurrection and its ramifications. In this regard, Newbigin notes, "almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church" (Newbigin 1989: 116). In essence, onlookers notice that something remarkable is going on, ask for an explanation, and the followers of Jesus present them with the truth of the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. When asked what they are to do in response, Peter in Acts 2, for example, indicates that they are to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus" (Newbigin 1989: 117).

As the church's role in this understanding is one of simply explaining and attesting to what *God* is doing, Newbigin asserts the following:

It is of the greatest importance to recognize that it remains his mission. One of the dangers of emphasizing the concept of mission as a mandate given to the Church is that it tempts us to do what we are always tempted to do, namely to see the work of mission as a good work and to seek to justify ourselves by our works. On this view, it is *we* who must save the unbelievers from perishing. The emphasis of the New Testament, it seems to me, is otherwise. Even Jesus himself speaks of his words and works as not his own but those of the Father. (Newbigin 1989: 117)

If mission is not a justifying "good work," but rather a joining in God's witness to His own activity, what is the interplay between the role of the church and the Holy Spirit in this witness? Newbigin writes, "It is the Spirit who will give them power and the Spirit who will bear witness. It is not that they must speak and act, asking the help of the Spirit to do so. It is rather that in their faithfulness to Jesus they become the place where the Spirit speaks and acts" (Newbigin 1989: 118). As such, "The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission" (Newbigin 1989: 119). It becomes, in essence, a setting for the activity of God through the Holy Spirit. Newbigin writes:

It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ. When they are so drawn, they become part of a community which claims no masterful control of history, but continues to bear witness to the real meaning and goal of history by a life which—in Paul's words—by always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus becomes the place where the risen life of Jesus is made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10). (Newbigin 1989: 119)

The church, then, serves as a community in which the Spirit works and bears witness to the truth of the gospel. As such, it becomes what Newbigin refers to as the “hermeneutic of the gospel,” a visible display in which the action of the Spirit testifies to the reign of God (Newbigin 1989, 234). Newbigin continues, “It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power. The whole New Testament bears witness to this, and so does the missionary experience of the Church through the ages” (Newbigin 1989: 119). As more recent testimony to this reality, Newbigin cites the church’s proliferation in the Soviet Union and in China despite the prohibition of “explicit public witness,” (Newbigin 1989: 119). In these settings, the church grew not through its “works” of witness, but instead “through the active power of the Spirit drawing men and women to recognize in this human weakness the presence and power of God” (Newbigin 1989: 119).

What, then, is the “logic of mission” that Newbigin presents? He writes as follows:

So the logic of mission is this: the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be private opinion. When we share it with all peoples, we give them opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part. Wherever the gospel is preached the question of the meaning of the human story—the universal story and the personal story of each human being—is posed. Thereafter the situation can never be the same. (Newbigin 1989: 125)

According to this logic, mission involves the sharing of the truth of what God has done and what God is doing. This witness is God’s work within the community of His church, a witness in which believers “will share in his mission as they share in his passion, as they follow him in challenging and unmasking the powers of evil” (Newbigin 1989: 127). He adds, “There is no other way to be with him. At the heart of mission is simply the desire to be with him and to give him the service of our lives. At the heart of mission is thanksgiving and praise. We distort matters when we make mission an enterprise of our own in which we can justify ourselves by our works” (Newbigin 1989: 127).

Summary and Application

From these chapters in *The Open Secret* and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, one sees a picture of mission in which the Spirit plays a primary role, with the church’s assuming the role of the attentive servant and the locus of the

Spirit's activity. Mission is the joyful, natural witness to the truth of what God has accomplished and continues to accomplish both in the larger human story and in personal stories. The mission is not the church's, but is God's, and it is prepared, led, and conducted by Him, with the church merely following His cues. The church's participation will bring risks and suffering, elements in which the church identifies with Christ, but this involvement will be led, accompanied, and empowered by the Spirit, who is sovereign.

Newbigin's writing of the Spirit's centrality in mission flows out of his Trinitarian theology of mission and his understanding of the *missio Dei*. Newbigin, in a sense, allocates the ownership and agency of mission largely to the Spirit within the Trinity, and places the church in a secondary role as an attentive servant. The witness is the Spirit's, not the church's, but the church is the means through which this witness is expressed. As the Spirit witnesses through the church, the Spirit is attesting to God's reign in Christ. This witness occurs primarily through the church as a community, whose fellowship in the Spirit serves as the hermeneutic of the gospel.

As the Western church seeks to engage contemporary Western culture with the gospel, participating in the mission of God and seeking to connect with increasingly more postmodern Westerners, it can learn a great deal from Newbigin's writings regarding the centrality of the Holy Spirit in mission. One could postulate that as Western culture begins to shift away from a primarily Enlightenment-based worldview into one that is less materialist in nature and more open to mystery, current and future generations may embrace the leading of the Spirit more readily than have the heavily Enlightenment-influenced generations of the past several hundred years. As "the wind blows wherever it pleases," (John 3:8, NIV) the Spirit's ways are not always "rational", and the recession of human reasoning and empirical science as the primary determiner of truth in Western cultures may allow for an openness to the Spirit's leading that has not existed previously.

If God the Holy Spirit dwells within the church and seeks to use the church within the *missio Dei*, it is important for the church, as Newbigin stated in his synod address in India, to seek "the recovery of the fullness of life in the Spirit" (Newbigin 1956:60). If the church is to be the locus of mission which is conducted by the Spirit, and if it is to truly serve as the hermeneutic of the gospel, then its structures and activities need to be oriented in a way which not only welcome the Spirit's presence, but which allow the Spirit to lead, directing the church in the mission for which it exists. Newbigin argues elsewhere that such a shift requires a strong exercise in discernment, as "not every spirit is the Holy Spirit" and "not every form of vitality is his work," but if the mission is truly God's, and if this mission is to be led and conducted by Spirit, then it is critical for the church to align itself in the posture of the

attentive servant so that it can truly serve the Spirit's purposes (Newbigin 1995: 187). Such a posture has indeed been exhibited in the rise of global Pentecostalism, but its expression need not be limited to the Pentecostal/charismatic movement itself, as Newbigin presented the challenge not to "leave that entirely to the Pentecostals" but for the church as a whole to rediscover "the truth that Church life is life in the Spirit" (Newbigin 1956: 60).

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