

• Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

EuroJTh (1997) 6:2, 169–171

0960–2720

The Open Secret. An Introduction to the Theology of Mission **Lesslie Newbigin**

London: SPCK, 1995, viii+192pp.,
£9.99, ISBN 0–521–42184–5

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Newbigin entwickelt in The Open Secret eine biblisch-trinitarische Theologie der Mission, die drei Aspekte umfaßt: die Verkündigung des Königreichs Gottes, die Teilhabe am Leben des Sohnes und das Zeugnis vom Geist. Auf dieser Grundlage geht Newbigin dann auf die folgenden gegenwärtigen missiologischen Themen ein: die Beziehung des Evangeliums zur Weltgeschichte sowie die Fragen, die von der Befreiungstheologie, der 'Church Growth School of Mission' und der Präsenz anderer Religionen aufgeworfen werden. The Open Secret bietet christliche Forschung auf höchstem Niveau und verdient eine weite Leserschaft.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet ouvrage, Newbigin expose une théologie de la mission qui est biblique et trinitaire, et qui s'ordonne autour de trois thèmes: la proclamation du royaume de Dieu, la participation à la vie du Fils, et le témoignage de l'Esprit dont nous sommes porteurs. Sur cette base, l'auteur aborde les problèmes missiologiques qui se posent actuellement: le rapport entre l'Évangile et l'histoire universelle, la théologie et la libération, la vision missionnaire de la croissance des Églises et la question des autres religions. L'ouvrage fait preuve d'une érudition chrétienne exemplaire et mérite une large diffusion.

The Open Secret is a worthy addition to the feast of Newbigin's writings. Newbigin was for some thirty years a missionary in India. There he was constantly challenged about the way in which the gospel encounters Indian culture. Since returning to England Newbigin has written extensively about how the gospel encounters Western culture. *The Open Secret* represents Newbigin's mature reflection on a biblical theology of mission. It is the deposit of a lecture series that he delivered to Christians preparing for mission work. It is not intended to be an academic work and combines a lucid

style (typically Newbigin) with a lack of academic footnotes. And yet, also typically Newbigin, one is intensely aware that the clearly ordered text is compact and undergirded by comprehensive and creative Christian scholarship and first hand experience of the main mission debates of this century. This is not a lightweight text, but it is clear, relevant, accessible scholarship of the very best sort.

The title of the book refers to the treasure of the gospel that has been entrusted to the church; it is the 'open secret of God's purpose through Christ, to bring all things to their true end in the glory of the triune God' (p. 188). Mission is the church's calling to steward this open secret. Newbigin rejoices over the growing recognition of mission as central to the identity of the church. However there is much debate over what 'mission' entails. Newbigin's aim in this text is to place the debate about mission in a biblical perspective.

And this he does in a wonderfully fresh and biblical way. After an opening chapter which surveys the debate about mission during this century, chapters 2–6 set out Newbigin's proposal for a biblical theology of mission. He argues in chapter 2 for an epistemological starting point in the lordship of Christ. The authority of Jesus is ultimate and thus to seek to root one's theology of mission in any other starting point is inadmissible. Indeed '[t]he Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole of life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all' (p. 17).

The question of Jesus' identity led the church to the doctrine of the Trinity and this doctrine resulted in the early church developing a new view of the world which healed the contemporary rift between the sensible and the intelligible. In this tradition Newbigin elaborates a trinitarian theology of mission around three loci: proclaiming the kingdom of the Father (faith in action), sharing the life of the Son (love in action), and bearing the witness of the Spirit (hope in action). Mission is all about the reign of God over the whole of creation (kingdom). In Jesus this has arrived but in the weakness of the cross; the resurrection is the firstfruits of the final coming of the reign of God but it takes the eye of faith to see this, so that mission is *faith* in action; it is living out in all of life the conviction that the reign of God has come and is coming.

Jesus embodied the kingdom, and the church participates in his life and mission. For all its brokenness, the church, as the eucharist indicates, is the place where the reign of God is present and at work in history. At the eucharist Christians are taken up again into the sacrificial life of Christ and sent out to be the community of the cross and resurrection in God's world: love in action. Mission is the work of the Spirit and the gift of the Spirit is the firstfruits of the coming kingdom. In this sense mission is hope in action.

In chapters 7–10 Newbigin, from the basis of his trinitarian theology of mission, examines important issues in current missiology. Chapter 7 deals with the gospel and world history, chapter eight with liberation theology, chapter 9 with the church growth school of mission and chapter 10 with the difficult question of the gospel and other religions. Newbigin's handling of these complex issues is masterful. He rightly recognises that the clash between the biblical view of history and modern historiography 'is perhaps the most important issue in the dialogue between the gospel and the contemporary culture of the Western world' (p. 83). He points out that in all historiography one has to have some criteria for determining what is significant, and the Christian historian correctly brings to the data the assumption that God has disclosed the meaning of the whole story in the story of Jesus.

Liberation theology is, according to Newbigin, a helpful reminder that faith and obedience cannot be separated in mission. Modern mission has been too influenced by colonialism and Newbigin agrees with liberation theology that the ideology of the free market is a form of idolatry. Confrontation of this idolatry is probably the most urgent missionary task of the coming century. Newbigin shares liberation theology's rejection of the idealist view of persons as essentially spiritual but has reservations about its adoption of a Marxist view of human nature which has little room for reconciliation, and its Marxist epistemology—social scientific analysis cannot take the place of the biblical story.

Newbigin shares the church growth school's concern for evangelism but denies that the Bible holds numerical growth and the message of the kingdom closely together: 'There is a deep concern for the integrity of the Christian witness, but there is no evidence of anxiety about or enthusiasm for rapid growth. In no sense does the triumph of God's reign seem to depend upon the growth of the church'.

Newbigin also insists that obedience and discipleship cannot be separated: 'It is notorious that the times and places from which successful evangelistic campaigns and mass conversions have been reported have often been marked by flagrant evils such as racism, militant sectarianism, and blind support of oppressive economic and political systems' (p. 135). However, *contra* liberation theology he is cautious about efforts of missionaries to fix the ethical content of that obedience; local churches must be led by the Spirit in this respect.

On the difficult issue of the relationship between conversion and culture, Newbigin thinks the church growth school is in danger of having a static view of culture, whereas it is always changing. He invokes Paul's doctrine of the powers as an appropriate Biblical framework for thinking about culture. The powers (of state, religion, law, custom etc.) 'provide the ordered framework within which it is possible for human freedom to develop' (p. 143). They are part of God's creation and to be brought under his reign. Newbigin proposes a three-pronged model for thinking about conversion and culture: the traditional culture itself, the 'Christianity' of the missionary, and the Bible. A limitation of the ecumenical movement has been its failure to recognise the traditioned nature of its own presuppositions.

The final chapter discusses the gospel among the religions. Newbigin is clear that the Christian cannot sacrifice her epistemological starting point in this discussion. He locates the roots of Hick's approach in philosophical idealism; this is as confessional an approach as a Christian one. Examining the various models for understanding other religions, Newbigin proposes that we leave the final destination of adherents of other religions to the mercy of God, and that we enter into dialogue with them simply as a witness to the One who has taken hold of us. We need to recognise light wherever we find it while also being aware that religion is the sphere of the demonic. The purpose of dialogue can only be obedient witness to Christ.

In a mere 192 pages Newbigin covers a lot of ground, and we cannot evaluate all his arguments in detail, although they inevitably call for just such engagement. One often feels that one is getting in a succinct page what Newbigin has developed through years of ministry! What makes this book so exciting is its *integrally* Christian starting point. It is extraordinary just how strong and conscious this

starting point is. The first few chapters which set out the theological foundations of mission are full of statements like the following:

'The Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all' (p. 17).

I have spoken of mission as the *proclaiming* of God's kingship over all human history and over the whole cosmos. Mission is concerned with nothing less than the completion of all that God has begun to do in the creation of the world and humankind. Its concern is not sectional but total and universal (p. 56).

Newbigin sets out from a comprehensive vision of Christ's Lordship, and this shapes his entire missiology. When one discovers the comprehensive Lordship of Christ (that is, a Christian worldview), one realises that such a holistic perspective reshapes one's thinking in all sorts of areas. Sadly, however, we often do not have the time or texts available to help us work through that process of re-formation. *The Open Secret* is a wonderful example of such reshaping, and if mission is half as central to a Christian theology as Newbigin thinks it is (and I agree), then working through the reshaping at this point will be helpful for one's understanding of the Bible, history (cf. chapter 4), the relationship between evangelism and justice (cf. chapter 8), a Christian approach to other religions and the problem of pluralism (cf. chapter 10), and many other areas. Certainly in the area of mission Newbigin demonstrates that his starting point is capable of bringing a nuanced perspective to bear on many of the contemporary debates in missiology.

Furthermore, Newbigin's *kurios*-centric approach takes the authority of Scripture seriously in a foundational way; Scripture is continuously and thoughtfully referred to. (Newbigin is intensely aware that without a strong doctrine of the authority of Scripture, the church will be unable to critique contemporary culture effectively [cf. Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda* St. Andrews Press, 1993:248-250]). The outline of his trinitarian theology of mission is developed out of passages of Scripture in the most helpful ways. For example, in his chapter on 'Mission as Action for God's Justice', Newbigin outlines in a very useful page how Romans 8 presents the unity of the Christian hope, embracing the private and public life of the human person (pp.106,107). Newbigin rightly focuses the authority of Scripture in terms of its mediating a personal relationship with Christ, but I do not think this is necessarily in conflict with

an evangelical affirmation of a propositional aspect to Scripture, as Newbigin sometimes suggests. (For a discussion of the authority of Scripture, see Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* [London: SPCK, 1986:42-64]). *The Open Secret* remains a model of missiological scholarship in the liberating grip of Scripture.

Newbigin's position on particular areas requires detailed evaluation that we cannot pursue here. Suffice it to mention that I am not persuaded by his appropriation of Paul's doctrine of the powers as a way into a Christian understanding of culture. In my opinion a dynamic notion of creation order, biblically understood, may be the better route here. Newbigin's theology of law and election, plus his view of the several interpretations of Christ in the NT as alerting us to the destination of the gospel to all mankind are always stimulating, but require careful analysis.

The Open Secret is a classic; it is one of those books that should be read widely, and engaged with in detail. Its great merit is its rootedness in a rightly huge view of the LORD CHRIST. Newbigin starts *The Open Secret* with the words, 'Christ is the light of the nations', and he appropriately ends the book as follows:

The mystery of the gospel is not entrusted to the church to be buried in the ground. It is entrusted to the church to be risked in the change and interchange of the spiritual commerce of humanity. It belongs not to the church but to the one who is both head of the church and head of the cosmos. It is within his power and grace to bring to its full completion that long-hidden purpose, the secret of which has been entrusted to the church in order that it may become the open manifestation of the truth to all nations (p. 189).

Craig Bartholomew
Cheltenham, England

EuroJTh (1997) 6:2, 171-172

0960-2720

***Truth and Authority in Modernity* Lesslie Newbigin**

Leominster: Gracewing, 1996. ix + 83 pp.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette brochure vise à aider l'Eglise à comprendre sa responsabilité missionnaire dans le contexte actuel et à l'assumer. L'auteur affirme que la recherche de la vérité s'effectue toujours