

# Open Secret

John T. Henry

November 27, 2005

## CITATION OF REFERENCE

Newbigin, Lesslie. The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission. Revised. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

## INTRODUCTION

Lesslie Newbigin's missiology course lectures over a four-year period are presented in this excellent and accessible book of theology. Newbigin confirms my understanding that our job is "to learn what he is doing in the world which is already his, not to introduce him to a world from which he is absent." (1995:67) Newbigin brings his practical experience from the mission field to his understanding of theology. Forged in the integrity of practice, Newbigin has paved the way ahead, with this book and his others, for the Church in a globalized pluralistic society.

## PROACTIVE QUESTIONS

My review of this book led me to ask the following questions:

### 1. What new keys does Newbigin offer to my understanding the theology of mission?

This book clarifies my understanding of the doctrine of election, the law, and the covenant of God, all of which have been distorted to the detriment of mission. Paul saw this issue as central to his call as a theologian. The doctrine of election should be taught as a "fearful responsibility," rather than defining an exclusive group. (1995:73)

Newbigin characterizes the role of the law. He shows with clarity how the law exonerates God of all blame for sin, how the law shows itself insufficient, and how the law was "ordained by angels." (1995:75) This delegated authority is limited, but ultimately gained control, a control from which humanity needed to be liberated. This notion is the same as the stoichaea, which was outlined in ch.16 of "Gospel in a Pluralistic Society". Newbigin summarizes with the idea that the covenant is not a contract. For the same reasons I agree with him that the atonement is not a contract either.

Newbigin helps clarify my understanding of mission and the Spirit. Mission is the "Proclaiming of God's kingdom over all human history and over the whole cosmos" and "...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." (1995:56)

Finally, the freshest insight I received from this book is the understanding that "significant advances of the church have not been the result of our own decisions about the mobilizing and allocating of 'resources.'" Newbigin says, "The significant advances in my experience have come through happenings of which the story of Peter and Cornelius is a paradigm, in ways of which we have no advance knowledge. God opens the heart of a man or woman in the gospel. The messenger (the 'angel' of Acts 10:3) may be a stranger, a preacher, a piece of Scripture, a dream, an answered prayer, or a deep experience of joy or sorrow, of danger or deliverance. It was not part of any missionary 'strategy' devised by the church. It was the free and sovereign deed of God, who goes before the church...this mission is not ours but God's." (1995:64)

### 2. What insights will I find about the role of the local congregation?

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (Jn. 20:21) This commission is not to individuals, but to the Church. This question, the role of the local church, has been one of my greatest questions as a missionary. Newbigin offers the best understanding, without directly

addressing the question. Jesus “introduced into history... the form of a community, not in the form of a book.” (1995:52) It is the role of the local congregation to gather to celebrate “the centrality of the Lord’s Supper in the continuation of Jesus’ mission.” (2 Cor. 4:10 and Jn 13-16) We celebrate this “happening” in history and its continuation. Rather than write a book, Jesus instituted a community, which remembers. As we celebrate, we remember, and as a community we “enter into the stream of historical happenings and become part of its course. In other words, if it is true that God’s reign concerns history in its unity and totality...we must be related to it, and must share in its power, not merely by reading of it in a book or hearing it in a verbal report, but by participating in the life of that society which springs from it and is continuous with it.” (1995:51)

We can rest in the faith as a community with confidence in our authority as messengers of grace and judgment. We can, by virtue of the deposit of the Spirit of God, be the presence of Jesus in a community. (Jn. 13:20 and Mt. 11:25-30) “The presence of the kingdom, hidden and revealed in the cross of Jesus, is carried through history hidden and revealed in the life of that community which bears in its life the dying and rising of Jesus.” (1995:52)

We see many churches today reach for a success model for growth, but this is not the biblical model of the local congregation and its witness to the world. Instead, it is the dependence on the Holy Spirit, especially when there is evidence of failure, brokenness, and foolish mistakes. “The real triumphs of the gospel have not been won when the Church is strong in a worldly sense; they have been won when the Church is faithful in the midst of weakness, contempt, and rejection.” (1995:62) There is little definition of the local congregation, but there is plenty of instruction as to the leadership, character, and purpose of the congregation. This gives an amazing flexibility for a community of believers to bear witness as the presence of the kingdom.

### 3. How can these understandings be applied in my ministry?

Newbigin offers what I believe the Church needs, a missiological understanding of theology, not a theological understanding of mission. Part of my call, though focused on student initiatives in mission, is to work with the Church toward the realization of this understanding of mission. “Mission (led by the Holy Spirit) changes not only the world but also the Church...There is a conversion of the Church as well as the conversion of Cornelius.” (1995:59) So my role will be more and more involved in mobilizing local congregations.

### SUMMARY OR SYNTHESIS

Newbigin points out the ‘fact of Christ’ as a happening at one time and place showing that “God’s reign concerns history in its unity and totality.” (1995:51) We therefore all relate to this monumental event, and we must learn to share in its power in our witness to the wider world. The cross of Christ is “a happening, it is a part of history. It is located at a particular point of place and time in the whole vast fabric of human affairs.” (1995:50) Too often I make missionary and evangelistic plans depending on my own ideas and strength, forgetting the most important thing about that mission. It is not mine and it’s not the Church’s, it’s God’s. This book has helped me learn afresh that as we learn not to depend on human ingenuity, we can demonstrate the “hope that is given by the presence of the Spirit who is the living foretaste of the kingdom.” (1995:64-65) We may not only announce the kingdom of God, we can embody it.