

9. THE MISSIONARY CHURCH IN WESTERN CULTURE

9.1. INTRODUCTION

A number of historically significant contributions to the world church have characterized Newbigin's life, securing him an important place in 20th-century church history: his theological work in the area of church government that contributed to the formation of the CSI, his formulations of the missionary church expressed in the official documents of the significant Willingen Conference, his chairmanship of the famous 'committee of twenty-five' that produced one of the most significant and foundational theological statements for the World Council of Churches that was adopted at the Evanston Meeting, the fashioning of the statement on local and ecumenical unity adopted at the New Delhi meeting of the WCC, and his role in the integration of the WCC and IMC along with the part he played in shaping the WCC and CWME in those early days. Perhaps the most significant historical accomplishment is his role as catalyst in challenging missiologists (and many other Christians in the West) to consider the central importance of mission to modern western culture. Newbigin believed that a missionary encounter with modern western culture was the most urgent item on the agenda of missiology: "It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture" (1986e:3). Newbigin produced more than half of his writings after he returned to Britain in 1974 and the majority of that literature has engaged the subject of mission in western culture.¹

When Newbigin returned to Britain he observed that the church was timid about the truth of the gospel. The primary root for this lack of confidence in the gospel was the enthronement of reason in the modern scientific worldview (1993h:230f.). Accommodation to this worldview threatened the church as a missionary community. Newbigin believed that the worldview at the centre of western culture needed to be addressed if the church was to faithfully embody and commend the gospel.

In this chapter we examine Newbigin's response to the threat posed by western culture. However, we will not attempt to summarize Newbigin's entire contribution but view his treatment through the lense of his missionary ecclesiology. There do exist a number of summaries of Newbigin's missiology of Western culture but the central place of a missionary ecclesiology has not been sufficiently recognized. By way of exception, Paul Weston (1999:50-51; 57-60) and Ian Barnes (1994:29, 32), in their brief descriptions of Newbigin's work, recognize the centrality of the church and the profound ecclesiological implications of Newbigin's mission and western culture project. The present chapter unfolds the centrality of a missionary ecclesiology for Newbigin's missiology of western culture in response to the modern scientific

¹This subject has been canvassed in at least one Ph.D. dissertation (Keskitalo 1998). Unfortunately, this dissertation is in Finnish and, in any case, was not available to me when writing this section. An English translation is planned. There is a twelve-page English summary that I received late in my writing.

worldview.

Newbigan believed that the western church was in an advanced state of syncretism. It had accommodated itself to the modern scientific worldview.² Following a brief

²Many today would argue that the primary threat to the gospel is postmodernism. Newbigan acknowledges that there are two important changes to the picture that he paints of the ascendancy of the modern scientific worldview. The first is the rise of religious fundamentalism; the second is the rise of postmodernism (1993g:230-231). He defines postmodernism as “the abandonment of any claim to know the truth in an absolute sense. Ultimate reality is not single but diverse and chaotic. Truth claims are really concealed claims to power, and this applies as much to the claims of science as to those of religion” (1993g:231). He recognizes that modernity and postmodernity pose two different problems for the evangelist: modernity advocates the immensely powerful yet unexamined assumption of neutrality; postmodernity poses the problem of relativism. Yet Newbigan sees the two as intimately related; postmodernity is the collapse of modernity (1995f:5). Nietzsche (the father of postmodernity) is the consistent outworking of Descartes’ critical principle (the father of modernity) (1995h:16-28). In terms of mission, Newbigan believed that modernity continued to be the primary threat to the Christian faith because it is embodied in the institutions of western culture: “In spite of its (modernism’s) erosion by the growing movement of ‘deconstruction’ among intellectuals in the ‘developed’ societies, *Modernism* is still the major challenge which the world faces, primarily because it is embodied in the global economic-

discussion of the syncretism of the western church, we examine Newbiggin's remedy for the liberation of the western church for a missionary encounter. This involved an historical, an epistemological, and a theological task. A missiological analysis of culture enables the church to understand its reigning doctrine as a historically construction. An alternative epistemology frees the church from the tyranny of autonomous reason. Understanding the gospel as public truth equips the church for her witness in western culture. The ecclesiological implications of this will then be elaborated.

9.2. THE WESTERN CHURCH: AN ADVANCED CASE OF SYNCRETISM

In Jesus Christ God has acted decisively and definitively to reveal and effect the divine purpose and goal for all cosmic history (1989j:50). The centre of the gospel is the cross; at the cross God made known and accomplished the salvation of the cosmos. If God has done this, then it is true and universally valid for all humankind; it must be communicated to all the world. The question that Newbiggin constantly poses is: "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?" (1989e:227). What is the most effective vehicle through which a scandalous gospel can be communicated so that it is credible? He answers: "I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it" (*ibid*). During his ministry, Jesus formed a community to bear this gospel to the world. The importance of the church in Newbiggin's thought is evident in his repeated comment that Jesus did not write a book but formed a community (*ibid*). Jesus made provision for the communication of the gospel to the world, not by committing it to writing and disseminating the written page throughout the world in the way Mohammed left behind the Koran, but rather by forming a community to bear that gospel in its life, deeds, and words. The primary vehicle by which the gospel is communicated is a community that believes and lives the gospel. When the gospel is faithfully embodied, a missionary encounter occurs between the gospel that the church bears and the fundamental beliefs and reigning public doctrine

financial-industrial system which is now more powerful than even the most powerful nation-states..." (1996b:8). Therefore, Newbiggin primarily addressed the modern scientific worldview as the cardinal danger to the missionary church and only near the end of his life included comments on postmodernity. But, in fact, his critique of modernity also holds important insights for interpreting and responding with a missionary encounter to the postmodern condition in western culture.

that shapes the society in which the church lives. The church is a “different social order” that challenges the dominant social order embodied in the culture’s institutions, customs, and practices (1989e:231). The witness of the church calls the inhabitants of the dominant culture to conversion, to the different way of life offered by the church in the gospel. How will conversion ever take place? “No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it” (1989e:232).

Newbigin calls for a ‘missionary encounter’ between the gospel and modern western culture (1986e:1). In these words we find the cardinal concern that shapes Newbigin’s mission in western culture project. If a missionary encounter between the gospel and western culture is achieved through the life of the church, then ecclesiology lies at the centre of this project.

We have noted in earlier chapters that there are two dangers that can eliminate a missionary encounter with culture—irrelevance and syncretism. In Newbigin’s view, the problem the Christian church faces in the West is “an advanced case of syncretism. Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture” (1994k:67). Our forms of Christianity within the Protestant churches—liberal, fundamentalist, and pietist— have surrendered the comprehensive claims of the gospel to the public doctrine of the Enlightenment (1983d:22). This syncretistic absorption of the church into the reigning plausibility structure of the culture effectively silences the gospel and eviscerates a missionary encounter between the comprehensive demands of the gospel and the equally comprehensive claims of the cultural story. This accommodation is endemic in the West because the churches have lived in a symbiotic relationship with its culture for so long that they have become “domestic chaplains to the nations” (1994k:114).

The peaceful co-existence of Christianity with the post-Enlightenment culture which this secured has endured so long that it is hard for the Church now to recover the standpoint for a genuinely missionary approach to our “modern” culture.... The Church has lived so long as a permitted and even privileged minority, accepting relegation to the private sphere in a culture whose public life is controlled by a totally different vision of reality, that it has almost lost the power to address a radical challenge to that vision and therefore to “modern western civilization” as a whole. Looking at the world missionary situation as a whole, this failure is the most important and the most serious factor in the whole world situation, because this western culture has penetrated into every other culture in the world and threatens to destabilize them all (1983d:22-23).

Newbigin’s critique of the western church focuses on the problem of syncretism. His appraisal of Peter Berger’s attempt to find a place for the Christian faith within the framework of modern western culture is an enlightening paradigm of his numerous critiques of culturally captive Christianity in the West (1986e:10-16). Berger examines what would be involved in religious affirmation in modern western culture. The subtitle of his book *The Heretical Imperative* is *Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979). Berger believes that we live in a pluralistic culture in which there is no plausibility structure or accepted doctrine that shapes the public life of society. In this pluralistic situation there are three possibilities for Christian affirmation which he labels deductive, reductive, and inductive. Karl Barth exemplifies the deductive

affirmation that simply affirms the truth of the Bible without giving rational grounds for this starting point. The truth of the gospel is simply asserted over against other non-Christian accounts of reality. Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization typifies the reductive strategy. It unashamedly accepts the secularized world of science as ultimate and tailors the gospel to fit into it. Berger opts for the third alternative, the inductive, which is best illustrated by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher. The clue to the human situation is the religious experience that is the focal subject of all theologies and religions. All these various religious experiences are signals of transcendence. To distinguish between true and false signals of transcendence one must weigh the claim in the 'scale of reason.' While Berger claims that this is not a capitulation to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Newbigin argues that Berger's religious affirmation rests on the rationalist assumptions of our culture rather than on any particular religious commitment. Berger has demonstrated, not that there is no plausibility structure in western culture, but that the *traditional* plausibility structure of Christendom has been dissolved by the acids of modernity. Newbigin writes: "My point here is simply this: while Berger correctly shows how the traditional plausibility structures are dissolved by contact with this modern world-view, and while he correctly reminds us that the prevalence and power of this world-view gives no ground for believing it to be true, he does not seem to allow for the fact that it is itself a plausibility structure and functions as such" (1986e:13f.). Berger is unaware that to distinguish between the public role of reason and private religious experience is already to succumb to the reigning plausibility structure of modernity. Christian faith finds its place as one more manifestation of universal religious experience that is confined to the private realm; this does not challenge the plausibility structure but leaves it intact, finding a place for the gospel within it. Newbigin comments:

Berger is a true follower of Schleiermacher in commending religion to its cultured despisers, and in seeking to show that there is a proper place for religious affirmation within the plausibility structure of the modern scientific world-view. But all of this procedure leaves that world-view unchallenged. The autonomous human being is still in the center—with total freedom of choice.... [The gospel] has been silenced by co-option into the modern scientific world-view. The gospel is treated as an account of something that happened in one of the enclaves where religious experience took place (1986e:15).

Thus Newbigin holds up Berger as an example of how the truth claims of the gospel have been relativized by the more ultimate truth claim of public reason. Berger finds a place for Christian affirmation *within* the plausibility structure of modernity. Newbigin believes that this constitutes a form of cultural captivity that effectively eradicates any missionary encounter. The mission of the church is not to accommodate but to challenge the plausibility structure of modernity with an alternative plausibility structure. A missionary encounter is the confrontation between two ultimate and universal truth claims based on faith commitments, not the absorption of one into the other. The church encounters its culture as it remains faithful to the gospel as its ultimate commitment, embodies its story, and judges the story of its culture in the light of the gospel. Ian Barnes puts it well when he says of Newbigin: "His purpose is not to make a 'space' for Christianity *within* a wide pluralism, but to recover the alternative universalist *counter* claims of Christianity based on the particular grammar of the life, death and resurrection

of Jesus” (Barnes 1994:29). All three adjectives used by Barnes to describe the ‘claims’ of Christianity are important: ‘alternative’ because the gospel’s claims present another way of understanding the world; ‘universalist’ because the call of the gospel is valid for all people and claims the whole of human life; and ‘counter’ because the gospel challenges the story of modernity, calling for repentance and conversion (1983d:53).

Newbigin’s recognition of the cultural captivity of the gospel and his call for a missionary encounter is rooted in his missionary experience in India. As a missionary in India Newbigin recognized that the doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* were foundational to the Hindu understanding of the world and had not been challenged in all the great revolutions within India from Buddha to Ghandi. These foundational assumptions simply describe the way things are and always have been. It is natural that the person and work of Jesus would be interpreted in terms of this explanatory framework. He describes this accommodation:

As a young missionary, I used to spend an evening each week at the Ramakrishna Mission, studying with the monks the Hindu Upanishads and the Christian Gospels. The great hall of the monastery was lined with pictures of the great religious figures of history, among them Jesus. Each year on Christmas Day, worship was offered before the picture of Jesus. It was clear to me as a missionary that this was an example of syncretism; Jesus had simply been co-opted into the Hindu world-view (1989f:1).

He continues: “It was only slowly that I began to see that my own Christianity had this same character, that I too had, in measure, co-opted Jesus into the world-view of my culture” (1989f:2). Upon his return to Britain he believed that the West had become as much a mission field as India was during his ministry there. He expresses in one sentence the concern that would motivate his call for a missionary encounter with western culture for the next several decades: “It has become clear to me that instead of allowing the gospel to challenge the assumptions of our culture, we have co-opted Jesus into our culture, giving him a minor role in the private sector” (*ibid*). A missionary encounter embodies and proclaims the gospel in such a way that the fundamental assumptions of the culture are challenged. In the case of the western church, the gospel has been domesticated by the fundamental assumptions of western culture.

Newbigin identifies the fact-value dichotomy that issues from the enthronement of autonomous reason as the primary threat to a faithful embodiment of the gospel in the church in western culture. The modern scientific worldview is based on a faith commitment to the autonomy of reason. All truth claims are judged at the bar of autonomous reason. Those claims which are judged to be universally valid according to the criterion of scientific reason are considered facts; those claims which cannot are values. Facts are public truth; values are private opinions, preferences, or tastes. One can know the facts with scientific certainty; values are simply believed. Scientific truth claims are admitted to the prestigious realm of facts; religious truth claims cannot be verified empirically and thus are dismissed as values. In the realm of values we are pluralist; in the realm of facts we are not.

Newbigin believes that this dichotomy is at the heart of the modern scientific worldview that has given rise to pluralism. As *karma* and *samsara* are the unexamined yet foundational beliefs of Hindu culture, the fact-value dichotomy has assumed the same role in western culture. The gospel had been seriously compromised as Jesus had been relegated to a minor role in the private sector. It is this insight that leads Newbigin

to examine the foundational beliefs of our culture in a way that a missionary would carry out the same exercise in India (1986e:21).

Newbigin's identification of the fact-value dichotomy as foundational for western culture opens much insight into the problems the western church faces in its missionary witness. Unfortunately, Newbigin does not explore other idols of our culture. Both Walsh and Middleton and Bartholomew and Moritz identify economism or consumerism as the primary idol that weakens the church's witness (Walsh and Middleton 1984:131-139; Bartholomew and Moritz 2000:2). While Newbigin's later reflections recognize the power of this idol, he never offers a detailed critique or how a missionary church might propose an alternative. He restricts his critique to the debilitating power of the fact-value dichotomy. This uncovers many important aspects of the church's syncretism; at the same time the breadth of the critique remains limited.

The remainder of the chapter will examine Newbigin's analysis of and response to the threat of the modern scientific worldview. Particular attention is paid to the ecclesiological issues in this response. How does Newbigin's response enable and equip the church to be a missionary community in western culture?

9.3. THE THREAT OF THE MODERN SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW TO THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

Wilbert Shenk suggests that if the church in western culture is to recover its missionary character two things are required: an inner and an outer mission consciousness (Shenk 1995:86-99). On the one hand, the church must cultivate a missionary self-understanding by comprehending its existence in relation to the reign of God; the church's nature is defined by its participation in God's mission to restore his rule over all creation. On the other hand, the church must develop a missionary understanding of culture. These are not two separate issues: fostering a missionary identity and nurturing a missionary approach to culture are two sides of the same coin. If the western church is to recover a sense of being an alternative community that embodies and announces the gospel within the dominant culture, a necessary corollary is to recognize where that culture has pressed the church into its own mould. Nourishing a missionary self-understanding requires a missiological analysis of culture that exposes the foundational assumptions and basic faith commitments of the dominant culture that domesticate and compromise the gospel. Traditional ecclesiologies can safely ignore the cultural context because that setting has little bearing on its life. A missionary ecclesiology that recognizes the church's orientation to the world recognizes that cultural analysis is essential for its self-understanding. How can the church embody a challenging witness in a particular culture? This question can be answered only by discerning the cultural currents that compromise the church's life. Thus cultural analysis is significant for ecclesiology. This section investigates Newbigin's analysis of and response to the threat of the modern scientific worldview in two parts. First, we briefly survey Newbigin's historical, epistemological, and theological work in response to the modern scientific worldview. Then we examine the ecclesiological implications of this analysis. What would a missionary church in western culture look like? How can the church in western culture live as an alternative community that challenges the prevailing cultural

worldview?

9.3.1. *Liberating the Church for a Missionary Encounter*

Martin Luther has said somewhere that the gospel is like a caged lion; it does not need to be defended, just released. For Newbigin this would be an ecclesiological statement. The barred cage that forms the prison for the gospel in contemporary western culture is the syncretistic accommodation of the church's understanding and forms to the fact-value dichotomy. The liberation of the gospel can only occur as the church's understanding and embodiment of the gospel is released from the idolatry of the reigning public doctrine of western culture.

Newbigin's 'mission to western culture' project can be interpreted as an attempt to liberate the church from its syncretistic accommodation and to recover its missionary posture. For this liberation and recovery three tasks are important: historical, epistemological, and theological. As to the *historical* task Newbigin writes: "One way to gain a perspective on our culture is to look at it from the angle of history. European culture was not always so.... There was a time when the Gospel was regarded as part of public truth... How did it come about that Christianity ceased to be part of public truth and became a matter of private opinion?" (1990z:2). When surveying Newbigin's writings on the topic of gospel and western culture, one is struck by the frequency of analyses that examine the historical roots of the missionary crisis of the church in the West. An historical analysis enables the church to see how the plausibility structure which appears to be simply the way things are is, in fact, a social construct that has been developed throughout the centuries of western history. This kind of analysis equips the church for its missionary encounter by showing "that the axioms and assumptions of our modern culture are not simply an objective account of 'how things really are', but are themselves questionable and vulnerable" (1984b:16). There are various themes that provide the clue for selection of data in Newbigin's historical narratives. Yet one motif is found repeatedly: it was the emergence of the humanist-rationalist tradition in the Renaissance which came to maturity in the Enlightenment to occupy the place of the public doctrine in the West that has marginalized the gospel to the private realm. The second task necessary to release the western church from its cultural captivity is *epistemological*. The idolatrous role of reason has established a widely accepted and unexamined epistemology in the public square of western culture that dismisses the truth claims of the gospel. Newbigin's writings attempt to demonstrate that this epistemology does not conform to reality. In its place he offers an alternative epistemology that liberates the church to embody the Scriptural story. The third task is *theological*: if the church is to reclaim the public truth of the gospel it is necessary to translate this epistemology in terms of the mission of the church. This requires a recovery of the proper understanding of Biblical authority. The gospel is a true story about the end of universal history that must be embodied by a community. From this standpoint, a doctrine of Scripture is closely connected to a missionary ecclesiology. The church is a hermeneutic of the gospel as it makes known the end of history in its life, deeds, and words. As Barnes puts it: "The recovery of the gospel as 'meta-narrative' applies not only to intellectual understanding but also to ecclesial practice" (Barnes 1994:33).

This brief summary demonstrates that the range of Newbigin's writings on the topic of mission to western culture is broad: historical, philosophical, theological, and missiological. This summary also shows that missionary ecclesiology is an important entry into the whole project. The goal of all Newbigin's analysis is a missionary church that embodies a counter story centred in the events of the gospel. It is not accidental that the most important books Newbigin writes on this subject conclude on an ecclesiological note: 'What must we be? The Call to the Church' (1986e:124-150); 'The Congregation as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel' (1989e:222-233).

9.3.1.1. The Historical Task: Missiological Analysis of Western Culture

Newbigin's approach in analyzing the foundational assumptions of our culture is to uncover its historical roots. Newbigin writes in the opening pages of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: "The purpose of these chapters is to examine the roots of this culture which we share and to suggest how as Christians we can more confidently affirm our faith in this kind of intellectual climate" (1989e:7). Telling the western story explodes the myth that the axioms that shape our culture are simply the way things are; they are a socio-cultural construct that has been fashioned over time. The belief that the gospel is only a private opinion that cannot attain to the status of truth has a history; such an understanding has not always been the case.

To expose the vulnerability of these unexamined assumptions which appear so obvious to a person living in the West requires the telling of the story from a missiological standpoint. There is an African proverb that states: "Until the lions have their historians the hunter will always be the hero of the story." Newbigin is aware that any telling of the story involves a commitment to a 'hero' whereby the facts of history are selected and interpreted. Most western histories assume the 'hero' of autonomous reason. Newbigin's retelling of the story motivated by missionary concern demonstrates the way that autonomous reason has replaced the gospel as the light of the world.

Western culture is the product of two incompatible historical streams: classical rationalistic humanism and the Biblical story (1989e:1-3; 1995h:3). The difference between the Greek and Hebrew views of the world is the location of reliable truth. In the Bible, truth is located in a story of God's deeds in history centred in Jesus Christ, while classical thought locates reliable truth in timeless ideas that can be accessed by autonomous reason. The gospel was born into the classical milieu and the ensuing mission of the church made it necessary to relate the gospel to the classical worldview. Newbigin interprets the missionary encounter of the early church in terms of faithful contextualization: the gospel was not domesticated into classical culture but provided a new *arche*, a new starting point for understanding and living in the world (1995h:4-9).

Newbigin's telling of the western story highlights the place of Augustine's *credo ut intelligam*. Indeed it is essential to Newbigin's narrative: he believes that the mission of the church in modernity has been crippled by an epistemology that places doubt before dogma. Modernity reverses the order of faith and reason fashioned by Augustine. His slogan 'I believe in order to know' forged a synthesis that endured for a thousand years in which "the biblical story was to have the greater part in shaping the thought of Europe" (1995h:9). In Augustine's thought, the classical-rationalist tradition was understood within the context of a faith commitment to the gospel.

Toward the end of the medieval period the writings of Aristotle reappeared in Europe when he was translated into Latin from the Arabic by Avicenna and Averroes (1995h:17). Thomas Aquinas accommodated the empirical rationalism of Aristotle within the otherworldly Christianity characteristic of the medieval church by distinguishing between things that can be known by reason and things that can be known by faith in divine revelation. This two-storey ontology and epistemology pried apart reason and faith and opened the way for classical rationalism and humanism to resurface as the dominant tradition at the time of the Renaissance (1989e:2; 1995h:19). The incompatibility of the two traditions of understanding and living in the world (classical and Christian) that had comfortably co-existed together in the Augustinian fusion during the medieval period became evident as the classical tradition challenged the faith foundation laid by Augustine. On Newbigin's view, the late medieval period and Renaissance form the hinge into the modern age. While the Biblical tradition provided the framework within which the classical tradition found a place during the medieval period, the roles of these two traditions are reversed in the modern period.

Newbigin highlights the work of four men in engineering this shift: Rene Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Descartes is the primary villain in Newbigin's telling of the western story. Descartes divorced the objective and subjective poles in human knowledge and turned Augustine on his head by advocating the priority of doubt over faith in the knowing process. "Doubt, not faith, was to be the path to knowledge. By relentless skepticism, the famous 'critical principle,' every claim to truth was to be put through the critical sieve in which only the indubitable would be retained" (1995h:21). John Locke reinforced this commitment to autonomous reason as the fundamental arbiter of truth by distinguishing between knowing and believing (1994k:103). Newbigin follows Michael Polanyi's contrast of Locke and Augustine (Polanyi 1958:266). Augustine brings the critical age of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating a post-critical philosophy; classical reason is understood in the context of the fiduciary structure of the Christian faith. Locke introduces into the English-speaking world a new critical age by inverting the relationship between belief and knowledge. The distinction between knowing and believing, with the former occupying pride of place, is the result of an exchange of traditions: the classical humanist tradition replaces the Christian tradition as the dominant way of understanding and living in the world. Francis Bacon contributed to this shift with his advice to "abjure speculation and collect facts" (MacIntyre 1981:7; Newbigin 1995h:55). Speculation refers to the universals of medieval philosophy: essence, existence, substance, cause, and purpose. However, since the ideal of a total empiricism is impossible, Bacon maintained the universal of 'cause.' Bacon's legacy is to reduce explanation to the cause-effect relationship and reject the concept of purpose as a clue to understanding (1986e:24, 34; 1989e:36-37). Isaac Newton strengthened the grip of autonomous reason and the classical tradition by his development of a method that seemed to explain the cosmos. "His model seemed to provide a clue to the understanding of everything from the movement of the stars to the fall of an apple. Descartes's vision of a world ultimately understood in terms of indubitable certainties of mathematics seemed to be vindicated" (1995h:29). The scientific method offered a way to certain knowledge that does not depend on divine revelation or faith.

While Descartes, Locke, Bacon, and Newton gave philosophical articulation to the developments in western culture during this time, the combination of two historical events enabled confidence in autonomous reason to become widespread at the time of the Enlightenment. The first was the remarkable success of science (1995h:29). The scientific method seemed to provide a reliable centre to unite people in the truth as it moved from success to success. It offered a method that could ‘explain’ reality without recourse to divine revelation or faith; science could liberate the West from the tyrannies of contentious religion and superstition. The second was the concurrent religious wars (1995h:30). While science appeared to unite people in the truth, the religious wars were stark evidence that religion leads to factions, violence, and bloodshed.³

For decades Christians soaked the soil of Europe with blood, warring over rival interpretations of the Christian message. It is surely not surprising that this dazzling new vision of reality should have exerted such a powerful attraction. A new light was dawning, and a bloodstained past could be seen for what it was—the Dark Ages, or, as the light slowly began to penetrate, the Middle Ages, the period between the ancient glory of classical culture and the newly dawning age of reason (1995h:30).

³For a defence of the thesis that secularism in the West is rooted in confessional wars of the 16th and 17th centuries see Wolfhart Pannenberg (1989:11-19). He writes: “Rather it was the unintended consequences of the Reformation in church history, politics, and world history which created the starting point for the origin of modern secular culture.... In this period of confessional wars, in which an attempt was made more or less vainly, and only in some cases successfully, to impose unity of faith in terms of one or other of the confessions, people realized that religious passion destroys social peace. Hitherto the dominant conviction had been that the unity of religion is indispensable as the foundation for the unity of society” (1989:11-12). Like Newbiggin, Pannenberg also notes that the result of these confessional wars was that “religion was no longer seen as a constitutive element of human nature... but as a matter of private preference...” (:16).

This led to the collective conversion of Western Europe at the time of the Enlightenment (1984b:11f.; 1986e:23). This age is called the ‘age of reason’ because a mathematical and analytical rationality is enthroned as the centre of European culture.⁴ Reason becomes the ultimate arbitrator in judging what truth claims may shape the public life of society. Truth cannot bow before any other authority than facts—interpreted in terms of cause and effect relationships captured in a method that employs the senses and mathematical rationality (1986e:25). It is precisely this enthronement of sovereign reason that has produced the public fact-private value dichotomy that shapes the plausibility structure of western culture.

Newbiggin’s narration of western history is a story of two different traditions of understanding and living in the world. Both traditions are committed in faith to some light to make sense of the world. The Christian tradition offers the gospel of Jesus Christ as the light of the world while the classical tradition offers autonomous reason disciplined by the scientific method as the light of the world. Augustine is the father of a synthesis that places the classical tradition in the context of the biblical story. Descartes is the father of a synthesis that places the gospel in the context of the classical tradition.

Newbiggin’s indictment of the church is that it has followed Descartes and thus been unfaithful to the gospel. When autonomous reason, the light of the classical tradition, is the ultimate arbiter of truth, the gospel cannot be propagated as truth but is reduced to the category of values, private opinion, and subjective taste (1989e:40). Timidity incapacitates the church’s witness; there is no missionary encounter. The question is: “How, in this situation, does one preach the gospel as truth, truth which is not to be domesticated within the assumptions of modern thought but which challenges these assumptions and calls for their revision” (1989e:5). The need of the hour, if that missionary encounter is to be recovered, is to again acknowledge the gospel as public

⁴Newbiggin is often portrayed as an opponent of the Enlightenment (cf. Ottati 1993:49-50). This ignores his numerous positive comments, such as: “we have to acknowledge the immense achievements of the Enlightenment” and “recognize that the agenda of the Enlightenment is not completed” (1984b:12). It also misunderstands why Newbiggin is critiquing the Enlightenment: a missiological concern—how has the enthronement of autonomous reason cut the nerve of the church’s confidence in the gospel? His is not a cultural, social, or intellectual history in which the enormous achievements of the Enlightenment must be duly recorded.

truth. This begins with the household of God; they must see where the gospel has been compromised in their own fellowship by these dichotomies. This claim must then be pressed beyond the boundaries of the Christian fellowship by a community that believes, embodies, and proclaims the gospel as public truth.

Newbigin's narration of the western story raises many issues that cannot be addressed in this section. Yet one basic problem can be noted since it concerns the basic structure of Newbigin's narrative. It appears that Newbigin has been too generous with the early church fathers and especially with Augustine. It may be questioned whether Augustine's synthesis was in harmony with the principle *credo ut intelligam* and whether the early church and Augustine faithfully followed the model of subversive fulfillment provided by John in relating the gospel to the classical worldview. It is more accurate to note that the early church fathers and Augustine were heavily dependent upon Platonic categories. Both J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh as well as Jonathan Chaplin rightly argue that the problem of dualism in western culture goes back to early church's and Augustine's "uncritical acceptance... of concepts drawn from pagan Greek thought" (Chaplin 1986:101; cf. Walsh and Middleton 1984:110-112). Chaplin is more generous with Augustine than Walsh and Middleton. He sees a fundamental tension in Augustine's thought between a robustly Christian faith which masters the classical tradition and a syncretism in which neo-Platonism compromises the gospel (Chaplin 1986:104-105). Newbigin has simply highlighted the positive stream within Augustine. While Newbigin sees the turning point at Aquinas' appropriation of Aristotle, he does not sufficiently recognize that the Augustinian synthesis with neo-Platonic rationalism paved the way for Aquinas. Newbigin too easily interprets the medieval period shaped by Augustine's synthesis as Christian; the pagan humanistic rationalist stream in the Middle Ages is not sufficiently recognized.

9.3.1.2. The Epistemological Task: An Alternative Theory of Knowledge

For Newbigin "the fundamental issue is epistemological: it is the question about how we can come to know the truth, how we can know what is real" (1994k:104). Indeed, issues of epistemology occupy a large place in Newbigin's later writings. It would be easy, however, to misunderstand this concern and to classify Newbigin simply as another western apologist or philosopher with a proclivity toward epistemological questions. Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that western philosophy, as it faced the storms of mutually conflicting worldviews in the 19th and 20th centuries, "got stranded in the shallows of epistemology" (Gadamer 1981:6). Obsession with epistemology filled a void created by skepticism about truth. Newbigin's concerns for epistemology could be misunderstood to stand in this tradition of retreat from ontology to tentative and myopic concerns with epistemological theory. If we approach Newbigin's whole project, however, from the standpoint of a missionary, we gain the proper vantage point from which to understand his concern with epistemology. His forays into knowledge theory are rooted in his recognition that the religious foundations of our culture are epistemological because autonomous reason has become a central idol in the West as the classical tradition has become ascendant. He comments: "The culture of which we are a part has prized above all the autonomy of reason" (1983d:51). Newbigin's concern is not to dabble in epistemology but to encounter and challenge the foundational beliefs

of western culture that hold the gospel captive. Newbigin's task is to liberate the church and the gospel from its captivity to western culture is "through a resolute attack on the fundamental problem which is epistemology, the way we formulate an answer to the question: 'How do you know?'" (1989e:25). This involves both a challenge to the existing epistemology and an offer of a more truthful model of the way we know the truth.

Newbigin draws on two sources to accomplish this task: the insights of post-empiricist philosophy and history of science, and sociology of knowledge. This is significant for this study because both of these disciplines strongly stress the importance of a *hermeneutical community* in the process of knowing.⁵ Newbigin's appropriation of the insights of these academic fields enables him to highlight the importance of the ecclesial community in knowing and communicating the truth. We might call this Newbigin's 'missiological appropriation' of philosophy and history of science and sociology of knowledge, or his 'missionary epistemology.' In an earlier section we have probed the significance of sociology of knowledge for a missionary encounter with culture by opening up Newbigin's use of the concept of a 'plausibility structure.' In this section we attend to his employment of categories from post-empiricist history and philosophy of science.

There are two philosophers important for our purposes that Newbigin utilizes to challenge existing epistemological assumptions and advance an alternate way of understanding knowledge. First, Newbigin utilizes Michael Polanyi's thought to demonstrate the importance of a hermeneutical community in understanding and living in the world. Newbigin draws ecclesiological conclusions from this alternate epistemology. Second, Newbigin leans on Alasdair MacIntyre's account of a paradigm shift (dependent on Thomas Kuhn 1970) to articulate the process of a missionary encounter between the church and its culture.

⁵In his helpful book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Richard Bernstein describes various stages in the development of the philosophy of science (1988:71-79). In summarizing the most recent developments he argues that to understand the rationality of scientific inquiry we must focus on theories, paradigms, and research programs in their *historical development*. With this shift it becomes clear that rationality always operates in the context of a *tradition*. When the importance of tradition for scientific rationality is recognized it is evident that "we must also consider the nature, function, and dynamics of *communities of inquirers*...scientific rationality... essentially involves the notion of a community" (1988:77).

Newbiggin's primary ally in challenging the popular way of understanding knowledge and developing an alternate epistemology is Polanyi. Polanyi challenges the subject-object dichotomy in science by speaking of personal knowledge (Polanyi 1961). In this phrase, Polanyi affirms the personal commitment of the whole person in the process of knowing. According to Polanyi scientific knowing involves apprenticeship into a tradition of knowledge. In contrast to the modern assumption that all traditions and authority must be subjected to the test of methodological doubt and critical reason, Polanyi affirms that the "authority of science is essentially traditional" (Polanyi 1961:466; quoted in Newbiggin 1989e:43). If one wants to participate in the scientific community, it is essential to internalize a tradition. The student must submit to the authority of the tradition by trusting the teacher, accepting what is being taught, and learning the skills that are necessary to employ the scientific method. Authority and tradition are not to be set over against the autonomy and freedom of human reason. Rather, one relies on the authority of a tradition precisely so that one can see for themselves (1989e:43-47). Scientists work by internalizing and indwelling this tradition. The assumptions, the past findings, the assumed method all become part of the equipment that the scientist relies upon to carry out his or her work. This tradition functions like spectacles or a probe in the hands of a surgeon. One does not attend focally to the probe or the spectacles. Rather one looks through the spectacles and attends focally to the object he or she is looking at. The surgeon feels through the probe and focusses his or her attention on that which is being examined. The whole scientific tradition functions like a probe or spectacles that are assumed in the process of scientific work. Polanyi calls this a fiduciary framework: it is a framework of assumptions, practices, and skills that the scientific community trusts when it carries out its work. It functions as a probe in which the scientist dwells and trusts to make advances in knowledge (1995h:40f.). The tradition becomes the assumed 'equipment' trusted by the scientist to enable him or her to carry on scientific work. This fiduciary framework contains a vast amount of 'tacit knowledge' that is transmitted by the scientific tradition which the scientist does not explicitly formulate but trusts uncritically to know the world. The scientific tradition is embodied and maintained by the scientific community (1989e:46). Polanyi calls this the 'republic of science.' It can be said of skilled practitioners of the tradition that "the tradition dwells fully in them and that they dwell fully in the tradition" (1989e:47). The tradition is maintained by the scientific community through the articles accepted for publication in scientific journals, the appointment of masters of the tradition to teaching and research posts, and the transmission of this tradition to the next generation of students.

Newbiggin highlights three elements of this description of science that are important for equipping the church for its missionary encounter. First, autonomous reason is an illusion; reason always works in the context of the authority of some tradition (1989e:58). The assumption of reason as a neutral umpire of truth is the result of an uncritical acceptance of the classical tradition. Even the most rationally rigorous of disciplines—the natural sciences—work within the context of a tradition.

Second, this rationality tradition is always socially embodied; the community of scientists work together in carrying forward this tradition and bringing its foundational insights to bear on various situations. The Enlightenment propagated the illusion that all authority and tradition must be brought under the searching light of rational criticism

to be validated. In fact, what took place was the triumph of one rationality tradition over another. It is not a matter of setting faith and revelation over against critical reason. Rather it is a matter of which tradition is shaping the rational process. According to Newbigin, rationality functioned in the context of Biblical revelation in the tradition rooted in Augustine's work. This is replaced at the Enlightenment by a tradition in which reason works in the context of a commitment to the autonomy of rationality and the almighty competence of the scientific method to provide the instrument for reason (1989e:58-59).

The third element that Newbigin accents in Polanyi's description of science is that the scientific tradition arises when there is an imaginative disclosure or leap that marks the birth of a new vision for scientific discovery. The imagination and the intuition play a role in the formation of new theoretical patterns.

There is an intuition that a kind of rational coherence lies hidden behind the apparently incoherent data. There is often a long period of brooding reflection. At some point there is an imaginative leap with a new vision of coherence, something which compels assent by its beauty, its simplicity, and its comprehensiveness (1989e:59).

This new insight or imaginative disclosure provides the light for working within the tradition. The scientific community labours to bring that insight to bear on the various data and problems with which it deals. Newbigin points to the imaginative disclosures of Kepler, Newton and Einstein which provided the light for the continuing scientific traditions (1989e:31, 59; cf. Polanyi 1958:7). Newton and Einstein shaped the work of generations of scientists with a "sudden illumination," an imaginative insight into the pattern of reality. This discovery of new patterns, often by an imaginative leap or intuitive insight, becomes "the starting point of a tradition of reasoning in which the significance of these disclosures is explored, developed, tested against new experiences, and extended into further areas of thought" (1989e:60). Thus this imaginative disclosure functions as light for the tradition in two ways. The tradition both arises by this disclosure and continues as the light of this insight is brought to bear on new contexts and new situations.

While Polanyi is concerned with a true account of how science works, Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi is fundamentally ecclesiological and missiological. The insights of this alternative epistemology are brought to bear on the mission of the church as Newbigin draws an analogy between the scientific tradition and the Christian tradition (1989e:52-65). The structures of both are similar. In both cases reason operates in the context of a continuing tradition; the tradition is socially embodied by a community—the church in the case of the Christian tradition and the scientific community in the case of scientific tradition; the tradition arises out of a disclosure which functions as the ultimate light in which the community works, and the tradition continues as that community brings the light of the original disclosure to bear on new contexts and situations. For the scientific community the light is scientific insight; for the church it is the light of the gospel.

Lamin Sanneh, who is uncomfortable with this analogy, writes: "I am a little uneasy about the parallel lines drawn for science and religion, for, however helpful, rather different vehicles proceed by them, the one being a triumph of instrumental contrivance and the other the ark of the religious covenant" (Sanneh 1993:166). He believes

Newbigin's Enlightenment roots are clear when he makes a path for Christianity by "turning it into a look-alike or surrogate rationality" (Sanneh 1993:167). Yet Sanneh has not taken account sufficiently of the differences Newbigin articulates concerning the starting points of the two traditions. While both traditions arise out of original disclosures, they fundamentally differ on the nature of the original disclosure in two ways. First, while the scientific tradition begins with the original experience "I discovered," the Christian tradition begins with the original experience "God has spoken" (1989e:60). Newbigin explicates this difference in terms of Martin Buber's distinction between I-You and I-It knowledge (1989e:60-61). I-It knowledge is the world of autonomous reason where the knowing subject is in control. He or she decides on the questions and tests, carries out the analysis and dissection, formulates the hypotheses and forces the object to yield answers to the question put to it. It is characterized by "I discovered." I-You knowledge differs fundamentally. Knowledge of another person is only available if I am willing to trust the other person as a free subject, open myself up to his or her communication, listen and answer questions put to me. Sovereign autonomy must be abandoned in the place of a trustful listening. This kind of knowledge will say "It has been revealed to me." Whereas Sanneh fears an incipient rationalism in Newbigin, this fundamental distinction challenges rather than upholds autonomous rationality. This is subversive fulfillment rather than syncretism.

The second difference between the two traditions is that the original disclosure in the Christian tradition concerns ultimate questions. This gives rise to a much broader tradition. Newbigin comments on the Christian tradition:

Unlike the scientific tradition ... this tradition is not confined to a limited set of questions about the rational structure of the cosmos. Specifically, unlike science, it concerns itself with questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of things and of human life—questions which modern science eliminates as a matter of methodology. The models, concepts, and paradigms through which the Christian tradition seeks to understand the world embrace these larger questions. They have the same presupposition about the rationality of the cosmos as the natural sciences do, but it is a *more comprehensive rationality* based on the faith that the author and sustainer of the cosmos has personally revealed his purpose (1989e:49; emphasis mine).

The scientific tradition is simply a tradition of understanding that seeks a limited knowledge of the lawfulness of creation on the basis of scientific discovery. The Christian faith is a wider rationality tradition that witnesses to the action of God in history which has revealed and effected the purpose of the Creator for all the world. The original disclosure of the Christian tradition is a story of universal history that tells us what God has done, is doing, and will do for the whole creation (1989e:50-51). Ultimately the Christian tradition can incorporate the origin, nature, and place of science into its story while the opposite cannot be done.

There are two important ways that these insights from philosophy and history of science are important for Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. First, the close connection between rationality, tradition, and community exposes the important place of the church in embodying the gospel. The analogy and parallel between the scientific community and the church reveal the significance of a hermeneutical community in maintaining and communicating a tradition of understanding. The gospel is transmitted by a community that faithfully lives in its light.

Second, a grasp of this epistemology liberates the church to again believe and embody the gospel with confidence. Speaking about the church's mission Newbigin affirms that a missionary encounter in the public square "would require a church that actually believes its creed" (1994j:9). "Uncertainty cuts at the root of any real missionary witness" (1984b:9); only a church that is confident that the 'Christ event' constitutes historical events that reveal and accomplish the end will boldly embody and announce that gospel over against the prevailing public doctrine. Christopher Duraisingh rightly notes that Newbigin's *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is a call to believe the gospel. Duraisingh writes of Newbigin:

He regrets the consequent attitude of timidity or of anxiety on the part of Christians, especially in the West. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* is a call to renewed confidence in the gospel. It is an attempt to see 'how we can more confidently affirm our faith in the kind of intellectual climate' in which we find ourselves (1989e:vii).

Newbigin has challenged the timidity of the western church by showing that the claims of autonomous reason are not simply the way things are; they are an alternative plausibility structure or tradition in action. The church is free to decline that way of looking at the world and can joyfully and confidently offer an alternative—the gospel as truth.⁶

Newbigin appropriates Polanyi in an insightful way and offers a 'missionary epistemology.' Polanyi's philosophy offers Newbigin the opportunity to stress the community in embodying a fiduciary tradition. However, it is unfortunate that Newbigin restricts himself to Polanyi. Developments in philosophy of science have brought out even more clearly the importance of the hermeneutical community in a continuing tradition.

Newbigin draws out the missionary implications of Polanyi's epistemology with the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre's description of a paradigm shift or conversion from one tradition to another. MacIntyre's comments are made in the context of a defence of tradition-based knowledge over against the charge of relativism (MacIntyre 1988:349-388; cf. 1989e:55-57). If all rationality functions in the context of a socially and linguistically embodied tradition, then what criteria are there to judge between the adequacy of rival traditions? In the Cartesian-Enlightenment tradition a supracultural and neutral rationality was considered to be the unbiased umpire to adjudicate competing truth claims. If this is an illusion, and scientific rationality is shown to be simply one tradition of reasoning, what criteria remain? McIntyre argues that traditions can be judged according to their adequacy for grasping and coping with the reality of creation that all human beings face (1989e:56). All traditions are constantly changing in an effort to make sense of the experience that confronts them. As new situations and problems arise, the community makes sense of these new experiences rationally within the light of the tradition. Sometimes anomalies challenge the tradition. Often the tradition is flexible and strong enough to bend and change to meet these new exigencies. At other times these experiences challenge the tradition in a more profound way and the tradition faces a crisis. There are basic contradictions and inconsistencies between the

⁶I have used *Gospel in a Pluralist Society* in mission classes for ten years in the university setting and have seen this liberation take place every year with numerous students.

tradition and experience that threaten the coherence of that tradition. At this point of crisis, adherents of that tradition will search for a rival tradition that can make more sense of these conflicting experiences. If another tradition offers another way of seeing things, another vision that accounts for the anomalies, there is a paradigm shift, a conversion to a new tradition. Traditions are not static entities; they bend and change and may even be abandoned if they cannot deal with the reality they face. Over against the charge of relativism, a tradition can be “subject to the test of adequacy to the realities which it seeks to grasp. Truth is grasped, can only be grasped, within a tradition, but traditions can be and are judged adequate or inadequate in respect of their perceived capacity to lead their adherents into the truth” (1989e:55).

This account of paradigm shifts and conversion has significant implications for Newbigin’s understanding of the missionary church. MacIntyre has opened up the dynamics of how scientific communities function in conversion from one tradition to another (1984b:15; cf. Kuhn 1962:52-135; Polanyi 1958:150-153, 318-319). When there are two rival scientific traditions, as in the case when the Einsteinian paradigm challenged the Newtonian paradigm, the adequacy of a tradition is demonstrated, not by recourse to a neutral adjudicator that stands above both, but by that tradition which is able to make the most sense of the world. The importance of a community for the embodiment of this ongoing tradition is helpful for seeing the way in which the church can challenge the reigning public worldview.

This is an especially relevant insight for the western church in today’s world. Modernity is breaking down and the church can offer an alternative way of understanding and living in the world based on the gospel rather than the scientific method. Modernity is characterized by scientism—a faith in science to bring salvation. Newbigin comments:

... it is clear that for many in the so-called Christian West science has become more than merely an organized body of knowledge or basis for technical progress. It has become itself a kind of religion. Multitudes of people look to the sciences as the ultimate source of truth. They see in science a body of finally reliable thought as contrasted with the myths and superstitions of religion. And if they have any hope of salvation from the ills that flesh is heir to, it is rather based on the achievements of science than on the promises of religion (1961c:15).

Science is translated into a rational world in two ways. The scientific approach masters the non-human creation with technology (1991h:25) and rationally organizes human society with the help of social sciences. Science is “the central citadel of our culture” and is “embodied in our political, economic, and social practice” (1986e:79). The dream of the Enlightenment was that a rationally organized society and technologically dominated nature would produce happiness. “Happiness (*bonheur*) was hailed by the eighteenth century philosophers as ‘a new word in Europe’.... Enlightenment people looked forward to ‘happiness’ here on earth. This would come within the reach of all through the cumulative work of science, liberating societies from bondage to dogma and superstition, unlocking the secrets of nature and opening them for all” (1983d:13f.).

Yet today the promises of science and technology are failing:

The centuries since Newton have seen the project of Enlightenment carried to the furthest parts of the earth, offering a vision for the whole human race of emancipation,

justice, material development and human rights. It was, and is, a noble project. Yet it has failed disastrously to deliver what was promised (1996d:73).

Today the broader cultural tradition that has shaped western culture is breaking down; economic, ecological, psychological, social, and military issues emerge as anomalies that contradict and challenge the claim that autonomous methodological reason offers the light that will lead to happiness and freedom. These failures bring a challenge and crisis to the Enlightenment tradition that grips the public life of western culture. It is precisely in this crisis that the church is called in its mission to offer the gospel as a fresh starting point that can give a more adequate account of the world. In a culture that is experiencing disintegration “it is the responsibility of the Church to offer this new model for understanding as the basis for a radical renewal of our culture;... without such radical renewal our culture has no future” (1983d:27). The church is a community that offers a rival tradition in its life—a tradition shaped by a different faith commitment. If the worldview of the West is failing, there will be the search for a rival tradition that is adequate to handle the contradictions of western idolatry. If the church is faithful in living an alternative plausibility structure, it offers an attractive alternative or rival tradition to which people may be converted. This offer of an alternative or rival tradition is not made by way of a rational framework or synthesis but is offered *in the life of a community*; the church is the hermeneutic of the gospel.

Newbiggin compares our era to the time when the Roman empire was disintegrating (1991h:15-25). In both cases there was a culture of extraordinary brilliance that was in crisis. In both the classical and modern scientific culture the remarkable achievements of the culture were threatened with destruction by the dualisms that arose from idolatry. Augustine offered the gospel as a new starting point⁷, a new *arche* for the development of culture. His synthesis not only provided a basis for social and cultural life for the next millennium but also preserved the splendid achievements of the classical period. Yet the basis for a new social order was not simply the rational synthesis of Augustine: “the Catholic Church was that new society, based on a new foundation, which could hold in trust the real treasures of classical culture even while it denied the foundation on which that culture had been built” (1991h:38). The offer of a new starting point at the time of Augustine was made in the communal life of the church based on a different faith commitment. Likewise today, if the achievements of the Enlightenment are not to be destroyed by the dichotomies that threaten the foundation of western culture, the church in its communal life—both publicly and privately—is to offer a fresh starting point for cultural life in the gospel. Newbiggin comments:

To those who fear that a fresh and unambiguous affirmation that the gospel of Jesus Christ must be the starting point and the criterion of all human thought and action will threaten the achievements of the Enlightenment and of those who have shaped our society on its principles, we can say with confidence that, on the contrary, we are offering the only basis on which the true fruits of the last 300 years can be saved from the new barbarians. But to say that is to set a daunting agenda for the universal Church today—no less than *to show in both public and private life what it means to confess Jesus as Lord* (1991h:38-39; emphasis mine).

⁷In the ten pages in which Newbiggin discusses this parallel he describes the gospel as a “new” or “fresh starting point” eight times. He comments: “The question of the starting point is the fundamental one” (1991h:25).

9.3.1.3. The Theological Task: The Gospel as Public Truth

Before we can speak more specifically of the ecclesiological implications of this alternative epistemology there is one more task that occupied Newbigin's attention to which we must turn. We have noted that the Christian tradition embodied in the life of the church lives in the light of the gospel's revelation of God's purposes for the creation. Yet one of the factors crippling the missionary church today is a lack of confidence and a misunderstanding of the Biblical authority. "I think that there is one theological task which we must undertake if we are to recover this kind of confidence in the Gospel for which I am calling. I refer to the urgent need for the development of a coherent and intellectually tenable doctrine of Scriptural authority" (1995f:7). If the church is to embody and announce the gospel as good news for all of life over against the bad news that scientific rationality is failing, it is essential to understand the nature of the gospel's authority. Indeed, "one of the central issues involved in a missionary encounter with our culture is the question: How do we appeal to scripture as the source of authority for our mission?" (1984b:13). The problem that confronts the church in the West is that the Bible has been part of the culture for so long that it has accommodated itself to the fundamental assumptions of the culture and appears unable to challenge them. The response of the Protestant church to the Enlightenment was to interpret the Bible in terms of the ultimate faith commitments of the Enlightenment rather than the other way round. A missionary encounter—which is essential to the church's life—was surrendered. Newbigin asks: "have we got into a situation where the biblical message has been so thoroughly adapted to fit into our modern western culture that we are unable to hear the radical challenge, the call for radical conversion which it presents in our culture? (1984b:11). Newbigin's view of Biblical authority has been addressed several times in previous chapters. This section will simply treat Newbigin's discussion of the ways that Biblical authority has been reshaped to fit into western culture, thus derailing a missionary encounter with modernity. The centrality of the missionary church will again be evident.

There are four dichotomies that deform Scriptural authority and threaten a missionary church: fact-value, cause-purpose, public-private, subject-object dichotomies. First, the fact-value dichotomy threatens the narrative structure of Scripture. The church is called to live in a different story than the one that shapes the dominant culture. The Bible reveals the story of universal history revealing the goal for all creation. If the narrative structure of Scripture is surrendered under the power of the fact-value dichotomy, the shape of the missionary church will be distorted.

With science as the arbiter of public truth, only statements that pass through the screen of autonomous scientific reason are established as 'facts.' The church responded to this dichotomy in two ways (1997a:100). On the 'liberal' side of the Christian fellowship the Bible was split by the fact-value dichotomy. On the one hand, the Bible was reduced to religious experience: "We are not dealing directly with acts and words of God, but with human religious experience which has interpreted events in a religious way on the basis of their cultural traditions and assumptions" (1991h:43). The Bible is reduced to the private world of values. On the other hand, modern scholarship sought to determine the 'historical facts' in the Bible: "Modern scholarship, following the

models of modern science, has worked by analysing and dissecting the material into smaller and smaller units and then re-classifying and re-combining them—obviously on the basis of a modern understanding of ‘how things really are’” (1984b:14). This reconfigured the narrative structure of the Bible. On the ‘conservative’ side of the Christian church the Bible is simply reasserted as propositional truth in the fashion of Enlightenment truth. In other words, the Enlightenment notion of fact is functioning in this notion of Scripture; Scripture asserts the ‘facts’ of Scripture over against the ‘facts’ of science. In this tradition too the story design of Scripture is changed. In the case of conservative scholars, it is not historical scholarship but systematic theologies that reshape the narrative of the Bible and reduce it to a set of timeless dogmas (1989e:12f.). As a result the text is able to say only what Biblical and theological scholars allow it to say and it says it in a way very different from what it was originally meant to say it.

In both cases the Enlightenment understanding of facts is operative. Both traditions are haunted by the Cartesian legacy that “there is available a kind of truth which is ‘certain’ in the sense that it cannot be disbelieved, ‘objective’ truth, ‘scientific’ truth”, truth that is achieved by the employment of a hermeneutical method (1985k:2). For the liberal tradition, the Bible as a true story cannot live up to the scientific notion of fact, and so the Biblical expositor employs the higher-critical method to determine what the facts are. The historical facts of Israel’s religion become simply *their* subjective religious experience. For the conservative tradition, the Bible is simply cast into the mirror image of its Enlightenment enemy. Newbigin draws on John Millbank (1990) to show that the roots of modern science as a special kind of knowing involved a “shift from a way of seeing truth as located in a narrative, to a way of seeing truth as located in timeless, law-like statements” (1992d:6). Instead of challenging this shift in the location of truth, the church has simply adopted it and reshaped the Bible into historical-critical statements of truth, theological statements of truth, or moral statements of truth. ‘Liberals’ have set forth historical truth as verified by the historical critical method, abandoning all religious truth claims. ‘Conservatives’ have set forth the ‘truth’ of the Bible as timeless theological propositions. Over against this Newbigin argues:

The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.... Here, I think, is the point at which we may well feel that the eighteenth-century defenders of the faith were most wide of the mark. The Christian religion which they sought to defend was a system of timeless metaphysical truths about God, nature, and man. The Bible was a source of information about such of these eternal truths as could not be discovered by direct observation of nature or by reflection or innate human ideas (1989e:12-13).

This formulation offers an alternative to the liberal and conservative traditions of the church. On the one hand, this story is a story about universal history and so holds universal validity; it is true. This stands against the liberal contention. On the other hand, it is a story (1989e:12, 38, 51) and not a system of timeless theological doctrines. This stands against the conservative contention.

In a missionary encounter with western culture it is essential, says Newbigin, to stress two things about the Biblical narrative. First, historical truth is essential to the Biblical narrative of universal history. Newbigin finds George Lindbeck’s categories helpful (1986e:59; 1996d:34-35). In *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Lindbeck contrasts three understandings of doctrine: propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-

linguistic. Adherents of the propositional model believe that the Bible asserts timeless propositional truths. Advocates of the experiential-expressive model believe the Bible employs Biblical imagery to represent general religious experience. These categories are roughly similar to the contrasts Newbigin makes between liberals and conservatives. The third category is cultural-linguistic. This understanding emphasizes the importance of the Bible as a narrative in which the church dwells and makes sense of the world *through* that story. Newbigin adds a qualifier so that his appropriation of narrative theology is not misunderstood. When we speak of Jesus as the clue to the meaning of the whole human story, it is not merely a cognitive clue for understanding. It is an historical act of atonement through which the world is being redeemed. It is more than a matter of illumination and intellectual understanding; “it is a matter of reconciliation” (1996d:39). This carries tremendous significance for Newbigin’s understanding of the importance of the church (1996d:25-32). If revelation is simply a “cognitive clue” then revelation is best communicated by way of a book; this is the unexamined contention of many within a more conservative tradition. However, if revelation is an act of God which atones and reconciles, this can be communicated only by a community that has experienced the power of the atonement and exhibits reconciliation in its fellowship. For this reason Newbigin continues to insist that the historicity of the Biblical narrative is essential to its authority. If narrative theology neglects this historicity, it fails to live up to the true nature of Scripture.

When the word *narrative* is used in theological discourse, it is sometimes with the implication that the historical truth of the narrative is not important. The narrative that structures our understanding of things might be nothing more than a story told by us to explain our experience, something with no ontological status beyond our imagination. It is of the essence of the Christian faith that this story is the true story (1996d:40).

The second thing that Newbigin stresses about the Biblical narrative is that the interpretation of Scripture must take account of the Bible as a redemptive-historical whole. Since it is a story about universal history the Bible must be understood in terms of its canonical whole. This is important for a missionary encounter with western culture. Western culture offers one story with a universal claim. The Bible offers another story with an equally universal claim. If the Bible is reduced to timeless statements of one sort or another (historical-critical or systematic-theological) they are easily absorbed into the reigning story of the culture. Newbigin writes: “I do not believe that we can speak effectively of the Gospel as a word addressed to our culture unless we recover a sense of the Scriptures as a canonical whole, as the story which provides the true context for our understanding of the meaning of our lives—both personal and public” (1991e:2).

This last point highlights the significance of a true understanding of Biblical authority for a missionary church. If ‘Bible bits’ are absorbed into the reigning cultural story, then there is no challenge. The church finds a place within the culture. It is only as the story as a whole in its comprehensive claim is maintained and embodied that the church will offer a contrasting way of life to its contemporaries.

The second dichotomy of the modern worldview that reshapes the Scriptural narrative and threatens the missionary church is the purpose-cause dichotomy; explanation is reduced to cause-and-effect relationships. When cause-and-effect

relationships are enthroned as the only way to explain reality, the category of purpose is effectively eliminated (1986e:23-24). The gospel reveals and accomplishes the purpose for all creation; the church embodies that purpose in its life. Discarding purpose as an explanatory category threatens the life of the missionary church.

In contrast Newbigin wants to restore 'purpose' as a category of explanation. We have observed above how Bacon and the other fathers of modern science attempted to advance an empirical knowledge that simply gathered facts. However, while many of the medieval universals were discarded, the notion of cause remained as the fundamental interpretive category. Following the Enlightenment it seemed natural that the Bible should be placed in this nexus of cause and effect. Newbigin comments of the Scripture: "It is firmly held within the web of facts, events, and experiences that are all at least in principle, patient of explanation in terms of the invariable operation of cause and effect" (1986e:43). The question that confronts Newbigin is how to recognize the rightful place of cause-and-effect explanations but at the same time affirm the truth of Scripture as it reveals the purpose of God.

In pursuit of this goal Newbigin offers a teleological and hierarchical epistemology (1986e:81-91). He begins his discussion with the nature of a machine. A machine can be analyzed in terms of physical and chemical laws that govern the structure and movement of its parts. These physical and chemical processes are the necessary condition for the operation of the machine but do not explain it; it can be explained only in terms of the purpose for which it has been designed. Already at the level of a machine purpose is an important explanatory category but it does not eclipse the importance of understanding the cause-and-effect relationships in the realm of physics and chemistry. To explain mechanics in terms of chemistry or physics would be reductionistic. Newbigin moves to animals as the next step. The physical, chemical, and mechanical constitution of the animal's body provides the necessary condition for the functioning of the animal. Yet these levels cannot explain the animal; numerous tests have shown that all animals can identify and solve problems according to some purpose. While a machine embodies the purpose of its designer, purpose is internalized in animals. Again purpose is a necessary explanatory category that does not jettison cause-and-effect relationships. To explain biology in terms of mechanics, chemistry, or physics would be a reductionistic explanation. Newbigin moves to the level of human relationships. The understanding of another human being comes not by tests and examinations. It is true that much can be learned by examining the human body in terms of its physical, chemical, or mechanical processes. Even laboratory experiments on the model of the study of animals will produce informative data. However, what is precisely new in the relationship between humans is the purposeful effort to communicate and understand. We move from an I-It relationship in the non-human creation to an I-You relationship between persons (cf. Buber 1937). Here there must be a listening, trustful openness if there is to be knowledge or understanding of the other person. The methods of the natural sciences fail in their endeavour to understand another human being. With the discussion of the mutuality between human beings we have not reached the top of the hierarchy of knowing. If there are conflicting purposes between human beings how are we to discern what is good, true, right, or best? This is possible only if there is a purpose for the whole creation.

... the concept of purpose becomes more and more necessary as we ascend without a

break through the realms of physics, chemistry, mechanics, and biology to the human person. I have reached a place where one could say that there are pointers to the fact that we cannot stop with the human level and that human conversation itself becomes inexplicable without reference to something beyond itself.... But no analysis of nature from the lowest proton to the highest form of life, could enable us to have direct knowledge of any purpose beyond our own (1986e:87f.).

At this point Newbigin argues that revelation is essential to the knowing process. “If purpose is a significant category of explanation, then revelation is an indispensable source of reliable knowledge” (1996d:76). If one is to discover the purpose of the universe there are two options available. Either one can wait around until the end of history and observe the purpose, or one can listen to the person whose purpose it is. The enquirer would have to decide whether to believe but, in any case, waiting until the end is not available. “If the whole drama of cosmic and human existence has any purpose, it could only be made known to us by revelation from the one whose purpose it is, and this revelation could only be accepted in faith” (1990z:9). It is for this reason that Newbigin wants “to speak of the Bible as that body of literature which... renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God” (1986e:59).

The ecclesiological implications of the category of purpose are important. The church is that body that God has entrusted with the clue to the purpose of the creation. That purpose has been made known and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church is the community incorporated into that purpose and therefore called to make it known. As it participates in the salvation of the end in foretaste, it makes known in its life, deeds, and words the goal of all history. Thus the being of the church is bound up in the call to embody that purpose and in the language of testimony to make it known.

As a member of the Christian church and from within its fellowship, I believe and testify (and the shift to the first person singular is, of course, deliberate) that in the body of literature we call the Bible, continuously reinterpreted in the actual missionary experience of the church through the centuries and among the nations, there is a true rendering of the character and purpose of the Creator and Sustainer of all nature, and that it is this character and purpose that determines what is good (1986e:88).

The third dichotomy that threatens a right understanding of Scriptural revelation and thus of the missionary community is that of public-private. If the story of Scripture is that of universal history and if the gospel is the revelation and accomplishment of the purpose of all history, then this is universally valid truth. The church is called to embody this purpose in the whole of their life. The public-private dichotomy threatens this comprehensive witness.

In contrast to the public-private dichotomy that reduces the Bible to the private realm, Newbigin affirms the Bible as public truth. He began to use this term in *The Other Side of 1984* to challenge the cultural dichotomy between private opinions and public facts (Weston 1999:51). The phrase becomes so common and characteristic of Newbigin’s thought that Ian Barnes has referred to the whole of Newbigin’s call for a missionary encounter with western culture as his “gospel as public truth project” (Barnes 1994:28). Newbigin’s concern for the gospel as public truth is summarized in the following words.

... truth must be public truth, truth for all. A private truth for a limited circle of believers is not truth at all. Even the most devout faith will sooner or later falter and fail unless those who hold it are willing to bring it into public debate and to test it against experience in every area of life. If the Christian faith about the source and goal of human life is to be denied access to the human realm, where decisions are made on the great issues of the common life, then it cannot in the long run survive even as an option for a minority (1986e:117).

Newbigin believes that for many years the Bible provided the model or story by which the world and history as a whole was understood. This role was displaced by the modern scientific worldview at the time of the Enlightenment, marking a return to the classical worldview as the public doctrine and marginalizing Scripture to a private role (1982i:6-7). Biblical scholars sought to fit the Bible into the Enlightenment assumptions rather than the other way round. Newbigin points to two clear examples. Schleiermacher attempted to fence off an area of inward religious experience that would be protected from the “objectifying consciousness” of the Enlightenment. He found a place for the Bible in the private world but left the public ideology of the West unchallenged (1986e:44f.). Bultmann’s program of demythologization and the construction of *heilsgeschichte* which belongs to the private world rather than public history also tailors the Bible to suit Enlightenment assumptions.

Again this reconstruction of Scripture threatens the church as a missionary community. If the gospel is restricted to the private realm of life, then the witness of the church is similarly limited. An effective missionary encounter in the communal and scattered life of the church is effectively neutralized. The missionary calling of the church is to offer a contrasting way of life that is comprehensive and challenges the whole of the modern scientific worldview.

There is a fourth threat to the missionary church that arises from a misunderstanding of Scripture. The three foregoing points have demonstrated the close connection between the church and Scripture in Newbigin’s thought. The subject-object dichotomy characteristic of modern Biblical scholarship effectively pries apart this close relation.

The claim was made that modern Biblical scholarship is objective and neutral. It was supposed that a neutral vantage point for the interpretation of Scripture in the hermeneutic method was available to western Biblical interpreters. There was no need to presuppose the truth of the Biblical story or to begin with a faith commitment but simply to employ a method to describe what is the case (1984b:14). In fact, objectivity and neutrality are illusions; critical scholarship is not a move to a more objective understanding of the Bible but “a move from one confessional stance to another, a move from one creed to another” (1995h:80). Or as Newbigin puts it elsewhere: “The Enlightenment did not (as it is sometimes supposed) simply free the scholar from the influence of ‘dogma’; it replaced one dogma by another” (1985k:1). The power of the Enlightenment vision is such that it is difficult to convince modern biblical expositors “to recognize the creedal character of their approach” (*ibid*).

Newbigin quotes favourably Lewis Mudge’s observation on the way the Bible has been misconstrued by the Enlightenment dogma. In Mudge’s introduction to the hermeneutical essays of Paul Ricoeur he writes: “We are deaf to the Word today. Why?... We construe the world in terms of the Cartesian dichotomy between the self as sovereign consciousness on the one hand, and an objectivized, manipulable nature on the other. We conceive ourselves as authors of our own meaning and being, set in the

midst of a world there for us to interrogate, manipulate and control” (Mudge 1980:4; quoted in 1985k:1). This Cartesian dichotomy distorts the nature of the text and interpretation in a number of ways. The text is no longer a conversation between two subjects in which the modern reader listens with trustful openness but simply an object which is the object of our masterful autonomy. The I-You relation is twisted into an I-It relationship in which the reader alone is in control. The message of the text is silenced and the reader is not challenged; he or she examines the text but in turn is not examined by it. The distance between the world of the text and the world of the reader widens as the horizons of subject and object are separated (1984b:13f.).

In contrast to the subject-object dichotomy that has objectivized and distanced Scripture from the interpreter, Newbigin emphasizes the role of faith and community in a true understanding of the Bible. The Bible and the church are inextricably woven together: “The Bible is the book of the community which testifies. The Book cannot be understood except in its relation to the community, and the community cannot be understood except in its relation to the book” (1985k:2). The Bible and the church exist in a dialogical relationship.

On the one hand, the Bible is a collection of books that is the product of the community. The books of the Bible have arisen out of a faith community whose authors participated in the ongoing tradition that interpreted and reinterpreted reality in the light of God’s deeds in history. The Bible is a product of faith and of the community that embodies that faith. On the other hand, the existence of the community can only be accounted for by the story that is at the core of its being—a story that is proclaimed and celebrated. The church is a community that embodies the story that the Bible tells. It is a record of God’s purpose for universal history as revealed and accomplished in the events of Jesus Christ. It is not simply an objective record that informs us of it but also an invitation to participate in it; the Bible is revelation and invitation. The church is the community made up of people who have responded positively to that invitation and now embody and proclaim God’s purpose for the world (1986e:62-64).

The Biblical story is “from faith to faith” (1984b:14). “The Bible comes into our hands as the book of a community, and neither the book nor the community are properly understood except in their reciprocal relationship with each other” (1986e:55). The community of the church is shaped by the attention it gives to the Bible. It is also true that the way the community reads the Bible is shaped by a tradition that has continued to read the Bible and bring its light to bear in varying contexts. Therefore, every Christian reader comes to the Bible with the spectacles of faith in a tradition that is fully alive in the community. And that community continues to be reshaped and modified as it endeavours to be faithful to the gospel in its context (1986e:56). Newbigin finds in this hermeneutical circle a clue for a proper understanding of the nature of Scripture. Modern scholarship, using the tools of literary and historical criticism, has enabled us to see that the present text is the result of a continual wrestling with the revelation of God’s purpose in the light of new experience. “Generation after generation, the story has been retold so as to bring out its relevance to the contemporary situation” (1986e:56). This ongoing tradition continues to be shaped by the faith response of the church; all interpretation of Scripture comes from “within our commitment to faith and discipleship, which has been shaped by the tradition in which we share as members of the community that acknowledges the book as authoritative” (*ibid*).

This account of Scriptural authority clearly moves beyond the subject-object dichotomy and the false objectivism that grips Scriptural interpretation. Interpretation of Scripture comes from within a community that embodies its story—a story told by former generations that also indwelt the narrative of God’s redemption. Proper interpretation of Scripture demands a faith response and personal commitment to the story the Bible tells. “But being personal does not mean that it is subjective. The faith is held with universal intent. It is held not as ‘my personal opinion,’ but as the truth which is for all” (1989e:50). The missionary nature of the church is defined by this commitment. It indwells the story of God’s activity in history. The church has been entrusted with the good news of God’s purpose for the creation as revealed in Jesus. The tradition that arises from that revelation in the community of the church is a missionary tradition; it exists to make known the good news.

9.3.2. Ecclesiological Implications: *The Way of a Different Social Order*

There is a “radical discontinuity” between the modern worldview embodied by the cultural community of the West and the Biblical story embodied by the church. It is a matter of two different faith commitments shaping two different social orders (1984b:15). It is therefore true that if “the Church is bold in giving its testimony to the living God who is revealed in particular events and in the scriptures which are the primal witness to these events, then it must necessarily clash with our contemporary culture. It must challenge the whole ‘fiduciary framework’ within which our culture operates” (1983d:53). The Biblical story is comprehensive and universal; it shapes every part of human life and culture. The western story is equally comprehensive and similarly claims all of human life. The question arises as to how the church is to engage the public life of its culture that is shaped by different faith commitments. How is the church to relate to the comprehensive claims of the gospel to the public life of western culture which is shaped by different foundational assumptions? Newbigin puts the question in the following way:

The church is the bearer to all the nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign, and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become *corporately* a sign, instrument, and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true and living God over all nature, and all nations, and all human lives.... What does the calling imply for a church faced with the tough, powerful, and all-penetrating culture [of modernity]... ? (1986e:124; emphasis mine).

9.3.2.1. Rejection of Privatization and Christendom

Newbigin rejects three options that offer an answer to the question just posed: privatization, Christendom, and perpetual protest (1986e:124-134). Each of these labels represent a way the church has related to its culture in past history. Privatization describes the contemporary church that has allowed the claims of the gospel to be folded into the public-private dichotomy characteristic of post-Enlightenment culture. Christendom or the *corpus Christianum* describes the church of the medieval period (with its legacy to the present century) that was part of the established society and demanded universal recognition of the comprehensive claims of the gospel by enforcing

its truth with political, social, and military power. Perpetual protest describes the early church that was a small minority and embraced the antithetical side of its missionary task without sufficient recognition of its calling to participate in cultural development.

Privatization is an option that has been seized by a church that has accommodated the claims of the gospel to the public-private dichotomy. Redemption is reduced to the salvation of the eternal soul (1986e:95-97). Newbiggin's rejection of the privatization option is based on three areas of the teaching of Scripture. First, to view humanity in terms of an eternal soul dwelling in a physical body unrelated to the social and natural world is rooted in an ancient pagan dichotomy and is a very different picture from the one that the Bible gives (1983d:38). The Bible gives a picture of human beings always related to each other and to the non-human world. This picture is given both in creation and in redemption; redemption is the renewal of creation (1986e:97).

Second, the message of the gospel is that the kingdom of God is at hand. God's reign is comprehensive and the community that begins to share in that reign is "sent forth to proclaim and embody in their common life the victory of Jesus, the reality of the reign of God" (1986e:99). This means that the "proper freedom of the Church is inseparable from its obligation to declare the sovereignty of Christ over every sphere of human life without exception" (1991h:71f.). As we have seen, Newbiggin contrasts the contemporary church that seeks a place in the private realm, away from an engagement of the public life of culture, with the early church that refused to accept the designation under Roman law of *cultus privatus*. The private cults of the Roman empire dedicated themselves to the propagation of purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members.

Such private religion flourished as vigorously in the world of the Eastern, Mediterranean as it does in North America today. It was permitted by the imperial authorities for the same reason that its counterparts are permitted today: it did not challenge the political order. Why, then, did the church refuse this protection? Why did it have to engage in a battle to the death with the imperial powers? Because, true to its roots in the Old Testament, it could not accept relegation to a private sphere of purely inward and personal religion. It knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations (1986e:99f.).

Accordingly, as noted earlier, the early church refused to accept the names characteristic of private cults (*thiasos* and *heranos*; cf. Schmidt 1965:515f.) and instead called itself the *ecclesia tou Theou*, the public assembly to which all humanity is called. It was precisely this all-embracing claim of Jesus Christ embodied by the church that made a collision with imperial Rome inevitable (1986e:100). Privatization was not an option for the early church, because it was faithful to its identity as a kingdom community. Neither ought it to be an option for the church in the West today.

A third reason for rejecting privatization is the Bible's teaching on the powers. While this alliance with secular culture assumes the presumed neutrality of the public square, "the truth is that, in those areas of our human living which we do not submit to the rule of Christ, we do not remain free to make our own decisions: we fall under another power" (1983d:39). The shrine of the public square does not remain empty; if Christ is not Lord, an idol will take His place (1986e:115). The idea of a neutral secular society is a myth (1989e:211-221). Therefore, the choice is not between "religious" and "neutral" societies but between Christ and idolatry. Privatization is a capitulation to idolatry. Newbiggin presses this insight, with respect to western culture, by insisting that

we do not live in a secular society but a pagan one. He comments:

The result is not, as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time (1986e:20; cf. 115).

Having eliminated privatization as a legitimate option, Newbigin also rejects Christendom as a way of mission in the public life of western culture. While the alliance of church and state has made important contributions to European society—for example, science, political democracy, and traditions of ethical behaviour (1986e:124; cf. :101)—the *corpus Christianum* has been shattered by the religious wars of the seventeenth century and is no longer an option (1986e:101). Furthermore, the history of Christendom has shown that the fruit of a partnership between church and state leads to a loss of the unbearable tension between gospel and culture that is necessary for a missionary encounter that sustains the church's identity (cf. 5.5.2.1.).⁸

No matter how often Newbigin attempted to clear himself of the charge of advocating a form of Christendom, it has continually returned. His assertion of the gospel as public truth continues to raise the spectre of theocracy and questions about 'coercive power.' This charge is sharply made by David Toole. In a letter to Stanley Hauerwas, Toole takes issue with a quote of Newbigin that Hauerwas had included in a lecture. For Toole, the claim of universal truth necessarily implies violence and oppression: "Is there not already a violence implicit in the conviction that one possesses the truth?" (Toole 1991:158). Toole recognizes that Newbigin and Hauerwas do not advocate an *imposition* of the truth on others by coercive power; nevertheless the question remains whether or not the claim that one possesses the truth already contains seeds of violence and coercion. Toole reproduces words from Hauerwas' lecture in which he quotes Newbigin. According to Toole, Newbigin's language is "incredibly violent and exclusionary" (*ibid*). His italicized words stress this violent and exclusionary posture:

As Newbigin reminds us, Christians can *never* seek refuge in a ghetto where their faith is not proclaimed as public *truth for all*. They can *never agree that there is one law* for themselves and *another* for the world. They can *never admit* that there are *areas of human life where the writ of Christ does not run*. They can *never accept* the thesis... that there has been no public revelation before the eyes of all the world of the purpose for which *all things* and *all peoples* have been created.... We know now, I think, that

⁸The tension between this critical note of Christendom and the more positive interpretation remains characteristic of Newbigin's thought. We observed in the section above (9.3.1.1.) that Newbigin characterizes the medieval period as 'Christian.' The reversal of doubt and faith in Descartes signalled an end to this period where the Bible had the upper hand in shaping culture. Again the formative and critical dimensions of the church's task in culture stand in tension.

the only possible product of that ideal is a *pagan* society (Toole 1991:158; italics his; the Hauerwas quote is in 1991:151; the Newbigin quote 1986e:115).

Can Newbigin withstand this criticism? Does he provide a basis for claiming the public truth of the gospel that is not also violent and coercive? Does he escape the charge of a return to the *corpus Christianum*? It is certainly clear from Newbigin's writings that he does not shy away from advocating the use of power to shape the public life of the nation with the gospel. He recognizes that some beliefs and not others will shape the public square. For example, in a discussion of education he says:

How is this world of assumptions formed? Obviously through all the means of education and communication existing in society. Who controls those means? The question of power is inescapable. Whatever their pretensions, schools teach children to believe something and not something else. There is no "secular" neutrality. Christians cannot evade the responsibility which a democratic society gives to every citizen to seek access to the levers of power (1989e:224; cf. 1994:171).

There is no pluralistic or secular neutrality that holds the ring equally for all traditions; this is an illusion. *Some* tradition of rationality *will* shape the public square and that tradition will find its centre either in Christ or an idol. Hauerwas illustrates this contention. He observes that the story of Columbus "discovering" America, "enshrined now in the language of objectivity effectively silences other voices" (1991:136). Drawing on Newbigin, Hauerwas further notes: "In the name of objectivity, which serves the politics of the liberal state, we have accepted the notion that the state can be neutral in religious matters. But as Newbigin observes, there is no way that students passing through schools and universities sponsored by the Enlightenment can avoid being shaped in certain directions" (1991:143). A neutral secularism based on universal reason is a myth; secularism itself has a very clear exclusionary truth claim. The pluralism of postmodernity is no different; it too enshrines exclusionary commitments. Contrariwise Terry Eagleton claims:

We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself (Eagleton 1987:9).

Yet the "laid-back pluralism" of postmodernity has produced culture wars on an unprecedented scale. This would support Newbigin's constant contention that there is no neutrality. The claim for a neutral secularism or pluralism is rooted in some tradition based on certain assumptions that claim truth. Yet Newbigin claims that the truth of the gospel is not coercive. Can this claim be sustained? Five considerations support his claim.

First, the Biblical story is unique in its understanding of history in that it is interpreted in light of the cross. All other universal stories look to a victorious end within history: "They look to the intrahistorical triumph of their cause" (1994k:204). Any community holding to a triumph for their cause within the confines of history will be inherently imperialist; such, for example, is Islamic theocracy. Unfortunately, the church has acted precisely in this imperialistic way, but this is a betrayal of the gospel. Newbigin finds the uniqueness of the Biblical story in the fact that the centre is found

in the cross. At the cross we learn of a triumph *beyond* history. Until then, in this already-not yet time period of redemptive history, the church must pursue justice in the public square under the sign of the cross.

The fact that the cross stands as the central Christian symbol must forever forbid the identification of the gospel with political power. The Church's witness to the gospel must always be made in the knowledge that the manifest reign of God can only be at the end when he brings all things to final judgement, that for the present age the reign of God must be veiled in the weakness and foolishness of his Church, and that it is God alone who can reveal to people his presence within this veil (1994k:167f).

The truth that has been revealed in Jesus does not take the form of "dominance and imperial power but that of one who was without power, or—rather—whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering" (1989e:163). A church who follows this Lord cannot coerce conformity.

Second, and closely related to the foregoing point, the gospel centred in the cross is the only foundation that can preserve true freedom. In the latter years of his life Newbigin stressed that the freedom offered by a pluralistic society is an illusion. On the one hand, insofar as other committed beliefs are enshrined in the public square, there is no true freedom. On the other hand, insofar as there is a real loss of confidence in any truth that can shape western society, there are only two possibilities for the future. In the distant future such a society will collapse and disintegrate; no society can exist except on the basis of common beliefs which are accepted as true. In the more immediate future western society will be ripe for domination by a person or group that does have some view of the truth. Newbigin recognizes that the freedom won at the Enlightenment is in great danger from the onslaught of an agnostic pluralism. The vacuum will be filled with some beliefs. The *only* way that true freedom can be maintained is on the basis of the gospel. Freedom can only be protected by a view of truth centred in the cross which recognizes that the final judgement has been withheld to protect liberty to accept or reject the gospel (1997e; 1986e:128, 137-141).

A third reason for rejecting the charge that Newbigin's claim of truth for the gospel is coercive is that he advocates a committed pluralism as a third possibility over against a coercive theocracy and an illusive privatism. He distinguishes between an 'agnostic pluralism' and a 'committed pluralism' (1994k:168). An agnostic pluralism believes that ultimate truth is unknowable and therefore there are no criteria to judge true from false, good from bad, or right from wrong. All lifestyles are to be equally tolerated in the absence of standards. In this tradition of rationality "to make judgements is... an exercise of power and is therefore oppressive and demeaning to human dignity" (*ibid*). A committed pluralism, by contrast, is devoted to a search for truth. Newbigin turns to Polanyi's notion of 'the republic of science' to illustrate committed pluralism. In this 'republic' scientists are free to differ from one another as they pursue their own research in a quest for truth. Yet their differences are not left to exist side by side. When scientists differ on a particular issue they do not congratulate one another on their pluralistic tolerance; they struggle to find out which person is correct.

Because it is believed that there is reality to be known, differences of opinion are not left to coexist side by side as evidence of the glories of pluralism. They are the subject

of debate, argument, testing, and fresh research until either one view prevails over the other as more true, or else some fresh way of seeing things enables the two views to be reconciled as two ways of seeing one reality (1991h:58).

As for the mission of the church in the public square “the key lies in the acceptance of personal responsibility for seeking to know the truth and for publishing what we know.... And if this is so, then the call to the Church is to enter vigorously into the struggle for truth in the public domain” (1991h:59).

A fourth reason in support of Newbigin’s claim that the truth of the gospel is not violent or coercive is his post-empiricist epistemology that opens the way for a dialogue with society. Ian Barnes has rightly argued that Newbigin’s tradition-based epistemology provides a basis for a non-coercive claim to truth because it opens the way for a dialogical engagement with culture (1994:36f.). Barnes comments further:

Newbigin is not a fundamentalist, presenting the gospel as a set of propositional truths: a body of truth and experience which is simply asserted over against other non-Christian accounts of the world. Yet Newbigin’s alternative approach enables him to engage more effectively in dialogue with alternative belief systems—a dialogue in which the language and more specific knowledges of other religions, cultures and modern science can be critically interpreted in terms of the ‘plausibility structure’ and ecclesial practice of Biblical faith (Barnes 1994:33).

This dialogue between the gospel and culture has been discussed above. The gospel does not simply shout a loud ‘no’ to culture; it equally affirms the good creation in all cultural development. Another way of expressing the same idea is to say that the church “does not claim to *possess* absolute truth: it claims to know where to point for guidance (both in thought and in action) for the common search for truth” (1989e:163). The truth as it is revealed in Jesus gives us the clue for searching for more truth wherever it can be found. This formulation opens up the way for dialogue with rival traditions in the search of further truth in God’s creation.

Fifth, Newbigin leans on the Dutch tradition of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd to argue that the problem with Christendom is not that Christians exercised power but that the institutionalized church exercised power. Over against this ecclesiastical totalitarianism Newbigin advocates the neo-Calvinist notion of sphere sovereignty, the doctrine that God has given in the creation order a measure of autonomy to each of the various areas of human life such as art, science, politics, and economics. The institutionalized church does not have direct authority over these spheres; rather each sphere is shaped by God’s word discerned and implemented by those within that sphere. This avoids both the post-Enlightenment idea of total autonomy of these spheres and the medieval understanding that each of these spheres is under the rule of the church. So while the church as an organized body has no right to authority in these spheres, Christians with insight into these areas may exercise power (1986e:143-144).

Newbigin faced the question of the task of the church in the public life of culture most explicitly in his chapter ‘Speaking the Truth to Caesar’ in *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (1991h:65-90). Here Newbigin’s ecclesiology is revealed clearly. In this chapter Newbigin spells out both a critical and a constructive task for the church within the public square. The critical task of the church is to unmask the ideologies or expose the fundamental idolatrous assumptions on which the public life

of culture is built (1991h:74-80). Newbigin draws insight from both Walter Wink and the Barmen Declaration. The Barmen declaration affirmed the truth of the gospel, and explicitly condemned the reigning ideology of nation, race, and blood (1991h:74-75). Often the Bible speaks of such creational entities as the state, law, tradition, and religion as the “powers.” While they have been created by Christ and for Christ, and therefore have a role to play in God’s creational order, they have been corrupted by sin and idolatry. “They are corrupted, become demonic, when they are absolutized, given the place which belongs only to God” (1991h:75). Newbigin gives several examples: the good gift of kinship is corrupted into racism when it is absolutized; the good gift of the individual personality is corrupted into individualism when it is absolutized (*ibid*).

The task of the church is to unmask and expose these idolatrous assumptions that give shape to the political and economic order. Newbigin believes that the most formidable power in western culture—the freedom of the individual to do as he or she wishes—has been most fully revealed in the ideology of the free market (1991h:75-81). Both the right and the left stand on the same idolatrous assumptions. Thus “it is not the business of the Church to make an alliance with either the right or the left in the present political scene. It has to unmask the ideologies that permeate them and offer a more rational model for the understanding of the human situation” (1991h:77).

The positive side of the church’s task is broached in the former statement. Pointing to the Barmen Declaration, Newbigin observes that it modelled both an affirmation of the gospel and an anathema on the reigning ideology (1991h:79). How is this constructive side of the task to be accomplished? The conventional reply would be to simply speak of a political or social philosophy that is prescribed for the healthy functioning of society. Newbigin is not averse to this kind of theoretical work. However, the importance of his missionary ecclesiology emerges at just this point. In the church’s life—gathered and scattered—it is to embody and proclaim the sovereign claims of Christ over all of life. A political or social philosophy may aid the task, but for Newbigin ecclesiology is fundamental. The church challenges the idolatry of its culture by a life lived by a different commitment.

9.3.2.2. Reformed and Anabaptist Ecclesiological Elements

Newbigin’s ecclesiological foundation is shaped by both the Reformed and the Anabaptist traditions. In an analogous way David Bosch too develops his views about the church in society around these two ecclesiologies (1982:8). He employs the term ‘alternative community’ that was coined in American Mennonite circles, to unfold the intrinsic similarities between the Reformed and Anabaptist ecclesiologies. Reformed ecclesiology tends to draw a too direct line from the church to the world; Anabaptist ecclesiology tends to reject the world and withdraw into a self-contained entity. This would seem to contrast the two ecclesiologies in basic ways. Yet Bosch believes that a closer look reveals “that the concerns of both groups are intimately related. The more identifiably separate and unique the church is as a community of believers (Anabaptism) the greater the significance it has for the world (Calvinism)” (*ibid*). The church has great significance in society both as a community that is a bridge-head for God’s kingdom in the world and in the various actions of its members as they act in a way consistent with their life in the alternative community. “And so my thesis is this: The church has

tremendous significance for society precisely because it is as a uniquely separate community” (*ibid*).

While Bosch calls for the melding of the strengths of Anabaptist and Calvinist ecclesiologies in the term ‘alternative community,’ it appears that the Anabaptist strain plays the greater role in his thought. Newbigin also wants to bring together these two traditions in his ecclesiology. He differs from Bosch in that he more explicitly emphasizes the calling of believers in the public square—a concern that has been characteristic of the Reformed tradition. The emphasis on the church as an alternative community and the calling of individual believers in the world received sustained emphasis in all his discussions of ecclesiology (1986e:141-144; 1989e:229-231; 1991h:81-85).

In his emphasis on the calling of believers in the world, Newbigin stands against the perpetual protest model that characterized the early church and resurfaced in various models of mission today. He notes that “the predominant note in the contemporary answers to this question is the note of protest”:

The political order, with its entrenched interests and its use of coercion to secure them, is identified as the enemy, the primary locus of evil. The place of the church is thus not in the seats of the establishment but in the camps and marching columns of the protesters.... The protesters contend that as Jesus was crucified outside the wall of the city, so the place of the Christian must always be outside the citadel of the establishment... Attempts of the kind that were often made earlier in this century—to bring together Christians in responsible positions in government, industry, and commerce to discuss the bearing of their faith on their daily practice—they dismiss as elitist and therefore incapable of generating true insights. A person who wields power cannot see truth; that is the privilege of the powerless (1986e:125).

Newbigin recalls that the early church assumed power and responsibility to shape the Roman culture when the opportunity was offered. To decline this opportunity would have been “an act of apostasy” and “an abandonment of the faith of the gospel” (1986e:129). He draws the conclusion for today’s church: “By the same token, the church today cannot without guilt absolve itself from the responsibility, where it sees the possibility, of seeking to shape the public life of nations and the global ordering of industry and commerce in the light of the Christian faith” (*ibid*).

This raises the question of *how* this should be done: “How this is to be done is the question with which we must wrestle; but that it must be done is certain” (*ibid*). Answers to this question range widely. A prominent answer today is that of Bosch’s above, a way consistently followed by Hauerwas and Willimon, Hall, and the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America, for example (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Hall 1997, 1999; Guder 1989). In this model the communal and critical dimensions of the church as a contrast community are emphasized. Newbigin also stresses this, but at the same time he is much more insistent that the individual callings of believers are essential to the mission of the church.

This two-pronged emphasis is evident in the three ecclesiological implications he draws in his lecture of ‘Speaking the Truth to Caesar’ (1991h:65-90). The first two concern the calling of believers in various sectors of public life. His first point is that “it must be the responsibility of the Church to equip its members for active and informed participation in public life in such a way that the Christian faith shapes that

participation” (1991h:81). Each believer is a ‘subversive agent’ that neither attempts to destroy nor preserve the idolatrous cultural forms but “subverts them from within” (1991h:82). Newbigin presses his concern that there is a need for preparation to take place to equip each member for his or her responsibility. Referring to a psychiatrist who believes that it is unprofessional conduct to allow the gospel to inform her work, he asks:

What kind of preparation is needed to enable a psychiatrist to discern the ways in which her profession could be subverted from its allegiance to other principles and become an area where the saving work of Christ is acknowledged? What would be the specific kind of training for a teacher in the public schools, for an executive in a big corporation, for a lawyer or a civil servant? Do we not need to invest much more of the Church’s resources in creating the possibility for such training (1991h:83).

His second point is closely related: if men and women are being trained for informed participation in their public callings in keeping with the gospel, there will be many Christians in responsible positions of leadership within various sectors of public life that could shape the plausibility structures of culture. This model moves beyond both a privatized Christianity and a Muslim style theocracy. Believers shape sectors of public life from within the institution itself. It is not a matter of ecclesial imposition but a matter of professionals who know and participate actively in that area of public life, giving leadership in the light of the gospel. It is a dialogical relationship with other folk who do not share the same faith commitments. The model of committed pluralism is the context; in interaction with others, the believer acts in accordance with his or her belief that the gospel is public truth attempting to persuade others of the plausibility of the gospel for that area of life (1991h:84-85). In these two points Newbigin draws on a Reformed ecclesiology.

In his third point Newbigin picks up the Anabaptist ecclesiology. He writes that “the most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order” (1991h:85). Newbigin’s long standing commitment to the local congregation surfaces again. He believes that the local congregation must be “the primal engine of change in society” (*ibid*). Newbigin contrasts his belief with two traditions with which he disagrees on this point: the ecumenical and Kuyperian traditions. In ecumenical circles the local congregation is overshadowed by powerful denominational and interdenominational agencies for social and political action. These bodies are separated from the life of the local congregation. Newbigin critiques the Kuyperian tradition along the same lines. He is concerned about the “anti-ecclesiastic polemic of this neo-Calvinist school” that has possibly arisen from the deep disappointment at earlier failures to reform the established church of the Netherlands (1996c:5). He concludes: “I must therefore totally reject the criticism which was made of my statement that the Church’s first contribution to society is to be itself a true community” (1996c:6).⁹ In this criticism we see again Newbigin’s concern to

⁹This criticism of Newbigin was never made in the papers or the discussions of the conference. Unfortunately, Newbigin did not understand Kuyper’s distinction between the church as an organism and as an institution, according to which the ‘church as an organism,’ acting through “lay” believers, both from within cultural institutions and, more especially, through separate organizations of believers in parliament, the media, trade-unionism, social work, etc., for the purpose of reforming these strategic areas of culture from a position of influence and strength afforded by communal action (Kuyper 1909, III:204; cf. DeGraaf

emphasize the Anabaptist dimension of ecclesiology. Newbiggin is concerned that the church exist as, what Stanley Hauerwas calls, a “paradigmatic community” or a “criteriological institution.” Hauerwas defines these terms as follows:

The task of the church [is] to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice.... The church, therefore, must act as a paradigmatic community in the hope of providing some indication of what the world can be but is not.... The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic. That is, she is a social ethic inasmuch as she functions as a criteriological institution—that is, an institution that has learned to embody the form of truth that is charity as revealed in the person and work of Christ (Hauerwas 1977:142-143).

What might this alternative community look like according to Newbiggin? Newbiggin outlines the salient features of such a community. This ecclesiology is articulated at a number of points; yet their structures are similar. We choose two points where this structure is revealed: first, in his description of the church as a hermeneutic of the gospel (1989e:222-233), and second, in a brief paper entitled ‘Vision for the City’ given at a conference on ‘The Renewal of Social Vision’ sponsored by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at New College in Edinburgh (1989f). The first offers a description while the second suggests a concrete implementation.

Newbiggin articulates six characteristics of a church that is a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel in western culture. These six characteristics are not randomly chosen; they flow directly from Newbiggin’s understanding of the idolatry of western culture against which the church must stand in its life. These features of a faithful church in the west emphasize countercultural aspects. Yet one of these characteristics is the ministry of the laity in shaping the public life of culture in their individual callings. We find both Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological threads woven together.

1968:57-88). This Kuyperian ecclesiology, speaking as it does of “organism” and “institution,” is unfortunate in its terminology, and this has perhaps contributed to the misunderstanding. Indeed, Herman Dooyeweerd believes the distinction makes an important point “in a really confusing terminological way” (1984:524). Yet the distinction points to an important ecclesiological issue. Ridderbos writes of the distinction: “It is my conviction that this distinction gives expression to an important truth....” (1965:27). In fact, the ecclesiologies of Newbiggin and the neo-Calvinist tradition are similar. Rightfully Newbiggin puts more emphasis on the church as alternative community and on the local congregation.

The first characteristic is that the church will be a community of praise and thanksgiving. A communal life of praise stands in contrast to scepticism, doubt, and a hermeneutic of suspicion that characterizes life in western society; a communal life of selfless thanksgiving stands as an alternative to the contemporary society's selfish obsession with rights. The second characteristic is that the church will be a community of truth. Western society lives in the twilight of relativism and uncertainty; a community that joyfully, humbly and boldly affirms and lives by the truth of the gospel offers an attractive rival tradition. The third feature that marks a faithful church in the West is that it will not live for itself but will be deeply involved in the concerns of its neighbourhood. This presents an attractive alternative to a society that lives with a preoccupation with the self; selflessness shines in the darkness of selfishness. The fourth mark of a church which is a hermeneutic of the gospel in western culture is that "it will be a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world (1989e:229). A congregation that presses the claims of Christ in the public square stands in stark contrast to a society that attempts to relegate 'religion' to the private realm. Fifth, a missionary congregation in the West will be a community of mutual responsibility. One of the roots of the contemporary malaise of western culture is an individualism which denies our mutuality and responsibility for one another. A church which manifests such communal life will be a "foretaste of a different social order" (1989e:231). Finally, the congregation will be a community of hope. Newbigin often refers to the widespread pessimism and disappearance of hope that marks western culture. A hopeful community presents an attractive alternative.

While an articulation of these features of a missionary congregation in the West raises many questions about concrete implementation, Newbigin's approach is clear. The church must be a community that embodies an alternative social order *in direct response* to the idolatry and need of the culture. The church is a good news people in a world where bad news thrives. One does wish that Newbigin had offered more guidance on *how* these various marks could be embodied in communal form. Nevertheless a model is offered that invites further cultivation.

Newbigin elaborates his vision of the way the church may communally embody an alternative story in a lecture that flowed from his work as a pastor in Winson Green. It offers a vision for the urban church in Britain (1989I). The paper unfolds in three parts. First, Newbigin unmasks one of the ideological powers at work in British society. Second, he articulates the responsibility of the church in relation to British society. Third, he spells out concretely what it would mean for an inner city church to be a contrast community over against the ideological power he has exposed.

This conference took place in the last couple of years of the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was in office as prime minister. Newbigin contrasts the conservative vision that she advocated with the opposing agenda of the welfare state. Since the establishment of the welfare state many British citizens took it for granted that the state had the responsibility for taking care of them. They spoke of their right to care and many became expert in working the system to attain their rightful share. In critique, Thatcher and many in the 'leafier suburbs' of Birmingham described this state as a 'dependent society' in which people, instead of taking responsibility for their own lives, depended on others to care for them. Newbigin labels Thatcher's view the 'selfish

society.’ Newbiggin tackles the evil in the ideology that grips British public life by exposing the idolatrous foundation that lies at the root of *both* views. Both the advocates of welfare and the conservatives share the view that they have rights without responsibilities. The welfare advocates claim their rights that the government has to provide without any corresponding responsibility. The right-wing reactionaries disavow any responsibility for those in need but claim their right to dispense what they have accumulated in the way they choose. But the problem goes deeper: this view of rights is “a product of the Enlightenment’s exaltation of the autonomous individual with his autonomous reason and conscience, as the centrepiece of our thinking” (1989:40). Community in which rights and responsibilities function in healthy harmony is steadily eroded by an individualist anthropology that exalts autonomy.

What is the church’s task in this setting? Newbiggin answers: “It is not the primary business of the Church to advocate a new social order; it is our primary business to *be* a new social order” (1989:40). The church’s primary calling is to be a sign and foretaste of a new order that is not simply a matter of words but is concretely illustrated in the communal life. Newbiggin points to the black-led churches that live a different story in the midst of the modern British metropolis. They say: “This is our story, and it is the true story. In the end you will all know that it is the true story” (1989:40-41).

In terms of the ideological power that Newbiggin has unmasked, this means that the church must be a contrast community which models a communal life and thereby challenges both the separation of rights and responsibilities and the autonomous independence of the individual that wreck human community. He mentions four characteristics of such a community; each of these characteristics is shaped by the Biblical story and stands in contrast to some dimension of the ideology he has exposed. The church will be a community of praise and love for others; this stands in contrast to a selfish community that seeks its own welfare. The church will be a community of mutual acceptance where each is given the dignity of being a member of the family; this stands in contrast to autonomous individuals who do not know the acceptance of a family. The church will be a community of mutual responsibility “where rights do not have to be claimed because responsibilities are understood.” Finally, the church will be a community of hope in contrast to a society that has lost hope submerged in despair or consumer saturation (1989:41). Here we see some of the characteristics that appear in *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, applied to the more specific context of British political and economic life.

In these characterizations Newbiggin is concerned to nurture a church that stands as an alternative community over against the idolatries that are destroying western culture. Newbiggin concludes:

I realise that I am not offering any recipe for a quick turn-round in national policy at the next general election. But I believe that it is as people are nurtured in local communities which experience and enjoy the life of caring and responsible relationships, and learn to sponsor and sustain all kinds of programmes for the development of their neighbourhoods, the way will be prepared for the extension of this experience to the life of the nation. And I am saying that the primary responsibility of the Church in relation to the renewal of vision for society is to be itself the sign and first fruit of a new order, to offer good news that a different kind of life is possible before it offers advice about how it is to be achieved.... The only plausible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation that believes it and lives by it. When that hermeneutic

is available, people find it possible to have a new vision for society and to know that the vision is more than a dream (1989l:41).

Three observations can be made on Newbigin's approach. First, the church is a community that lives by a different light than the dominant culture. The charge to embody the gospel is a call to live as an attractive alternative. Second, a missiological understanding of culture is essential to this task. Faithfully embodying the gospel requires an understanding of the deep currents of the culture that force the church into its mould. Further, if the church is to *be* good news it must know the bad news of the context. Finally, this call involves both a communal embodiment and individual responsibility of each believer in his or her calling in culture. It is a countercultural stance with responsibility for the development of culture. There is the fusion of an Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiology. The label 'different social order' moves beyond the confines of the gathered church to the scattered church's life in the public square.

Questions remain, however. Has Newbigin sufficiently integrated the emphases of the two ecclesiologies? Does the church as a new social order move beyond the confines of the gathered community? If so, how does this look on Monday morning? Or are we left with a dichotomy between church gathered and individual believers in the world? Has Newbigin offered a sufficient ecclesiological model that can stand against the powerful modern and postmodern of the West? Has he taken sufficient account of the individualism and differentiation of western culture?

Newbigin's image of the church was formed in the undifferentiated societal context of India. He writes about the experience of his first diocese in Madurai: "My picture of the Church formed in those years is deeply etched in my mind, the picture of a group of people sitting on the ground, with a larger crowd of Hindus and Muslims and others standing around listening, watching, discussing..." (1994k:55). In his exposition of the church Newbigin returns repeatedly to this image (e.g., 1961e:24).¹⁰ In this undifferentiated situation a communal witness would be the most powerful witness the church could give. But even Newbigin recognized during the 1960s that the highly complex and differentiated world of modernity required new structures that would enable the church to engage the public life of Western culture; the communal witness of the village church was inadequate (1966b:100-122). He later writes:

In our complex and highly differentiated society, we have to develop structures of Church life which express the claim of Jesus to rule the whole life of the world, without doing it in a Constantinian way.... Our kind of society is distinguished from earlier kinds by its high degree of differentiation. An Indian village today, like an English village 300 years ago, is one total world which embraces the whole life of its people. But in a modern city each of us lives simultaneously in several different

¹⁰Daniel T. Niles writes of the church in the villages of India and Ceylon in words almost identical to Newbigin's. In his well-known book *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Churches* Niles writes: "It is a common experience in India or Ceylon, when an evangelistic team visits a village, that in the meeting that is organized the small Christian community in the village will be sitting in the middle while the Hindus and Muslims will be standing all around. And, in that situation, the evangelist is aware that whereas he is pointing to Christ, his listeners are looking at that small group sitting in front of them. The message will carry no conviction unless it is being proved in the lives of those who bear the Name that is being declared" (1962:197). Comparing this statement with Newbigin's description in *Is Christ Divided? A Plea for Christian Unity in a Revolutionary Age* (1961e:24) raises an interesting question about the origin of the image.

'worlds.'... But our Church structures remain as they were when the village was the world. It still works well in an Indian village, but not in an English city (1980d:6; cf. 1980f:64-67).

It is also during the 1960s that Newbigin's emphasis on the mission of the laity increased. These themes never disappear from Newbigin's writings. Yet it appears that the Indian image of the village church exerted itself with increasing pressure during the latter decades of his life (1987a:22-23; 1994k:55). It provided a vivid illustration of the missionary church for which he longed. This image stresses the communal witness of the church in the midst of culture. However, this powerful image is simply inadequate for the demands of the highly complex and differentiated culture of the West. The tension between this communal image within an undifferentiated culture and the mission of the scattered laity remains in Newbigin's writing.

George Vandervelde has pressed this concern (1996). Vandervelde notes that "Christian Community is the golden thread throughout all Newbigin's writing" (:10). The church *as community* receives sustained emphasis throughout all his writings. Vandervelde continues: "Reading and listening to Newbigin speak of community in this concentrated way, one knows that he is speaking of something real and concrete. Yet, here problems arise as well, problems that may point to the malaise of the Western church, more than any deficiency in Newbigin's thought" (:12). Vandervelde points to Newbigin's six characteristics of the church that is will be a faithful hermeneutic of the gospel (1989e:227-233). Newbigin begins each characteristic with "The Christian community will be..." and then completes the sentence with various descriptions—a community of praise, a community of truth, and so forth. It is striking, Vandervelde observes, that a *community* is presupposed in each of these descriptions (*ibid*). That presses the urgent question: "Where is this community, especially in a modern urban setting?" (*ibid*). Newbigin uses the word community "as if the individualism and the privatization, that he criticizes so sharply and architectonically in Western culture has not ravaged the church—so much so that many do not experience the 'church' as 'community'" (*ibid*). Newbigin's missionary experience enables him to know the ravages of individualism and it is precisely this that "makes Newbigin's unproblematic treatment of the church as the Christian community surprising" (:13). Vandervelde makes the following critique: "At the most crucial point in his thought, Newbigin fails to be contextual, namely with respect to 'community.'... He does not take into account the effects of Western culture, namely individualism and differentiation" (*ibid*). Vandervelde argues further that "on the crucial matter of Christian community, Neo-Calvinism is far more contextual. It has taken very seriously the differentiation and the structural or associational pluralism that marks Western culture (*ibid*). The church finds expression in various Christian communal organizations that address various spheres of public life. In other words, Newbigin has rightly pointed to the importance of community, the importance of the gathered congregation, and the importance of the calling of believers in culture. However, the individualism and differentiation of western culture require various Christian communal bodies that address the public spheres of culture. Vandervelde goes on to point out many theoretical and practical problems that beset the ecclesiology of the neo-Calvinist tradition and ways that Newbigin's ecclesiology offers insightful critique. Yet Vandervelde's critique demonstrates that Newbigin has not sufficiently integrated the Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiological

elements.

9.3.2.3. Newbigin's Legacy: The Ecclesiology of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America

In one of the last articles that David Bosch wrote, he distinguishes five different traditions of the relationship of the church to civil authorities (Bosch 1993:89-95): Constantinian, pietist, reformist, liberationist, and anabaptist. He dismisses the first two—Constantinian and pietist—as otherworldly. He interprets the other three as “world-formative” and “much closer to each other than may appear at first glance” (Bosch 1993:94). The scope of these categories can be broadened to assess the relationship of the gospel, not only to civil authorities, but to the whole of culture. In this scheme, it is the anabaptist tradition—which Bosch elsewhere calls the alternative community and countercultural model (Bosch 1982)—that has been gaining ground and begun to function as the dominant model in the North American context among those who, inspired by Newbigin, are calling for a missionary encounter with western culture.

According to Bosch, the anabaptist model emphasizes that “the primary task of the church is simply to *be* the church, the *true* community of committed believers which, by its very existence and example, becomes a challenge to society and the state” (Bosch 1993:92). Mission is the planting and nourishing of ecclesial communities that embrace an alternative pattern of life. There are two important features that characterize this model. First, it emphasizes the *communal* dimensions of the missionary witness of the church. There is a reaction against a reduction of mission to the calling of individuals in culture and against a neglect of the church as a community that embodies the life of the kingdom together. Second, the *critical* side of the church's relationship to its culture dominates. “[T]he church is understood to be an implicit or latent *critical factor* in society.... the church is critical of the status quo, indeed *very* critical of it” (*ibid*). These two factors are combined in the designation ‘alternative community.’ Bosch summarizes:

The church simply exists in society in such a way that people should become aware of the transitoriness, relativity, and fundamental inadequacy of *all* political programs and solutions. The believing community is a kind of antibody in society, in that it lives a life of radical discipleship as an “alternative community” (*ibid*).

These two important features have been developed in critical reaction to the impact of Christendom on the shape of the church: under the Christendom *symphonia* the church lost its sense of being a distinct community embodying an alternative story. Both the communal and the critical dimensions of the church's mission were eclipsed by its established position within culture. This Christendom legacy continues to the present

in the western church.¹¹

In the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Guder 1998), an ecclesiology is articulated that is shaped by this countercultural, communal, and anti-Christendom stream. The book arose out of a study and research project inaugurated by the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America (GOCN/NA), a movement which emerged in the late 1980s in response to Newbigin's call for a missionary encounter with western culture. GOCN/NA is an important movement that is pressing the question of what a missionary encounter with North American would look like. The network's activity revolves around three foci: ecclesiology, theology, and cultural analysis. The development of a missionary ecclesiology for North American has been a prominent item on the GOCN/NA agenda. The book *Missional Church* represents, what might be called, an "official" ecclesiology of the GOCN/NA movement. Co-authored by six leaders within the network, it represents an ecclesiology that has become influential within the whole GOCN/NA movement. The book *Missional Church* is clearly indebted to the ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin (Guder 1998:5).

In formulating an ecclesiology for North American culture, the book adopts the centring metaphor of an alternative or contrast community (Guder 1998:9-10). While the six writers of the book come from Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, and Anabaptist traditions, they find a common commitment to the church as an alternative community. They write: "The thrust of the gospel exposition in this book is to define a missionary people whose witness will prophetically challenge precisely those dominant patterns [of oppressive, exclusionary, and racist cultural dynamics] as the church accepts its vocation

¹¹A number of authors associated with the Gospel and Our Culture network in North America pursue this theme (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989; Hauerwas 1991; Hall 1997; Shenk 1991; 1993; 1995; 1999:118-128; Hunsberger 1995). While all these authors identify the legacy of Christendom as the primary obstacle to a missionary church in the West today, their emphases differ. Hall wants to distinguish himself from Hauerwas because he believes that Hauerwas's "language frequently betrays a not-of-this-world posture so unqualified as to beget the danger of ghettoization" (1997:67). In contrast, he speaks of disengagement for the sake of cultural engagement (:51-66). Shenk has focussed his critique on the impact of Christendom on the mission and self-understanding of the church. This enables him to avoid the sweeping generalizations characteristic of Hall and Hauerwas and to offer a more nuanced critique.

of society that took place continues as a positive legacy in the West even until today. While Newbigin affirms the importance of the communal witness of the church, he also stresses the calling of individual believers in society. By contrast, the communal dimension of the church's calling is emphasized to the point of neglecting the mission of individuals within culture. The calling of believers in the world is not mentioned in *Missional Church*. While Newbigin accents the critical dimension of the church's witness, he also emphasizes the positive cultural calling of the church in culture. By contrast, the critical dimension of the church's stance toward its culture is stressed in *Missional Church*; all attempts to exercise culturally formative power are dismissed as 'functional Christendom' (Guder 1998:116).

A number of reasons account for this difference of emphasis. Part of the problem is Newbigin's failure to combine the Reformed and Anabaptist emphases into an integrated missionary ecclesiology. Both Newbigin and the GOCN/NA offer important

cultural order that was on offer to them. Martyrdom is, as the word indicates, witness, pointing to an alternative offer. The witness is vindicated when it is carried through in a positive mode, saying yes as well as saying no, encouraging the acts of repentance and change by which the powers offer homage to Christ (:215).

O'Donovan recognizes that this interpretation of Christendom leads him away from Stanley Hauerwas. While he acknowledges the force of Hauerwas's critique of Christendom, O'Donovan challenges Hauerwas's notion that Christians were attempting to further the kingdom by use of political power. The account of the early church was that those who held power became subject to the rule of Christ and used that power in the service of His kingdom. While this harboured danger and temptation, the early church did not see this as a reason to refuse the triumph Christ had won among the nations. It is "this triumph of Christ among the nations [that] Hauerwas is not prepared to see" (:216). While Newbigin is more aware than O'Donovan of the dangers of Christendom on the mission of the church, there are many points of agreement between them.

contributions to an emerging ecclesiology for postmodern culture; however much more work remains to be done.

9.4. CONCLUSION

Newbigin devoted the latter part of his life to fostering a missionary encounter between the gospel and western culture; this may prove to be, perhaps, his most significant accomplishment. This endeavour can be interpreted as a specific application of his contextualization model articulated in the last chapter. Thus the church plays a central role in Newbigin's 'gospel in western culture' project.

Newbigin is a highly contextualized thinker. A missionary encounter with western culture demands an understanding of the deep currents that shape that culture. It is only as the church recognizes the fundamental assumptions that press its life and understanding into an idolatrous mould that it can begin to struggle against such a syncretistic compromise. According to Newbigin, the idolatrous commitment to reason in the West has fashioned a fact-value dichotomy that forms the central shrine of our culture. This analysis, clearly, is incomplete and inadequate. While it yields much fruitful insight, it leaves many other idols—perhaps some that are even more powerful, such as the idol of consumerism—untouched. It remains for others to continue a 'missiological critique' of other idols.

Newbigin attempts to liberate the deeply compromised western church from its syncretistic accommodation to the fact-value dichotomy by means of retelling the western story, offering an alternative epistemology, and advocating the gospel as public truth. Through a retelling of western history from the standpoint of the gospel, this dichotomy can be recognized as a human construct that is vulnerable. While the main lines of Newbigin's narrative are helpful, he has not taken sufficient account of the powerful humanistic and rationalistic currents that shape Augustine's thought. Consequently, he too easily contrasts Augustine with Descartes and Locke. Augustine and the medieval period are Christian while Descartes, Locke, and the modern period capitulate to rationalistic humanism. Yet Augustine's own synthesis paved the way for Aquinas, and finally Descartes and Locke. Newbigin's ambivalent approach to Christendom can be, in part, attributed to this positive assessment of Augustine.

Through the offer of an alternative epistemology the church can understand the proper creational place of reason and the rightful place of the gospel. Newbigin's appropriation of Polanyi and MacIntyre illumine the calling of the church to indwell the fiduciary framework of the gospel. It is unfortunate that Newbigin did not move beyond Polanyi; Newbigin makes exclusive use of Polanyi for missiological purposes. Yet philosophy and history of science have moved on since Polanyi with an even more pronounced accent on the importance of the hermeneutical community. A more wide-ranging dialogue with this tradition would have enriched Newbigin's discussion.

Through a deepened understanding of the gospel as a universal story the church is prepared to embody that gospel faithfully. Newbigin uncovers the foundational assumptions of western culture that have eclipsed Scriptural authority. The church can only be a missionary community when it rightly understands the nature of the gospel and embodies its universal message.

The retelling of the western story, the offer of an alternative theory of knowledge, and a deepened understanding of the gospel as public truth are all a necessary part of the process of revisioning the church as an alternative social order. Newbigin rejects three options for revisioning the church's mission: privatization, Christendom, and perpetual protest. In spite of criticisms to the contrary Newbigin does not advocate a return to Christendom.

As Newbigin formulated his ecclesiological convictions regarding the church in the West, he drew on the Anabaptist tradition that stresses the church as an alternative community and on the Reformed tradition that emphasizes the calling of the scattered church in culture. Newbigin believes that the call of the gospel "will be credible when it comes from the heart of a Christian congregation which is confident in the Gospel, believes it, celebrates it, lives it and carries it into the whole life of the community in which it is set" (1996b:11). Many questions remain as to how this might be implemented in view of the incredibly powerful cultural tradition that shapes the West and is now shaping much of the rest of the world. The differentiation and individualism of the West poses a massive problem for the missionary community. Vandervelde rightly notes that it is precisely at this point—"at the most crucial point in his thought" (Vandervelde 1996:13)—that Newbigin fails to be contextual. He speaks of the importance of community (Anabaptist emphasis) and the importance of participation in cultural development (Reformed emphasis), the importance of antithesis and critique (Anabaptist) and the importance of cultural involvement (Reformed), the importance of community (Anabaptist) and individual callings (Reformed). Yet these emphases are not sufficiently integrated in Newbigin's ecclesiology. Indeed this lack of integration has impacted the Gospel and Our Culture movement in North America. The GOCN/NA has picked up the communal and critical side of Newbigin's ecclesiology, neglecting other equally important elements.

There is a crying need for a missionary ecclesiology of western culture that integrates at least these two concerns. There is, further, a need to develop a 'postmodern understanding of mission in the public square.' Newbigin's emphasis on both cultural development and antithesis, communal embodiment and individual callings, found in the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, offers the rudiments of a faithful ecclesiology for western culture in the 21st century.