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The New Evangelization and Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's the Household of God

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The world will always consciously or unconsciously, judge what the church says by quantities. They will interpret the printed epistle by the living epistle.

Lesslie Newbigin[1]

The Church of South India

The Church of South India came into being through a union of Anglican and Reformation churches/communities in South India. Although controversial at its inception, especially for the Anglican Communion, today, it has a membership of over five million, and is India's second largest Christian church after the Catholic Church. It came into existence just one month after India achieved independence from Britain in 1947. The inspiration for the Church of South India was born from those words of our Blessed Lord in the Gospel of St. John 17:21: "That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." The Church of South India took as its motto those words of the prayer of Jesus, "That they all may be one." The Church of South India was a milestone in the ecumenical world. This was the first time in history in which a union was effected between episcopal and non-episcopal churches. In this union four Christian traditions came together --- Anglican (Episcopal), Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist. One of the most well-known and theologically articulate bishops of the Church of South India was Lesslie Newbigin.

[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 50.

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Bishop Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998)

Bishop James Edward Lesslie Newbigin (8 December 1909 – 30 January 1998) was a British theologian, missiologist, missionary and author. Though originally ordained within the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), Newbigin spent much of his career serving as a missionary in India and became affiliated with the Church of South India and the United Reformed Church, becoming one of the Church of South India's first bishops.

A prolific author who wrote on a wide range of theological topics, Newbigin is best-known for his contributions to missiology and ecclesiology. I was privileged to know Bishop Newbigin during the 1980s when we were both members of a theological discussion group in Birmingham (England), known as the "Open End." It was a very heterogeneous group that included such diverse theologians as John H. Hick (Presbyterian), Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford (Anglican), Frances M. Young (Methodist), Michael D. Goulder (former Anglican), and the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, Hugh Montefiore. In this diverse group Lesslie Newbigin brought to the table, as it were, not only a profound knowledge of theology and ecumenism, but a Christian commitment marked by a deep, personal piety. In his "theological/intellectual/spiritual biography" of Newbigin, Methodist theologian and veteran ecumenist Geoffrey Wainwright assesses the bishop's influential writing, preaching, teaching, and church guidance, concluding that his stature and range is comparable to the "Fathers of the Church."[2] A very high and well-deserved accolade indeed!

Five years after the inauguration of the Church of South India, during November 1952, Lesslie Newbigin gave the Kerr lectures in Trinity College, Glasgow, the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Glasgow. These lectures were published eight years before Vatican II as *The Household of God.* If they were being published today, some sixty years later, by a Catholic bishop participating in the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, they would be aptly entitled *Ecumenism and the New Evangelization.* The message is straightforward: the new evangelization must be accompanied, if it is to be persuasive, by a renewed commitment to ecumenism.

The Household of God

A summary of Newbigin's book now follows. Rather than have recourse to a plethora of endnotes, page references to *The Household of God* will simply be noted in parenthesis. For Newbigin, the importance of ecclesiology today flows from three major factors:

[2] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2000), v.

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1. The breakdown of Christendom. This has to do with the rupture of the synthesis between the gospel and Western culture, "by which Christianity had become almost the folk-religion of Western Europe" (1). Where Christendom is taken for granted, mission suffers. "Western European civilization has witnessed a sort of atomizing process, in which the individual is more and more set free from his natural setting in family and neighborhood, and becomes a sort of replaceable unit in the social machine… Wherever Western civilization has spread in the past one hundred years it has carried this atomizing process with it. Its characteristic product in Calcutta, Shanghai, or Johannesburg is the modern city into which myriads of human beings" are atomistically cast (3-4). If this were true in 1952, it is much re-enforced today. All over the world, through the complex of forces described as "globalization," persons are severed, and also wish to sever themselves, from their originating and nurturing communities. So, it is natural, for people to ask if there is a family/society to which they may belong and be truly at home, and if there is, where is it?

2. The experience of the Christian mission. Too often the missionary movement was controlled by the old Christendom idea. The Christian "folk-religion of Europe" was taken throughout the world. In the course of the second millennium Christianity and Western culture --- the old Christendom --- were exported to Africa, Latin America, India and the Orient. The Church often functioned as Karl Rahner has it, as "an export firm which explored the European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior"[3]

3. The ecumenical movement. "The ecumenical movement has been a byproduct of the missionary movement, arising out of the missionary experience of the church outside of the old Christendom, and enormously reinforced by the experience of churches within Christendom which have found themselves here also in a missionary situation face-to-face with new paganisms. It is important to bear this fact in mind, for the ecumenical movement will become fatally corrupted if it does not remain true to its missionary origins" (10). The modern ecumenical movement was born during the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, with participants from all over what were described as the missionary territories of the world. Now mission is everyone's business. Newbigin recognizes that mission within the old European Christendom is now every bit as important as mission to the rest of the world was regarded then. This is the terrain of the "new evangelization." The World Council of Churches, established in

[3] Karl Rahner, SJ, "A Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," in his *Theological Investigations,* vol. 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 78.

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1948, gave incipient institutional embodiment to the conviction that the church should be one, but it remains neutral about the proper form/shape of that unity: "We are divided from one another, but Christ has made us his own, and he is not divided." Newbigin reminds us that: "It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind him was not a book, nor a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community… The actual community is primary; the understanding of what it is comes second" (20-21).

The Three Embodiments of the Church

For Newbigin there are three main embodiments of the church. As each is described, it may be felt that these embodiments are something of an ecclesiological caricature, but even if they are caricatures, there is enough realism in them to enable Newbigin's contrast to go ahead. First, the embodiment that emphasizes faith, that faith comes by hearing, and so, by the centrality of the preaching of the Word. This might be referred to as "classical Lutheranism." It is the key emphasis of many of the Reformation communities, both in the sixteenth century and today. Second, the embodiment that both honors preaching and acknowledges the necessity of faith, but is also centered on the sacramental activity of the church, rather than on the Word. This might be referred to as "classical Catholicism." The sacramental emphasis is central to Catholicism, both in its Western and in its Eastern forms. It might be framed in terms of Henri de Lubac's great axiom, "the Eucharist makes the church." As a result of Vatican II – in the Constitutions on Revelation and the Sacred Liturgy – Catholics are aware that there is not only no opposition between Word and Sacrament, but also that every celebration of sacrament is accompanied by a celebration of the Word. This awareness may not have been so obvious at the time Newbigin was writing in 1952. So, for the sake of his argument, we may say that the characteristic distinguishing mark of Catholicism is sacramental celebration. Third is the embodiment that is more interested in the experienced effects of Christianity rather than in classical Lutheranism/Protestantism or classical Catholicism. For want of a better term Newbigin refers to this as "Pentecostalism."

Newbigin criticizes the tendency in the Reformation traditions to downplay the importance of the historical and visible continuity of the church. "It is necessary to seek penitently and realistically for the source of the tendency to endless fissiparation which has characterized Protestantism in its actual history. How has it come about that the vast majority of Protestant Christians are content to see the church of Jesus Christ split up into hundreds of separate sects, feel no sense of shame about such a situation, and sometimes even glory in it and claim the support of the New Testament for it?" (53). He emphasizes: "What God has given to the world in

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Christ is something different, an actual divine humanity, a real presence of God in human history, not a new idea about God, but God made man, and calling men into fellowship with himself… This divine-human fellowship is a real visible community having its place in world history, even though the secret of its life is invisible and lies beyond world history. Christ has promised to be with it to the end of the world, and it is his presence which constitutes it… This divine-human fellowship is a real visible community having its place in world history, even though the secret of its life is invisible and lies beyond world history. Christ has promised to be with it to the end of the world, and it is his presence which constitutes it" (56-57). This is a fine passage. It articulates what is important about substantial Catholic ecclesiology. The church is *there*. It can be seen, heard, and touched. It is visible. This acknowledgment leads Newbigin to conclude: "The difficulty about what is purely spiritual is that it is apt to become purely private. We are not discarnate spirits and we enter into spiritual communion one with another only through our sense experience of sight, sound, and touch. Without this we quickly become prisoners of our own selfhood" (58).

It is most doubtful if the central Reformation ecclesial traditions would deny this visible embodiment of the church, at least in broad outline. "The Body of Christ in which Christians are members is a visible body, entrance into which is marked by the visible sign of baptism. In the same way the center of its ongoing life is a visible sign of bread broken together… The visible center of this common life is the common sharing in the Lord's Supper, in which the members are made participants in his Body and Blood" (70-75). There may be different understandings of the sacraments and especially of the Eucharist. But classical Reformation traditions have not and do not wish to sever themselves from at least the celebration of Baptism and Eucharist.

Newbigin recognizes that even in Reformation traditions that are very critical of traditional Catholic ecclesiology, they all accept in practice "a certain authority over the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments." (59). So, there is always some sense of "apostolic succession." "The same Luther who denied in principle that the church could exclude him from the communion of Christ, in later life placed the use of the power of the keys among the essential marks of the church alongside of the word and sacraments. The followers of Calvin and Knox, who had both absolutely denied that ministerial succession is a mark of the true church, are found asserting a perpetual succession of presbyters. And the followers of John Wesley, who had performed an act of ordination for which he had no ecclesiastical authority, would probably be more horrified than any other body of Christians if one of their members today did the same… (These things) are a deeply impressive testimony to the fact

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that it belongs to the nature of the church to have a visible and continuing structure" (77). Having made this emphasis abundantly clear, Newbigin equally emphasizes what might be called the importance of "anonymous apostolic succession": "No one who is not spiritually blind or worse can fail to acknowledge that God has signally and abundantly blessed the preaching, sacraments, and ministry of great bodies which can claim no uninterrupted ministerial succession from the apostles, but who have contributed at least as much as those who have remained within it to the preaching of the Gospel, the conversion of sinners, and the building up of the saints in holiness" (84). If the marks of holiness are to be seen in the lives of Christians in the Reformation traditions, then somehow, perhaps in ways that are not easily articulated by Roman Catholics, there is present elements of apostolic succession.

When it comes to Pentecostalism, the "central element is the conviction that the Christian life is a matter of the experienced power and presence of the Holy Spirit today; that neither orthodoxy of doctrine nor impeccability of succession can take the place of this; that an excessive emphasis upon those immutable elements in the Gospel upon which Orthodox Catholicism and Protestantism have concentrated attention may, and in fact often does, result in a church which is a mere shell, having the form of a church but not the life; that if we would answer the question 'Where is the church?,' we must ask 'Where is the Holy Spirit recognizably present with power?'" (95). Note the importance of the adverb "recognizably." If the Holy Spirit is present, then for the Pentecostalist that presence should be verifiable. It should make a difference, and this difference coincides with the experience of the earliest Christians as expressed in the New Testament. This is how Newbigin puts it: "The Holy Spirit may be the last article of the Creed but in the New Testament it is the first fact of experience" (96). Experiencing the Holy Spirit is more important than doctrine about the Holy Spirit. Now obviously there cannot be experience without some kind of doctrine, however latent. But, if we bear with Newbigin's ecclesiological caricatures, the point is that this characteristic of the Pentecostal ecclesial experience must be taken seriously. Indeed, one may appropriately see if present in different degrees throughout the entire history of the church, beginning with the Corinthians in the New Testament, the Montanists of the second century, and so on to the enthusiasts of every Christian generation, as they emphasize the centrality of experience over doctrine. So, the Catholic-Protestant debate needs to be three-cornered, to include the Pentecostal forms of Christianity.

Newbigin acknowledges a certain reluctance on the part of more traditional/classical ecclesiologies to engage Pentecostalism: "We are uncomfortable without definite principles by which we may guide our steps. We fear uncharted country and the fanatics of all kinds who, upon the alleged

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authority of the Holy Spirit, summon us with strident cries in all directions simultaneously. Only those who have never borne the heavy burden of pastoral responsibility will mock at the cautious spirit of the ecclesiastic. But on the other hand let us admit that according to the New Testament we are summoned precisely to the task of 'discerning the spirits'; that it is there taken for granted both that the Holy Spirit is free and sovereign, able to work in ways that demand rethinking of our traditional categories, and that he himself gives to the church the necessary gifts by which he may be known (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:10)" (106). Having said this, there must be balance: "When the claim to possession by the Spirit, attested perhaps by abnormal signs of spiritual power, is made the ground for treating the unity and order of the church with contempt, and for despising the great mass of 'nominal Christians' in whom only the virtues which we have come to regard as normal for a Christian are to be seen, we must say bluntly as St. Paul did, that this is not the work of the Spirit but of the flesh. There is one Body as there is one Spirit, and there are no grounds for thinking that we can try to separate one from the other without disastrous error" (116).

Mission, or the New Evangelization

Newbigin quotes the mid-20th century Protestant theologian Emil Brunner: "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning" (162). "(The church) has its being, so to say, in the magnetic field between Christ and the world. Its *koinonia* in him is a participation in his apostolate to the world" (162-163). This is exactly the point of view that comes to expression, albeit different ways, of Vatican II's decree *Ad Gentes* and constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. This is an older phrasing of what our contemporaries refer to as the "new evangelization." The church exists to be missionary; the church is mission, just as the whole event of Jesus Christ, the whole event of the Incarnation is mission.

"It is no accident that the modern movement for Christian reunion is a by-product of the modern missionary movement, and that its chief impetus has come from the areas where the church has been formed by missionary expansion outside the frontiers of the old Christendom." (173). Disunity among Christians for Newbigin destroys mission. Hence the abiding importance of ecumenism, especially of this three cornered ecumenism – Catholic (including, of course, the Orthodox), Protestant, and Pentecostal. "I do not think that a resolute dealing with our divisions will come except in the context of a quite new acceptance on the part of all the churches of the obligation to bring the Gospel to every creature; nor do I think that the world will believe that Gospel until it sees more evidence of its power to make us one. These two tasks – mission and unity – must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation one with another." (174). In our

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contemporary terms Newbigin is reaffirming that the new evangelization will not work and cannot last unless it is also fueled by a passion for mission that is undergirded by an equal passion for Christian unity.

Towards the end of his book Newbigin writes: "I began these lectures by asking: 'What is the manner of our incorporation in Christ?' I have tried to show that all the three answers which we looked at our true; we are made members in him by hearing and believing the gospel (classical Protestantism), by being received sacramentally into the visible fellowship of his people (classical Catholicism), and both of these only through the living presence of the Holy Spirit (Pentecostalism). At the same time I tried to show that when any one of them was taken as alone decisive, error and distortion followed" (148).

Conclusion

Although it is many years since I first encountered and read Lesslie Newbigin's *The Household of God,* the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome, discussing all aspects of the "new evangelization," reminded me of his powerful message. Many of the Synod fathers are reemphasizing the importance of ecumenism. Bishop Newbigin's little book may be of considerable help in this regard.

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