The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America

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The contextual missiology of the North American churches is poorly formed, at best. At the heart of the recent work of Lesslie Newbigin, there lies a challenge to develop a domestic missiology marked by the theological depth he has habitually brought to bear on missiological issues. To do so will require that we acknowledge the fundamentally new social circumstances in which the churches of North America now live, and pursue the answer to three questions in light of those circumstances: How must we grasp our identity? How must we seek the "common good"? And how must we tell the gospel?

At the Lausanne II at Manila gathering of evangelical missionary forces (in 1989), time was reserved in the schedule for national gatherings. In those meetings, people from—or working in—each country met to pray, evaluate, share, and strategize regarding the evangelizing task facing the church in that place. In every gathering, that is, except one. The USA meetings were noteworthy because their focus was not on evangelizing the USA but on continuing to mobilize USA churches for the evangelization of the other countries of the world. To the USA participants, the USA did not yet appear to be a field for mission, only a launching pad for missionizing the "elsewheres" of the world (cf. Van Gelder 1990).

The situation is not much better within ecumenical mainline Protestant denominations. For all the talk about "reciprocal mission" or "mission in reverse," it is hardly feasible that any North American Protestant church would do anything but laugh if it were suggested that an African or Asian be called to be the founding pastor/evangelist for a project to plant a new church in an area inhabited by white middle-class folks. We still send white missionaries to plant churches among non-white peoples elsewhere in the world. But we cannot conceive of the need for missionaries from other places and cultures to do that here. We fail to see the need for anyone else to help us, not even with the very aspects of the work of the churches which have
become most vexing for us (e.g., evangelism!). We welcome colleagues from elsewhere as informants on their part of the world. Perhaps we will allow them to give a measure of critique from the perspective of their culture. But by definition, we Americans are “not in need” of missionaries to come help us.

These dynamics betray a mindset which lies at the root of what must be called a glaring gap in American missiology. We have failed to give clear-cut attention to the development of a domestic, contextual missiology for our own North American setting. In its place has grown an implicit, functional missiology suffering from a lack of scrutiny and critique. In most of our churches, ask what people think about “mission” and immediately you get responses about “people over there” in faraway places across the globe, people who have “little or no knowledge” about Christ, among whom our missionaries are working to bring the light of the gospel. Shift the focus by saying, “No, I meant local mission right here.” Now what you hear about are benevolent projects for helping the poor and disadvantaged. Again you say, “But what about evangelizing your community?” Then the conversation shifts to the ways the church is seeking to attract, gain, and retain new members.

“Over there, helping the poor, recruiting members”—these have become the operational missiologies of our churches. And they are not just uninformed notions of lay people. They are fueled and undergirded by the guidance implicit in the language of missiological institutions and movements. The fundraising dimensions of denominational and independent global mission agencies transmute what should be occasions for mission education in our churches into mere mission promotion designed to sustain extensive logistical superstructures. The tendency toward social ethical preaching in our pulpits (whether emphasizing public justice or private moralities) combines with the basic (if fading) American value that every person has a right to material well-being to produce a posture of benevolence toward the poor. The American mystique of growthism makes growing the church larger an end which is more important than representing the gospel of the reign of God.

It can be defended that each of these has a measure of validity. But even when taken all together, global mission support (i.e., a large missionary budget), benevolence toward the poor (building houses and supplying food), and church growth efforts (parking lots and visitation programs) form an inadequate notion of a congregation’s mission. Its inadequacy shows up in several ways. In the first place, all three facets of the complex enjoy a strong dependence upon root American values (the same values by which we design our economy, gauge national progress, wage war, etc.). We have the attitude that if we can do something, we should do it. Personal freedom is the greatest good. Material well-being belongs to free people. Growth and success proves that these essential values are right.

While this might suggest that what we have here is, in fact, a very contextualized, domestic missiology—which I have said we lack—I contend that it is not so domestic as it is domesticated. It has comfortably emerged out of a set of cultural values that have been uncritically allowed to shape the scope of mission for us.
A second inadequacy follows on the heels of the first. Inherent in the American mythology is a sense that individual freedom—the fundamental myth—is substantiated as a proper foundation for the social order by a supporting myth, material success. The pragmatism, benevolence, and success dimensions of the functional missiology I have been describing function for us in congregations in a way that is similar to their operation in the larger culture, as confirmation and therefore as a gauge. If our church grows, the rightness of our faith is somehow verified. We help the poor, but of course, look for that help to have its proper effect—that the poor will then get themselves back on their feet. We support global efforts as long as we can see the payoff. The consequence is that these three dynamics of pragmatism, benevolence, and success function more to serve the self-assurance and self-confidence of the congregation than they serve the world in which the congregation lives or the reign of God which it represents. We feel better when we do these things, and especially when they are done successfully. The bottom line is that we feel better because we are able to feel okay about ourselves.

The greatest sign of the inadequacy of this reigning missiology is its lack of theological depth, or even theological character. Biblical rationales can always be marshalled, of course. But the fruit of global missiological reflection has scarcely been brought to bear on the need for an operative congregational missiology that is larger than the truncated versions which have been so largely unattended—versions which touch ever so slightly upon the missionary calling of the church. Consequently, the church in America has become increasingly anemic. As a result, our congregations flounder under the influence of false myths and, ultimately, un-missionary thinking.

It is to such issues as these that the most recent writings of Lesslie Newbigin have spoken. In effect, he has thrown down the gauntlet, challenging the churches of the West to look to our own contexts as missionary settings and to be as rigorous about what that must mean for our own missionary life as we have been about doing mission elsewhere. He was not the first to see the crisis. Nor was he the first to ask about the nature of “the missionary encounter of the gospel with Western culture.” But in many ways he has become a potent catalyst for focusing our attention on what must become a primary agenda for Western churches. His return from India in the mid-1970s to his native land, England, gave occasion to play out there the wealth of missionary perspective and statesmanship which had been his contribution within global missiological conversations for several decades. The fruit of that worldwide dialogue fueled his challenge to the churches of the United Kingdom in The Other Side of 1984 (1983). His way of putting the agenda was sharpened as it was brought more directly to American attention with the publication of Foolishness to the Greeks (1986). In The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989), the essential agenda called for in the earlier books has been further explored along a number of fronts, including especially the development of what might be called a postmodern apologetic to undergird believing and testifying, and the recovery of what it means to be a missionary congregation that serves as the hermeneutic of the gospel.
If Newbigin has thrown down the gauntlet (in the "medieval glove" sense of that word), he has accompanied that challenge with an indication of the nature of the gauntlet (in its other meaning) which we are forced to run. His description (particularly in Foolishness to the Greeks) of what he sees to be a rudimentary facet of Western culture, namely the dichotomy that has come to exist between appropriately public "facts" and essentially private "values," provides clues for understanding a kind of daily gauntlet each of us navigates, whether we are believers in Christ or other people in the culture. For the church, the effect of the dichotomy strikes at the heart of our self-understandings. The church's former privileged position in Western societies under a Christendom model is now gone, and it will not be regained. The church, as a faith community, is relegated by the culture's frame of understanding to the private world of personal values, beliefs, and opinions. By and large, the church has willingly (if sometimes unknowingly) accommodated itself to that relegation and become a privatized, voluntary association for perpetuating its set of faith opinions. But for a church that believes that the gospel it embraces was God-given and intended as news for the whole world, for its public as well as its private life, there is a deep dilemma. We run the gauntlet between a failed Christendom and a false privatization, in pursuit of new ways of running it.

We run the gauntlet in another way, as well. When we recognize that we are engaging a cross-cultural missionary situation made more complicated by the fact that the culture in view is our own, we are thrown into serious difficulty. How can we critique our culture, and seek the gospel's critique of it, while our way of judging the culture and our way of reading the Bible are themselves shaped by our own culture? We are forced to develop approaches which navigate between the Scylla of culture-bashing on the one hand and the Charybdis of absorption into the culture on the other, attempting to avoid both dashing ourselves on the rocks and getting swallowed into the sea.

While Newbigin provides many helpful insights for taking up his challenge and running the gauntlet, probably his most important contribution is that he has stimulated and framed the agenda. But it is important to recognize the ground from which that framing arises within the broader sweep of his missiological orientation. That will provide help along several lines: for interpreting his essential thesis; for recognizing its missiological character; and for identifying some of the contours for our engagement of the agenda within our own North American context.

**Missiological Orientations**

**A Missiology of Culture**

Foolishness to the Greeks is a book in two parts: the first ten pages, and the remainder of the book. This is what some fail to recognize who read Newbigin and too quickly judge that he holds a "Christ-against-culture" posture and engages only in culture-bashing. The first part contains in very distilled form a summary of his orientation toward the cultural-ness of human life, an orientation which has become standard for missiological reflections regarding places outside of the West. While his summary is
remarkably unsophisticated in cultural anthropological terms, it bears with
great force the major insights of the global missionary experience and
suggests that now we must do business the same way within our Western
cultures. More than that, he, perhaps more than anyone, has grappled
theologically with the issues of gospel and culture, not just engaging them
as practical and strategic issues. Essential for understanding his proposal is
an appreciation for the theology of cultural plurality which implicitly
permeates these and much of his other writings.

At the heart of Newbigin's theology of cultural plurality lies his sense of
a "three-cornered relationship" between the gospel, a particular culture, and
the church (Newbigin 1978b:165-172). Of special importance are the dynam-
ics which emerge around each of the three axes formed: the conversion
encounter axis, the reciprocal relationship axis, and the missionary dialogue
axis (Figure 1).

Along the first axis, the gospel and its communication presents to every
culture a "challenging relevance." It is relevant insofar as it is embodied in
the terms by which people of the culture have learned to understand their
world. It is challenging because in every culture Jesus is introduced as one
who bursts open the culture's models with the power of a wholly new fact
(Newbigin 1978a:11-12). Embodiment without challenge would lead to
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Figure 1. A Triangular Model of Gospel-Culture Relationships

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it precipitates a fundamental paradigm shift which brings about a new ultimate commitment at the center. It entails, in that sense, a "radical discontinuity," a break into new directions, for the one embracing the gospel. Never is this a total discontinuity, however, because the gospel and a person's response to it of necessity remain embodied in a particular culture's way of seeing, feeling, and acting.

The second axis, the reciprocal relationship between gospel and church, is the fruit of conversion. A community is established for whom "the Bible is the determinative clue to the character and activity of the one whose purpose is the final meaning of history" (Newbigin 1986:62). But this community, which is a "people of the book," is also the community that bears the Bible as its own testimony. The community's tradition shapes its reading of its book, while its reading and re-reading of the book further shapes its self-understanding. It is the church's commitment to the Bible's authority, embodied in an active discipleship, which enables the hermeneutical circle between Bible and church itself to become the hermeneutic of the gospel among the cultures of the world.

The third axis is that between the missionary church and a local culture, whether it is "other" than the culture of the church or is in fact its own. The church's style of life becomes a missionary dialogue. That implies a multiplex church in full ecumenical dialogue among its own members in the variety of human cultures. But more, it suggests that witness is always given with the recognition that when heard and embraced, it is not the form of embodiment already achieved in the missionary church which will dictate the way conversion and discipleship will emerge in the new culture. Newbigin calls for a sense of the radical independence of the new convert (and newly converted church) vis-à-vis the missionary church through which the message has come. That complements the radical discontinuity of conversion itself, vis-à-vis one's own culture, and thus affirms the proper enculturated-ness of the forms which that conversion will take. Again, this radical independence cannot remain a total one, in that the new church takes its place alongside the other churches of the world in the necessary ecumenical conversation between the various inculturations of discipleship.

It is important to grasp these features of Newbigin's missionary approach which are briefly stated here. The authority of the Bible, its affirmation and critique of every culture, and the church's attitude toward both of these features are essential for a serious missiological encountering of the Western culture which is for us in North American churches both our assumed reality and our missionary assignment. Newbigin's model helps us become more discriminating in our concern to avoid both syncretism and irrelevance, more focused upon inhabiting the biblical vision as part of a multi-cultural Christian community, and more open to the ongoing dialogue with our own culture which is as much an inner dialogue as an outer one.

A Theology of Conversion

The second feature of Newbigin's missiological orientation which governs his approach to Western culture is his way of understanding conversion.
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He sees it as threefold. Conversion means being turned round in order to recognize and participate in the dawning reality of God's reign. But this inward turning immediately and intrinsically involves both a pattern of conduct and a visible companionship. It involves membership in a community and a decision to act in certain ways. (1969:96)

Conversion has mental, ethical, and communal dimensions for Newbigin. It is not accidental that the outline of Foolishness to the Greeks (1986) reflects this pattern. After establishing his central thesis in the earlier chapters and showing how the missionary encounter he describes is born by a community which inhabits a different plausibility structure than that shared by the surrounding society, Newbigin takes up in turn these three dimensions of conversion. In Chapter 4 he examines the "Dialogue with Science" and demonstrates the "wider rationality" that can be claimed for Christian faith, which, unlike the predominant modern scientific worldview, does not exclude the category of purpose in regard to knowing (cf. 90). Chapter 5 follows with the "Dialogue with Politics," the ethical dimension of conversion. There Newbigin portrays the calling of the church to be "resident aliens" which embodies in its life "a witness to the kingship of Christ over all life—its political and economic no less than its personal and domestic morals" (102-103). In the final Chapter 6 he gives a preliminary description of the resultant "Call to the Church" to recover "its proper distinction from, and its proper responsibility for, this secular culture that we have shared so comfortably and so long" (135). He asks the church to consider the forms of its life appropriate to a community governed by the vision of the coming reign of God (127-129, 134-137). In other words, the second half of this book is given over to an account of the shape of the radical paradigm shift to which the gospel calls the church in the midst of contemporary Western culture, a shift that "leads to a new vision of how things are and, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is 'rendered' for us in the pages of Scripture (1986:64)."

This is important to recognize when tempted to see in Newbigin's proposals, as some do, an accommodationism either to a residual Christendom model (Thomas 1984) or to a ghettoized sectarianism (Kaiser 1987). He is attempting to avoid both, and of course—with all of us—runs the risk of falling prey to either. But whether or not his own specific visions for renewal and recovery achieve this goal, it is at least true that his pursuit is governed by a fundamental conviction that, whatever form the church's witness must take, it must represent a genuine and essential conversion of mind, behavior and communal commitment.

A Postmodern Apologetic

It is perhaps Newbigin's richest contribution to Western Christian persons plagued by the nagging "failure of nerve" in regard to overt and explicit witness to a faith in Jesus Christ that he has supplied what I believe...
can be properly called a "postmodern apologetic." In a way that gives deep and empathetic response to the culture's intimidation that repels us into silence in all but our most formal opportunities to speak the gospel, Newbigin draws upon Michael Polanyi's sense of the ways of knowing in order to affirm the legitimate "rationality" of believing the gospel to be true and true for all. In so doing, he not only releases the failure of nerve but its twin, the internal crisis of faith which it finally entails.

The most comprehensive setting out of this apologetic is to be found in The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (1989). There, in the first five chapters (1-65), Newbigin seeks to provide a way of believing and knowing that shows how both scientists attempting to know physical objects and persons attempting to know God engage in the knowing in distinct but comparable ways. The supposed objective factuality of scientific knowing is broadly assumed in our culture to lie in contrast to religious conviction. But as Polanyi (1958) has observed, all knowing—scientific no less than religious—is subjective in that it is an act of personal commitment. Along with a focal dimension, it includes a tacit dimension of frames of reference and tools for knowing (including language) which are relied upon, at least for the moment, as investigation proceeds. Even doubt, as a knowing tool, rests upon beliefs held without doubting. As well, all reasoning depends upon and is embodied within some rational tradition maintained within a particular community. In these ways, scientific knowing is not fundamentally different from religious knowing.

And religious knowing, which is likewise subjective, nevertheless bears features similar to those our culture has more readily assigned to scientific knowing. Personal knowing has an objective referent; it is offered with universal intent. What is claimed to be known by "scientist" or "believer" is offered not as private opinion but as public fact and begs to be published and shared so that it can be questioned and checked in the public forum. In science as in religion, innovation is not so much by reason of new facts as by paradigm shift, and such shifts result from acts of imagination or intuition. It is the imagined "clue" which gives rise to advances in knowing. In the case of Christian faith, the gospel, the sense "that in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus God has acted decisively to reveal and effect his purpose of redemption for the whole world" (1989:5), provides the clue to the meaning and purpose of the world's life.

Seen in the light of these observations about "personal knowing," religious knowing is no less credible than scientific knowing when both are rightly understood. In obvious ways, the apologetic Newbigin offers gives encouragement to move beyond intimidation, secure in the sense that the alternate "rational tradition" borne by the Christian community can be understood to be a credible "wider rationality" than that offered by the reigning plausibility structure of the culture. A sense of the ways we "know" gives rise to new ways of believing and witnessing.

The Missionary Congregation

A recurrent and forceful theme in Newbigin's missiology has been his challenge to the church to embody its true missionary character. Invariably,
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he focuses that challenge upon the fabric of the local congregation, emphasizing the necessity for visible unity among “all in each place” who believe the gospel and the implications of the catholicity of such truly united local bodies. Indeed, he has played a critical role in the definitions of unity and catholicity within World Council of Churches deliberations. But always, unity and catholicity are crucial for Newbigin because of their connection to the church’s missionary character. A local church bears in itself all the marks of the catholic church and fully represents its fellowship to neighbors close at hand. That local church’s unity is evidence that God has in fact sent Jesus into the world to be its Savior. In that and a myriad of ways, the local congregation is the essential “hermeneutic of the gospel,” the lens through which it may become known and by which it can rightly be interpreted.

It is the glaring absence of missionary character in the churches of the West that has most alarmed Newbigin and spurred his engagement of “the missionary encounter of the gospel with Western culture.” That encounter, after all, is one which belongs to the heart and birthright of the church. So when he wrote *The Other Side of 1984* (1983), it was in order to raise “Questions for the Churches.” *Foolishness to the Greeks* concludes with a “Call to the Churches” focused in the question, “What Must We Be?” (1986:124ff.). The concluding chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* attempt to sketch the congregations’ hermeneutical importance and the form of ministerial leadership required for such a missionary recovery (1989:222ff.). There, in a telling observation, he touches the raw nerve most illuminating of the central missiological problem for the Western churches: the need for recovering a practical missionary ecclesiology, a self-understanding of and by the churches which envisions our missionary character and lives in faithfulness to it. He observes:

We have lived for so many centuries in the “Christendom” situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations. In a situation of declining numbers, the policy has been to abandon areas (such as inner cities) where active Christians are few and to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in the places where there are enough Christians to support them. Needless to say, this simply accelerates the decline. It is the opposite of a missionary strategy, which would proceed in the opposite direction—deploying ministers in the areas where the Christian presence is weakest. The large-scale abandonment of the inner cities by the “mainline” churches is the most obvious evidence of the policy that has been pursued. (1989:235-236)

The implications for a domestic missiology for North America are important. There is a crisis touching the character of evangelism in a pluralist, secularist setting. But that crisis is first one of the identity of the church itself which renders its witness in such a setting. There is a crisis regarding the nature of the church’s responsibility in and for the public order of the larger society. But that responsibility begs for a new, post-Christendom definition of the church itself. The priority of questions surrounding the re-imaging of the church corresponds to Newbigin’s long-standing convic-
tions about the essential ecclesiological rootedness of the church’s engagement in mission:

The basic reality is the creation of a new being through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This new being is the common life (koinonia) in the Church. It is out of this new creation that both service and evangelism spring, and from it they receive their value. These different acts have their relation to one another not in any logical scheme, but in the fact that they spring out of the one new reality. (1958:20)

A North American Missiological Agenda

Most simply and directly put, it is the church’s mission to represent the reign of God. It is the characteristic language of Newbigin to speak of the church as the “sign, instrument, and foretaste” of that reign (1978b:163; cf. 1986:117), language which has come to be shared broadly in ecumenical and Roman Catholic ecclesiology. It emphasizes that the church dares not equate itself with God’s reign, which it only serves, but it must also avoid divorcing itself from that reign. As Newbigin has put it:

The . . . danger to be avoided is the separation of the Kingdom from the church. It is clear that they cannot and must not be confused, certainly not identified. But they must also not be separated. From the beginning the announcement of the Kingdom led to a summons to follow and so to the formation of a community. It is the community which has begun to taste (even only in foretaste) the reality of the Kingdom which can alone provide the hermeneutic of the message. (1980:19)

In its mission under the reign of God, the church represents it as its community (koinonia), its servant (diakonia), and its messenger (kerygma). In its very life, as well as in its deeds and words, the church provides the locus and occasion for the Holy Spirit’s manifestation of God’s reign (cf. Newbigin 1980:41). This basic understanding of what is properly the church’s mission, anywhere and anytime, becomes suggestive regarding the mission of the moment for the churches in North America. The agenda before us gathers around three questions cast in light of the new circumstances: Christendom is gone, the church has been relegated to the private realm, and God is viewed by our contemporaries as neither necessary nor effective. With utmost seriousness, the churches of North America are faced with three matters of immediacy which are crucial for recovering our missionary character.

How must we grasp our identity?

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the North American churches have experienced a great sea change in our social location and function. No sooner had the Protestant-Catholic-Jew consensus of mid-century provided a place for the more formal elements of what Robert Bellah described as America’s “civil religion” (i.e., the phrase “under God” in the pledge of allegiance and “In God we trust” on our coinage), than we found ourselves...
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experiencing a “restructuring of American religion.” Robert Wuthnow documents the factors which have contributed first to a cleavage between two competing versions of civil religion and then to its collapse altogether (1988: Chapter 10). As a result of these and other trends, we have come to a place in which the fundamental “legitimating myths” underlying the American social order have shifted. In place of “inalienable rights” with which we have been “endowed” by our Creator, the first principles have now come to be (1) freedom; (2) material success, as confirmation of the rightness of the freedom myth; and (3) technology, as the infrastructure by which the other two are borne along. What was once “freedom in the interests of religious faith” has become “faith under the protective cover of freedom.” Freedom has become the “guiding principle that needs no further justification or definition.” Religion is seen merely as a story that illustrates the value of freedom (Wuthnow 1988: Chapter 11).

Such a shift as this means a change in social location for the churches. As Kennon Callahan has put it in more popular fashion, “the day of the churched culture is over” (1990). The day has gone when the church was generally valued by the society as important to the social and moral order and when because of that people tended to seek out a church for themselves. We sail today in a different kind of sea.

If our caretaker days are over and the church is no longer looked to for legitimation or moral underpinning, we have scarcely begun to live as though that were true, and this explains why we experience these changes as a crisis. The Christendom experiment has run its course and is over, but our images and instincts are still formed by its memory. We play out the church’s routine as though the concerns of the church and the quests of the culture go hand in glove. We are never quite sure which is the hand and which the glove, but we are certain they form common cause. The rude awakening that is breaking in on us is that whatever such connection there may have been in the past, it is vanishing.

We are caught between a Constantinian Christendom which has ended and to which we cannot return, and the culture’s relegation of the church to the private realm which is untenable if we have understood rightly that the gospel is news that has relevance to the public life of the whole world (Newbigin 1986:101-102). Over and over, it is the image of “exile” that seems to many people to capture best who we have become and how we might live in hope in the place of our planting. Perhaps the image is especially pertinent because in its dis-location an exile community feels most keenly the loss—or simply, the absence—of a clear sense of its identity or a focused center for its life. To know itself as exile is the beginning of recovery.

Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon elicits a rich tapestry of identity for the church in a new exile. Exiles hold the ultimate power to name themselves (Daniel 1; cf. John 1:12). Or, more accurately, they have the freedom to use the names given them by the empire while boldly retaining names that assert its limits! They are possessed with promises that this is not the way things will end, while carrying instructions to seek the welfare of the city in the meantime (Jeremiah 29:1-14). They are full of danger for
the empire, driven by dangerous memories and promises, expressing themselves with dangerous songs and criticism, eating dangerous bread and making dangerous departures (Brueggemann 1988; cf. Isaiah 40-55). They are at once both a “chosen out” people of distinct character and a “scattered around” (diaspora) people of common similarity (1 Peter 1 and 2).

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon propose a “confessing church” model as a “radical alternative” to the “activist” (Constantinian) or “conversionist” (privatized) models that are current. What they envision is the church as “an alternative polis, a countercultural social structure called church.” Such a church has as its overriding political task “to be the community of the cross.” They wish to see a church “that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price.” They invite us to see ourselves with exilic eyes as “resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief” (1989:44-49).

The inevitable charge that these proposals constitute a new sectarianism warns of a danger that a more crisp sense of being an alternative community will make the church aloof from the culture’s need for its healing presence. But being “of” the world (culture) has never been a better guarantee that the church is “in” the world (cf. Posterski 1989-28). In fact, only by adopting alternative principles can the church free itself from the social segregation it experiences at the hand of the culture’s principles. Already in the early 1970s, George Lindbeck predicted what he termed “the sectarian future of the church” (1971:227). He noted that to the degree generalized social support disappears, it becomes necessary for Christians or members of any other deviant minority to gather together in small, cohesive, mutually supportive groups. They must become, sociologically speaking, sectarian (1971:230). This is different from an “ecclesiastical” or “theological” sectarianism which splinters into competing groups. The early church, a “strongly deviant minority, unsupported by cultural convention and prestige,” remained “catholic” and “ecumenical” for all its diversity (1971:227). It was the merging of that sociological sectarianism with the divisive and schismatic theological variety that has plagued the church subsequently. A recovery of the sociological form without its attachment to the ecclesiastical form is Lindbeck’s proposal for a responsible sectarianism for our age.

The practical agenda which emerges in light of our present circumstances includes four basic tasks for congregations and their leaders. Two relate to the healing of the church’s identity and intimidation: (1) forming an alternate, communal “world”; and (2) casting a “wider rationality.” The other two have to do with the church’s inner and outer dialogue with the culture: (3) healing our fragmentary “worlds” (work, home, leisure, commerce, education, politics, church, etc.); and (4) igniting a subversive witness (Hunsberger 1991).

How must we seek the “common good”? An exilic image helps, rather than hinders, the church’s inclination...
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toward seeking the common good, if properly understood. But, if Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon provides any guidance at all in that regard, it is to be found in the absence of Constantinian language (Jeremiah 29:1-14). The exiles were to seek the welfare of the city, but not from any impulse that they must somehow seize control of its policies and dictate its ideology. Nor was their welfare-seeking to be done in order to justify themselves as pragmatically useful in the eyes of the ruling ethos, as the church has been pressed to do in modern American society. The impetus to seek the city’s welfare was not even to be borne along by expectations of success in refashioning the shape of Babylon; it was borne only by the recognition that their service announced greater realities than those upon which the Babylonian society was based (cf. Daniel 3:16-18).

If the Christendom image of our fit in the social scheme of things has played out and our prior sense of social responsibility was largely attached to it (in the espousal of both liberal and conservative agendas), what new sense must we gain of our God-given call to seek the common good? In a religiously and ideologically plural setting, what is the place of Christian visions for what makes the common order “good”? How must they be sought or offered amidst the alternate visions? If we seek the good not from a hope of success, then from what hope can we find motivation for representing the justice, peace, and joy of the reign of God? A new cast to the very way we ask the questions is called for.

While the carving of new paths for our thinking and action will not be easy and cannot be quickly achieved, at least several contours would appear to be important features for the way ahead. First, we must be self-conscious that we offer our action for the common good within a pluralist setting and according to pluralist rules. While the church seeks and finds its own identity beyond the definitions given by the culture, we cannot expect our participation in the social struggles to follow our rules. In this respect we will need to learn from the churches of the world which live out responsibility for the common good from their positions as minorities. The dynamics of mission in weakness and persistence at the margins will need to characterize our work.

Second, our pursuit of the common good must be marked by a more rigorous wholism. The polarization between Christian action for social justice and Christian action for personal morality is problematic because both too easily represent an accommodation to the culture’s individualist rights and interests. If the church only mimics the culture’s loosening grip on the question about that which serves the common good, and reflects the same tendency toward single-issue politics and constituency satisfaction, there will be little contribution that will distinguish the character of the coming reign of God the church represents.

Third, our action for the common good requires more complete communal integrity within the church. Whatever we espouse for the good of the society must be demonstrated by a living community which believes the vision enough to form its life around it. Ephraim Radner describes the shift implied as a movement from our tendency to think in terms of totalistic, theocratic
transformation (a liberationist model) toward the recovery of a sense that it is "the growth and expansion of religious communities, separate but within the larger society, that will engender vehicles for noncoercive deliverance" (1989:933). The church that pronounces concern for the homeless on the White House lawn, based on a set of values at odds with the culture, will welcome the homeless themselves into the shelter of their homes and houses of worship. For that integrity, Radner suggests, the image of exile serves better than one of liberation. In that image, the church becomes "a vessel of deliverance" rather than its agent.

Fourth, our care for the common good must grow from a care-filled eschatology. To say it that way is to distinguish such an eschatology from an overly "careful"—in the sense of reticent—eschatology which holds back from risk-taking and vulnerability. On the other side, it distinguishes it from a "careless"—in the sense of reckless—eschatology which blusters on triumphalistically. To be learned is a pursuit of the common good that sets aside both our hand-wringing and our utopianisms, both our hand-washing self-justifications and our demanding impositions. It is the reign of God, after all, that is coming, and our assurance of that creates confident and humble action.

**How must we tell the gospel?**

The third critical issue facing churches wishing to recover their missionary character is evangelism. On one side the issue concerns telling the gospel in terms appropriate to an audience of people who live with post-Christian, secular convictions. As George Hunter (1989) has pointed out, the genius of such diverse people as Samuel Shoemaker, Robert Schuller and Bill Hybels lies in the seriousness with which they saw and pursued the matter of communicating with secular people. Such a nuancing of our gospel-telling, lacking for the most part in the dominant "programs" of evangelism, is a long overdue development.

But something more crucial is needed. The very way in which we conceive evangelism needs overhauling. We cannot expect that in our new circumstances its shape as a Christian practice will not be re-made. At least four features are implicated in that renewal.

1. We have already hinted that it is important to the vitality of today's churches to show the Christian faith to provide a "wider rationality" than that of a culture for which the reigning paradigm explains things in terms of cause and effect without any recourse to questions of purpose. The silenced witness of the church grows out of the intense intimidation which the culture breeds. Here is where what we have called the postmodern apologetics which Newbigin offers help. Unless North American Christians are empowered to find confidence in ways of knowing that are demonstrably rational but liberated from false cultural shackles, it is unlikely that powerful witness will emerge. Our guilt-ridden motivational strategies and church growth technologies will never provide adequate substitutes.

2. A tandem requirement is that evangelism be grounded in a credible demonstration that life lived by the pattern of commitment to Jesus is imaginable, possible, and relevant in the modern and postmodern age. This
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requires more than what we meant previously when we called for verbal witness to rest on consistent Christian living. That tended to mean living exemplary, moral lives as upstanding citizens. The requirements of moral faithfulness are no less now, but more importantly the current need is for a demonstration that a faith in the gospel of God can be the genuine organizing center integrating the fragmented pieces of modern living. Only when that is seen lived out by someone who believes that way will the message about the reign of God have credibility. “The gospel will be perceived as a feasible alternative when those who do not know God have some positive, personal experiences with people who do” (Posterski 1989).

3. A re-shaped evangelism will include a new willingness to influence. Donald Posterski’s most important contribution to the “re-inventing” of evangelism is perhaps his seizing of the horns of the pluralism dilemma and offering a way to witness by going into and through the culture’s pluralist assumptions rather than continuing an evangelistic stance formed by resistance and opposition to those dynamics. He encourages a style which moves alongside “the principles that govern a pluralistic society: acceptance of diversity..., appreciation of options..., and interaction with alternatives” (1989:168). He judges that the tolerance factor in pluralism is an open opportunity for evangelism, not a barrier that stymies it. “When people sense they are accepted and appreciated for who they are, they are ready to interact without being defensive” (1989:169). An evangelistic style, therefore, that begins with acceptance and appreciation will have gained the opportunity and freedom to influence.

4. All of this implies a deepening humility of witness. Newbigin suggests the image of a “witness” giving testimony “in a trial where it is contested” and where the verdict “will only be given at the end” (1986:64). It is the function of such a witness “not to develop conclusions out of already known data, but simply to point to, report, affirm that which cannot come into the argument at all except simply as a new datum, a reality which is attested by a witness” (1982:14). David Lowes Watson (1983) has suggested a shift from a sales model to a journalist model, keying on the recognition that evangelism is a global announcement that the reign of God is at hand. Another model which commends itself in an age requiring that evangelists become meaning-makers (cf. Posterski 1989:31-48) is that of “docent,” in the sense of its use in museums and (e.g.!) the Atlanta Zoo. At the latter, docents are volunteers trained to mix among the crowds and be available to explain the various animal behaviors and habitats, providing interpretations of the worlds represented in the exhibits. Evangelism implies casting the “wider rationality” of a world seen as the location of the saving purposes of God.

Paying Attention

All of this will require of us to be more attentive in several areas. If our practical missiology points us toward developing patterns of life, deed, and word, the wider missiological task includes the attention we give in three other directions.
First, we must pay attention to the culture. It has cost us too much to assume that we know our culture and this has led too easily to accommodation. Only a sharp analysis of the cultural and social systems shaping, and being shaped by life in North America, can enable us to keep our missiology contextual. Current studies in these areas are plentiful. The special need is for missiologically sensitive readings of America’s cultural history, of the new sociological histories of the role and fate of the churches, and of the depictions of current cultural trends and future scenarios.

Second, we must pay attention to the gospel. There is here a theological agenda that must correspond to the phenomenological one. The central question of theology—What is the gospel?—must be asked in more culturally particular ways. And the more particular the question, the more will be our sense that the answer will emerge in unexpected ways. It will come more out of Christian communities which increasingly learn the habit of “indwelling” the gospel story so deeply that it shapes their life of common discipleship (cf. Newbigin 1989:232). The meaning of work and vocation, the integrating of our pluralistic experience, and a de-clericalized relocation of theology to the province of the laity are all implicated as elements of a missiologically sensitive theological agenda.

Third, we must pay attention to each other. It will require of us a new range of “ecumenical” partnerships if we are to hear the gospel as it takes form in the variety of cultures, subcultures, denominational cultures, and ethnic cultures of North America. There is no substitute for that breadth of listening if the forms of our common mission are to be seriously directed toward the dominant undercurrents of the culture as a whole. And at this point, the agenda takes on global dimensions because the growing pervasiveness of Western culture, carrying with it its pattern of resistance to the gospel, has made the agenda Newbigin has fostered a world-encircling one. Our openness to receive help from the world church and its own missionary encounter with our culture can no longer be avoided. We are one church in our common mission to represent the reign of God in a modern, secular, pluralistic world.

Notes
1. H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic text, Christ and Culture (1951), is not really an exception to that non-Western focus. His treatment has more to do with Christian attitudes and postures along the way in the journey of Western civilization and hardly raises the issues that arise with a contemporary anthropological understanding of “culture.” The plurality of cultures in the world does not bear on his treatment. Increasingly, the categories of his paradigm fail to account for the complexities involved in Christian relationships to cultures and for the evolving configurations of Western culture. For these and many other reasons, the need for a new paradigm presents one of the most pressing challenges we face.

2. This author’s Ph.D. dissertation was an exploration of this feature of Newbigin’s missiology (Hunsberger 1987). Centered in an understanding of the biblical doctrine of election as the inherent logic of mission (cf. Newbigin 1986:53, 98-99, 127; 1989:80ff.), Newbigin develops a theology of cultural plurality which provides theological grounding for discussions of cross-cultural mission, ecumenical
relationship, and interfaith dialogue.

3. By introducing the term "postmodern" in reference to Newbigin's apologetic approach, I do not intend to make any particular claim regarding whether postmodernism is a newly emerging cultural paradigm, or merely another extension and expression of modernity, or something more like the sense of a coming fin de siècle similar to that which expressed itself at the end of the nineteenth century (cf. Mestrovic 1991).


5. A forthcoming book by George Hunter (1992) explores important features of which we need to take account.

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