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A Hermeneutical Congregation: A New Reading of Leslie Newbigin's Missional Ecclesiology through the "Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel" Principle

Abstract

Within the Missional Church Movement, the work of Leslie Newbigin in developing a missional ecclesiology has been foundational. Yet often his ideas are not fully followed, rather just his language or overarching principles. Thus, a new reading of Newbigin's central idea for missional ecclesiology, the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel, is necessary. Looking at his initial work on this concept, expanded with the work of others, along with examples from churches, forms the content of this article. Ultimately, it provides a new way of reading Newbigin's missional ecclesiology for application in local churches.

Keywords: missional ecclesiology, Leslie Newbigin, Missional Church Movement, congregation as hermeneutic, community

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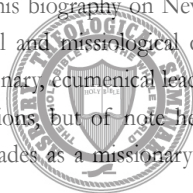
Introduction

At the turn of the century, commentators began reflecting on the recent past and trying to project the future of things to come. Ideas such as globalization were discussed, and the pending technological revolution was becoming noticeable on the horizon of global history. In the midst of this, a group of scholars and pastors embarked on a project looking at the current state of the Church in North America and came to a distinct conclusion, “Christianity in North America has moved (or been moved) away from its position of dominance as it has experienced the loss not only of numbers but of power and influence within society” (Guder 1998:1). Whether or not Christianity ever truly held dominance in North America, or was simply the outward expression of humanistic principles that espouse freedom of religion, is a debate left to the historians. The focus here is upon the movement that came out of that project, the Missional Church Movement (MC).

One of the major contributions of this movement has been in the development of missional ecclesiology, a theology of the church that builds upon mission. The growth of missional ecclesiology (Niemandt 2012) and a return to a focus upon the local congregation (Keifert 2000) has largely marked this conversation. Many of these ideas have connections to the theological principle of *missio Dei* and mission coming from the heart of God. This theological principle, taken into the local church and applied to the questions about what the church is and how it should be, is what brought about missional ecclesiology, and one of the earliest and most prominent people to do so was Bishop J.E. Lesslie Newbigin.

As rarely in modern times, the Church had in Lesslie Newbigin a bishop-theologian whose career was primarily shaped by his evangelistic and pastoral responsibilities and who yet made contributions to Christian thought that match in interest and importance those of the more academic among his fellow bishops and teachers. Their origin and destination in practice is what gave and continues to give such an extraordinary resonance to the oral and literary products of Newbigin’s creative mind and loving heart. On any reckoning that takes seriously the ecclesial location and reference of theology, Newbigin must be accounted an ineluctable presence in his era.¹

Geoffrey Wainwright begins his biography on Newbigin this way to establish his importance to the theological and missiological conversations of the twentieth century. A lifetime as a missionary, ecumenical leader, author, speaker, pastor, and educator has many contributions, but of note here is his work upon returning to England in 1974 after decades as a missionary in India. The Enlightenment’s

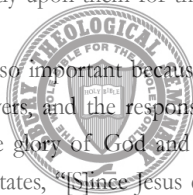


reclassification of the Western world, the splitting of church and mission into “two separate entities, responsible for two distinct tasks” brought about a deeply secularized or “neo-pagan” world in the West, which would spark Newbigin’s “reflections on missiology...in relation to the Western world” for the remainder of his life (Nikolajsen 2012:366). It is these reflections that the MC has picked up and built upon for the sake of their missional ecclesiology, because they are part of what made Newbigin “a giant in the fields of ecumenical and missionary theology in the twentieth century”(Weston 2996:viii). Yet, the MC has not always used Newbigin’s writings in their original form, often time borrowing his terminology but not necessarily his ideas.

Of particular interest is Newbigin’s work in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (GPS), out of which the concept of the local congregation as a hermeneutic of the Gospel develops. GPS, which is only referenced three times in *Missional Church* (the book that is traditionally viewed as the start of the movement), developed some of the major underlying themes of the MC and the writings of its proponents. Of the references in *Missional Church*, one is made to preface a discussion about missional leaders (Guder 1998:219), and a second is about the necessity of churches being culturally bilingual for the purposes of translating the Gospel to their community (Guder 1998:237). Yet both hold the assumption of the first Newbigin quote in the book; “[F]or the church to live out an intimate engagement with the narrative of God’s action in Jesus Christ that shapes its life and thought, it must use personal and communal ways of knowing that reach beyond the merely rational” (Guder 1998:41). This statement, referencing the portion of GPS that is under study here, serves as an underlying theme to the *Missional Church* book and the MC movement. This congregation must know God intimately and must seek ways of relevant engagement with its surrounding community. That is why Newbigin’s concept is so important to this discussion.

Because Newbigin was a leading voice of the developing ecclesiological dialogue of the twentieth century, (Nikolajsen 2013:255) his voice must be read and applied with the utmost care to the church of the twenty-first century. The importance of Newbigin and his ideas, and the lack of depth of their use by the MC leads to my proposed new reading of his ideas; one that is closer to his original thought and that builds directly upon them for the purpose of applying them to local churches.

This application is so important because Jesus has left the world with the community of his followers, and the responsibility is upon those followers to represent him well for the glory of God and the reconciliation of creation. Michael Goheen (2002:355) states, “[S]ince Jesus did not write a book but left a

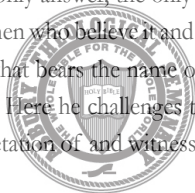


community to communicate the gospel of the kingdom, the church now played a central role in Newbigin's understanding of the gospel." This is why Newbigin is so important for the community of Christ followers in developing churches that represent the missional heart of God. And with such churches, the unity of the Body of Christ and the expression of Jesus' love – by and through his followers – may be seen in communities around the world. As Jesus taught, the unity of his followers will be identified in their love for each other (Jn. 17:34-35). It is this ecumenical unity that Newbigin strives for in his ecclesiology, and one that is obtainable through the missional ecclesiology he espouses. "For Newbigin, unity - a unity which was tangible and visible - belonged to the true nature of the church, and the demonstration of this unity was essential for the effective witness of the church" (Laing 2012:xvi). Thus, this missional ecclesiology serves a dual purpose – the increased day-to-day missional living of churches and their members, and the increased unity of churches across the theological spectrum.

For this purpose, we now embark on an expedition through Newbigin's missional ecclesiological thought. The focus of this will be upon Newbigin's concept of the local congregation as a hermeneutic of the Gospel found in GPS. With the chapter, where he lays out this concept, which is a large portion of what he builds toward throughout the book, he develops six main characteristics of such a congregation. We will take a look at the concept itself, then specifically focus upon the six characteristics with examples from congregations who are trying to live out just such an ecclesiological life.

The Six Characteristics

Newbigin's chapter in GPS (ch. 18) "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel," begins this conversation with a depiction of the current crisis and need of the church in the West. Having abdicated its place on the moral and truth-directing high ground for society, during the modernization and secularization of the West,² the church must rethink its role in this new contemporary context (Newbigin 1989:222-223). In doing this it must strive to become the sign and foretaste of the Kingdom (Newbigin 1989:224). Therefore, to recover this position and purpose of the church, Newbigin puts forth his new idea about what the church should be. "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" (Newbigin 1989:227). This new idea is the concept that bears the name of the chapter, the congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel. Here he challenges the local congregation "to be in its own life an enacted interpretation of and witness to the good news that in Christ



God is making all things new.” (Rae 2012:190) It is because of this concept that such a congregation is necessary in communities around the world today.

Newbigin establishes the problem that the gospel in the West now exists as “one element in a society which has pluralism as its reigning ideology”(Newbigin 1989:222), thus it “becomes a personal value, and discipleship is reduced to the private and the domestic” (Flett 2015:197). It is in answering this problem that the concept is developed, first out of the idea that “[T]he gospel interprets creation and history for the people God” (Newbigin 1989:198). Newbigin then inverts this concept to show that in its hermeneutic of the gospel, “the congregation is the ‘central reality’ by which the gospel might become ‘credible,’ might claim to be public truth” (Newbigin 1989:198). In this, it must be a visible congregation, re-establishing its word, sacrament, and office (or structure) in a way that garners questions and provides a counter life to that which is offered by the culture (Newbigin 1989:198-203). “The congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel is called to be visible, a concrete and historically continuous society” (Newbigin 1989:202), while also constituting itself within its movement beyond itself. It is in this movement, that the missions of the church is exercised, in the spirit of the deep imbibing of the ideologies and faiths it encounters (in his conversation about engagement with other faiths) (Newbigin 1995:184), which will in turn bring about its own redefinition and identification - being “changed and learn(ing) new things” (Newbigin 1989:124). Yet, dependent on God to reveal Himself to those with which this congregation engages (Newbigin 1989:224-225). And it is in the visible move of the church, in missions, into the world surrounding it that confronts the powers of darkness and reveals the reign of Christ (Flett 2015:206). This movement is one in the visibility of the Cross and the special (in-)visibility of the resurrection (revealed to those God chooses) (Flett 2015:203-206).³ This movement is possible because Christ, who is the central point and goal of history, has broken down all walls - which are only rebuilt by those who reject him (Flett 2015:207) The church, then, must strive to regain its place by being involved in the community, reminding it of its place within the reign of God - the eventual judgment of all by God (Newbigin 1986: 124-150).

Newbigin then develops six characteristics of such a community, based in the love and mission of God as seen in the visible cross and invisible resurrection. “It is in the local congregation that the credibility of the gospel becomes apparent, for that is the place where a real community of men and women, of young and old, of stranger and friend, are gathered into the reconciled fellowship of the body of Christ, hear the declaration that their sins are forgiven, and feast together at the table of the Lord” (Rae 2012:195). This congregation is marked by these six

characteristics that we will be unpacking for the remainder of this article. Each characteristic will be described by Newbigin's thought, expanded with the ideas of others, and examples given from churches living out these characteristics.

A Community of Praise

The first characteristic Newbigin develops - what he believes is also its most important (Newbigin 1989:227) - is that this sort of community will be one of praise. This is a praise that provides both freedom and thanksgiving - freedom in discovering the true self in the reverence of the only One who is worthy of it, and thanksgiving in the understanding of our sin and the gracious gift of God's mercy (Newbigin 1989:227-228). These two elements, freedom and thanksgiving, are what define a community of praise based in the scriptures and acting as an interpretation of those scriptures to its surrounding community.

The freedom Newbigin describes is freedom from sin and expectation, freedom to be themselves in the worship of their Creator. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would include in this a freedom that engages the other in love and respect. "It means awakening in believers true freedom for God and others. The Church, which is the new humanity redeemed in Christ, is the community in which this other-centeredness is realized and practiced with the hope of being finally consummated at the *eschaton*" (Franklin 2007:115). Thus, a praising community based in freedom will not only willingly offer reverence to God, but they will freely offer themselves to others.

The other main element, thanksgiving, is commonly held in conjunction with praise. "Basic to praise is thanksgiving, understanding that we only stand in God's presence by an act of his grace. Such gratitude is not containable," it becomes "an overflow of the joy experienced by those liberated from bondage," and thus "expands beyond our horizons to encompass our neighbor" (Flett 2015:210-211). Thanksgiving, offering of praise and self in response to the gracious gift of mercy, is not just a response, its a missional response - it witnesses and spills over to those around us. Because of this, worship also serves as an element of mission in this congregation. In Acts 2, we see a congregation with worship at its center. Here, "the church is seen to be dedicated to worship as that which informs the community and inspires it to act with love and caring concern with and for the community" (Cowan 2013:60). It is this type of worship that this congregation will exemplify.

Ruth Meyers discusses a church attempting to live out such praise (they use the language of worship) as part of the mission that the church undertakes. She provides some quotes from congregants of this church - All Saints' Episcopal Church in Chicago - and then gives her own conclusion. "Perhaps, then, by manifesting God's fierce love for the world in all its complexities, worship at All

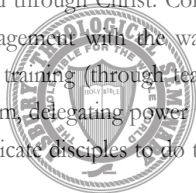
Saints' is itself mission, just as the congregation's food pantry and relationship with a congregation in Sudan are also mission" (Meyers 2010:39). For them, their praise is an act of mission, sharing with guests and the rest of the community the love, freedom, and thanksgiving that make up part of their identity as Christians. This church, like others who also engage praise as an element of mission (in particular the Orthodox tradition, which sees the full liturgy as part of mission and an act of praise) (Ware 1997:264-306), are simply living out what it means to be a community of praise as Newbigin envisioned.

A Community of Truth

A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy scepticism can be sustained, a scepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself. And, if the congregation is to function effectively as a community of faith, its manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda, but must have the modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus.⁴

This description of what it means to live as a community of truth is a challenge to this congregation. As Newbigin argues, this congregation will be marked by their counter plausibility structure, one that offers a different perspective and story of human history (Newbigin 1989:228-229). This story, hinging upon the Jesus event, allows this congregation to participate within society while also acting as a counter-cultural agent. Thus, it calls the congregation to engagement with their community on the grounds of truth – truth about themselves and the community as seen from the ultimate truth – Jesus Christ.

As Robert Coleman (2006:16) depicts in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, the Gospel is not just the teaching about Jesus Christ, but all "that the revelation of that life in Christ includes the way he lived and taught others to live." This living includes speaking the truth about Christ and the salvation available through faith in him as well as acting like him in love and mercy towards the rest of creation – enacting the salvation received through Christ. Coleman shares a model of Jesus' plan for evangelism and engagement with the waiting world, one that includes the selection of his disciples, training (through teaching and modeling) them for this ministry, consecrating them, delegating power to them, supervising them, and ultimately calling them to replicate disciples to do the same (Mt. 28:18-20). Living



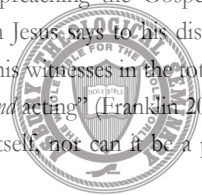
out the truth of Jesus, linchpin of history and savior of humanity, is what makes this congregation one of truth. A truth lived out in the community in which the church is located and which calls that community towards the God who redeems it.

It is just this sort of congregation that Corey Johnsrud is studying in a recent *Covenant Quarterly* article. “In order for congregations to increase their capacity for understanding and joining God’s mission in the world, they must first have a sober and true accounting of their current reality, which requires honest conversations and communal discernment” (Johnsrud 2016:31-32). It requires truth telling of the self (the congregation), the community (the world), as well as the Gospel. The first two, self and community, are what the Veritas seminar attempts to guide and provide space for. This then extends to the telling of the truth of the Gospel, which allows for truth telling in mission as well. Living as a community of truth means being shaped by the (new) “plausibility structure” (Newbigin 1989:228) of the Gospel, which causes us to engage “with the world and (expose its) false claims to power” (Flett 2015: 211). It is no simple task to truthfully evaluate and discuss ones self, the world, and the Gospel. But under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the shaping of the Gospel, this congregation stands as an example of Truth to its members and the surrounding community.

A Community Deeply Involved in the Concerns of its Neighborhood

This congregation is to be a place where the Gospel overflows in word and action to the surrounding community. Newbigin defines the local church as “God’s embassy in a specific place” (Newbigin 1989:229). It is in this place, the surrounding neighborhood and context of a church, that the congregation is truly itself. Every member must be either part of this neighborhood or committed to it, bringing about the truth of the Gospel in the context that surrounds the building itself, both in proclamation of and in living out the Gospel. If either of these is neglected – not being about the neighborhood or not being about the Gospel – then this congregation loses its place as a Church of God, it is no longer the *ekklesia* of Christ.

But what does it mean for the congregation to be about its neighborhood? It means that they are embedded in a larger community, concerned with the things that concern its neighbors, preaching the Gospel both in word and in deed. “Bonhoeffer notes that when Jesus says to his disciples, ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ he means they will be his witnesses in the totality of their existence, both in word *and* deed, proclaiming *and* acting” (Franklin 2007:101). The *ekklesia* of Christ cannot be a place all about itself, nor can it be a place all about missions in the world; it must be both.

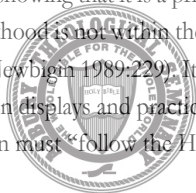


Instead of being totally consumed with itself (the church which has forgotten its neighborhood), or totally concerned with its community (the church that has forgotten the Gospel), “the church is to be ‘God’s embassy in a specific place,’ meaning that it is and remains a foreign presence, but one for this place” (Flett 2015: 211). It is fully concerned with what is going on in the community surrounding it, but it does so as a verbal and physical representation of the Truth. This congregation is in a neighborhood and must be a part of that neighborhood as a sign of the Kingdom of God. “While each neighborhood church is called to be a sign, foretaste and instrument of God’s kingdom, she is to do so in light of *who* she is and *where* she is ministering” (Woodward 2012:171). Thus, it must exercise a level of intentionality in engaging with its community, becoming aware of its needs, and meeting those needs as best it can as a representative of God’s kingdom. This intentional engagement comes out of its nature as a missionary church of a missionary God. “It actually moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary ‘points of concentration’ (Newbigin) such as evangelism and work for justice and peace” (Bosch 1991:373). And sometimes this being engaged in the community and working for peace can be costly.

David Forney (2008:69-71) provides an example of this in his depiction of the Confessing Church of 1930’s Germany. He shows that its leading members “journeyed outside the gate” to “listen to the one who... bears the abuse Jesus endured.” And in this they developed The Barmen Declaration as a way to strengthen and encourage German Christians to resist the heresies of Hitler’s Nazi government and stand for the Gospel (Forney 2008:71). This group of leaders, led by the Spirit, ventured into the community and took a stand against tyranny that looked to harm people, and they paid for it as well. Banishment, imprisonment, and even death laid ahead for some of the members of the Confessing Church. Yet they were compelled by the Gospel and a desire to live it out; to be engaged and work for the sake of peace and truth in the community.

A Community that Prepares and Sustains People for the Exercise of the Priesthood in the World

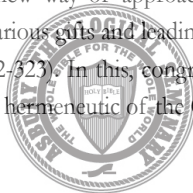
Newbigin calls out the royal priesthood of all believers imparted by Christ in the New Testament, showing that it is a priesthood that must be exercised. “But the exercise of this priesthood is not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world” (Newbigin 1989:229). It is through its engagement with the world that the congregation displays and practices the priesthood they received from Christ. This congregation must “follow the High Priest as the one who alone



fulfills” the task of standing before God on behalf of the people, and standing before the people on behalf of God (Flett 2015:211). Newbigin argues that living out this priesthood takes two key elements: the training (in discipleship) of each member for this type of life (with the attached continual training and support that is necessary), and the embracing of diversity.

This type of discipleship is different than discipleship of recent church history; it is a missional discipleship - formed around engagement “in mission and being intentional about faithful discipleship” (Maddix 2013:17). This type of discipleship is about a way of living, acting, thinking, and being that reflects the Gospel and our relationship (personally and corporately) with Jesus Christ. “People share meals, serve others, discuss issues of culture in relation to their Christian convictions, and pray without beginning with specific invitations to accept the gospel” (Maddix 2013:20). This is a community that is focused on discipleship for the purpose of being a light to the nations. They form their practices of discipling around principles of: contextualization, redemption of all creation, acts of compassion/justice/mercy, hospitality, cross-perspectival dialogue, and working for the freedom of those in bondage and oppression (Maddix 2013:22-25). This new type of discipleship, focused on the growth of the individual in community for the sake of God’s mission in the world, requires discipling as a way of life. Which is where Newbigin’s second principle, that of diversity, becomes important. “Newbigin advocates the recognition of the wider gifts of the body and the different forms of expression such gifts take. There exists no uniform style of evangelism or of Christian discipleship. Only in the diversity of gifts can the body fully exercise its royal priesthood” (Flett 2015:212). Thus, this type of community will embrace diversity, explore new ways of discipleship, and support the various gifts and callings of its members in reaching the neighborhoods and peoples that surround them.

It is this type of discipleship that served as part of the emphasis of Alan Roxburgh in his consulting with the Churches of Christ Conference of Victoria and Tasmania when they invited him to help revitalize their network of churches (Cronshaw 2015:322). In this process, Roxburgh taught these pastors and ministries to not “read Scripture in an attempt (just) to master it but let Scripture read them” and through this develop a new way of approaching their communities – one which was respectful of the various gifts and leadings of each congregation and its members (Cronshaw 2015:322-323). In this, congregations are better prepared to engage their communities as a hermeneutic of the Gospel.



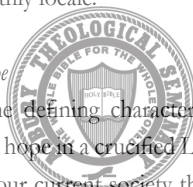
A Community of Mutual Responsibility

This type of congregation will be an *actual* community. Newbigin (1989:231) states, “that we grow into true humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another.” Though communities are often considered as simply a gathering of individuals, this congregation will be a community of people who are responsible to each other, for each other, and with each other – a fellowship. Fellowship will not just be a Christian code word for gathered together, but rather a way of life that leads each person into deep relationship, accountability, authenticity, and responsibility with other members of the congregation; thus creating a true community. Bearing in itself, “the type of social concerns it will see in the wider society,” this community strives to be, “‘a different social order’ and so manifest ‘relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another’” (Flett 2015:212). Because of this, this congregation will be formed by the Gospel while also living as a sign and foretaste of the Gospel. They become a witness of something different than society at-large, and thus serve in centripetal mission as well as the centrifugal movement we normally see in the missions of the church. But this mutual responsibility has some other key markers of community as well, namely authenticity.

This authenticity is both lived out in the congregation and in the surrounding community. In this congregation, it is an authenticity of confrontation, forgiveness, acceptance, unity, and hospitality (Minatera 2004:42-51). In describing authenticity and confrontation at Christ Fellowship, Milfred Minatrea (2004:46) shows the experience of one of their pastors that, “the only way a church becomes ‘real’ enough to ‘speak the truth in love’ is through establishing authentic relationships that value personal accountability.” It is these types of relationships that form the bedrock of this congregation that function as a community of mutual responsibility. Sharing all the aspects of their lives with each other, holding each other accountable, challenging each other to deeper faith and missions, all of these are signs of a true community of Christ. And it is through these relationships that this congregation can reach out to the world in authentic love for the witnessing of the Gospel. “The church is sent into the world, citizens of one Kingdom, living in another” (Minatera 2004:49). It is in this role that the congregation must live out its Kingdom citizenship in its earthly locale.

A Community of Hope

Hope is one of the defining characteristics of such a congregation, because Christian hope, that is hope in a crucified Lord for salvation of all creation, is not only so different from our current society that it is rendered unthinkable, it



is beyond comprehension - requiring the new plausibility structure of the Bible. “[T]he gospel offers an understanding of the human situation which makes it possible to be filled with a hope which is both eager and patient even in the most hopeless situation” (Newbigin 1989:232). This congregation will be one defined by hope, a hope that comes from the biblical plausibility structure that assures of the reconciliation of all creation by Christ (Newbigin 1989:101).

The hope to which this congregation strives “is directed to the reality of the resurrection, a reality not yet generally visible, but a present reality nonetheless” (Flett 2015:212). Thus, “[T]he church is grounded and exists within this reality,” which is only possible, “when, ‘local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.’” It is a hope that is founded in Christ, lived out in the congregation, and extended to the community for the purposes of their salvation and God’s glory. This type of hope, a plausibility structure built on hope, takes deeper reflecting and the engrafting of hope as an attitude of the mind and heart, a way of life, for this congregation.

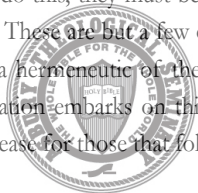
This hope comes from Jesus Christ and is centered in the eschatological future to which he taught. “For Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ, and strains after the promises of the universal future of Christ” (Moltmann 1967:16). Yet it is not an all-future hope. In hoping for the future, it is changing the present with a hope that derives from the current reality of the risen Christ. This hope, based in Jesus Christ, is for the Kingdom and representative of the King. Its what drives this congregation to missions, sharing their hope with the rest of creation. “By living in the world and anticipating in the kingdom of God, the Church has to become critically and prophetically involved in all spheres of society” (Kim 2005:107). It changes the world today with the hope of a life fully lived, which can only happen by participating in the risen Christ. Thus, it is a present and future hope, one that pushes the congregation toward missional engagement. It is in this hope that the congregation seeks to live out its place as the “sign, instrument, and foretaste of the Gospel” (Newbigin 1989:233) before a watching world.

The (West) German Catholic Church, in the wake of World War II, Nazi Germany, and Vatican II, strove to develop a way forward to heal from past mistakes, address their history, and connect with the future not only of the Church but of their community as well (Thompson 2016:387-388). They completed this task through the diocesan synodic document “Our Hope” in 1975. This hope, what the (West) German Catholic Church would reestablish itself upon, both critiqued and reflected upon the teachings of the Church, ultimately determining that the

hope that exists in Jesus Christ to confront sin and reconcile the world to himself is the only way which the Church can exist in the world – “conform(ing) to hope’ – to live as a ‘counterweight’ to the hopelessness of the modern world” (Thompson 2016:356). Thus, it is through hope that the Church is not only established, but the way in which it engages with the community-at-large. It is by hope that the Church gets its name, the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

Having now reviewed the six characteristics, the question is how does a congregation go about becoming such a hermeneutic? First and foremost is that they must embed themselves in scripture. Daily reading the Bible, all of the Bible, will begin to shape the lives of this congregation and its members to the Word of God – binding it on their hearts (Deut. 6:6). To do this, developing Bible reading plans (of many different types for the many different people in the congregation) is necessary. As well, developing ways for the congregation to hear the whole Bible spoken and taught from the pulpit is necessary (Catholic, Orthodox, and high liturgical Protestants have plans that may help). Second, this congregation must openly dialogue amongst itself about the concerns, deficiencies, gifts, and passions of its various members. Knowing who does what well and who is passionate about an issue will help in developing plans for community engagement. Third, having already found out about people’s gifts, passions, and needs, developing individualized ways for people to grow closer to God individually and communally is the next step. Fourth, this congregation must get into its surrounding community and ask questions, find out about the important issues, and ways in which they can partner with the community for its flourishing. Fifth, this congregation must develop ways to properly evangelize the community it has now engaged. As Peter tells us, we must “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15b). Thus, they must teach each other how to give these answers and embark on conversations about their faith and the hope that is evident in their lives. This leads to six, the need to be reminded of the hope in Jesus Christ to redeem all of creation. This hope is the defining marker of this congregation, thus every member must openly expose this hope everywhere they go. To do this, they must be reminded of it regularly from within the congregation itself. These are but a few of the steps necessary to begin crafting this congregation as a hermeneutic of the Gospel, and many more may be developed as this congregation embarks on this task. It will not be easy, but nowhere does Christ promise ease for those that follow him.



Why would a congregation want to do this? It is the role of the church, in seeking to follow the Holy Spirit, to reach out to its surrounding community with the arms of Christ and interpreting the words of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in proclamation and action, for the glory of God and the living out of the Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. Newbigin offers this role as a challenge to every local congregation. “By describing the congregation as the only hermeneutic of the gospel, Newbigin reminds us that the gospel can only take bodily form. The gospel is no free-floating message, no individual belief system. It creates, shapes and sustains a people, a body. This congregation is a visible entity in history” (Flett 2015:213). Thus, this type of congregation must seek to live out the characteristics Newbigin lays out in his description of such a community. But it cannot live them out individually; they must be lived out together. They mutually support and enhance each other, so to live out one is to live out them all. It is not an easy task - or everyone would do it - but it is a necessary and proper one. The consequences of such a congregation are vast for both the future of the Church (in particular in the West) and for the future of society. And I will leave the final word to Newbigin on the subject.

If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society, if Christians are to occupy the “high ground” which they vacated in the noontime of “modernity,” it will not be by forming a Christian political party, or by aggressive propaganda campaigns. Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the “Constantinian” era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life and claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.⁵

End Notes

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), v.

² Though Newbigin is specifically talking to the Church in the West, and MC movement has narrowly focused on Western Christianity, I believe that the ideas of the Newbigin and the MC can be readapted for churches all around the world. The details of this process are beyond the scope of this article, and since Newbigin and the MC discuss exclusively the West, that will be the context of this discussion.

³ Newbigin's discussion of election (which is beyond the scope of this article) can be found in Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 80-88, Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 68-78, & Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian*, 48-53.

⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 229.

⁵ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 232-233.

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