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# A House Divided? Reconsidering Newbigin's *The Household of God*, Six Decades Later

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**T**he *Household of God*, first given as a lecture series in 1952, begins with a question: “By what is the church constituted?”<sup>1</sup> The question may sound like something taken from a catechesis exam, but it serves as the foundation for Newbigin’s attempt to articulate a historically grounded ecclesiology. Newbigin identifies three ways the church has answered the question. The first answer is that the church is constituted by Word and act, a mode of thinking most common in Protestant circles.<sup>2</sup> The Protestant voice should be welcomed, Newbigin argues, for its emphasis on justification by faith and the church’s reliance on the promise of grace given in Christ. Yet Newbigin also critiques the Protestant view for its “over-intellectualizing of the content of the word ‘faith’” and its understanding of unity “in terms of agreement about doctrine.”<sup>3</sup>

The second answer Newbigin identifies is the Catholic answer: that we are “made incorporate in Christ primarily and essentially by sacramental incorporation into the life of His Church.”<sup>4</sup> Whereas Newbigin claims that Protestant churches have gone astray in downplaying the importance of the visible, historical unity of the church, the Roman Catholic Church has thrived as a “visibly defined and organized body with a continuing structure.”<sup>5</sup> Yet Newbigin critiques the Catholic view for forgetting that the church is the “body of Christ when it is truly spiritual...knowing that it has nothing in itself, but lives only in ardent longing and eager receptiveness.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Newbigin turns to the Pentecostal answer: that the church is constituted by “a matter of experienced power and presence of the Holy Spirit today.”<sup>7</sup> Newbigin praises the Pentecostal answer for its emphasis on the church’s dependence on the authority of the Spirit that calls, gathers, and sends it, but worries that such space left for personal conviction can lead to a “proliferation of mutually irresponsible sects” and a sense of spiritual narcissism

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1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), ix.

2. *Ibid.*, 49.

3. *Ibid.*, 52.

4. *Ibid.*, 60.

5. *Ibid.*, 72.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 108.

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in some misguided church leaders.<sup>8</sup> Newbigin deems all three answers necessary but insufficient for understanding the *esse* of the church, which he claims is its mission. It is only, Newbigin asserts, “when Christians are engaged in the task of missionary obedience” that “they are in the situation in which the Church is truly the Church.”<sup>9</sup>

## Relevance of Newbigin’s analysis

Contemporary readers, especially pastors, will likely find Newbigin’s analysis of these three ecclesiologies interesting but distant from their ministry contexts. Yet where *The Household of God* flourishes is its bridging of this seemingly abstract theology with the life of the church in the world. Newbigin himself notes that that the “unity of the Church will not distill out of a process of purely theological discussion” but will come only through engagement with the world in which the church is situated.<sup>10</sup> Any ecclesiology that attempts to take such a task seriously will have to begin with a theology of mission, where the historical and the eschatological make contact.

Newbigin claims that the church will need to respond to three events that have pressed the need for a new ecclesiology oriented toward mission: the breakdown of Christendom, the engagement of Western Christian missionaries with other religions, and the rise of the modern ecumenical movement. Contemporary readers will note that all three phenomena have changed in significant ways since 1952, suggesting a need to reevaluate Newbigin’s thesis in relation to a new historical situation. Despite these shifts, *The Household of*

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8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 151.

10. *Ibid.*, 152.

*God* remains an urgently relevant book for the church. Through such ecclesiastical, demographic, and social changes, the church will only be able to strive for unity and remain in mission so long as it views itself not as it was or is but as God is calling it to be.

### Erosion of Christendom

The first major historical shift Newbigin identifies is *the erosion of Christendom*.<sup>11</sup> Newbigin claims that Europe's enclosure by Islamic territories saturated Christianity into the European culture for over a millennium. Yet the recession of the Islamic territories, culminating with the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, combined with the rise of anti-Christian movements, has brought the church back into contact with the non-Christian world. These interactions have forced the church to make previously unspoken assumptions explicit, leading to a heightened need for a new ecclesiology. The end of Christendom has also been accelerated by globalization and atomization, which have led to an unraveling of traditional social ties and institutions. For example, Newbigin bemoans the "atomizing process" Western Europe experienced after World War II, in which people were able to move freely among jobs, homes, and even families.<sup>12</sup>

Globalization and the rise of modern technology have increased such atomizing exponentially since 1952. Identities are now informed less by institutional affiliations and inherited practices than by personal relationships, especially among younger generations.<sup>13</sup> Events such as Watergate, the invasion of Iraq, and the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church have created an environment in which institutions are widely viewed with skepticism. Misconduct is no longer attributed to individual bad actors but is instead seen as the product of flawed systems. The rise of a more individualistic and anti-institutional culture has created an environment in which authority is no longer inherited through traditions or institutions but emerges from experience and relationships. Drawing from Newbigin, Darrell Guder suggests that churches must now "earn the right to be heard" within their communities.<sup>14</sup> Just as Newbigin in 1952, Christians now must ask what it means to be a church united in mission in this post-Christendom world.

The end of Christendom has presented the Western church with an identity crisis. As Newbigin notes, many Christians are left asking what the boundaries, structure, and terms of membership of the church are. There is, for Newbigin, "no more urgent theological task than to try to give... plain and credible answers" to these questions.<sup>15</sup> In much of the West this secularization is further complicated because the church remains enmeshed in political and cultural practices.<sup>16</sup> As the ecclesiological sorts itself

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out from the political and cultural realms, the church must find a new axis for its life in the world.

There is a great risk of focusing on maintaining the privileges the church currently enjoys at the expense of the church's eschatological calling. We must, in Newbigin's words, "abandon the attempt to define the Church's *esse* in terms of something that it has and is" but look instead to the Church's striving toward the "fulfillment of God's purpose."<sup>17</sup> The key to this identity crisis is understanding the eschatological nature of the church. The identity of the church must remain its identity in Christ. Ecclesiological questions should lead to cruciform answers, recognizing how the brokenness of the church and the world is made whole in Christ.

If the church can understand its eschatological calling to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God, it is possible that such a globalized and atomized world will make unity more feasible, albeit in new and unexpected ways. If identity is formed more by relationships than institutions, church unity that emerges on a personal or congregational level will have better success than unity that originates from ecumenical organizations. Unity will likely coalesce around shared projects and interests, not out of goals that seem removed from individuals' experiences.

The East End Fellowship in Richmond, Virginia, is one example of how unity and mission are being renewed on a local level.<sup>18</sup> In a nod to the role of personal relationships in forming religious identity, the church calls itself a fellowship to attract "seekers" who want to be formed in a community defined more by shared experiences than institutional structures. The East End Fellowship has built a model for congregational life that starts not with inherited practices but with what the kingdom of God might look like. For the East End Fellowship, this is manifested in a common commitment to live out an incarnational witness in an under-resourced neighborhood in Richmond.

Witness, mission, and unity are seen as functions of personal relationships where the love of Christ is embodied. What lies beneath the language of diversity, inclusion, and service is an eschatological view of the church as a foretaste of the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> For example, if the church is to be a foretaste of God, diversity in membership and liturgical style must not be merely

11. Ibid., 11.

12. Ibid., 13.

13. "Millennials in Adulthood," *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, March 7, 2014, <http://www.pewsocial-trends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

14. Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 146.

15. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 14.

16. For a useful introduction to this phenomenon, see Robert N.

Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Dedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

17. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 132.

18. Corey Widmer (Pastor of the East End Fellowship) in discussion with Darrell Guder and Richard Osmer, March 25, 2014.

19. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 143.

tolerated or welcomed but invited. In a post-Christendom context, the church can only live out its mission and find greater unity by viewing itself shaped not by political institutions or cultural heritages but by the radical inclusion of the kingdom.

### Reversal of global mission from the West to the West

The second historical transformation Newbigin identifies is *the West's experience with mission*. The global mission of the church, Newbigin argues, showed disunity to be an "intolerable scandal."<sup>20</sup> Disunity was less of a problem in the Christian West where churches could split apart and secede ground to secularism because the churches themselves had done so much to shape that culture. The church, Newbigin claims, provided "only a small part of the total concerns of their members" because their needs could be met in the semi-Christian culture.<sup>21</sup> Yet outside the West, Newbigin found that joining a church in a non-Christian culture often requires a "radical break [of] the whole of the non-Christian culture."<sup>22</sup> In this situation, the church must be both distinct from the culture while maintaining responsible social engagement within the dominant culture.

Sixty years later, the context surrounding Newbigin's analysis of church and culture has almost reversed itself. In many areas served by European missionaries, the church has grown very rapidly and come to hold a great deal of influence in local culture.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the secularization of Europe and North America has complicated how the church understands its mission in a post-Christian context. Whereas the church once had a shaping influence on culture, the church now finds itself being shaped and formed by influences beyond its control. In their struggle to stay relevant, many churches have taken on the attributes of their own culture in order to draw people in. The emergent church is one example of how some Christians have attempted to shape the liturgical life of the church around culture, often in unconventional ways built around the pre-existing interests of the community. For example, it should be no surprise that dinner churches, such as St. Lydia's in Brooklyn, have developed during a time of increased consciousness of the ethics and spirituality of food.

Such an eschatological understanding of the church suggests that the church functions as an "instrument of that reconciling work of Christ."<sup>24</sup> This instrumental understanding remains integral to how the church must understand its mission and unity in a context where it is shaped by culture. Such an eschatological view of the church leads congregations to see themselves as uniquely responsible for proclaiming the Gospel to all peoples. If, as Newbigin claims, the church is "a separate community marked off from the world in order to save the world," aligning the church too strongly with

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the dominant culture mutes the prophetic voice of the church and dulls the radicalism of the Gospel message.<sup>25</sup>

Given culture's influence on the church, mission can no longer be seen as geographically removed from the life of the church but must be integrated into the daily life of the congregation. Christians no longer have the luxury of choosing whether or not they will witness to the world but instead must decide what kind of witness their life will speak. Moreover, the church must take on an eschatological perspective because its division has become an impediment to the proclamation of the Gospel. Only an eschatological understanding of what the church is called to be allows the church to see how its current disunity makes it an imperfect instrument of the kingdom of God. Only with this eschatological identity can the church have the courage to refute not only the false barriers of race, sex, class, and sexual orientation imposed by culture, but also the denominationalism and fracturing that stem from the church's own sin. An eschatological worldview is integral to the life of the church because it affirms that the church is not a conduit of cultural influence but an instrument working for God's reconciliation in the world.

### The rise of ecumenism, now including Pentecostals

The third historical change Newbigin highlights is *the connection between mission and the rise of ecumenism*. Newbigin asserts that there "can be no true ecumenical movement except that which is missionary through and through."<sup>26</sup> Much of Newbigin's argument reflects a concern that the ecumenical movement would move toward unity without committing to mission, achieving only a "false sort of ecumenism...amid the wreckage of the old Christendom."<sup>27</sup> Though *The Household of God* was written during a robust period of ecumenical engagement, Newbigin's fear is not without warrant. The International Missionary Council's linking with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961 at New Delhi was on the horizon, suggesting a greater emphasis of the relationship between mission and ecumenism. Yet the Uppsala meeting of 1968 marked a turn away from an understanding of

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20. Ibid., 18.

21. Ibid., 15.

22. Ibid.

23. For example, Philip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity," *The Atlantic*, October 2002.

24. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 17.

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25. Ibid., 16.

26. Ibid., 18.

27. Ibid.

ecumenism based in mission, the seeds of which later came to fruition in the 1980s.<sup>28</sup>

Newbigin's primary concern was that the ecumenical movement would shirk the burdens of the church's missional task and succumb to a kind of federated unity that fell short of the eschatological unity the church is called to embody.<sup>29</sup> It is worth remembering that the WCC was not created for the sake of unity but emerged from a shared desire to bring the Gospel to all people. What is needed now is a re-emphasis on the eschatological function of the church as being called to mission in and through its unity. Unity without mission is an empty gesture, while mission without unity is an empty Gospel.

This eschatological identity of the church suggests that the church is called to be a sign that points beyond itself to the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup> Federation unity was a valuable tool for organizing the global church in its mission work, but it faltered when it began to point to itself instead of the promised kingdom. It is only when the church knows that it is not at its final destination that it can point the way to where it is headed. Newbigin suggests that the decline of federation unity presents an opportunity for a new kind of unity insofar as the mission of the church will now have to emerge from "a local and congregational" level.<sup>31</sup> One need not be as critical of federation unity as Newbigin to see how there must be an added emphasis placed on mission-oriented ecumenism at the congregational level. For example, while Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue has been a great gift to the church, such institutional engagement will not reach its full potential without similar work among congregations in their own communities. Ecumenism is not something to be observed and applauded but a responsibility of all the people of God.

Six decades after its publication, *The Household of God* remains helpful for understanding the challenges of mission and unity. Though the historical context has shifted dramatically, the church's mission and life together are constituted not by its historical situation but by its understanding of its eschatological nature. More work remains to be done to bring this unity to fruition, both in the academy and among congregations. The most urgent is a reconsideration of the role of the Spirit in the life of Protestant churches. As Newbigin notes, an eschatological view must always be seen as "a new obedience to, and a new possession by, the Holy Spirit."<sup>32</sup>

Pentecostalism has too often been written off based on caricatures of its theology, and there remains a great deal more work to be done in integrating the contributions of the Pentecostal tradition into the life of the broader church. There are now nearly 300 million Pentecostals in the world, a group too large and fast-growing

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to be ignored.<sup>33</sup> The presence of a robust Pentecostal voice in the ecumenical conversation, especially at a local level, is vital to the cultivation of a church more reflective of the world's diversity and the Gospel's call to unity.

While Pope Francis has received wide press coverage for his inclusive gestures toward refugees, women, and non-Christians, many church leaders could also learn from Pope Francis's willingness to reach out to and pray with their Pentecostal counterparts.<sup>34</sup> This does not mean minimizing theological, historical, and cultural differences where they exist. It does, however, require maintaining a posture of invitation and openness that seeks to emphasize our common participation in God's mission. Such prayerful openness and discernment of common mission invite the Spirit to transform us into the church God is calling us to be.

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28. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197–200.

29. See also Lesslie Newbigin, "Ecumenical Amnesia," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 1 (January 1994): 4.

30. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 145.

31. *Ibid.*, 21.

32. *Ibid.*, 26.

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33. "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population" (*The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, December 2011), 17, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>.

34. Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 253.