

Mission in Christ's Way

A STUDY GUIDE

To accompany

*Mission in Christ's Way:
A Gift, A Command, An Assurance*

By Lesslie Newbigin

Study Three in The Ekklesia Project's
Going Deeper Series

Inagrace T. Dietterich

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Note: The text of Newbigin's "Mission in Christ's Way" is available on the web at the following address:

<http://www.newbigin.net/searches/detail.cfm?ID=1715>

In the midst of a rapidly and radically changing cultural context, the church is being challenged to transform its basic identity and its vocation—to go to its very roots. The familiar understandings and the comfortable postures of the past are experiencing profound challenge today. The old paradigms and models are insufficient for the faithful and effective realization of the church’s divine purpose. Being faithful to a living and dynamic God who is actively present in changing historical situations—“Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:19)—requires that the church itself must be adventurous and open to radical change. For the community of God’s people to “sing to the Lord a new song” (Isa. 42:10), it must learn new ways to put the questions, develop new frameworks for dealing with them, and craft new proposals for shaping the church’s ministry and mission.

Church leaders are challenged to respond. They have the responsibility not only for managing their present ministry but also for shaping a vision for the future of their church bodies: local, regional, national. How will they give leadership in this extraordinary moment in history? The most insightful church leaders will recognize the need to get to the roots, to examine the presuppositions that inform the church’s vision, mission, goals, structures, leadership, member involvement, and engagement with an increasingly secularized world. They will lead the church through this fundamental theological task.

Within this context, Lesslie Newbigin’s study of the nature and shape of the church’s mission can be an invaluable resource for congregations. These Bible studies, which were originally presented in India in 1986, were circulated more widely to churches around the world as preparation for the World Conference on Evangelism in 1989. Almost two decades later, evangelism and the shape of the church’s mission continue to be significant issues for the ministry of contemporary congregations.

This study guide has been created as an aid for those congregations desiring to explore these important matters. Neither Newbigin’s book nor this guide is designed for private and individual use; rather, both are intended as vehicles to enable church members to think, dream, talk, and plan together. It is for those who, uncomfortable with the current life, practices, and structures of the church, are seeking to discern God’s call for a more faithful and effective future. It is hoped that reading and studying together *Mission in Christ’s Way* will not deepen your congregation’s conversation about these matters, but also lead to a clearer vision and more faithful practice of the Christian faith.

Inagrace T. Dietterich
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SESSION ONE

GETTING STARTED

A. Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to invite participants into a conversation with the book by Lesslie Newbigin and with one another about the shape and purpose of the church's mission. This study guide is designed to enable you to accomplish the following objectives:

1. To investigate the shape and purpose of Jesus' mission.
2. To consider the significance of Jesus' announcement of the inbreaking reign of God.
3. To explore how the liberating presence of the Spirit empowers Christian mission.
4. To discover what it means for the church to be the bearer of the reconciling grace of God.
5. To begin to see mission as a gift and promise rather than a command and burden.
6. To reflect upon how your congregation might more fully become a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God.

B. Expectations

During this study course you can realistically expect to:

1. Investigate the connection between Jesus' mission and the mission of Christian congregations.
2. Engage in biblical study regarding Jesus' announcement of the reign of God.
3. Reflect upon the significance that in Jesus' mission there is both the presence of the kingdom and the proclamation of the kingdom.
4. Consider the mission of your congregation in light of the biblical witness to Jesus' mission.
5. Learn new concepts and new words—or reappropriate and reinterpret old concepts and old words.
6. Feel confused and frustrated part of the time.
7. Have a good time while working hard.
8. Explore and deepen your own vision of Christian mission as you share and test ideas with others.

9. Participate in a mutual learning community as you interact—listen and share—with others in the group.

C. Some Helpful Norms

It is always helpful for a group undertaking a learning experience together to clarify the norms which will guide their life together. The following norms or standards are suggested for your journey together. You may want, as a group, to add to the list.

1. It is OK to be informal, to call each other by first names, to create a relaxed atmosphere.
2. It is OK to take responsibility for your own learnings and not expect the group leader or other members to be responsible for you. Feel free to ask questions when confused and make contributions when inspired.
3. It is OK to share a different opinion, to disagree without being disagreeable.
4. It is OK to share and test your own ideas, images, or personal experience with others in the group.
5. It is OK to practice your best listening skills in this group. Active listening means listening closely when others speak, paraphrasing their words, and checking with them to be certain that you have correctly understood them.
6. It is OK to build on the ideas of others in the group, that is, to add your own thoughts to what others have expressed in order to help an idea stretch and grow.
7. It is OK to question the ideas being proposed in the group, or in the resource study book, but it is also equally OK to question your own ideas and assumptions.
8. It is OK to be playful and have fun—at appropriate times.

D. Design of the Study Process

Laid out in an easy-to-follow manner, this resource begins with a brief introduction to the life and ministry of the author, Lesslie Newbigin, followed with a study guide for each of the four chapters of *Mission in Christ's Way*. In the Appendix are suggestions for facilitating the group's study. The study process for the four chapters consists of three parts

Ideas	Identifies the key concepts from the text.
Interpretation	Provides questions which enable participants to interact and respond to the ideas shared by the author.
Integration	Suggests ways to explore the biblical witness and make connections with other resources.

The final session provides the opportunity to reflect upon and draw together the learnings of the group.

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Session 2:	Introduction: Lesslie Newbigin: A Passion for Mission
Session 3:	Chapter One: Mission in Christ's Way
Session 4:	Chapter Two: A Question about the Kingdom: A Promise About the Spirit
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SESSION TWO

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN: A PASSION FOR MISSION

The question which has to be put to every local congregation is the question whether it is a credible sign of God's reign in justice and mercy over the whole of life, whether it is an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, whether it cares for its neighbors in a way which reflects and springs out of God's care for them, whether its common life is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends for the whole human family. (Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom*, 1980)

In the early decades of the Christian church, many of the distinctions that modern church people take for granted did not exist. Rather than having academic professors teaching theology and Bible, pastors serving local churches, and designated people carrying out duties within denominational settings, all of these ministries were combined. In other words, the theologians of the church were usually bishops who were also pastors and teachers. Lesslie Newbigin was a modern embodiment of such a wholistic approach. His vigorous reflections on the vital issues of ministry and mission speak with continuing freshness and challenge.

In one of his most widely-read books, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (1989), Newbigin describes himself in this manner: "I can make no claim either to originality or to scholarship. I am a pastor and preacher, trying to make available to my fellow pastors and others such thinking as I have gleaned in my very unsystematic reading bearing on the topic I am trying to address." Rather than engaging in leisurely and detached reflection, virtually everything Newbigin wrote was in response to a request to speak or write for a particular occasion. A brilliant and respected Christian leader, Newbigin practiced what he preached. "His offerings include his writings, but beyond the written page his unceasing energies as teacher, pastor, and ecumenical statesman mark him out as one that matched a keen mind with personal kindness and zealous conviction" (Martin Robinson, Bible Society *TransMission* Tribute to Lesslie Newbigin).

After ordination and commissioning as a missionary in 1936 by the Church of Scotland, Newbigin served for almost four decades in India. He was an architect of the church union that resulted in the formation of the Church of South India (1947) and became one of its first bishops. From 1959 until 1965, he brought his wisdom and energy to the ecumenical ministry of the International Missionary Council (1959-61) and the newly formed World Council of Churches (1961-65). Invited back to India in 1965, Newbigin served as the bishop of Madras until his retirement in 1974. Returning to England, he became active in the United Reformed Church, serving as moderator of the general assembly and as the minister of a small local church in the inner city of Birmingham.

From 1974 to 1979, Newbigin was on the staff of Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, lecturing there and in many other places on mission theology. From the early 1980s until his death in 1998, he was the guiding force behind the Gospel and Our Culture movement in

Britain and other Western countries, fostering for the churches of the West a sense of the missionary encounter of the gospel with their own cultures. A prolific author, Newbigin published hundreds of articles and more than thirty books.

When Newbigin returned to England from the so-called “mission field” of India, he was struck by the condition of the so-called “Christian West.” As a foreign missionary in India, he had the experience of trying to communicate the gospel across the cultural divide that separated India from the European West. He had to discover how to communicate the gospel in a culture whose presuppositions simply made it incredible. Returning to England, he discovered to his astonishment that he faced the same problems there. He observed: “It didn’t take long to discover that we are really not in a secular society, but in a pagan society—not in a society which has no gods, but a society which has false gods.” Thus began his preoccupation with exploring what it would mean for Western culture to truly engage in a missionary dialogue with the gospel.

Focusing upon the nature and mission of the church in a religiously and culturally plural world, Newbigin developed a missional ecclesiology. That is, an understanding of the nature and purpose of the church grounded in God’s redeeming mission to a broken and alienated world. The starting point is God’s initiative in Jesus Christ as the decisive revelation of the meaning of divine love and salvation. Basing his reasoning in the biblical account of the character, actions, and purposes of God, he sought to reclaim the church for its missionary purpose. Thus, through his writing and speaking, he sought to cultivate ways of believing, of witnessing, of being community, and of living in hope. George Hunsberger summarizes Newbigin’s understanding of the church’s mission.

Why the Church? By what authority, and on what ground, is there a rationale for the Church to exist at all? The authority to witness is its authority to exist: the only adequate witness is one that iterates what is visibly and truly embodied in a community of people embraced by the message.

The presence of the Christian community functions as a hermeneutical key, an interpretive lens through which onlookers gain a view of the gospel in the living colors of common life. The Christian congregation offers itself to be a community within which one can grow into faith in the gospel, put on the garb of its followers and join oneself to the distinctive practices that mark the community as God’s own people. (Bible Society *TransMission* Tribute to Lesslie Newbigin)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What difference, if any, does it make for your interpretation of a book to have an understanding of the life and ministry of the author?
2. Asked to name the “gods” of modern cultures, Newbigin identified money, sex, prestige, power. What are some of the gods that demand allegiance in today’s culture?
3. Returning from the “mission field” to England, Newbigin discovered that his home country had become a “mission field.” In what ways do you think the United States is a mission field?
4. What does it mean to speak of the church as a hermeneutical key or interpretive lens? What are the implications for the life and practice of the church?
5. If all that people knew of God was the life and practice of your congregation, what would they know?

SESSION THREE

MISSION IN CHRIST'S WAY

Ideas

- “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). This must determine the way we think about and carry out the mission; it must be founded and modeled upon his. We are not authorized to do it in any other way.
- How did the Father send the Son? Beginning with Mark 1:14-18, six key points about Christ's way in mission:
 1. It is the announcement of a fact.
 2. It is about the sovereign rule of God, and therefore about the whole of life and the whole of creation.
 3. The reign of God, the kingship of God, is no longer merely a doctrine in theology; it is no longer something in the distant future. It confronts you now. That is what is new.
 4. You can't see it because you are facing the wrong way. You have to go through a total mental revolution; otherwise the reign of God will be totally hidden from you.
 5. The call, therefore, is to turn around and believe the gospel.
 6. This believing is not a simple possibility for everybody. It must be God's work. God takes the initiative.
- What *is* the kingdom of God anyway? Jesus answers with strange sayings that seem like riddles. The presence of the reign of God is not as plain as one might wish. It is revealed and yet hidden.
- The cross is both the final parable and the final “mighty work,” the place where the kingdom of God, God's power and wisdom, is hidden and revealed.
- It is *Jesus*, this man going his humble way from a stable in Bethlehem to a cross on Calvary, who *is* the presence of the kingdom. The gospel is this: that in the man Jesus the kingdom has actually come among us in judgment and blessing.
- In the mission of Jesus we see that there is both the *presence* of the kingdom and also the *proclamation* of the kingdom. Words without deeds are empty, but deeds without words are dumb.
- The church is true to its calling when it is a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the kingdom.
- What is required of us is faithfulness in word and deed, at whatever cost; faithfulness in action for truth, for justice, for mercy, for compassion; faithfulness in speaking the name of Jesus when the time is right, bearing witness to God by explicit word as occasion arises.

Interpretation

1. What catches your attention in Newbigin's six key points about Jesus' announcement of the kingdom?
2. What does it mean to say "Jesus is the Kingdom"?
3. How is the kingdom of God both hidden and revealed in the cross?
4. What is the relationship between the *presence* of the kingdom and the *proclamation* of the kingdom?

Integration

1. Read Mark 1:1-14. What do we learn about mission in Christ's way from this passage?
2. Read Luke 7:18-23. What does it mean to say that the kingdom is both hidden and revealed?
3. Read John 27-37. In what way is the cross the "final parable"?
4. Why is it important to maintain the connection between the name of Jesus and the message of the kingdom of God?
5. What does it mean to say that the church is to be a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the kingdom?

SESSION FOUR

A QUESTION ABOUT THE KINGDOM:

A PROMISE ABOUT THE SPIRIT

Ideas

- We are constantly tempted to see the cause of the Gospel as if it were a program about which we could be optimistic or pessimistic. We need the warning. The Kingdom of God is, quite simply, God's reign; it is not our program.
- The Holy Spirit is the foretaste, the pledge, the *arrabon* of the kingdom. It is more than a verbal promise. It is a real gift now, a real foretaste of the joy, the freedom, the righteousness, the holiness of God's kingdom.
- Yet the Holy Spirit also carries the promise of something much greater to come and makes us look forward and press forward with eager hope towards that greater reality that lies ahead.
- The church's confidence lies not in its programs, but in the Spirit's ability to constitute the church as a witness to the mighty acts of the living God who alone is king.
- The first Christian sermon was preached not because the apostles decided to have a mission, but because the presence of a new reality was so manifest that people came running to ask what it was.
- It is not that the church has a mission and the Spirit helps us in fulfilling it. Rather, it is that the Spirit is the active missionary, and the church (where it is faithful) is the place where the Spirit is enabled to complete the Spirit's work.
- Mission, in other words, is gospel and not law; it is the overflow of a great gift, not the carrying of a great burden.
- The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is given already the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness.

Interpretation

1. What is the problem with viewing the kingdom of God as a church program? Where have you seen evidence of this approach?
2. Read Acts 1:1-8. What do we learn about the reign of God from this passage? What do we learn about the role of the Holy Spirit?
3. What does it mean to speak of the Holy Spirit as the *arrabon* of the Kingdom?
4. In what ways is mission “primarily the work of the Spirit”? What is the role of the church?

SESSION FIVE
PARTICIPATING IN THE PASSION:
WITNESSING TO THE RESURRECTION

Ideas

- In the Johannine account of the missionary commission, the disciples are frightened. They are doing what the church has so often done, withdrawing from the world and seeking protection for itself.
- Jesus comes into their midst and declares “Open those doors which you have shut. Go out into that world of which you are afraid. Continue till it is finished, what I came to do. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.”
- It was the scars of the passion in his risen body that assured the frightened disciples that it was really Jesus who stood among them. It will be those same scars in the corporate life of the church that will authenticate it as indeed the body of Christ, the bearer of his mission, the presence of the kingdom.
- The cross is not abject submission to the power of evil; it is the price paid for a victorious challenge to the powers of evil. Jesus’ ministry was a ministry of active challenge to all the powers of the devil, whether in the disease that racks the body, the evil spirit that torments the soul, of the corruption and hypocrisy that poisons the body of society.
- Mission in Christ’s way is neither withdrawal from the world into a religious sanctuary, nor engagement with the world on the world’s terms. It is a totally uncompromising yet totally vulnerable challenge to the powers of evil in the name and in the power of the kingship of God present in the crucified and risen Jesus.
- What is made possible for us by what Christ is and has done is that we can so live and act that there are created signs of the kingdom, signs and foretastes, enabling people both to enjoy now a foretaste of the joy and freedom of the kingdom, and also to press forward in confident hope for its full realization.
- It is the whole church, acting in all its members in the secular life of the world, that is to be the bearer of the reconciling grace of God. The wounds of Christ plead with us to repent of our pride, to be humble, to be so reconciled with one another that we can be the bearers of his gift of reconciliation in the life of society.

Interpretation

1. Read John 20:19-30. How did the disciples respond to Jesus' death? How did Jesus demonstrate his identity?
2. What is the role of the cross in Jesus' mission in and for the world?
3. What does it mean for the church to follow the pattern of Jesus' mission, to be sent as he was sent?
4. What is meant by the "priesthood of the whole church"?

SESSION SIX

A GIFT, A COMMAND, AN ASSURANCE

Ideas

- Taken in isolation from the other texts we have considered, Matthew’s “Great Commission” could seem to validate a triumphalist style of mission.
- “Discipling the nations” does not mean that the nations have to become like us. Christianity is something that is always changing. The Holy Spirit, through the faithful witness of the church to the gospel, teaches the church new things and brings it—through its successive missionary encounters—into the fullness of truth.
- Discipling does not mean the imposition of a new code of law, but it certainly means a new kind of life that is almost certain eventually to call aspects of culture into question.
- The object of the verb “disciple” is not individual people, but “nations.” In the context of the Bible as a whole, we must say that “discipling the nations” means bringing those who were outside the family of God into one family, in which unity doesn’t mean uniformity and diversity doesn’t mean division, in which love and freedom are the only absolutes.
- The transcendent lordship of Christ is made manifest precisely in the fact that our manifold ethnic and cultural diversities, without being destroyed or devalued, are nevertheless transcended in that new reality which is given to us in Christ through the Spirit.
- The fundamental reality is not a command but a promise. It is the presence of a new reality in the life of the world, the presence of the risen Lord himself, that is the dynamic of mission.
- The Holy Spirit is the primary missionary; our role is secondary. Mission is not a burden laid upon the church; it is a gift and a promise to the church that is faithful.
- The command arises from the gift. Jesus reigns and all authority has been given to him in earth and heaven. When we understand that, we shall not need to be told to let it be known. Rather, we shall not be able to keep silent.

