LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

A Theological Life

GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Conversation by a South Indian road, around 1970
(Photograph used by permission of the Newbigin family)

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Preface

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.

Christian theology is more immediately a practical than a speculative discipline, and such speculation as it harbors stands ultimately in the service of right worship, right confession of Christ, and right living. Right practice demands, of course, critical and constructive reflection, and the best Christian theology takes place in the interplay between reflection and practice. That is why honor is traditionally given to those practical thinkers and preachers who are designated "Fathers of the Church." Most of them were bishops who, in the early centuries of Christianity, supervised the teaching of catechumens, delivered homilies in the liturgical assembly, oversaw the spiritual and moral life of their communities, gathered in council when needed to clarify and determine the faith, and took charge of the mission to the world as evangelistic opportunities arose. A figure of comparable stature and range in the ecumenical twentieth century was Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998).

A Northumbrian raised in the Presbyterian Church of England, Newbigin went from his studies at Cambridge to service as a Church of Scotland missionary in India. He spent two lengthy periods on the subcontinent: first, from 1936 to 1959, as an evangelist, an ecumenical negotiator, and, from 1947, a bishop in the Madurai and Ramnad diocese of the newly united Church of South India; second, from 1965 to 1974, as bishop in metropolitan Madras. In between, from 1959 to 1965, he served as general secretary of the International Missionary Council at the time of its integration with the World Council of Churches. In 1974, he formally retired to Britain, but only in order to take a teaching position for five years at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham and subsequently to act for almost a decade as pastor to a local congregation in a racially and religiously mixed area across the city. Besides being elected moderator of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, Bishop Newbigin spearheaded the Gospel and Our Culture movement

in Britain. In his second (or third) retirement in Southeast London, he figured as a national sage and finally prophet and continued toward the end of his ninth decade to accept, despite failing eyesight, numerous and multifarious speaking engagements. Throughout his life, his analytic penetration, his conceptual power, and his mental agility ensured the intellectual quality of his practical wisdom; and his ideas remain to be drawn upon by all those who still engage as he did in the tasks of commending the Gospel and defending the Christian faith, of the spiritual formation of individuals and the edification of the believing community, of reforming the Church and restoring its unity.

What confronts the reader of this book is a theological life in several senses. First, it is the life of Lesslie Newbigin himself, a life lived in faith, hope, and love, which are traditionally called the three theological virtues because they depend directly on God's presence in the human soul. Newbigin's was such a life in Christ. Second, this book is a theological biography in that it concentrates on the theological thought of its subject, always shown in relation to the contexts in which he lived and the ministries in which he engaged, always located in the broad tradition of churchly life and thought of which he was a part, and always examined for what the thought forged in Newbigin's life has to say to all times and places and to this time and place in particular. And third, the book is intended as itself a piece of theological writing, in a genre which can bear revival, namely theology as biography or biography as theology: it aims to instantiate a way of doing theology that takes sanctified life and thought seriously as an intrinsic witness to the content and truth of the Gospel.

Given the interweaving of those several strands in the book, it is important to indicate how they may nevertheless be distinguished. To clarify whose is what: the structuring of the book according to aspects of a life is mine, whereas of course the life whose aspects it presents is Newbigin's. Again, the places where Newbigin is being directly quoted or closely paraphrased—and I have provided for the reader much opportunity for firsthand contact with the subject's thought—are plainly set within my ordering of the material in relation to the classic themes and questions of Christian theology and my comments on his arguments in relation to the history of theology, doctrine, and dogma. And finally, I state quite openly when I am making developments and applications of Newbigin's thought that depend also on my own experience and reflection.

To elaborate a little on that last point, I am engaged in a continuing encounter with my subject that has lasted, on and off, for more than three decades. With a generational gap of thirty years, and at a much lower level of prominence on my part, I have shared many of the same interests as Lesslie Newbigin; my career has reflected, albeit palely, a few features of his own; and our paths have crossed at several junctures. I, too, was raised outside the Church of England, though as a Methodist, not as a Presbyterian. After my undergraduate studies at Cambridge, I trained for the ministry at Wesley College, Leeds, where I did some work (and the significance of this will emerge) on sacrifice in the Old Testament. My first encounter with Newbigin

occurred when, as director of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism at the World Council of Churches, he came to lecture at the graduate school of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey; I remember a German fellow student of mine being impressed that the bishop from South India could speak so incisively in an "unfootnoted" way. My overseas missionary service as a teacher and pastor in West Africa coincided with Newbigin's second major period of service in India. In the mid-1970s, we overlapped in Birmingham, where Newbigin taught missiology at Selly Oak and I taught Scripture and theology at the Queen's College. During that time we were both called on by Faith and Order at the World Council of Churches to address the current theme of local unity and conciliar fellowship. We both worked, in successive stages, on the ultimately unsuccessful plan for covenanting among the English churches. My move to the United States in 1979 still allowed me to roam the world in the cause of the unity and mission of the Church to which Bishop Newbigin continued his lifelong devotion. We corresponded over editorial projects of mine, to which Newbigin contributed readily with vigorous and substantial texts. He gave a series of lectures at Duke University, where I teach. Thus, although I was never an intimate of Lesslie's, we enjoyed over many years an easy rapport and saw eye to eye on many matters. It is from this fundamental sympathy of outlook, coupled with my admiration for Newbigin's life and thought, that this biography is written.

My study seeks throughout to show Newbigin's theology as it emerged in the varied contexts of his life and work. The introduction relates his life in a nutshell, so that the reader may have a constant reference to the times and places in which the theological activity is to be situated. The principal source here is Newbigin's autobiography, *Unfinished Agenda*, supplemented by correspondence preserved among his papers, by personal conversations with him, and by the reminiscences of others. Then the bulk of the book is arranged in order to exhibit the various facets of this jewel of a man: first and foremost as a believer and a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ; then as an evangelist faithfully proclaiming to others the Gospel he had received; as an ecumenist passionate for the recovery of unity among divided Christians; as a diligent pastor and bishop in the Church of God; as a missionary strategist under the guidance of the Spirit; as a student of the world's religions and an interlocutor with their representatives; as a visionary who saw human society and the daily lives of people in light of the Kingdom of God; as a liturgist and preacher leading the assembled community to glorify God and find by grace a share in the life of the Blessed Trinity; as a teacher of Scripture and of the doctrinal tradition that interprets Scripture; and finally as an apologist for the Christian faith in the world of late modernity. The sequence of these chapters is in a very rough way chronological, for the aspects are displayed in the order in which they became specially prominent in Newbigin's life or in which a particularly important work was written or accomplished. Once such an aspect is introduced, the chapter may look back at earlier manifestations of that same interest on Newbigin's part and pursue the theme into the later stages of his career. My own evaluations occur partly in the course of the presen-

tation and partly at the end of several chapters, where the continuing importance of Newbigin's insights may also be suggested. The conclusion of the book estimates Newbigin's place in the Christian Tradition, draws from Newbigin's example some lessons about the doing of theology, and offers, in the perspective set by its subject, some further material considerations concerning the big issues for churchly reflection and action in our time and into the foreseeable future.

As I followed Newbigin's work over the years, I was impressed by the strength and consistency of his vision and its practical enactment; the impression was confirmed as I reread his writings and talked with him in preparation for this book. Newbigin offers, I believe, an authentic representation of the scriptural Gospel and the classic Christian faith. There is no question here of conducting a critique of Newbigin from a quite different standpoint. I have not even sought to tie up too firmly the occasional loose ends that may be observed in his thought, for that might tighten its texture beyond what is suitable. Certainly it has not been part of my plan to engage all the secondary and tertiary literature on Newbigin and the ambient issues. (In that regard, I have even resisted, though with difficulty, the temptation to read George Hunsberger's 1998 book, *Bearing Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*.) What is present here springs from my own encounter, in person and on paper and in the results of his work, with a great man of God, theologian, and pastor.

When, in early 1994, I first mentioned to Lesslie Newbigin the project that was developing in my mind for such a book as this, he was hesitant about the prospect of a biography; but as I clarified my specifically theological intention, he wrote that "if anyone is to do it, I would certainly be happy that it should be you" (May 7, 1994). From that point on, he unfailingly gave me his prompt and detailed cooperation in correspondence, conversation, and the supply of continuing literary materials. He gave me ready access to all his writings and papers and permission to use them.

My other debts are nevertheless numerous. On a bright autumn morning, at a crucial point in the shaping of this book, I was received into his Bible Society office at the Selly Oak Colleges by Dr. Dan Beeby, theological and pastoral confidant of Lesslie Newbigin. Himself of Northern English Presbyterian stock and a former missionary in China and Taiwan, Dan Beeby told me that three things were necessary in order to understand what Lesslie was up to: some knowledge of the Reformed tradition, some experience in cross-cultural mission, and a streak of nonconformity. Dan has since commented generously on the complete manuscript of the book. The draft text was also carefully read by Martin Conway, a younger friend of Lesslie's whose kindliness was much appreciated by Newbigin. Martin made many valuable suggestions and saved me from some errors of judgment, although he and I, who have known each other since our Caius College days, differ at some points in how we interpret and evaluate Newbigin's work. Philip Butin and Telford Work, two of my *Doktorkinder*, agreed to furnish perspectives on Newbigin from the rising generation, and their contributions figure in the conclusion

of the book. While he was writing his second thesis on Newbigin for the University of Helsinki, Jukka Keskitalo and I held a long conversation in a garden in Turku. Choon-Khing Voon employed her research skills in tracking down a number of documents that I had missed during my own sorting through the Newbigin archives lodged in the Selly Oak Colleges library. In my long association with Oxford University Press, Cynthia Read has always been a supportive editor, and she has become a cherished friend.

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A Pew Evangelical Fellowship allowed me to extend my Duke sabbatical from a semester into a year, during which most of the research for this book was done. I am very grateful to the trustees and to the selectors.

The book is dedicated to Margaret, my companion along the way.

Durham, North Carolina G. W.
Pentecost 2000

Contents

Preface v

Introduction: A Man in Christ 3
The Career 3
The Character 16
The Reader and the Writer 20
The Theological Life 26

1 The Confident Believer 29
Grasped by Christ 29
Three Student Papers 32
Ransomed, Healed, Restored, Forgiven 38
Proper Confidence 49
A Contemporary Faith 53

2 The Direct Evangelist 56
Lifelong Practices 56
The Gospel for Indian Students 59
The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever 65
Reconverting the West 72
Locality and Language 75

3 The Ecumenical Advocate 81
The Movement for Mission and Unity 81
The Church of South India 84
"The Reunion of the Church" 86
"The Household of God" 98
"The Unity We Seek" 113
"A Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United" 117
The Abortive Covenant of the English Churches 121
The International Anglican-Reformed Dialogue 123
Crisis Around the World Council of Churches 128

4 The Pastoral Bishop 135
Ministry in and of the Church 135
The Pastor 137
The Bishop 150

Ministries Ordained and Lay 155
Episcopacy and the Historic Episcopate 158

5 The Missionary Strategist 162
The Foreign Missionary in India 162
The International Missionary Council 164
World Mission and Evangelism 173
The Open Secret 177
Mission in Late Modernity 192
From Tambaram 1938 to Tambaram 1988 197

6 The Religious Interlocutor 204
In India 204
At Chicago and Harvard, at Yale and Cambridge 209
In Birmingham 219
Amid and Against Religious Pluralism 222
In the Face of Islam 231

7 The Social Visionary 237
Britain in the 1930s 237
India from the 1940s to the 1970s 243
Britain Around 1984 256
A Christian Vision for Society 265

8 The Liturgical Preacher 270
The South India Liturgy 270
The Form of Sound Words 279
The Sacraments of the Lord 286
The Glory of God 294

9 The Scriptural Teacher 298
The Authority of the Bible 298
The Reading of the Text 303
The World's Story 313
The Rule of Faith 317
"My Nearest Approach to a Dogmatics" 326
The Gist of It 330

10 The Christian Apologist 335
The Modern World 335
The Secular Flirtation 341
The Intellectual Battle 354
The Ecclesiastical Witness 375

Conclusion: The Man in History 390
"Like a Father of the Church" 390

Unto the Third and the Fourth Generation 393
"Amid the Rubble of History" 408
Epilogue 409

Notes 411

Index 453

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LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

Introduction

A MAN IN CHRIST

The Career

James Edward Lesslie Newbigin was born in Newcastle-on-Tyne on December 8, 1909, to Annie Ellen *née* Affleck, wife of Edward Richmond Newbigin, shipping merchant. According to Lesslie's autobiography, his earliest memories were almost all happy ones. His mother, a gentle person and an exquisite pianist, loved her children with a strength and constancy from which Lesslie never ceased to draw life. His father, a devout and thoughtful Christian and a radical in politics, took part in family outings to moors and fells and beach, and he satisfied the children's natural curiosity on all manner of subjects, as well as teaching Lesslie woodworking and model making. After local kindergarten and preparatory school, Lesslie went off to board at Leighton Park, the Quaker institution in Reading, Berkshire. From Bill Brown, the geography master, he learned to get to the heart of a big book so as to expound and defend its argument in debate. In chemistry classes, he was taught that "life is a disease of matter," and elsewhere he imbibed a broadly deterministic view of history; yet in his last year at school he gleaned from F. S. Marvin's *The Living Past* a vision of the human story as an upward striving toward growing mastery over all that stands in the way of man's full humanity. Lesslie ended up as senior prefect and remained grateful for the headmaster's advice not to overrate opposition or take it as directed against oneself. By this time he had abandoned the religious assumptions in which he had been reared, but he was prevented from dismissing the Christian faith as irrational by a reading of William James's essay *The Will to Believe* and of a book by a Presbyterian minister and family friend, Herbert Gray, which offered a lucid and reasonable exposition of Christianity.[1]

Having successfully gained entrance to Queens' College, Cambridge, Lesslie spent the first half of 1928 as an office boy in his father's business and there encountered both the excitement and the pains of a fiercely competitive economy. "Indelibly fixed in my memory," he wrote, was the occasion "when, by very rapid and accurate work, we secured an order ahead of our rivals and—a day or two later—learned that for the colliery which had lost the order this was the final blow. It closed, and hundreds of miners were thrown on to the street. Our small triumph was their colossal disaster. I began to see the reality of what I later learned to call 'structural sin.' "[2] After a summer trip to Germany, Lesslie went up to Cambridge in the Michaelmas term. Not very assid-

uously, he read for part one of the Geography Tripos but gave more time to music, debates, rock climbing, and the cultivation of friendships. Some of these latter occurred through the Student Christian Movement (SCM) as he began to explore the faith again. In the summer of 1929, while helping in a camp for the apathetic or desperate unemployed of South Wales, Lesslie was one night granted a vision of the Cross that reached to the depths of human misery and gave ground for fresh hope. His own new certainty now accompanied him on the evangelistic campaigns he took part in with fellow students. Visitors to Cambridge whom Newbigin met through the SCM included John R. Mott, father of the modern ecumenical movement; Jack Winslow, missionary from India; John Mackey, missionary from Peru; and William Temple, then Archbishop of York, who declared from the pulpit of Great St. Mary's that "it is possible to be comparatively religious but there is no such thing as comparative religion." "I was beginning," Newbigin wrote, "to have a thrilling sense of sharing in a worldwide Christian enterprise which was commanding the devotion of men and women whose sheer intellectual and spiritual power was unmistakable. I became, even as a second-year undergraduate, a reader of the *International Review of Missions*, and the Christian faith into which I was growing was ecumenical from the beginning."[3] He belonged to the Madingley Group, whose annual pilgrimage to the village after which it was named provided a focus for its regular prayer on behalf of Christian unity. The fledgling ecumenist secured his own ecclesiastical allegiance by being confirmed into membership of St. Columba's Presbyterian Church in Cambridge. At the SCM Swanwick conference in the summer of 1930, Newbigin heard an unexpected but inescapable call to the ordained ministry. Returning to Cambridge for his third and final year as an undergraduate, he read economics and heard the lectures of John Maynard Keynes.

To earn the wherewithal for his theological training, Newbigin found employment as an SCM staff secretary. Among the committee members in Edinburgh interviewing him for the job was Helen Henderson, daughter of Irish Presbyterian missionaries to India, with whom he fell in love there and then. They were to become colleagues in Glasgow for two years. Both were favorably considered for missionary service by the Church of Scotland, and Helen underwent the statutory year of training at St. Colm's College in Edinburgh; but the couple could not marry until Lesslie, having become a candidate for ordination under the Newcastle Presbytery, had completed his theological studies at Westminster College, Cambridge. From 1933 to 1936 he studied under John Oman and Herbert Farmer. His continuing SCM interests brought him into touch with J. H. Oldham, as well as William Temple, and so above all with the Life and Work movement, which, with Faith and Order, was to become from 1938 the World Council of Churches (WCC) "in process of formation." In May 1936 the Newbigins were formally commissioned by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for work in India, and on July 12 Lesslie was ordained by the Presbytery of Edinburgh for service as a foreign missionary. On September 26, 1936, Lesslie and Helen sailed from Liverpool for Madras.

After a month's voyage they docked at Madras and were immediately driven by car the thirty-six miles to their first home in the small country town of Chingleput. Newbigin wrote:

> That first taste of India was so vivid that it could never be forgotten—the soft, cool evening air, the lines of brightly lit stalls as we slipped out of Madras by the trunk road, the glint of light on polished brass water-pots, the graceful movement of women in their beautiful saris, and then the open country with the paddy fields and the big leafy trees fringing the road. On the way we had to stop because of a puncture and there was a chance to stand still in the darkness, smell the strange and delicious scents, listen to the symphony of the cicadas everywhere and watch the slow rhythm of the bullock-carts going by patiently, endlessly, through the night.[4]

For five months in Chingleput (where Lesslie helped with the English services on Sundays in the leprosy colony) and then four more months in the hills of Kodaikanal, the Newbigins spent a daily shift in learning Tamil, both the literary language and the ordinary language of the street and the shop. They were due to be stationed in Conjeeveram (later spelt Kanchipuram), but Lesslie's leg was smashed in a bus accident. After unsuccessful treatment in Madras, they set sail again for Britain. On November 14, 1937, Lesslie underwent in Edinburgh his tenth operation—a bone graft, after which osteomyelitis set in and amputation seemed probable. Friends prayed daily, and when the plaster was removed, the surgeon found that healing had begun. By the following February Lesslie was out of bed and by May he was walking on crutches. He had continued to study Tamil throughout his convalescence. In the further year that would be needed before final cure, he served as candidates secretary for the foreign missions committee of the Church of Scotland. In June 1939, the Newbigins' first child, Margaret, was born. On September 15 they left Newcastle, having seen Lesslie's father for the last time. On October 18 they finally arrived in Kanchipuram.

In a circular letter of April 1940, Newbigin described Kanchipuram as "one of the seven sacred cities of India, a place which has hardly a street without one or more temples, a place where Hinduism is at its strongest. The wonderful successes which the Church is having in certain parts of Indian society should not make one forget how massively resistant is the central core of ordinary caste-Hinduism."[5] In the city, with its 70,000 inhabitants and its annual influx of pilgrims for the great festival in May and June, Newbigin engaged with others in street preaching and in the distribution of gospels; he also shared with the head of a Hindu monastic community in the leadership of a weekly study group devoted to the Svetasvara Upanishad in Sanskrit and St. John's Gospel in Greek. As the district missionary, he undertook regular administrative duties and handled emergencies, besides touring the surrounding noncaste villages with Indian coworkers for pastoral and evangelistic purposes, making it his aim to strengthen local leadership in the congregations. The war years did not much disrupt the life of the Newbigin family, now augmented by the birth of Alison in 1941 and Janet in 1944. John would be born in 1947.

During the years in Kanchipuram, Newbigin became a representative of the South India United Church (SIUC) in the later stages of the negotiations that would allow the SIUC (Presbyterian and Congregationalist by origin), the Methodists (of British missionary origin), and the Anglicans to constitute the Church of South India (CSI). In what Newbigin called "the final struggle" toward unity, the decisions in the House of Bishops in the (Anglican) Church of India, Burma and Ceylon especially were touch and go, and during his home leave in 1946–47 Newbigin spent much time and energy not only in advocacy of the union among Scottish Presbyterians but also in defending the plan in the face of Anglo-Catholic opposition in the Church of England. The newly united Church was to be episcopal in structure (which worried many on the Reformed side), and all ministers from the founding denominations were to be recognized with little further ado as presbyters in the CSI (which meant in some Anglican eyes that those from the SIUC and the Methodists lacked priestly ordination). After positive final votes among the Methodists, the SIUC, and the Church of India, Burma, and Ceylon, the union was inaugurated in Madras Cathedral on September 27, 1947. Here is Newbigin's full description, in a circular letter written at the time, of what many ecumenists would regard as the highest moment so far in the recovery of visible unity, when Christian communities from the Anglican and some nonepiscopal traditions were for the first time brought together into organic union:

> During the last few days of the week messages were coming in from almost every part of the world, and from an amazing variety of Churches and Christian societies, assuring us of their prayers as the day of union drew near. It made us all very conscious of the great company of people who were with us in heart and mind during the service, and we could not help also constantly remembering the presence of all those who worked so hard for this union and who now serve in the Church triumphant.
>
> We [the bishops elect] set off together for the Cathedral at 7 on the Saturday morning. There had been rain the previous night, and it was a fresh, bright morning. A very large *pandal* [pavilion], seating about 2,000 people, had been erected beside the Cathedral, equipped with loudspeakers. The cathedral itself was, I believe, seated for about 1,500. According to the Madras papers there were 4,500 present, but I think 3,500 is more correct. Practically the whole of that number were in their seats from about 7.45 till 12.15, with only a short break between the two services when they could leave their seats. Yet when I asked some people if they were not tired, they repudiated the suggestion most indignantly. The whole of that great congregation seemed to remain in absolutely rapt attention to the very end. One had the overwhelming sense of a great company of worshipping people utterly taken up into the thing they were doing, made one by the presence of the living Spirit of God. When I was talking afterwards to a much-beloved Irish Presbyterian missionary who was there from North India, he summed it up by saying "The tide of the Spirit just rose and covered the walls." I don't think one could put it better.
>
> The first service began with praise, prayer, the reading of St. John 17, and confession. Then an authorised representative of each of the uniting Churches

> came to the steps of the chancel, read out the resolution of the governing body of his Church accepting the union, and then turned and went to the Table and laid on it a signed copy of the Scheme of Union and a book containing the signatures of all the ministers of his Church assenting to the Basis of Union and accepting the Constitution. Each one knelt for a moment in silence at the Table as he and we commended to God this action of each Church in giving up its life to become part of a greater whole. Then there was a very solemn prayer asking for God's blessing on the union. Then the bishop presiding (Bishop Jacob of Travancore) came forward and read in ringing tones the declaration that the three churches were now become one Church of South India. Immediately there followed the Te Deum, and what a shout of praise it was! It was as if all the frustrated desire of these 28 years had at last burst through the dam and was pouring out in one irresistible flood. I think many found it hard to refrain from tears during that singing. . . . We looked round at each other, and with each fresh face remembered again with a kind of start of joy that the walls between us were down and we were one Church. . . .
>
> When we had sat down, the five Anglican bishops came forward and presented themselves before the two senior ministers representing the SIUC and the Methodist Church. The Secretary of the Joint Committee read the declaration of their appointment to serve as Bishops in the united Church. They were then questioned as to their acceptance of the Basis of Union and Constitution, and knelt at the rails to be commissioned by each of the two ministers to exercise the office of a bishop in the congregations which had hitherto been part of these other churches. Prayer was offered for them, and then we sang "All hail the power of Jesus' name". Thereafter all the ministers of the three uniting churches were similarly questioned and commissioned to exercise their ministry in the Church of South India. Then with hymn, offering and prayer the first part of the service ended.[6]

At the age of thirty-seven, Lesslie Newbigin had been elected to serve as one of the first bishops in the united Church. During the second part of that liturgy on September 27, 1947, he received consecration to the episcopate.[7]

In a further letter, dated October 26, 1947, the new bishop described his diocese of Madurai and Ramnad thus:

> The diocese of Madura and Ramnad exactly covers the Government districts with those names, which you will find on the map in the extreme South-East corner of India. It is an area roughly 100 miles each way, but not, of course, square. On its Western side it runs along the borders of the State of Travancore, and the border is marked by magnificent ranges of hills running up over 8,000 feet. These hills are largely uninhabitable jungle and are full of a great variety of wild animal life including elephants, tigers, cheetahs and the ubiquitous monkey. But there are valleys running up into the mountains where there are many villages, among which we have a considerable Christian population, and there is the famous hill station of Kodaikanal, 7,000 feet up and surrounded by lovely forests and rolling downs, the resort of holiday-makers from every part of India during the hot season. The greater part of the diocese is, of course, the plains area, stretching from the hills to the sea, and the great majority of the 50,000 in the diocese live in the plains. And the natural centre of the whole area is the ancient city of Madura.

> You can find Madura on Ptolemy's map of the world. It is a very ancient city, and for long the capital of a famous kingdom. Throughout the Tamil country it is regarded as the cultural capital of the region. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was the scene of a famous Roman Catholic mission, and there is still a very strong Roman Catholic Church here. The American [Congregationalist] missionaries began work in 1834, at which time the population of the city was about 30,000. It is now about 400,000 and growing rapidly. The main reason for the rapid growth is the presence here of the [Scottish-owned] Madura Mills, and other modern [cotton-spinning] mills. They employ thousands of men and contribute to making the city larger and more wealthy. At the same time they naturally furnish material for difficult labour problems, and one of the first things that strikes a newcomer is the daubing of the Communist hammer and sickle on walls and houses everywhere. The control of the powerful labour unions is practically in Communist hands.[8]

Ecclesiastically, the diocese included not only the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions but also parts of the former Anglican diocese of Tinnevelly, where both the (high-church) Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the (low-church) Church Missionary Society labored. Something of Newbigin's evangelistic and pastoral work is described in chapters 2 and 4, but here already may be repeated a story that he liked to tell about the hazards of a bishop's job in catholic-minded corners of the former raj:

> On my first visit to the headquarters of the SPG area I confess to having been nervous. I need not have worried. I was escorted to the Church in a procession which included an Indian band, a brass band, a choir, an elephant borrowed from the temple, and a phaeton borrowed from the Rajah of Ramnad and drawn by a magnificent white horse, in which the bishop, garlanded with roses, was invited to sit. My Presbyterian upbringing asserted itself. I tried to protest. A senior member of the church, astonished, asked me what was the trouble. I said the first thing that came to my lips: "When our Lord went in a procession, He rode on a donkey." "Ah," was the relieved reply, "but He did that so that we could do this." The answer to that would have taken a long time, and I meekly sat down in the carriage, alternately trying to imagine what the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland and the Standing Committee of the SPG would have said.[9]

Newbigin served as bishop in Madurai and Ramnad for some twelve years. By virtue of his own remarkable abilities, in combination with his episcopal standing in a Church that many were ready to view as a first fruit in a wider unitive process, he became during that period a prominent figure on the international ecumenical scene. He was a consultant to the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948 ("Man's Disorder and God's Design") and chaired the high-powered and rambunctious theological "committee of twenty-five" that prepared the theme for the WCC's second assembly at Evanston, Illinois, in 1954, "Christ, the Hope of the World"; thereafter he was appointed to the central committee of the WCC.

In 1956 he was named vice chairman of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order and pressed that "the nature of the unity we seek" become a central question at the third assembly of the WCC to be held in New Delhi in 1961; in fact, he himself turned out to be the decisive drafter of the key paragraph in the description of ecclesial unity that would be adopted by that assembly.

Bishop Newbigin also had the delicate task of helping to keep communications open between the Church of South India and the worldwide Anglican Communion when, as a "special guest" of Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher, he attended the Lambeth Conferences of 1948 and 1958 (he came again in 1968, under Archbishop Michael Ramsey, as a "consultant"); but although some clarifications were achieved and, on the second occasion, 160 Anglican bishops received communion at a celebration of the CSI liturgy, yet these Lambeth Conferences were still not able to declare "full communion" with the CSI. Newbigin's disappointment was sharp and went deep. Had Lambeth been able to "give a cordial welcome to what had been done in South India," he wrote decades later in his autobiography, "the whole worldwide movement for unity among the Churches would have gone forward. The Anglican Communion would have fulfilled its true ecumenical vocation to provide a centre around which reformed Christendom can be brought together in unity and in continuity with the historic ministry of the universal Church. That opportunity was lost, and is not likely to come again."[10] From his days in Cambridge and in India, through his international activities, and after his retirement to Britain in 1974, Lesslie Newbigin made and kept many Anglican friends–Oliver Tomkins, Michael Hollis, Leslie Brown, Stephen Neill, George Bell, Hugh Montefiore, Martin Conway, Mary Tanner, and N. T. Wright, to name but a few from different generations—but there can be no mistaking his frustration at the institutional and corporate failure of Anglicanism to deliver its potential in the matter of Christian unity.[11]

In the 1950s, meanwhile, Bishop Newbigin became closely involved in the work of the International Missionary Council (IMC). In 1952 he participated formatively in the IMC's Willingen conference on "The Missionary Obligation of the Church." In January 1958, at the Council's assembly in Accra, he was elected—in his absence!—chairman of the IMC. He had already been sounded out for the full-time general secretaryship, a post which he was shortly afterward persuaded with some difficulty to accept. The CSI seconded him for five years "as a bishop of the Church of South India without diocesan charge, released for service with the International Missionary Council." Newbigin thus assumed principal responsibility on the IMC side for guiding the integration which he himself judged necessary between that body and the World Council of Churches; and after the integration was formally enacted at the New Delhi assembly in 1961, he became director of the Division of World Mission and Evangelism and an associate general secretary of the WCC. During these "bureaucratic" years (the word is laughably inappropriate in Lesslie's case, though he had considerable administrative gifts), he needed for a while to triangulate between London, Geneva, and New York. More significantly, he undertook extensive tours of Africa (1960), the Pacific (1961),

Latin America (also 1961), and the Caribbean (1962), as well as shorter trips to, say, Thailand and Japan and various parts of Europe and North America.[12] Old Africa hands may appreciate one vignette from Newbigin's visit to the Congo in October 1960:

> At about 11 p.m. we drove out to the Stanley statue to see the lights of Leopoldville [later Kinshasa]. It was a memorable moment for me, with all kinds of conflicting thoughts in my mind. Below was the vast sweep of the river, narrowing towards the rapids whose thunder formed the undertone of every other sound. To the right the glimmering lights of Leopoldville, the great expanse of the Stanley Pool dimly glimpsed in the moonlight. Across the river the lesser lights of Brazzaville. Above us towered the immense figure of Stanley looking out into the unexplored regions beyond. Around us a bunch of cheerful young Africans laughing and talking and occasionally giving a friendly slap to one of the lesser statues that form part of the monument. I suppose that much more history will have to unroll before we shall be able to see in one perspective the courage and vision of the white man's opening up of Africa, and the bubbling gaiety of the young Africa which the white man—to his perplexity—awaked.[13]

A single example must suffice to show the impact Newbigin's presence could have. It comes from the first National Conference of Australian Churches, held in Melbourne in February 1960. This account was written by David M. Taylor in the official report, *We Were Brought Together*:

> As far as it is possible for us to understand the mysterious workings of God's power, He made special use of Bishop Newbigin and of our study of 1 Peter. While all our distinguished overseas guests made their own special contribution to our fellowship and to our thinking, all willingly concede that Lesslie Newbigin was the outstanding personality of those ten days. And if we ask precisely what he did for us, it requires more than one man's pen to do him justice. Without taking away one whit from the glory and honour due to God Himself for the way He used His servant, we may express our gratitude to the Bishop for the way he made himself available as a channel through which the Holy Spirit might work.
>
> The unusual thing about Bishop Newbigin was the way he could talk freely and firmly about matters on which we are divided, yet instead of soon reaching the point where some of us would be gloating because we found that he was on our side, while others would be rejecting him, he spoke on and on, drawing from us all a continuing affirmative response. If we analyse why it was that this happened, we see it was no accident or chance, but the result of the combination of clear head, humble spirit, and long and careful search for truth. As we listened to him expounding the biblical doctrine of priesthood, for example, one by one we recognized our own blind spots. We saw that he was preserving everything we were anxious to defend, yet he was doing the same for others who came from other traditions. Bishop Newbigin is master of his subject and takes the greatest pains to find the most accurate way to express the spiritual truth given to him.
>
> Thus he himself set us an example in that very field to which he referred when at the end of the Conference he tried to pick out our greatest needs.

In his closing message he gently but firmly said our need is for better theology. In the Antipodes a common feature of our life is that we think we can get on without much theology. Large numbers of our people have it firmly fixed in their minds that theology is something obscure and far removed from the real needs of the common man. . . . One of the lessons we must not fail to learn from our Conference is this, that no man can speak clearly and convincingly on the problems that puzzle Christians today unless he really gives himself to the task of thinking theologically. Bishop Newbigin's fluency is the result of taking infinite pains, over many years, first to find "what the Spirit saith unto the churches," and secondly to find the exact word, and the right combination of words, in which to express this message.[14]

The early to mid-1960s were the years when Newbigin became most fascinated with the "secular theology" that had been adumbrated by Hans Hoekendijk and Paul Lehmann at the IMC Willingen conference in 1952 and that had come into fashion typified by a lopsided interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his "religionless Christianity." Much more will be said about this in chapters 7 and 10, but it must be clear from the outset that Newbigin never bought heavily into this vogue, even while recognizing that the "worldly" reference of the Gospel had often been underplayed. Here is Newbigin's telling account of a significant occasion:

A crucial event was the conference called at Strasbourg in July 1960 by the World's Student Christian Federation on "The Life and Mission of the Church." It was the brain-child of D. T. Niles and Philippe Maury who believed, as I did, that there was an emerging theological consensus about the missionary nature of the Church and that the coming generation of student leaders could be captured and fired by the vision so that a new generation of ecumenical leaders could be prepared to take the place of those who were growing old. There was an immensely impressive array of speakers including even Karl Barth, but the event proved very different from the expectations. To quote the report in the WSCF's journal: "It must have been striking to everyone how much indifference there was to the theological issues and ecumenical achievements of an earlier generation." The convictions to which I and those of my generation—D. T. Niles, Visser 't Hooft and Philippe Maury—had come with much wrestling were dismissed, to quote the same report, as "pious talk and Geneva ideology". The new vision was of the world, not the Church, as the place where God is to be found. Consequently "the mission and renewal of the Church in our day depends on acceptance and affirmation of the secular world in place of traditional Christian tendencies to reject it." The most articulate exponent of the dominant mood was Hans Hoekendijk whose address called us "to begin radically to desacralize the Church" and to recognize that "Christianity is a secular movement—this is basic for an understanding of it."

On a theological level I had to recognize the big element of truth in what was being said, but I was acutely aware at the same time of what was being ignored or denied. . . . On a personal level I found the event very painful. It was painful to experience the contempt in which missions were held. . . . I did not yet know how far the decade that had just begun would take us from the lines on which my own theological development had brought me. I had

> been pleading for a "churchly" unity because I believed that God's purpose of reconciliation could not be achieved by a concatenation of programmes and projects unless these were leading towards the life of a reconciled family within the household of God. I was soon to learn that "churchly" was an adjective of abuse, and that the only way to be really part of God's work as understood in the 1960s was to leave the Church behind. The "secular decade" had arrived. The Student Christian Movement would not again in my lifetime be, as it had been, the most powerful source of new life for the ecumenical movement.[15]

The event that closed the secular '60s for Newbigin was the "shattering experience" of the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala, where the ecclesiastical *soixante-huitards* took over the show—epitomized by a vaudeville artiste's singing of the satirical "there'll be pie in the sky when you die" to rapturous applause.[16] "The scars left on the body of the Church by that traumatic decade," wrote Newbigin fifteen years later, "will take a long time to heal."[17]

In 1965 Newbigin returned to India to serve as bishop of the Church of South India in Madras. In presenting to an international audience a series of meditations that he had originally given as communion addresses to his clergy and other coworkers during the nine years of his episcopal ministry there, Newbigin described the great city thus:

> Madras is a city of some three million people, adding 100,000 to its population each year. About half of this annual addition is made by immigrants from the hinterland of the city—often young people who have managed to struggle through an elementary education in their village and have come into the city in search of work. For very many of these the first "home" is simply a sleeping place on the pavement. After a time, in company with others from the same village or area, they will perhaps manage to find a vacant site where a cluster of bamboo and thatch huts can be erected on some dark night when the police are looking the other way. They thus become part of the great company of slum dwellers, living in crowded clumps of unventilated huts, without water, light or sanitation—but with an unbeaten determination to come up in the world. The fortunate ones, where one or both of the members of the family can secure and hold a job in a factory, may eventually graduate to a small three-room house in one of the new residential estates. And they can dream that children or grandchildren will eventually qualify for one of the stylish bungalows which are to be seen, surrounded by their well watered gardens, but seldom more than a stone's throw from one of the slums.
>
> The small town which grew up in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries around the East India Company's Fort is now a great centre of both heavy and light industry. North, west and south of the city, stretching to a radius of 25 miles, there is a great belt of factories which together produce a substantial part of India's total industrial output including railway rolling stock, weapons, heavy and light vehicles, cloth, tyres, electrical goods and much else besides. Industry forms a very large part of the life of the city and has to have a large place in the thinking of the Church.[18]

The Church of South India diocese as a whole comprised almost one thousand congregations, with some 110 congregations in the city of Madras. For about fifteen of these last, the language of worship was English, and for most of the rest Tamil; their denominational backgrounds varied between Anglican, Reformed, and Methodist, but the majority of them used the forms of service developed in the CSI since union. The membership ranged "from the dwellers in the slums and on the pavements to the men and women who hold positions of highest leadership in government, business and the professions." Of the engagement of the Church with its urban location (the place "for" which it was present, as Newbigin would come characteristically to phrase it), he wrote:

> Like the Church everywhere, the congregations in Madras are tempted to turn their backs upon the world around them and to concentrate on their own concerns. Yet it can be said with thankfulness that there is a real measure of concern for and involvement in the problems of the city as a whole. Some—though by no means all—of the congregations have active programmes of direct evangelism. Some of them have responded to the call to enter into the problems of the slums, both with emergency help at times of disaster from flood or fire (very common occurrences) and with long-term programmes such as the provision of modern sanitation units for more than a dozen of the slums. The Church has also been able to cooperate with the Slum Clearance Board of the Tamilnadu Government in programmes for community development in the new housing units built to replace the hovels in which people had been living. Under the name of "Christian Service to Industrial Society" there is a programme aimed at helping Christians in industry—both on the management and on the workers' sides—to understand and fulfil their calling as Christians in the changing conditions of modern industry, and to awaken the Church to a biblical understanding of industry and its problems. A community Service Centre, operating on behalf of a number of churches, provides both training for service to society and an opportunity for men and women in many sectors of public life to equip themselves for Christian witness and service in the common life.[19]

Elements of Newbigin's episcopal leadership of the Church's social and evangelistic ministries in the metropolis are discussed particularly in chapter 4.[20] During this period the bishop also served as deputy moderator of the CSI (he was disappointed by a failure on the Lutheran side to constitute with the CSI a united "Church of Christ in South India"), as convenor of the National Council of Churches' Committee on Faith and Order (with the full-time help of a young Syrian Orthodox priest, he headed up an all-India study program that engaged the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mar Thoma, and Protestant churches and culminated in a residential conference at Nasrapur in 1972—"a very blessed occasion on which we found a deep unity of spirit even when we tackled very controversial issues"), and as a member (again) of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order (at the Louvain meeting of 1971 he was reluctantly involved in launching the ecclesiologically ambiguous concept of "conciliar fellowship," but on the other hand he found

himself enriched by participation in the section on the role of the handicapped in the Church).

Approaching the retirement age of a CSI bishop at sixty-five, Lesslie undertook with Helen their return to Britain by way of an overland trek. In September 1974 he began five years of teaching missiology and ecumenism in the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. His audiences comprised British and other European students undergoing missionary training, as well as students coming from overseas churches for further study in England. A special and much appreciated feature of Lesslie and Helen's ministry was the Sunday afternoon tea parties they held for students in their home. As discussed at several points in this book, the scarcely retired bishop became much involved in the ecclesiastical and educational affairs of the city of Birmingham. In 1978–79 he served as national moderator of the United Reformed Church, the body into which his original Presbyterian Church of England had been integrated with the former Congregational Union/Church in 1972.

On settling again in his native land, Newbigin had been deeply struck by the mood of despair among the people and the moral decay in the country. Upon his retirement from Selly Oak, he responded to a challenge he had issued to the Birmingham district council of the United Reformed Church by himself accepting a call to the pastorate of a seemingly moribund cause in the shape of

> a small congregation of about twenty members which worshipped in a building just across the road from the Winson Green prison. It had begun 120 years earlier as a mission from the Handsworth Congregational Church to an area which was described as being bounded by the prison, the lunatic asylum, the London North-Western Railway and James Watt's famous foundry. Officially known as "Mary Hill" it was popularly described as "Merry Hell."[21]

The current residents came mostly from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. Between January 1980 and September 1988 Newbigin ministered there; from September 1982 he had as his associate, at his initiative, a presbyter seconded by the Church of North India, Hakim Singh Rahi, who was fluent in Urdu and Hindi, as well as in Punjabi and English. The British Council of Churches invited Newbigin in the early 1980s to share in a working group of leading thinkers to prepare a major conference on Church and society initially foreseen for the year 1984; by an unpredictable providence, this led to his writing the first of his remarkable studies on the Gospel and Western culture, which were to add up to what he later called "the most intense years of missionary endeavour in my entire life," climaxing in the international conference of July 1992 at Swanwick that he saw—and had planned—as the event at which to hand on that torch to a wide range of younger Christian leaders. These years were, for Newbigin himself, the late stages in what had been a deep preoccupation of his since the 1930s with the relationship between Christianity and modern Western civilization and with the question—formulated since 1975 in terms borrowed from the retired Indonesian general T. B. Simatupang—"Can the West be [re]converted?"

These concerns went increasingly hand in hand with Newbigin's attention to Islam as the respected and more and more evident rival for the spiritual allegiance of Europe and much of the world.

Early in 1988, Newbigin returned to India for a WCC consultation arranged to "revisit" the Tambaram 1938 world missionary conference, and there he clashed sharply with representatives of the "Harvard school" in their approaches to the religions and found himself in a reprise of the part played by Hendrik Kraemer at Tambaram half a century before. After his third retirement, Newbigin continued to be in national and international demand as a speaker, although he largely confined his overseas travels to Europe and North America. In May 1989 he allowed himself to be cajoled into traveling to Texas for the second half of the WCC world conference on mission and evangelism in San Antonio and, once there, to give an off-program address late one evening that was attended by virtually the entire membership. Seven years later, it was with even more resistance and humility on his part that he was eventually persuaded to travel to Brazil for some days of the succeeding WCC world conference on mission and evangelism, in Salvador de Bahia in November 1996, when his eyesight had largely gone, and yet he gave, in two installments that had to be fitted into an already overcrowded timetable, what many present recall as the most valuable address of the entire event.

In 1992 Lesslie and Helen moved from Birmingham to London in order to be nearer to three of their four "loving and supportive" children. Out of their retirement home in South East 24, Lesslie kept up a significant ministry in local ecumenism. At his funeral service in Dulwich Grove United Reformed Church on February 8, 1998, it became clear to others, as Martin Conway reported, "what a remarkable role he had played in prayer, reconciliation, and inspiration between churches and their leadership of different denominations and races." Two quite different features from Lesslie's final years, which will surprise only those unaware of his lifelong attachment to music and his perennial openness to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, were his association first with Nigel Swinford and the New English Orchestra and second with Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), the London focus for a while of the Toronto Blessing. The links with HTB in particular merit further mention, and here Simon Downham, the curate who had the closest day-to-day relationship with Lesslie, has been most helpful.[22]

Downham says that although "HTB has come to be regarded in some circles as a flag-bearer of the so-called charismatic renewal, in practice its heart is for 'winning souls.' Indeed one might go so far as to say that our understanding is that the Spirit's work in our midst is precisely to that end. Perhaps that is the clue to Lesslie's surprise and delight at ministering here. There was none (or not much!) of the introspection that has discoloured so much of the charismatic renewal, but rather a passion for mission, even if our understanding of mission was not quite as sophisticated as those who wrote about mission would have liked." Downham recounts the original contact, made in the summer of 1994, in this way:

> I had devoured Lesslie's work while studying Theology in Oxford, at Wycliffe Hall. I had suggested that he would be an ideal speaker to invite to Holy Trinity Brompton's holiday/teaching conference. His was one among several names. Sandy Millar, the Vicar of Holy Trinity, had a dream that he should invite Lesslie and quite late in the day rang to invite him. Lesslie, much to my surprise, agreed to come. The conference was taking place at a holiday camp in Morecambe in Lancashire, and Lesslie arrived having got himself through train and bus strikes from London to Morecambe. I remember meeting him and being apprehensive about what he would make of us and what we would make of him. He had been asked to talk about mission and culture. I remember him being introduced and before he'd said anything he was given a five-minute standing ovation. "After applause like that," he said, "I can't wait to hear myself speak." At once we took him to our hearts and it seemed he took us to his. He gave an hour-long learned exposition of the problems of preaching the Gospel in our western culture. Of course I'd heard the material before and had read much of it but was transfixed. More than that, many in our congregation with no theological background were transfixed. I remember one of our West Indians was leaving the conference hall at the same time as me and said "I don't think I understood half of that, but I know it's important and I'm going to buy the tape and make sure I understand all of it." Lesslie had that effect on us. It was an unlikely relationship, but the more seriously he took us, the more seriously people wanted to take the message he was bringing.

Picturing HTB as "a gushing oil well which simply needed capping," Newbigin returned many times to the church; here were "two hundred people attending his courses, all of whom were tertiary educated and involved in careers where their potential influence was not inconsiderable." He gave various series of lectures, preserved on audiotape, on St. John and Romans, on the major Christian doctrines, and on the Gospel in relation to the worlds of science, politics, and the religions. On one occasion he offered a particularly powerful and profound meditation on the Seven Words from the Cross.

Lesslie spent Christmas 1997 in the hospital with "an unexpected heart problem," as he put it in his last letter to me. He had been looking forward to traveling in mid-January to Birmingham in connection with the joining of Winson Green United Reformed Church with Bishop Latimer Anglican church in a local ecumenical partnership. His last journey, however, took another form. On Friday, January 30, 1998, the Lord took him closer to his eternal reward. Memorial services were, of course, multiplied. A year later, Lesslie and Helen were reunited.

The Character

Of middling height, sturdy build, and wiry manner, Lesslie Newbigin, in the words now of the anonymous obituary notice in the London *Times* (January 31, 1998), "was strikingly handsome and remained amazingly youthful in appearance well into his seventies." From my first meeting with him in 1963

to my last meeting with him late in 1996, the physical and mental impression he made on me was one of disciplined energy. Warmly acknowledging the personal impact of Newbigin on theology at King's College, London, in recent years, Professor Colin Gunton speaks of Lesslie as "something of a driven man."[23] As they met him in various arenas, many people sensed that the driving force was the Holy Spirit. "Lesslie in the flesh was quite as alluring as Lesslie in print," said Bishop Hugh Montefiore at the memorial service in Southwark's Anglican cathedral, and "one always knew that any advice he gave was both wise and prayer-laden." Lesslie, of course, did not parade his prayer life, but from glimpses we know that he always began "[his] morning prayers by singing a hymn—even if only under [his] breath," and that for a long time he "used Lancelot Andrewes' *Preces Privatae* as a guide in the quiet hour each morning."[24] "When he asked how you were," said Dan Beeby in his address at Lesslie's funeral, "you knew it was a prayer-backed question," which was exactly in keeping with the charge he laid upon his presbyters as bishop in Madras.[25] And in the obituary notice he wrote for the London *Independent* (February 4, 1998), Beeby recounted that to the very end Lesslie's "brilliance, pastoral care and missionary zeal were all present in the two 'sermons' he preached in intensive care a few days before he died."

"Humility," "kindness," and "courtesy" are words that frequently recur in people's characterization of Lesslie Newbigin. His habitual gentleness did not exclude firmness in argument. He recognized "impatience" as a trait in himself. On no more than a couple of occasions, Martin Conway recalls Lesslie's turning "terse" after a disagreement. Certainly he could be forthright. Hans-Ruedi Weber—in 1961 a young man on the way to becoming himself a distinguished missiologist and biblical expositor but hailing from a "Swiss village background and having no Oxford and Cambridge degrees"—accompanied Newbigin to the meeting in Samoa from which sprang the Pacific Conference of Churches:

> Early during the Malua meeting Lesslie took me aside and severely criticized something I had said during the first or second introduction to the Bible studies on Galatians. He felt that I had been carried away by rhetoric and had made Paul say things which were not in the text. (What exactly the point was, I no longer remember.) Lesslie was deeply worried about this, and in a brotherly but very firm way he corrected me. This small incident is certainly typical of the way Lesslie collaborated with others, and quite a few of his colleagues did not always like his frankness.[26]

Far more of Newbigin's colleagues, like Weber himself, let nothing impair their esteem and affection for the man.

Two collaborators who knew Lesslie Newbigin well in day-to-day work were Leslie Brown, a fellow missionary in South India, and Hakim Rahi, his associate pastor at Winson Green. Brown, who went on to become an Anglican bishop and archbishop in Uganda and then Bishop of St. Edmondsbury and Ipswich, wrote this to me: "Lesslie has been since then not only a dear friend but a hero. He was at my consecration in 1953, but Abp. Fisher wouldn't let

him lay on hands. He was also with us in Uganda and took a quiet day for the bps before they elected me Archbishop. To see a true bishop I look at Lesslie."[27] Hakim Rahi wrote this: "For me to make any kind of comment about the ministry of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin is like a tiny lamp trying to comment about the sun. I am certain I can never find adequate words to describe that adorable person. It was sheer good luck or divine grace that gave me the rare privilege to work with him."[28] At a service of thanksgiving in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, for the golden jubilee of Newbigin's consecration to the episcopate in the CSI, Bishop Colin Buchanan recalled a very difficult time in his own life as an Anglican suffragan in Birmingham: "I was distanced from my own diocese and, in a caring way, Lesslie in effect became my bishop. So I owe him a personal debt which is over and above all that I learned from him as a theologian." The speaker concluded with the observation that "there is something wonderfully young in Lesslie—a touch perhaps of God's sunlit eternity."[29]

In his later years a number of article-length tributes to Newbigin's life and work had already appeared in quite varied locations: those, for instance, of Bernard Thorogood, then general secretary of the United Reformed Church, in the *International Review of Mission* (1990), of Martin Conway in the *Epworth Review* (1994), and of Tim Stafford in *Christianity Today* (1996).[30] The January 1990 issue of the *International Review of Mission* in fact contained a whole batch of shorter pieces, "In Tribute to Bishop Lesslie Newbigin," by a score of prominent ecumenists and missiologists, including Cardinal Jan Willebrands, Bishop Hans Joachim Held of Germany, Professor C. F. Hallencreutz of Sweden, Professor Charles West of Princeton, Dr. M. M. Thomas of Bangalore, and Dr. Pauline Webb of the BBC. To mark Newbigin's eighty-fifth birthday in 1994, a festschrift with international contributions was edited in India under the title *Many Voices in Christian Mission*.[31]

From this wealth of illuminating material two items may be picked out, both from Indian sources. The first is an anecdote from Bishop Sundar Clarke, Newbigin's successor in Madras, who affectionately called his predecessor "a bishop on the run":

> There had been heavy rains which had destroyed a number of houses, huts and school buildings. Without delay Lesslie rushed to these spots and found roofless schools and stunned, apathetic people. He called for a ladder, climbed it, asked the local people to pass him the leaves that had blown off, and began to thatch a shed to make into a school. It was a fascinating spectacle to see him so involved and exhibiting his faith and theology to a people who had lost not only their roofs but were also spiritually shattered. He did it and he got them to do it! In this sense he did theology and got people to do theology in life and in situations of need.[32]

The second, chosen partly to ward off accusations of "hagiography" of a kind that got the genre a bad name, is a very ambivalent piece by Paolos Mar Gregorios (Verghese), Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan of New Delhi, whose relationship with Newbigin had known tense moments over the years:

> Lesslie Newbigin and I went to Geneva at about the same time—soon after the Third Assembly of the WCC in New Delhi, 1961. We were both from India—in different ways—but had met for the first time at the Assembly. He came from the missionary empire of the Western Church, and from the nation of my colonial masters. I had just been ordained an Orthodox priest, barely a month or so beforehand. I was in every sense a novice in the Church, having lived and worked in the world as a layman for the first thirty-nine years of my life.
>
> Our positions in the WCC headquarters were similar. He was in charge of the division of world mission and evangelism; I was director of the division of ecumenical action. We were both associate general secretaries and met often with Dr. Visser 't Hooft, the general secretary. We started our work in the old "barracks" at 17 route de Malagnou, and I was excited about the prophetic pioneering that the WCC had already done for more than a decade by then.
>
> I admired Lesslie for the lucidity of his linguistic expression, for the clarity with which he could present his case, for the transparency of his commitment to Christ and to the unity of the Church, and for the simplicity of his lifestyle.
>
> But our backgrounds were so different from each other. I came from a Church that experienced the mission of the Western Church as a disruptive and in many ways destructive force. I came from a situation in which the Church was one until the Western missionaries came as colonists and conquered it by money and political military power. To me, the kind of mission the Western Church represented was the source of disunity and unbelief while for Newbigin it was the agent of Church unity. To me, Augustinian Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) represented a deviation from the teaching of Christ—a tragic deviation that has hurt humanity. For Newbigin, Augustine was a great Christian thinker, in fact the one thinker by whose standards other thinkers were to be judged.
>
> So our views often clashed. Newbigin is a great teacher, and was a very popular missionary among the Tamil Christians of my land. Sometimes I felt he was treating me with a kind of paternalistic condescension, which he must have acquired in my country, living with doting Christian disciples.
>
> The net result was that most of my ideas about what Christians should do in the world were politely ignored or actively countered, as coming out of innocent ignorance, out of lack of proper instruction by Western masters of Christianity.
>
> This is a time to pay a tribute to a great Protestant soul who has dedicated his life to serving Christ as he knew and understood, a fruitful life of fourscore years. May God grant him many more years of selfless and humble service in the vineyard of the Lord.[33]

From among Newbigin's many human relationships two in particular may be selected for viewing from Lesslie's side: first M. M. Thomas, and then W. A. Visser't Hooft. Having met him a year earlier, Lesslie became properly acquainted with Madathilparamphil Mammen Thomas in 1942, the year in which "M. M." was rejected both for ordination by his Mar Thoma Church (because his politics were too radical) and for membership in the Communist Party (because he was not prepared to refrain from openly preaching the Gospel). Although M. M. was the younger by seven years, Newbigin later

named him as the man he "would choose as *guru* in that difficult area of thought which deals with the meaning of the Gospel in politics, culture, and the inter-faith dialogue."[34] Thomas eventually became director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore (from 1962) and chairman of the central committee of the World Council of Churches (1968–75). As will appear later in this book, Newbigin and he served each other frequently as sparring partners. "In a very rare measure," said Newbigin of Thomas, "he has held together the things which tear most of us apart. Deeply committed to involvement in the secular issues of our time, he has at the same time lived by a deep and growing personal faith centred in the risen Jesus. Realistic in his exposure of the sins of the churches, he has yet remained deeply rooted in and loyal to the Church of his own birth." The "coherent theological pattern" in Thomas "has had the risen Christ as its centre and the whole world as its circumference. To speak in Hindu terms, M. M. has held together in his own discipleship the way of action (*karma*), the way of wisdom (*jnana*), and the way of devotion (*bhakti*). We do well to thank God for this gift to the Church of our day."

Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft, said Newbigin, "is widely remembered and honoured as the first General Secretary and (in large measure) the architect of the World Council of Churches. It is less often remembered that his central passion from beginning to end of his active life was for the missionary faithfulness of the Church."[35] Nine years older than Newbigin, "Wim" was from the start deeply respected by Lesslie as a senior colleague in the ecumenical institutions and became an increasingly close friend, as is evident in the many references to Visser 't Hooft in *Unfinished Agenda* and in correspondence between the two. Theologically, the two were related through their Reformed ancestry and through their appreciation of Hendrik Kraemer and (more slowly in Newbigin's case) Karl Barth. Newbigin heard especially Visser 't Hooft's repeated castigations of "syncretism," whether in the "national" churches of Europe or in the "democratic" churches of America or in unguarded attempts at "indigenization" in other cultures (Visser 't Hooft looked rather, with Kraemer, for "subversive fulfilment"). Visser 't Hooft's concern for the Church of Jesus Christ was that it might credibly witness across all frontiers to "the royal freedom of the Gospel"; the reach of the divine sovereignty into every sphere of life was not to be achieved by annexation of elements in the secular that stood in blatant contradiction to the Christian faith. Christianity was now in debate, even battle, with "scientific rationalism" and "neo-pagan vitalism." These themes resound also through Newbigin's thought and work.

The Reader and Writer

Given all Newbigin's multifarious activities, it is hard to think of him, for all the formidable energy he possessed, as an exhaustive reader, and certainly he did not feel it necessary to display his learning in footnotes to his own writings. Rather he appears to have made discerning choices among the lit-

erature that providentially came his way (sometimes with the help of friends) and then, by penetrating and receptive reading (with techniques learned from his geography master), to have made a critical and constructive appropriation of the ideas from such works as they suited the themes he was engaged on at the time and which would stay with him over the years.

Newbigin was, in fact, given to naming such-and-such a book as among "the three or four most crucial books" he had read. Thinking to make a count, I consulted Lesslie, and we arrived—by conversation, correspondence, and finally an audioletter he sent me as late as December 1997—at an agreed short list. When, as a young man, he was moving back "from unbelief to belief," he was convinced by William James's *The Will to Believe* that there were not three options—belief, unbelief, and agnosticism—but only two, to trust or not to trust, and that the will was involved in this decision. Eric Fenn's "little paperback" *Things and Persons* (1931) introduced him to Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* and "was quite decisive for the argument with scientific determinism, which up till then had seemed to me to present impassable barriers"; he was also reading G. A. Studdert Kennedy's writings during that period. While a theological student at Westminster College, Cambridge, Lesslie was turned by the study of James Denney's *Romans*, he said, from "theological liberalism" to a lifelong evangelical belief in the objective atonement wrought by Christ on the Cross. During the second half of the 1930s Newbigin was preoccupied with the relation of the Gospel to politics, and Reinhold Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the first part of which he heard in Edinburgh in the spring of 1939, "brought together and consolidated the kind of thinking with which I had been wrestling during those years." Similarly, Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) "consolidated and affirmed what I was not very coherently feeling my way to"; Kraemer's book continued to represent "a nodal point" for Newbigin's thinking. C. N. Cochrane's "brilliant" *Christianity and Classical Culture* (1940) helped Newbigin to grasp the decisive importance of the Nicene and Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity and how St. Augustine was able to build upon its foundation a new worldview that would shape the thought of Western Christendom for a thousand years. At the final approach, in the 1940s, to the union of the churches in South India, it was A. M. Ramsey's *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (1936) which changed Newbigin's mind in favor of "the compatibility of a catholic belief in an historic succession with my evangelical belief about the Gospel." Newbigin read the "seminal" works of Roland Allen—*Missionary Methods—St. Paul's or Ours?* (1912) and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder it* (1927)—during the early years of his episcopate in Madurai, when he was confronted with congregations that lacked paid leadership and found that they were often the most lively, although he had already, during his time as a district missionary in Kanchipuram, been anxious to "win the local village congregations away from a wrong kind of dependence on the mission bungalow." J. H. Oldham had tried for many years to persuade Newbigin to read Michael Polanyi, the Hungarian scientist and philosopher of science, but Newbigin first did so with

the Gifford Lectures, *Personal Knowledge*, fairly soon after their appearance in 1958; having once read the book, he resolved to reread it every ten years, and "certainly I have read it several times since." In the decade of the 1960s Newbigin got "a bit carried away by the enthusiasm for the secular" and was, as he later judged, too much influenced by the thesis of A. T. van Leeuwen's *Christianity and World History* (1964). After being repelled as a theological student by Karl Barth's writings, Newbigin became captivated by the man when he worked with him in person in the 1950s, and he resolved to read the *Church Dogmatics* in their entirety after his retirement; this he accomplished in 1974–75, having been led "by the grace of God to start with section four and then work backwards; otherwise I would never have survived."

None of the books Newbigin read in his later years seems to rank as "decisive," but his writings show that he was perfectly willing to pick up and run with ideas from a number of them, such as the tardily discovered classic by Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* (1935), Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987), Carver T. Yu's *Being and Relation: A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism* (1987), or Christopher Kaiser's *Creation and the History of Science* (1991). Tom Wright, dean of Litchfield and New Testament scholar, has told me how Newbigin, when his eyesight was failing, had his "reading teams" work with him through Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Newbigin found in such work the refutation of the historically and theologically "destructive scholarship of so many trends in the last thirty years" which Lesslie "knew in his bones couldn't actually be getting to the heart of the matter."[36]

Passing from Newbigin the reader to Newbigin the writer, we find that he wrote in many modes and idioms. He kept up a prolific correspondence, private, professional, and public. To give just one example from the latter domain: In October and November of 1989 he was exchanging letters with high officials of the Royal Mail in an effort to keep postal employees from obligatory work on Sundays at a time when the resumption of Sunday collections was being planned and the introduction of Sunday deliveries was being considered. Newbigin's epistolary margins were narrow; he reused the blank backs of older letters; he never liked to retire an envelope. It was not just when his eyesight failed that one needed to be aware of the keys that stand in proximity to those his fingers actually struck, although the postscript of a late letter to me both makes and illustrates the point: "My typing is an exercise of faith, but I hope grace will enable you to guess my intention in vases where I have hit the wrong key."[37]

Newbigin's prepared addresses or his incisive interventions could shape or turn a meeting. On one occasion he asked a president of the South African Methodist Conference whether he would like his speech "flavoured with sugar or with salt."[38] Newbigin was a master draftsman of ecumenical documents. We shall see him at work in the IMC Willingen conference of 1952 and in

composing the description of unity that would be adopted by the WCC at the New Delhi assembly in 1961, and these two instances must stand for many. His clarity of mind, his fairness in summary, and his freshness and fluency with language all earned him trust. As anyone who has done the job will know, willingness to take on the drafting task also gives one—especially if one learns to be receptive of other suggestions rather than defensive of one's own first efforts—an unequaled influence on the final outcome.

On ecumenical occasions Lesslie could also craft limericks to "relieve the times of weariness." In *Unfinished Agenda*, he gives just one sample that captures some prominent figures from the time of a WCC Central Committee meeting during a hot and drowsy afternoon in New Haven, in 1957.

> George Florovsky was making a very long and largely incomprehensible speech. Franklin Fry in the chair was maintaining a firm and soldierly appearance. Ernest Payne, the vicechairman, at his side, was visibly wilting. The following lines seemed to flow unbidden onto the pad on my knee:
>
> Florovsky is speaking again.
> His meaning is not at all plain.
> But while Franklin C. Fry
> Will never say die
> It clearly gives Ernest A. Payne.
>
> Unfortunately D. T. Niles at my side saw, read, seized and passed the paper along the row. I don't think the chairman ever understood why the committee's decorum so suddenly disintegrated.[39]

In later years Lesslie compiled a collection prefaced thus: "I am normally a good sleeper. When occasionally sleep evades me, I concoct limericks. This gentle form of mental exercise is sufficiently interesting to banish boredom, but not so exciting as to produce unwanted stimulation. There is no hurry. If it refuses to come out right, there is always another night; if it does 'click' one drops off to sleep. Something accomplished, something done has earned a night's repose. It is a tranquilliser with positively no harmful side-effects." The collection took off from the names of places which St. Paul visited (or might have). Here are two examples with some theological significance:

The Final Equations

A cosmologist living in Thrace
said "Time's just a hiccup in space."
At this Stephen Hawking
said "Ah! Now you're talking,
and God's just the grin on its face."

Original Sin

The bad little boys of Apulia
have a badness unique and peculiar.

All moral instruction
is met with obstruction,
and rules only make them unrulier.

Some of Lesslie's limericks were read by family members at his funeral and memorial services.[40]

Newbigin's handwritten lectures—for instance, of the Bangalore series of 1941 on "The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress" or the Henry Martyn series of 1986 on "Church, World, Kingdom"—reveal that he did little or no stylistic revision, although he would sometimes make cuts of a paragraph's length for reasons of timing (he would write the estimated delivery time of a page at the top of page 1). His texts as printed could sometimes have profited from a little editorial tightening to avoid verbal repetitions or to lighten some lengthy prepositional phrases ("in terms of" and such). At its frequent best, however, Newbigin's published writing was vigorous and colorful; he could be trenchant, but his blade was a scalpel rather than a scimitar, curative rather than destructive.

Newbigin's bibliography runs to several hundred titles, depending on the categories of writing included.[41] The books, in particular, need to be located in their biographical and geographical circumstances. The first, *Christian Freedom in the Modern World* (1937), was written on board ship during the first passage to India; it was a critical response to John Macmurray's *Freedom in the Modern World*, which was receiving favorable attention in the British Student Christian Movement at the time but seemed to Newbigin antinomian in tendency. The need to "defend the South India scheme" in face of English Anglican critics in particular led to Newbigin's *The Reunion of the Church* (1948), which was republished in 1960 with an extensive new introduction that could draw on a dozen years of life since union in the CSI and answer the continuing criticisms. Newbigin's early years as a bishop in the CSI are recounted in *A South India Diary* (1951), published in the United States as *That All May Be One* (1952); many readers who encountered the text through the SCM's Religious Book Club testify to the profound impression made on them by this narrative combination of evangelism, ecumenism, and episcopal care. The author's formal ecclesiology in unitive, missionary, and eschatological perspective is found in *The Household of God* (SCM 1953), the book of his Kerr Lectures in the University of Glasgow, which achieved the status of a classic and was reissued as such by Paternoster Press in 1998. Newbigin's *Sin and Salvation* (1956) started life in Tamil as the bishop's aid for village teachers in the Madurai and neighboring dioceses and was taken up, in English, by the Religious Book Club.

Both *One Body, One Gospel, One World* (1958) and the inelegantly entitled *Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (1963), improved in the United States to *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, stem from their author's involvement with the International Missionary Council and the WCC's Division of World Mission and Evangelism, in whose successive employment he was during the period of the IMC's integration with the WCC. *A Faith for This*

One World? (1961) resulted from the William Belden Noble Lectures given in 1958 at Harvard, a place noted for its comparative studies in religion. *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (1966), the Firth Lectures at the University of Nottingham in 1964, show Newbigin at the height of his—never blind—flirtation with the ideas of the decade.

By the time of his Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale in 1966, published as *The Finality of Christ* (1969), Newbigin was back in India as CSI bishop in Madras, where he also delivered *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (1968) as addresses to the Christian Medical College, Vellore. That was the venue, too, for *Journey into Joy* (1972). A collection of the bishop's communion homilies for his coworkers in Madras, first published there in 1974, was adopted by Archbishop Coggan of Canterbury for his Lent Book of 1977, *"The Good Shepherd": Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World.*

Newbigin's missiological teaching at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, where he served from 1974 to 1979, was deposited in *The Open Secret* (1978), which was republished in slightly revised form in 1995. His long-matured exposition of the Fourth Gospel, *The Light Has Come*, was issued in 1982, by which time he was serving as a local pastor in Winson Green. Newbigin's entry into the "1984" project of the British Council of Churches was marked by *The Other Side of 1984*, the themes of which were much more fully developed in his 1984 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986). The desired "missionary encounter with modernity" became the subject of many shorter writings during Newbigin's final retirement. The most comprehensive statement of his thinking in the later years of his life is found in the book resulting from his Alexander Robertson Lectureship in the University of Glasgow, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989). The continuing vigor of his thought finds expression in his last book, coauthored with Lamin Sanneh and Jenny Taylor, *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in "Secular" Britain* (1998). Meanwhile, backed by diaries kept and letters written over the years, Newbigin had in 1985 published his autobiography as *Unfinished Agenda* and then brought the business up to date with a postscript in 1993.

In dealing with writings composed by Newbigin over a period of sixty-odd years and in various cultural contexts, I have had to make certain decisions concerning grammar and typography when quoting from them. In general, British spelling and punctuation have been retained in quotations from works published in the United Kingdom or in India, whereas American conventions have been kept for works published in the United States. The reader will notice the trend of printers over recent decades to reduce pronouns referring to God from initial capitals to lowercase. On the other hand, there are indications that Newbigin himself continued to capitalize Gospel, Church, Kingdom, and Scripture, and I have standardized usage in that sense, particularly as it matches my own predilection. On the matter of gender-inclusive language, Newbigin wrote as follows in the preface to *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989): "Like all people who have used the English language I have until recently been accustomed to using the masculine pronoun inclusively to refer

to both halves of the human family. That this is, for valid reasons, no longer acceptable to many readers poses a problem for the writer. To use both pronouns ("he or she") at every point can make sentences intolerably convoluted. I have therefore used both "he" and "she" inclusively and—I hope—impartially. I hope that this will not expose me to any serious charge of moral delinquency." Subsequently his preferred solution seems to have been to turn phrases so as to minimize the use of generic pronouns altogether. I have not made anachronistic changes where quoting or closely paraphrasing earlier writings. Bible quotations have been maintained in the versions originally cited by Newbigin. Where I make my own use of the Bible I have consistently cited according to the Revised Standard Version, thereby respecting the English-language translation that prevailed in ecumenical circles for a very long period in Newbigin's life. In leading the reader straight through a particular writing of Newbigin, I have usually not considered it necessary to give page references for every quotation; instead, I have provided a few landmarks that would allow the researcher to retrace the route in the originals.

The Theological Life

Newbigin theologized in the midst of practice and for its better pursuit. He never rushed into major projects or programs without consideration, and the lessons he learned in action he passed on to others. He preached what he practiced—or, like Chaucer's good priest, "first he wrought, and afterward he taught." As observed by Hans-Ruedi Weber, Lesslie "was an initiator and animator of ideas, of an ever new common search, and often also a sharp critic, based on biblical insights. He liked to be at the beginning of things, at the frontier of thinking and initiatives."[42] These engagements with new challenges were what lent punch and shifting nuances to Newbigin's thought and writing. The lineaments of his thinking, however, remained constant for sixty years, and as his ideas developed and expanded, the fundamental pattern continued to be readily recognizable. In this book I argue that Christ's atoning work constituted the center, set within an increasingly explicit trinitarian frame and persistently directed toward the goal of God's reign.

The confident believer is shown faithful to the sight of a cosmic Cross, expounding the entire work of Christ as our salvation from sin, and confessing the Resurrection as the foundation stone of a new creation. The direct evangelist is seen bearing individual and institutional witness to students, landless villagers, industrial workers, urban professionals, and modern intellectuals concerning the universal Gospel of the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The ecumenical advocate appears tireless in the defense and encouragement of what makes for "the unity of all in each place" within the household of God as the congregation of the faithful, the body of Christ, and the community of the Holy Spirit. The pastoral bishop is watched exercising the cure of souls and the care of the churches in two South Indian dioceses and then on the local and national scene in Britain, setting an example to

the flock in their own proper ministries among their neighbors. The missionary strategist is followed drawing implications from his experience as a foreigner in India for the cross-cultural nature of the global Church's task in fulfillment of its duty, at home and abroad, of letting people into God's "open secret." The religious interlocutor is heard in friendly yet firm debate with Hindus, responding to the challenge of Islam as a respected rival, and in sharp conflict with Western academic pluralists who seemed to him to have surrendered their birthright. The social visionary, passionate in his concern for living human beings, is observed clarifying the distinctions between the Kingdom of God and the idea of progress, between a Constantinian state and a Christian society, between welfare and justice, between liberty and license. The liturgical preacher presents on the ecumenical stage a drama of word and sacrament, whose directions he had helped to compose for the *Book of Common Worship* of the Church of South India, the whole being said and done to the glory of the Triune God. The scriptural teacher is discovered expounding the Bible as God's story with the world, interpreting the authoritative texts in light of the classic rule of faith, and inviting others to learn further with himself. The Christian apologist is caught puzzling over the relation between Christianity and modernity and then cutting through the ambiguities in order to offer in the Gospel a new-old alternative to other worldviews that always end up in either self-idolatry or despair, if not both.

The lens of Newbigin's life, work, and thought gives access to wider pictures, both retrospectively and prospectively. Retrospectively, Lesslie Newbigin instantiated the ecumenical movement for a good fifty years, and so some of the most significant and complex developments in the twentieth-century history of Christianity may be viewed through him: Faith and Order, Life and Work, Mission and Evangelism; the World Council of Churches; successes and failures in national and local unions; the *aggiornamento* of the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council, and the consequent growth of bilateral relationships among the Christian world communions stimulated by the entrance of that Church on the ecumenical scene. All this was taking place, of course, amid one of the most agitated periods in global history, and the reader is invited never to lose sight of what can only be minimally recalled here: two world wars, the Communist revolutions in Russia and China, the rise and fall of the Soviet Empire, the decolonization of much of what has been regarded as "the third world," the staggering growth of science and technology, the decline in numbers and influence of the Western churches, the burgeoning of churches in parts of Africa and Asia, the reinvigoration and spread of Islam, the philosophical deconstruction of modernity, and so forth. The reader will remain aware of the geopolitical, ecclesiastical, and intellectual currents with and against which Newbigin swam.

Prospectively, movements and developments began that will continue to influence Church and world in the twenty-first century. Newbigin addressed several of them in their early stages, and insights and guidance may be found in his work for the ways in which Christians may regard these influences as they go forward. His life and writings, in fact, touch directly and powerfully

on several of the most lively issues facing the churches and the theologians: the transmission of the Gospel along the axes of time and space, which raises questions of tradition and evangelization and the hermeneutical and communicational aspects of them; the relation between the Christian faith and competing worldviews; the emergent "clash of civilizations" on some sort of a religious basis; the current political, economic, and ecological ordering of the world in light of God's proclaimed and awaited Kingdom; the historic role of the Christian West, its slide into religious and intellectual apostasy, and its need for revitalization; the new geographical configurations of the Church, with the apparent southward shift in its center of gravity; issues of authenticity and multiculturalism at local and universal levels; the thriving of "independent" and "charismatic" companies of Christians and the tiredness of some older "denominations"; the forging of new theological alliances across continuing confessional and institutional lines, as between (say) "catholics" and "evangelicals"; issues of life, death, and conduct in the areas of bioethics and sexual morality. The reader may see all these matters, too, on the horizon in looking through the lens of Newbigin's theology.

Trying my hand at what Newbigin called "the lowliest of art-forms," I might provisionally sum up the subject of this book as follows:

> A Presbyterian Bishop from India,
> never short for theological ginger,
> in the end did his best
> to reconvert the West—
> and bequeathed an *Unfinished Agenda*.

1

The Confident Believer

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

(Galatians 2:20)

Grasped by Christ

"Faith is the hand that grasps what Christ has done and makes it my own"; but first, "Christ has laid hold of me." That expresses the intensely personal character of the faith within which Lesslie Newbigin's own life was lived and in which all his more technical discussions must be situated. The particular formulation just quoted of what it is to be a Christian believer occurs in the book *Sin and Salvation*, which the bishop wrote in the 1950s for village teachers who, with little formal theological education, carried a heavy load in the pastoral care of several thousand rural congregations in the Tamil-speaking dioceses of the Church of South India.[1] The book was begun in Tamil, and when pressures of time necessitated a shift to English composition, the author adopted a style that would lend itself to translation into the vernacular. Addressing a situation in which both teachers and students needed a statement of the Gospel in its most basic form, the book contains the heart of the evangelical faith such as Newbigin himself had discovered it during his own days as a theological student in Britain in the 1930s and such as he would continue to commend it on his return to his home country in the 1970s. That faith undergirded his thinking, his practical ministry, and his entire existence. That is why this theological biography begins with an account of Newbigin as a believer: his faith—or more exactly the Christ whose grasp he returned—constituted the core of his identity and the substance of his message. Both comprehensive and concise, the Indian book will provide most material for the exposition in this fundamental chapter; but the systematic account of the source, object, content, and process of the gospel faith found in *Sin and Salvation* will be enclosed by the story of Newbigin's first arrival at that faith and by his later development of it as proper confidence in the universal sovereignty of the Savior.

The evangelist speaks of what he knows. "I believed, and so I spoke," wrote St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:13–15, following the Psalmist; and so it was with Newbigin. Having been laid hold of by Christ and having grasped what Christ has done, like the apostle he testified in the Spirit of faith to the salvation which God has wrought in Christ and is waiting to extend by grace to more and more people so that the chorus of thanksgiving may swell to God's glory. In considering Newbigin as believer, we must therefore give attention both to the fact of his belief and to the content of his belief. Phrased in the terms of technical theology, the *fides qua creditur* and the *fides quae creditur* are coordinates: "the faith by which one believes" and "the faith which one believes" call for each other; the act of faith is directed toward the God who summons it and about whom the believer then may and must speak.

According to his own autobiographical account, Newbigin had by the end of his schooldays with the Quakers at Leighton Park "abandoned the Christian assumptions of home and childhood." That faith of some kind was not beyond the bounds of rational possibility was kept open for him by the reading of William James's *The Will to Believe*, picked up from his father's bookshelves.[2] As an undergraduate at Cambridge, he was attracted by friends into the company of the Student Christian Movement and learned to read the Bible and pray as a seeker. In his first summer vacation from the university he worked in a social service center run by the Society of Friends in the Rhondda Valley of South Wales; and amid the distress of miners "rotting for years in hopeless unemployment and destitution," and stimulated perhaps by a reading in William Temple, he saw in the night "a vision of the Cross, but it was the Cross spanning the space between heaven and earth, between ideals and present realities, and with arms that embraced the whole world":

> I saw it as something which reached down to the most hopeless and sordid of human misery and yet promised life and victory. I was sure that night, in a way I had never been before, that this was the clue I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world. From that moment I would always know how to take bearings when I was lost. I would know where to begin again when I had come to the end of all my own resources of understanding or courage.[3]

Having become active in the Student Christian Movement at Cambridge, Newbigin was upon graduation appointed to its national staff in Scotland. In the deep economic recession of the early 1930s, his Christian concern addressed social conditions, but any tendency to limit the need to a temporal amelioration of human life was tempered by both a memory and a trip abroad that marked Newbigin deeply. While on a student mission from Cambridge to industrial Lancashire, he had "visited a tenement where three families had to live in a single small flat, and at least one of the men was dying of tuberculosis": "When I struggled to find words for that situation I knew once and for all that a merely humanistic hope was not enough. At that point my talk about a new social order was impertinent nonsense." The other experience took longer to acquire its proper interpretation. In 1932 Newbigin visited

Germany and was "taken in by the freshness and the vitality" of the National Socialist youth. When "the demonic character" of Nazism became obvious, the lesson made him, he said, ever thereafter "skeptical" toward claims by "the new wave" to be "God at work in the world."[4]

When, in 1933, Newbigin returned to Cambridge for three years of ministerial training at the Presbyterian Church's Westminster College, he managed to secure freedom enough in his program for a good deal of personal reading in exploration of the Christian faith. He settled on the Letter to the Romans as likely "the most complete and condensed statement of the Gospel," and the influence of that epistle of St. Paul's on his thought was to be lasting and profound.[5] He spent months with the Greek text, thereby acquiring the habit of familiarity with the original that was more common among theological students then than it has since become; and that practice certainly affected the Bible studies that he was to conduct as an important part of his several later ministries. Karl Barth's celebrated commentary on Romans, which in the aftermath of the First World War had signaled the shift in continental Protestant theology to a dialectical and eschatological version of the Christian faith, Newbigin found "incomprehensible" at the time, although he would later become deeply indebted to the mature Barth of the *Church Dogmatics*. Nor yet was he satisfied with the recently published commentary on *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* by the English Congregationalist C. H. Dodd. Dodd took the wrath of God on which the apostle expatiates in the second half of the first chapter as "not a certain feeling or attitude of God towards us, but some process or effect in the realm of objective facts, an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." If, however, " 'wrath' was only an anthropomorphic way of describing the consequences of sin," then according to Newbigin " 'love' would have to be explained along the same lines." Coupled with Dodd's "demythologizing" of God's wrath was his preference for "expiation" over "propitiation" as a rendering of *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25, lest the latter term suggest "the placating of an angry God." Newbigin was more persuaded by the tougher route to affirming the love of God followed by James Denney, the professor of systematic and pastoral theology at the Free Church College in Glasgow, in his commentary on Romans in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*. According to Denney, who had published in 1909 a classic work, *The Death of Christ: Its Place and Interpretation in the New Testament*, the mercy of God does not discount the holiness of God that cannot abide sin, and the freely given gift of righteousness to the sinner comes at a price to God:

> Grace does not signify that moral distinctions are ignored in God's procedure: the righteousness which is held out in the Gospel is held out on the basis of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. It is put within the sinner's reach at great cost. It could never be offered to him—it could never be manifested, or indeed have any real existence—but for the propitiatory virtue of the blood of Christ. Christ a propitiation is the inmost soul of the Gospel for sinful men. If God had not set Him forth in this character, not only must we despair for ever of attaining to a Divine righteousness; all our attempts to read the story

> of the world in any consistency with the character of God must be baffled. . . . It is a demonstration of His righteousness—that is, in the widest sense, of His consistency with His own character—which would have been violated by indifference to sin. And that demonstration is, by God's grace, given in such a way that it is possible for Him to be (as He intends to be) just Himself, and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus. The propitiatory death of Jesus, in other words, is at once the vindication of God and the salvation of man. That is why it is central and fundamental in the Apostolic Gospel. It meets the requirements, at the same time, of the righteousness of God and of the sin of man.[6]

Newbigin credited Denney's insights into Romans as the decisive factor in this "turning point" in his theological journey: "I began the study as a typical liberal. I ended it with a strong conviction about 'the finished work of Christ,' about the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary." Such passages from Denney as the one just quoted find echoes in Newbigin's *Sin and Salvation* and time and time again when he is expounding the Gospel as a believer and offering it as an evangelist for the response of faith.

Three Student Papers

An early theological exercise of Newbigin's was the exegetical paper he wrote at Westminster College for W. A. L. Elmslie in November 1935 on the Hebrew text of Exodus 30:11–16 (which is interpreted as the provision for a poll tax or levy for the initial construction of the tent of meeting—forerunner of the temple—where "atonement" is to take place).[7] Newbigin develops from the phrase *kopher naphshô* in particular a detailed consideration of the concept of atonement in the Old Testament. He notes that the verb *kpr* ("to make atonement") is never used in the Old Testament with God as its direct object (in the way in which pagan practice is to "appease the deity"). This is remarkable because (and this observation provoked from Elmslie the marginal comment of "excellent") "in view of the deep Hebrew conviction that all sin is ultimately sin against God, we might have expected that God would have become the natural object of this verb which denotes the covering or expiation of sin and its consequences. The fact that this is not so springs from the equally fundamental truth of the higher Hebrew religion, that God is one who himself undertakes to deal with and 'blot out' sin." Newbigin the student exegete goes on to make the theological comment: "It is, of course, the fact that both these statements about God are true that explains the difficulty of interpreting the word *kpr*. The complexities of its use reflect—as does much theological thought—the struggle of the human mind to hold together the facts that God is both Judge and Saviour, and simple solutions to the problem are apt to arise from the neglect of one of these two truths." When God is the expressed or implied subject of the verb *kpr* (as in Psalms 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Isaiah 6:

7), the meaning is to blot out, purge, or forgive sin, and "the thought of God as the author of forgiveness quite overshadows the thought of Him as judge." In the ritual code of the second temple (included in what modern critical scholarship has designated the "P" writings), the agent of atonement is the priest, and the instruments are primarily and normally the bloody sacrifices of the sin offering (*hatta'th*) or burnt offering (*'olah*). Yet the system of atonement is not a placatory human invention; rather it is "provided by God Himself for His people, as part of the gracious act by which He redeems them out of bondage and makes them His children."

This thereby precludes any notion of "an absolute alienation of God from His people. Whatever be the things which stand between Him and them, God sees beyond them and provides for their removal." Yet this must not be taken in such a way as to infringe on either God's holiness or human accountability. In a passage which anticipates Newbigin's evangelistic style and the evangelical substance of his views on sin and salvation, on grace and faith, the Cambridge essay proceeds:

> Guilt is not something which can be simply removed as one wipes a dirty mark off the face of a child; no mere act of omnipotence can remove it from without, unless it is to destroy our moral responsibility. And we part company with the biblical conception of God if we do not allow room in our understanding of Him for wrath against the sinful. It is true that the Bible uniformly refuses to pretend that man can appease God's wrath, but it is certainly very far from the idea of a God who cannot be angry with sinful men. God in the Bible speaks to men in living converse according to their condition; He does not merely emit a stream of 'unchanging love' like a wireless broadcasting station which continues to radiate its programme according to a predetermined plan irrespective of what listeners there be and what they think of the programme. Such a conception of love is abstract and unreal and is certainly not biblical. . . . Forgiveness is not merely the washing away of defilement, physically conceived: it is a transaction between God and the guilty soul, and it is apparently regarded as delayed until certain sacrifices have been made by men in accordance with God's instructions.

But "why must the 'way to God' be so stained with blood?"

The priestly code, says Newbigin, is seeking to answer the question of how the holy God can dwell in the midst of a people which is unholy. The message of the great prophets and the sequence of disaster upon disaster in the national life have led to a deeper awareness that the covenant by which the Lord binds himself to Israel contains inalienable moral demands. A proper consciousness of guilt recognizes that "atonement" is needed—and receives the assurance that its means have been graciously provided from the divine side to "bridge" the "gulf between God and His people." The blood of sacrifice expresses "that blend of tenderness and wrath which is redemptive love." Looking back, the Christian faith considers the death of Christ as the universal atonement between God and humankind that had been prefigured in the Lord's provisions for Israel: "What we see in the full light of the Cross is the