



BOOK REVIEW: 'THE CHURCH AND ITS VOCATION:
LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S MISSIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY'
BY MICHAEL GOHEEN

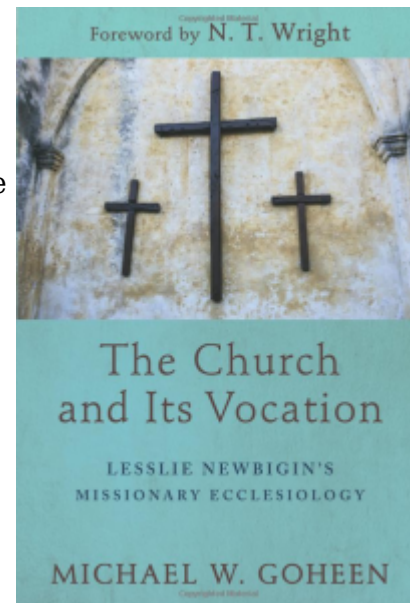
Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

Michael Goheen is a teacher and writer who has devoted himself to understanding and interpreting the work of the late Lesslie Newbigin. He is a Canadian who divides his time between Canada and the United States. What distinguishes Goheen is the way in which he works as both an academic and a "pastoral" leader within congregations. His writing is born out of excellent research and on-the-ground experience in congregations.

I confess that when friends asked me if I had read this book I said 'No' and didn't really want to read another of 'these books' even one on Newbigin. Then I was asked to participate in a dialogue with a series of leaders who were using Goheen's book as a basis for their conversations. I reluctantly ordered a copy with the plan to do a quick skip through in order to have some ability to join the conversation. In truth, from the first page on I was gripped by the crispness of Goheen's writing and the breadth of scholarship that he has brought to this important and excellent book. Newbigin was, and remains, one of the most important missiological minds of the late twentieth century who, for all of us, raised the critical questions of what it means for the people of God to address the still unaddressed challenge of the modern West. His question: 'Can the West be Converted?' distilled what is at stake for Christian life in both Europe and North America.

The great tragedy of our situation today, particularly on this side of the Atlantic, is that many can quote Newbigin's question, many use the language of 'missional' (which Goheen clearly chooses not to use in the title to his book) with great ease as they propose one method after another to fix and remake their churches but, in my experience, few leaders have taken the time to actually read and absorb what Newbigin wrote about these matters. Goheen's book is, in this context, a great gift to us as we confront the increasing unraveling of not just the 'West' he so clearly understood but also the churches that were formed and spread around the world from the great reformations and colonizations.

The important service of this book is the way in which Goheen's life long study of Newbigin is brought to bear on the question of the church and its vocation. He doesn't produce a narrow reading of this question but provides a rich, nuanced overview of all Newbigin's thinking around this question. I would strongly urge any leader wrestling with the question of what it means to be God's people in our day to take the time to not just read, but to absorb Goheen's fine introduction to Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology, an introduction that shows the heart, mind and passion of a man whose love for the gospel and the people where he dwelt framed all his writing. Here is a mind alive to the great story of God's unfolding purposes for all creation. Here is a vision for being God's people that is so much bigger than our narrow claims for Christ and the gospel. Goheen has given us a great gift but it is a gift we need to unwrap, dwell with, meditate upon so that its words go deep into our imagination. Newbigin's wisdom about the vocation of the church is dearly needed.



One of the strengths of this book is its focus. Goheen chooses not to engage with a wide band of other writers. He doesn't spend time interacting with others around questions of ecclesiology, mission or vocation. What we get is a very focused interpretive commentary on Newbigin himself. This is a strength of the book. We get to Newbigin and are able to reflectively dwell with his ideas, his framing of what it means to be the church. The final chapters on the encounter with Western culture and Newbigin's legacy for today are wonderful summaries of what is at stake for the church and its vocation as well as an invitation to put away the latest novelties and tactics and embrace a theological framing for being the church. There are places where one would want to raise questions about some of the assumptions that seem to lie within Goheen's presentation (the notions of "ministry" for example raise many questions about the adequacy of existent forms to address the questions of ecclesial vocation), there's repetition and probably too many bullet points in places but these are minor compared to the rich gift he has given to the church at this time.



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