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THE ELECT AND NON-ELECT AS HISTORICALLY DYNAMIC CATEGORIES: LESSLIE NEWBIGIN'S RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION

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INTRODUCTION

Lesslie Newbigin's explication of the doctrine of election is not very well known outside the field of mission studies. It is not usually mentioned in historical surveys of the doctrine or the relevant entries in theological dictionaries. Newbigin's approach, however, has the potential to breathe new life into the somewhat staid and repetitive debates which have taken place over this contentious topic in the history of Christian thought, especially in the traditions of the West. It opens new possibilities for reconceptualising this article of faith in a way which might help reconcile what has previously been conceived of as diametrically opposing positions.

We begin by giving a description of Newbigin's understanding of election. This will be done through an examination of the way he defends this doctrine from a significant charge levelled against it. Our description draws mainly from two of Newbigin's later works, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (first published in 1978)¹ and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).² These two sources contain Newbigin's mature thought on the topic of election, presented in a relatively systematised manner. Election is, of course, also mentioned in Newbigin's numerous other works. George R. Hunsberger has made a significant contribution to the scholarship in this area by making a careful survey of Newbigin's statements on election throughout the latter's wide corpus of writings, divided into the 'earlier', 'middle' and 'later' periods.³ An analy-

¹ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978. A revised edition was issued in 1995 by the same publisher.

² Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

³ George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), chap. 2. Geoffrey Wainwright records a conversation he had with Newbigin, where the latter mentioned his disagreement with Hunsberger's thesis that elec-

sis of Hunsberger's survey reveals that Newbigin is remarkably consistent in his view of election throughout his life, and that the concepts mentioned (at times in rather inchoate forms) in Newbigin's earlier works are given fuller and more systematic expression in the two later works we mentioned.⁴

After setting out Newbigin's position, we propose to interact with it, examining its viability and suggesting a few refinements which we think might be helpful for clarifying and strengthening his position. Finally, we explore the potential of Newbigin's approach for helping to reconcile opposing positions in this field, thus contributing to the possible overcoming of an impasse which has plagued the doctrine of election in the Western tradition for a significant period of time.

NEWBIGIN'S UNDERSTANDING OF ELECTION

Overturing the Scandal of Particularity.

Newbigin opens his reflections by noting that 'there is surely no part of Christian teaching which has been the subject of so much ridicule and indignant rejection as the doctrine of election'.⁵ He traces the cause of this rejection to the doctrine's incompatibility with the worldview which conceives of salvation as a direct, almost context-free encounter between an individual human soul and the divine. This worldview is to be found in the Indian traditions, as well as modern Western culture, which stress the autonomous use of human reason to arrive at timeless truths. This leads, in turn, to 'the scandal of particularity'. Surely, if God had wanted, he could have revealed himself to every single individual in the entire human race in this direct fashion? Why, then, does he play favourites? Why does he choose certain persons and communities over all the others

tion has consistently been the controlling theme in his theology (Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 443, n. 51). This does not detract from Hunsberger's competent survey of Newbigin's writings on the topic.

⁴ Hunsberger states that, 'While at a couple of points the election argument is expanded and more fully elaborated, none of the details in [Newbigin's] use of the doctrine of election in *The Open Secret* are new' (*Bearing the Witness*, p. 68). Hunsberger also mentions on p. 81 that there is an 'expansion' of Newbigin's theme of the 'inner logic' of election in chap. 7 of the latter's *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. There is possibly one exception to the rule that these two later works of Newbigin's contain all his key thoughts on the doctrine of election, which will be mentioned when we evaluate if Newbigin's approach to election leads to a reductionistic view of the church.

⁵ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 80.

to bestow his saving grace? These are questions posed to the doctrine of election by both traditional Indian beliefs and the rationalism of the Western Enlightenment.⁶

Newbigin addresses this objection by pointing out that Christianity is based upon a very different worldview. Its conception of God as triune tells us that 'interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God'. The human creature who has been bestowed the image of this God is therefore meant to live in a state of 'relatedness' to other human beings.⁷ This provides the first justification for the doctrine of election. God uses election as his method of salvation because it fosters the 'relatedness' which is itself a goal of salvation. The elected person or community is mandated to bless those around them by bringing the good news of God's saving grace through both their words and deeds.⁸ This binds the elect community in a profound way to those it has blessed. It brings about reconciliation where there has been conflict, and realises the mutual dependence we are meant to have upon one another.⁹ In one of Newbigin's favourite metaphor, God has not designed his saving revelation to come to us through the sky-light. Instead, we have to open our doors to the neighbour he sends as his appointed messenger, with whom we are then to permanently share our home.¹⁰ So, for Newbigin, the first justification for the doctrine of election is that 'the means by which the good news of salvation is propagated must be congruous with the nature of the salvation itself'.¹¹

The second justification for election is based on Newbigin's conception of the gospel, which rests, in turn, on his critically realistic epistemology. At its root, the gospel is not a set of timeless propositions or an experiential encounter.¹² It has its own 'plausibility structure', and hence offers a particular perception of reality and way of living. A 'plausibility structure', however, is not an abstract body of ideas. It must be embodied

⁶ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, rev. ed., p. 70.

⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, chap. 11.

⁹ Ibid., p. 82. See also Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 50. Newbigin sees this mutual dependence also operating on a more macro level in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. He cites Paul's teaching in Rom 9-11 that the 'transgression' of the Jews had allowed the gospel to reach the Gentiles, while the salvation of the Gentiles will in turn provoke Israel to jealousy (*Open Secret*, p. 76).

¹⁰ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 82-3.

¹¹ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 54.

¹² Newbigin speaks approvingly of George Lindbeck's rejection of both the 'Propositional' and the 'Experiential' models in favour of the latter's 'Cultural Linguistic' approach (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 24).

in actual human communities.¹³ 'The gospel,' therefore, 'always comes as the testimony of a community which, if it is faithful, is trying to live out the meaning of the gospel in a certain style of life, certain ways of holding property, of maintaining law and order, or carrying on production and consumption, and so on'. Moreover, because all human communities exist in particular cultural contexts, there is no 'pure gospel' in the sense of a timeless culture-free version. 'Every interpretation of the gospel', Newbigin insists, 'is embodied in some cultural form'. This leads us to the 'logic of election'.¹⁴ There is simply no way for the gospel to be presented except through its embodiment in a community which indwells the Biblical narrative and 'reasons and loves' according to its plausibility structure.¹⁵ Hence, God elects Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New in order for these communities to testify to the gospel and draw others into their fellowship. The method of election, therefore, is not only justified with regard to the goal of salvation, but also the nature of human knowing and the nature of the gospel.

From this, Newbigin moves to purge the doctrine of the 'scandal of particularity'. Contrary to major strands of his own Reformed tradition, Newbigin affirms only a single predestination,¹⁶ and he insists it is a predestination to service. Because (for the reasons given earlier) it was necessary for God to utilize election as his method of salvation,¹⁷ the elect have been given a weighty responsibility to show forth the gospel. Election should therefore not be conceived of as an elevation to a privileged position before God. Instead, to be elect is to be given an unenviable obligation, one likely to involve suffering, reproach and humiliation. We see this in the most prominent instances of the elect in both the Old and New Testaments, i.e., the nation of Israel and the person of Jesus.¹⁸ Moreover, the elect have no special claim on God. They have no basis for saying, 'We are chosen while the others are not!' Newbigin conceives of the 'elect' as a dynamic category. It is not to be understood as a definite number of individuals fixed in the eternal decrees of God. As George Hunsberger puts it, 'election', for Newbigin, 'designates God's acting personally and

¹³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 85, 98–9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5. See also chap. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁷ Hunsberger explains the sense in which Newbigin understands it was 'necessary' for God to elect a people to bear his witness: 'Necessity only comes by the requirements of God's own personal nature and the way the world has been made to be lived in relationship to God' (*Bearing the Witness*, p. 321 n. 12).

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 84.

particularly in history, selecting a people to be uniquely his own'.¹⁹ As history progresses, the people who are chosen to bear God's witness shifts depending on where the gospel bears fruit. Newbigin therefore states emphatically that 'to be chosen, to be elect... does not mean that the elect are saved and the rest are lost'. Instead, the elect are chosen 'in Christ', and this means that they are incorporated into the mission of Christ Jesus to the world.²⁰ Although Newbigin does not say so explicitly, it would be entirely in line with his emphasis on the awful responsibility of the elect and their corresponding lack of special privileges to assert that the elect actually exists for the sake of the non-elect; for those who have yet to come to salvation in Christ. Therefore, while Newbigin continues to insist on the 'particularity' of election, he dispels the 'scandal' in a radical fashion. He comes close to overturning the traditional conception of the categories and depicting the non-elect as the more privileged class.

An Approach Sub Specie Temporis.

Paul Jewett has helpfully classified the historical approaches to election as those which try to view the doctrine from God's perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*) and those which treat it *sub specie temporis*.²¹ Newbigin's position clearly belongs to the second category. From God's point of view, the elect might indeed be a fixed class of individuals (whether stemming from his foreknowledge or will), but Newbigin does not see this as the correct starting point for considering this doctrine. Election is instead to be viewed as a historical phenomenon; something dynamic which is actualised in space and time, with profound practical implications for those who have been chosen. Hunsberger goes so far as to say that, for Newbigin, the focus of attention in election falls on the "selection" established by the historical converting action of the Spirit, rather than the "decree" of the Father' or the "decision" in the Son'.²² As Newbigin himself puts it, Christians betray their trust when they 'are concerned more to probe backwards from their election into the reasons for it in the secret counsel of God than to press forward from their election to the purpose for it, which is that they should be Christ's ambassadors and witnesses to the

¹⁹ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 86.

²⁰ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 86–7.

²¹ Paul K. Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 65–6.

²² *Bearing the Witness*, 86. This brings Newbigin quite close to the approach of Moise Amyraut, who sees the Spirit as the chief agent of election. (Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, pp. 101–2 has a concise description of Amyraut's position.)

ends of the earth'.²³ This *sub specie temporis* treatment is, for Newbigin, the proper Christocentric approach to election. It takes 'as the starting point of our thought the fact of Christ', since it places 'the actual work of Christ in history' at the 'determinative centre' of the doctrine, rather than unwarranted speculation about the composition of the elect.²⁴

INTERACTION WITH NEWBIGIN'S POSITION

A Reductionistic View of the Church?

A point of evaluation which has been made concerning Newbigin's understanding of election is that it results in a reductionistic view of the Church. John Roxborough has suggested that Newbigin 'appears to have widened our understanding of the mission of Israel, and narrowed that of the church to those things we call mission'.²⁵ If we look at Newbigin's later works (as summarised above), there is indeed the sense that he has over-emphasised the missional aspect of election, and correspondingly over-instrumentalized the elect. The danger is present that one might lapse into an overly 'activist' view of the church, and view her identity mainly in terms of what she does. This tendency can perhaps be traced to Newbigin's inadequate exposition in these works of what it means for us to be elected 'in Christ'. As mentioned earlier, he sees this mainly in terms of us being incorporated into *the mission* of Christ, and largely neglects to mention the rich vein of reflection his own Reformed tradition has accumulated on the benefits accruing to those chosen 'in Christ', including the exaltation to the status of being the sons and daughters of God, as we are joined to Jesus the Son of God.²⁶

This charge, however, of over-instrumentalizing the elect is effectively refuted when we look at an older work of Newbigin's, *The Household of God* (1953). After quoting Emil Brunner's well-known assertion that 'the Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning', and insisting that mis-

²³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁵ These comments of John Roxborough are quoted in Michael T. Heneise, 'A Critical Evaluation of Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Mission in the Light of Western Pluralism', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4 (2004), 49. Heneise citations were taken from the paper mounted on Roxborough's website, but it is now at a different URL: <<http://roxborough.com/Articles/ANZAMS%20II%20delivered.htm>> [accessed 16 October 2016].

²⁶ Jewett, *Election and Predestination*, pp. 55–6 has a good summary of the insights of the Reformed position on this point.

sions is the *esse*, and not merely the *bene esse*, of the Church,²⁷ Newbigin issues a corrective by protesting against the view of J.C. Hockendijk, who suggested that the nature of the Church could be quite exhaustively defined by her function. A more balanced view is to see the Church both as 'a means and an end', because it is only when she is 'a real foretaste of heaven' that she is able to be 'the witness and instrument of the kingdom of heaven. It is precisely because she is not *merely* instrumental that she can be instrumental'.²⁸ Moreover, because the means by which the gospel is spread is to be congruous with the nature of salvation, the Church can carry out her mission only 'in so far as she is herself living in Christ, a reconciled fellowship in Him, bound together in the love of the Father'.²⁹ There are certainly ample warnings here about the dangers of having a reductionist view of the Church, which views her only in terms of her mission.³⁰ The question remains as to why Newbigin did not reiterate these warnings in his later works. Perhaps, in his effort to overcome the 'scandal of particularity' (which he saw as the main stumbling block to the acceptance of the doctrine in both the Indian and Western contexts), Newbigin felt the need to stress almost exclusively the responsibilities of the elect, in order to drive home his point that being elected is not in any way indicative of God's special favour.

The Goal of Election.

Another comment along similar lines concerns Newbigin's understanding of the goal of election. In his writings on the topic, he often does not mention any higher goal than the call for the elect to bear witness to the gospel. However, in his more general comments on missions, he states explicitly that 'the goal of missions is the glory of God'.³¹ We can infer from this (since election is a call to missions) that Newbigin would concur with the traditional Reformed axiom that the final goal of election is the glory of God. However, because Newbigin departs from the traditional Reformed assertion of a double predestination, he would have to conceive of this glory in a different manner. His scheme would not sit well with the strand of Reformed theology which argues that election manifests the

²⁷ Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 142-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-8 (emphasis in original).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

³⁰ Hunsberger also relies on passages from *Household of God* to argue that Newbigin sees 'a union of salvation and service, beneficiary and bearer, means and end' in his teaching on election: *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 104-7.

³¹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 180.

glory of God in that it demonstrates his attributes of grace (in his dealings with the elect) and justice (in his treatment of the reprobate).³²

Our suggestion is that Newbigin can come up with a different conception of God's glory based on his critically realistic epistemology. His contention is that the Christian faith 'grows' as the mission of the Church extends to the ends of the earth. 'New treasures are brought into the life of the Church' as believers from previously unreached cultures illumine aspects of the gospel not previously seen due to the culture-bound nature of human perception.³³ Newbigin writes,

As we confess Jesus as Lord in a plural society, and as the Church grows through the coming of people from many different cultural and religious traditions to faith in Christ, we are enabled to learn more of the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of God (Eph 3:14-19) than we can in a monochrome society.³⁴

So, 'only at the end shall we know what it means that Jesus is Lord of all... God's perfect reign cannot be made manifest to all until the mission of the Church to all nations is complete'.³⁵ What is achieved through election is therefore the completion of our understanding of the gospel and the realization of God's perfect reign over the numerous diverse groupings of this world. This, we suggest, could form a basis for Newbigin's reconceptualization of the traditional Reformed axiom that election has the ultimate goal of the glory of God. It certainly seems to offer a more positive and holistic view of God's glory than the traditional exposition.

The Means for Post-Mortem Conversion.

Concerning the extent of salvation, Newbigin, while rejecting a dogmatic universalism based on rationalistic grounds, believes in the possibility of salvation for those who died without coming to faith in Christ.³⁶ In fact, he seems to be open to the possibility of a universal salvation.³⁷ New-

³² See, e.g., John Calvin's well-known assertion in his *Institutes* III.24.14 that '[the reprobate] have been given over to this depravity because they have been raised up by the just but inscrutable judgement of God to show forth his glory in their condemnation'.

³³ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 123–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 125.

³⁷ One of Newbigin's oft-cited passages from Scripture is Rom 11:32: 'For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.' (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 83, 85 and 125.)

begin, however, eschews the idea that we can be saved 'over our heads'. A personal conversion experience is an essential aspect of the salvation process.³⁸ How, then, might those who had died as non-Christians go through this experience subsequently? Newbigin becomes somewhat reticent at this juncture. The only thing he is willing to say is that there will be a great 'eschatological event in which the fathomless depths of God's wisdom and grace will be revealed'.³⁹ This might conceivably be the time when unbelievers are given the opportunity of personally coming to faith in Christ. But the problem is that it is not clear if this is salvation which is wrought through the historical process of election. Having expounded at length on the necessity of election for God's saving purpose, it would seem inconsistent to embrace the possibility that other methods (e.g. a direct 'contextless' kind of encounter between God and individual human beings) might be utilised at the 'eschatological event'.

It behoves Newbigin to offer more details, at the risk of being speculative, on how he envisages the process of election to be relevant to persons who pass from this world without coming to faith in Christ.⁴⁰ Otherwise, it would appear that election is not a particularly effective method for reaching the world. In the long history of humankind, an unimaginable number have passed from this world without any opportunity to come into contact with God's elect communities. There was no appointed neighbour to whom they could have opened their doors and with whom they could have shared their lives. If election is ultimately to prove irrelevant to this substantial proportion of the human race (even if they are eventually saved via other means), both the necessity and significance of the doctrine might be questioned.

³⁸ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 167–8 sets out Newbigin's position on this matter.

³⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 125.

⁴⁰ One available scheme (which would fit quite comfortably into Newbigin's framework) is that suggested by his fellow British theologian P.T. Forsyth. Forsyth envisages the process of election to continue beyond this life. The non-elect will have post-mortem opportunities to encounter the elect and be blessed by them. Hence, as the afterlife continues through various cycles, the number of the non-elect gets progressively fewer, until a possible universal salvation occurs. (Forsyth, like Newbigin, is adverse to a dogmatic universalism asserted on a purely rational basis.) Under this scheme, election remains, from the start to the end, God's chosen method of salvation. For more details of Forsyth's position, see Theng Huat Leow, *The Theodicy of Peter Taylor Forsyth: A 'Crucial' Justification of the Ways of God to Man* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pp. 69–70.

Relationship with Karl Barth's Understanding of Election.

Any meaningful discussion of election in contemporary theology finds it difficult to escape the long shadow cast by Karl Barth's explication of the doctrine. In some ways, it can be said to rest on the opposite end of the spectrum from that of Newbigin's.⁴¹ While Newbigin quite clearly approaches the doctrine *sub specie temporis*, Barth could arguably be the theologian who seeks to extract the greatest mileage from the doctrine in order to explicate the eternal being of God. It is not necessary, for our purposes, to describe Barth's approach in all its multi-faceted details. We focus only on Barth's well-known assertion that the doctrine of election is 'the sum of the gospel',⁴² because it describes first and foremost that primal decision of God's where he constituted himself as the God who is for human beings. In Barth's own words, 'This self-determination [of God] is identical with the decree of His movement towards men.'⁴³ Some interpreters of Barth have, as is well-known, tried to read the Swiss-German theologian as going so far as to assert that God's very triunity was constituted by his logically (though not temporally) prior decision to elect. This has led to the rise of opposing views from other commentators on Barth.⁴⁴ We cite the existence of this debate to illustrate how radically *sub specie aeternitatis* Barth's approach has been understood to be, at least in some quarters.

Given how fundamentally different Barth's approach is from Newbigin's, is there any possibility that each might complement the other? The answer is yes. Barth's attempt to utilize the doctrine of election to explicate the eternal being of God offers something lacking in Newbigin's position. It provides the church with a clearer picture of the God who has elected her members and (as a corollary) is sending them as his witnesses to the non-elect. It is a picture of a God who in his freedom has elected to love the entire human race. Such an understanding of God would provide a greater impetus for the Church's mission, since it grounds this mission in the more solid foundation of an eternal election which is entirely consistent with it, rather than an election understood only in terms of its materialization in the history of our world. It also provides a far richer

⁴¹ Hunsberger has a good analysis of the differences in approach between Newbigin and Barth in *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 85-7.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/2: *The Doctrine of God*, Part 2, ed. by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. by G.W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 3. This source will hereafter be referred to as *CD II/2*.

⁴³ *CD II/2*, pp. 91-2.

⁴⁴ A good summary of the debate is given in Michael T. Dempsey, 'Introduction', in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 1-28.

content to the gospel to be preached by the church as it carries out her mission—a gospel which has election not only as its method, but also a fundamental part of its message.⁴⁵

The converse is also true. Newbigin's approach could well complement Barth's position by supplying an additional layer of meaning to the concept of 'election'. This meaning is derived from the perspective of the concrete history of our world, and imposes important obligations on the elect in their daily existence. This would go a long way in preventing election from being viewed as a kind of 'heavenly decision' which takes place completely over the heads of human beings and which has little relevance for the moral choices we have to make in the here and now. This is a pitfall which the Reformed tradition has not always been successful in avoiding. Newbigin's focus on election as it is fulfilled in the history of the world through concrete events of interaction between the elect and non-elect also provides a more plausible explanation as to why a dogmatic universalism should not be asserted. There are historical barriers to the effective spread of the gospel, whether through the failures of the elect or cultural and individual impediments facing the non-elect, which provide a level of explanation as to why some might eventually not be saved.⁴⁶ Barth, with his focus on election as God's eternal primal decision, with correspondingly less attention paid to its historical outworking, has faced difficulties in his attempts to refute a dogmatic universalism.⁴⁷

In concluding this section, we wish to point out that Barth and Newbigin both claim to be Christocentric in their understanding of election. We might not have to choose between the two, since both of them might be correct—at the level of their perspectives. Both, certainly, agree that the traditional Reformed understanding of the doctrine which divides the human race into two fixed categories according to the inscrutable elect-

⁴⁵ This distinction between method and content has been pointed out by Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 85.

⁴⁶ If we adopt P.T. Forsyth's understanding of how election might function in the afterlife to bring those who have died as non-Christians into the faith (as described in an earlier footnote), the impact of these historical barriers might persist even in the afterlife, due to the strong continuity between this life and the next, as envisaged by Forsyth. See Leow, *The Theodicy of Peter Taylor Forsyth*, p. 70-71 for more details on Forsyth's position.

⁴⁷ Barth's denial of *apokatastasis* has been challenged by, amongst others, Emil Brunner (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, Dogmatics: Vol. I., trans. by Olive Wyon [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946], pp. 348-9) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (*The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. by Edward T. Oakes [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992], pp. 183-7).

ing will of God is based more on unwarranted speculation than a genuine Christocentricism.

NEWBIGIN'S APPROACH AS A WAY OF RECONCILING OPPOSING POSITIONS

We mentioned in our introduction the impasse over the doctrine of election in significant segments of the Western tradition. This is most clearly exemplified in the struggle between the 'Calvinist' and 'Arminian' sectors of the Church, which began from the acrimonious debate between the Remonstrants and their compatriots in Reformed Orthodoxy in the Netherlands in the late 16th century. We have, in the previous section, argued that Newbigin's perspective *sub specie temporis* might be well complemented by a particular kind of eternal perspective—that proposed by Barth. In this section, we wish to examine how Newbigin's challenge to another kind of approach *sub specie aeternitatis* (i.e. that offered by both the 'Calvinist' and 'Arminian' camps) has the potential to move both positions towards some measure of reconciliation. It does so by seeing the debate over issues like whether God has eternally predestined a fixed number of the elect or whether he elects us based upon his foreknowledge of who would freely receive the gospel message as illegitimate Promethean attempts to storm the heavens in order to gain a perspective not granted to us.

From his preferred creaturely viewpoint, Newbigin argues that we need to allocate a significant scope for the operation of God's mysterious sovereignty in our salvation. In *The Household of God*, Newbigin speaks approvingly of Calvin's notion of 'the secret working of the Holy Spirit' in the process of Christian conversion. 'We are bound,' Newbigin asserts, 'to go on to confess that this gift of the Holy Spirit is of God's pure grace, given to those whom He chooses according to the secret counsel of His will.'⁴⁸ This position follows quite naturally from Newbigin's critically realistic epistemology, which dictates that the human decision alone is unable to fully explain the 'miracle' of conversion. Conversion, for him, involves the embrace of the plausibility structure of the Christian faith as it stands, and not on the basis of some more ultimate framework of belief. Otherwise, of course, that more ultimate framework would constitute one's true faith, rather than Christianity. How then do we explain why some people are willing to forgo their former plausibility structures for that of the Christian faith? Newbigin's reply falls back on the notion of God's mysterious sovereignty:

⁴⁸ Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 101-2.

I do not choose this, but I am chosen. If I am pressed to answer the question, this is the only final answer. God in his mysterious providence has chosen and called me, through means which are only partly known to me, to be part of this community of faith for the sake of sharing his secret with the whole world.⁴⁹

However, because we are chosen 'for the sake of sharing his secret', there is, correspondingly, a profound sense of human responsibility in election. We have no licence to appeal to any immutable distinction between the elect and non-elect in an attempt to evade this responsibility. From our perspective, the categories are dynamic, and the elect have been given the onerous commission of presenting the gospel to the non-elect in order for them to become the predestined. The 'secret working of the Holy Spirit' which Newbigin speaks approvingly of pertains only to the sequence of salvation, and not the ultimate composition of the elect. Furthermore, Newbigin's insistence on election as a necessary means for the spread of the gospel implies that the community which is supposed to embody the gospel has a heavy responsibility to do it well, since there is no other way for the message to be presented. This statement of his sums this up well:

It is true that at every step of the process there is an element of ultimate mystery which the mind of man cannot fathom. No one can say why it is that one was chosen and another not, why it is that here the word came 'not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost' (1 Thess 1.5), while there the same word carried no regenerating power. The answer to that question is known only to God. But if we cannot know for what *reason* one was chosen, we can most certainly know for what *purpose* he was chosen: he was chosen in order to be a fruit-bearing branch of the one true vine (John 15.16), a witness through whom others might be saved.⁵⁰

Newbigin's approach can therefore be said to hold the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the realm of election without resolving it rationally in favour of one or the other. Because of this, the concerns of each opposing side to maintain their position for the sake of the Christian life are quite satisfactorily addressed. Newbigin's emphasis on God's sovereignty leaves little room for a 'Pelagian' reliance on human effort to secure one's own salvation or that of others. With that, the accompanying problems of human pride, anxiety over whether one

⁴⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 100. Newbigin also warns of a 'Pelagianism' which has infected the Church, leading her to think that people are converted due to her techniques or efforts at evangelism (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pp. 224 and 243).

⁵⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 100-101 (emphasis in original).

has done enough, and service to God which stems not from gratitude but a desire to win his favour are avoided. Moreover, Newbigin's naming of God's glory as the ultimate goal of election serves as a powerful antidote to the anthropocentric tendencies which sometimes appear with an over-emphasis on human responsibility in election.⁵¹ But if 'Calvinist' concerns are assuaged, 'Arminian' worries over the need for Christians to take responsibility for their Christian life and ministry are also relieved, in the ways we have noted earlier. Furthermore, the somewhat thorny issue of how to view the relationship between God and sin in a Calvinist scheme is rendered moot. This includes the debates which have taken place within the Reformed tradition as to whether God can properly be said to be the 'author of sin' (see, e.g., the contrary assertions of the Westminster Confession⁵² and F.D.E. Schleiermacher⁵³), and whether evil is in any sense necessary to God's purposes for his creation.

I have previously written on the need at times to hold seemingly opposing theological notions in tension with one another.⁵⁴ In such cases, it might not be desirable to resolve this tension in a rational manner, as this might have an adverse impact on one's Christian life. Rather, if there is to be a resolution or synthesis, it should be one worked out in the context of practical Christian living. I therefore issued the call for us to allow goodness (in the sense of right living) to serve as a legitimate end of Christian theology, instead of being constantly obsessed with finding a rational resolution. The focus of my previous arguments was on the practice of petitionary prayer. Newbigin's understanding of election might serve as another example of the need for such tension in the service of

⁵¹ P.T. Forsyth is one who appreciates the role the traditional Reformed emphasis on the glory of God plays in challenging an anthropocentric Christianity. While he rejects the traditional Calvinist conception of a double predestination, he praises it for being the 'most mighty of all [dogmas] for personal faith': *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (London: Independent Press, 1955), p. 310. This is due to the theocentric nature of the doctrine, located in its greater eagerness to uphold God's freedom than that of the human creature: *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society: An Essay in the Philosophy of Experimental Religion*, 2nd ed. (London: Independent Press, 1952), p. 255.

⁵² Chap. III, para. 1.

⁵³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2nd edn, ed. by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 328 (para. 80, 2).

⁵⁴ Theng Huat Leow, "'For Goodness' Sake": Some Observations on the Justification for Dialectics in Christian Theology', in *What Young Asian Theologians Are Thinking*, ed. by Theng Huat Leow, Christianity in Southeast Asia Series (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2014), pp. 115-27.

goodness.⁵⁵ The greatest strengths of the 'Calvinist' and 'Arminian' positions might always have been their utility for practical Christian living. This could be the reason why they have persisted for so long, appearing in different movements throughout the history of the Church, in spite of strong opposition from the other camp. Is it possible to have the best of both worlds; to incorporate the benefits of both positions for a Christian trying to live out his life and testimony to the world? It might be—if we are willing to forgo the approach *sub specie aeternitatis*, as defined by the proponents of both camps, and be contented with what we can properly know as creatures. This kind of approach will not answer all our questions, but it might prove especially conducive for the life and mission of the elect.

⁵⁵ Newbigin does demonstrate an awareness of the need for a tension which is in the service of the Christian life. See, e.g., *Open Secret*, pp. 80–81.