



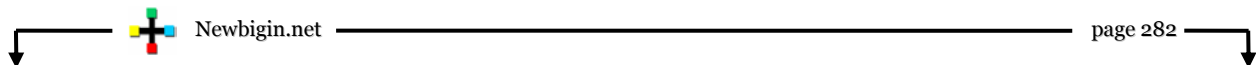
The Nature Of The Christian Hope

1952

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

The Ecumenical Review 4, 3 (April): 282-284.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



In the January number we published a number of comments on the first report of the Advisory Commission on the Theme of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The following answers have been written by members of the Commission.

The comments so far published on the first report of the Commission on the main theme of the Assembly show how wide is the range of opinion in the Churches regarding the very substance of our message to the world. We are accused both of a merely futurist eschatology, and also of having fallen victims to the prevailing heresy of "realised eschatology ;" of having formulated our report in Biblical terms, and of having abandoned the Bible. Of some of the comments one is first moved to exclaim "Has this man read our report at all ?" but it is more profitable to reflect that we have evidently failed to say what we meant. With all of them one would like to engage in vigorous debate, for which there is here not room. I think that there is one issue emerging from the debate so far which is clearly of vital importance for the Church's formulation of its message. The debate suggests that we are compelled to choose between present realisation and future hope ; that too much future hope means too little present realisation, and vice versa. It is suggested (Craig) that since the second coming of Christ is probably a long way off more attention should be given to immediate matters. On the other hand it is feared (Hartenstein) that an overdose of "realized eschatology" is fatal to "future eschatology." I cannot think that the Christian faith is this sort of "balance of power" between present and future. It is surely absurd that one group of Christians should be afraid of too much hope for the future, and another group afraid of too much manifestation of the power of Christ in the present! Yet the debate so far shows that this is the situation, and if the Assembly can give a message which will help to lift the Churches above this dilemma, it will surely render a very great service.



The discussions of the Commission centred from the beginning round the word "hope" – the word given to us by the Toronto Central Committee. We often used, in our discussions, the phrases "The Great Hope," and "The Lesser Hopes." We all recognize that there are many things for which Christians can and ought to hope, things realizable within our own lifetime or within that of our children. But of none *of* these things can we say that it belongs to the substance of our faith to say with complete certitude, "This will be so." They are all hopes which may be disappointed. But we rest upon a hope which cannot be disappointed, about which we have utter certainty, and in the strength *of* which we can – if necessary – face the possibility of being disappointed in all our lesser hopes. That is the hope of Christ's ultimate victory – a victory embracing both the destiny of the whole world and the destiny of every individual. We have surely a duty to make the nature of that hope utterly plain.

I cannot see that calculations as to the probable date of Christ's second coming (Craig) have any relevance to the bearing of this hope upon our present situation. It is the End which qualifies everything that leads up to it. Many a man has engaged in the same kind of calculation about his own end, arguing that because death was probably many years off, it could for practical purposes be left out of account. The divine answer is, "Thou fool." Surely the important point is that, in the Christian message, "the dimension of the last things is assigned to present things" (Maury). The force of the New Testament eschatology is not destroyed by the fact that 1900 years have since elapsed and that countless centuries may yet have to run. I believe that the Assembly should speak with the utmost clarity and boldness about this, the one hope which can never be disappointed. And it is, I believe, particularly vital that we should not distort and weaken this message by separating out the New Testament teaching about the resurrection of the believer from its total corporate and cosmic context.

The Commission concentrated on the attempt to explicate the word "hope." We tried to make clear that we knew that hope was not the whole of Christianity, but it is certainly true that we said very little about the present working of the powers of the age to come. We are accused here of blindness where we were in fact deliberately restricting our attention. But it may very well be true that, in any message given by the Assembly, this restriction will be wrong, and that the Message should contain something about the present working of the Holy Spirit,



about the missionary calling of the *Church* (Devanandan) and about our present union with Christ (Ioannidis) as substantial as what is said about the Christian hope. And indeed, when the efficacy of the sacraments is defined in terms of bare anticipation (Hartenstein), the time has certainly come for extremely vigorous counter-statement. At its next meeting I think the Commission should give more of its time to the other part of the title originally proposed to it – the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord." It seems clear that we shall not be able to speak the clear word of hope which we ought to speak, without becoming more clear about what we mean by Christ's present Lordship. And it is obvious that the debate between those who wish to include reference to the resurrection in the title of the Assembly, and those who wish to omit it, will not be resolved without a very thorough penetration into just this very subject. While this is primarily a matter of the "feel" of words, and (of course) the desire to omit it in no way implies a denial of the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian message, the debate does show that there is wide difference of view between those who wish to emphasise the hidden character of Christ's present Lordship, and those who wish to emphasise its visible character. I think that the main attention of the Commission at its next session should be given to this issue. But it is vital that the false dichotomy between present and future should be overcome, and that the Assembly should give a

message in which both Christ's present Lordship and His final victory are proclaimed with the utmost clarity and force.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.