



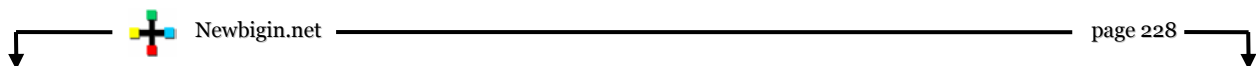
A Review of "New Ways For Christ," by Michael Wright

1976

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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The writer is an Anglican parish priest and was a professional journalist before he was ordained. He writes out of the experiences of two parishes, one rural and the other in a new urban area. He faces, and seeks to help others to face, the "stripping" which results from growing shortages of funds and of manpower in the Church. His plea is that we take this as an opportunity to be more effectively "stripped for action". But this cannot happen without clear thinking and planning. He shows how the principles of "Management by Objectives" can be applied to the work of a parish. His emphasis is upon teamwork, mobilizing *all* the resources, and setting the priorities. But he is not only concerned about organization; he is deeply concerned about the quality of the Christian life of the members, about training them in prayer and meditation, about building them up in the faith. "Teamwork by the whole congregation with holiness at the heart of it" is the way the book's message is summarized by the publisher, and it is a fair summary.

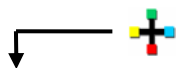
The writing is clear and practical. The author writes about the things he has done – some successes and some failures – and he writes with the sharpness of a trained journalist. Surely anyone involved in the life of a Christian congregation would gain from reading this book.

And surely also the life of the Christian congregation is the very heart of the Christian mission. The whole thrust of the 20th century rediscovery of the missionary nature of the Church is lost if it does not lead to a radical re-conception of what it means to be a local congregation of God's people. If the integration of mission and church is only a matter of the re-organization of boards, synods, assemblies and bureaucracies, it has failed. Therefore one welcomes eagerly every new effort to see the life of the local congregation afresh in missionary terms.

This is Michael Wright's concern, and on a certain level he helps us. And yet he makes me want to dig deeper into the theological issues. The history of the WCC Study on "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation" showed that one could not take up this issue without being led into the profound debate of our time about the nature of mission itself. Two books which I have recently read put the issue extremely sharply. Margaret Kane in her book *The Church in an Industrial Society* puts down in two parallel columns all the assumptions of two opposed and incompatible concepts of the mission of the Church, one of which is that normally held by church

members, the other that which undergirds industrial mission as she sees it. Personally, I could not accept either as it stands, but that is not to the point. The point is that there is a huge chasm between the two. Juan Luis Segundo, in his five-volume work entitled *A Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, shows that both of the two opposed views of mission can be read out of the text of the Vatican Decree GAUDIAM ET SPES: according to one, "the interpretation of the signs of the times will be made by a Christian who tries to find out whither the objective demands of love are carrying the world today, and who joins with other human beings not to bring them the truth but to seek it out". According to the other view, "the signs of the times are the events which are capable of bringing men to formulate direct questions on the value of faith and the Christian signs". (Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition*, p. 135). Segundo opts firmly for the first view, and believes that the traces of the second in the Vatican documents are the results of mental hangover. Again I cannot agree, but that is not the point. The point is that we shall not get further with the most important of all missionary issues – namely the recovery in practice of the missionary character of the local congregation – until we have attained greater theological clarity about what the mission of the Church is, about how the life and growth of the Church is related to God's purpose for the world.

It is unfair in a review to ask for a different book! Let me repeat my great appreciation for what this book does, and at the same time plead for more work on the issues which it does not tackle. Is it time to take up



afresh, in the light of the theological debates of our own time, the study of missionary structures for the local church?

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