



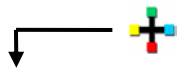
Reply to Konrad Raiser

1994

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

The International Bulletin of Missionary Research 18, 2 (April): 51-52.

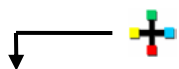
All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are 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.



I am grateful for the courteous and generous response of Konrad Raiser to my quite harsh criticism of his book. Clearly there is much common ground. I accept his thesis that there has been a "paradigm shift," and I accept in general his accounts of the former and later paradigms. But paradigm shifts are not, like climatic changes, events that we simply have to record. They are the ways into which, by mutual persuasion, we seek to guide our contemporaries. They call not only for description but for evaluation. Here we differ.

I do not regard the "classical" paradigm as nonnegotiable. I sought to challenge it in my pamphlet entitled *Trinitarian Doctrine for To-day's Mission*, thereby earning the disapproval of my great colleague Wim Visser 't Hooft. But I do regard as nonnegotiable the affirmation that in Jesus the Word was made flesh; there can be no relativizing of this, the central and decisive event of universal history.

Like Raiser, I was brought into the ecumenical movement through the concerns of Faith and Order. It was with sorrow that I had to give up my position as vice-chairman of Faith and Order when I became a WCC staff member. My concern has not been to promote an "evangelical" theology, if that word is used (as it often is) to exclude other Christians. I am concerned for the integrity of the WCC's witness to the faith that we confess together in the Nicene Creed. Surely to speak much of the atoning work of Jesus on the cross is not to be sectarian or unCatholic! My own theological struggle during the final stages of the gestation of the Church of South India required a very serious



acknowledgment of the truth in the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession.

I agree that the "classic" paradigm lacked adequate recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit. As a missionary in India, I had been strongly influenced by the missiology of Roland Allen, for whom the recognition of the work of the Spirit in mission was the very center. When I

became part of the WCC staff, I proposed the study on the missionary structure of the congregation precisely with the hope that Roland Allen's ideas might penetrate the older churches. But the "paradigm shift" of the 1960s ensured that the study was hijacked in the interests of the dominant ideology of the secular. Thirty years later secularity is out and "spirituality" is in. But there are many spirits abroad, and when they are invoked, we are handed over to other powers. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, is known by the confession that Jesus alone is Lord.

Raiser finds that there are three new realities that I have not adequately recognized – religious plurality, the concept of the *Missio Dei*, and the ecological crisis. I offer a word on each.

Religious plurality is as old as known human history; what is new is that churches in the old "Christendom" have woken up to it. One may well admit that the euphoria of Western colonial expansion, which was so often mixed in with missionary motives, enabled the Western churches to engage in world mission without seriously facing for themselves the question of the uniqueness and finality of Christ. The collapse of Western self-confidence and the corrosive effects of the "acids of modernity" (Lippmann) now produce a mood in which the recognition of religious plurality puts a question mark against the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ. That is precisely the issue now to be faced: Do we look for the ultimate unity of the human family as the fruit of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, or do we have some other center to propose? The "reticence" about interreligious dialogue with which Raiser charges the missionary movement arises from the recognition that there is a kind of "cocktail-party dialogue" (Johannes Aagaard), which operates on assumptions that do not include the affirmation that Christians must make, namely, that in Jesus God has acted decisively for the redemption of the world.

The *Missio Dei* slogan emerged following the Willingen Conference in 1952, which spoke of the source of the church's mission in the action of God the Father in sending his Son. Once again the powerful intellectual currents of the later 1950s and 1960s hijacked this biblical statement in the interests of a missiology that bypassed the church and led to the acclaiming of all sorts of secular movements as "God at work in history." In reaction against an overly church-centered missiology, we had a missiology that found God's redeeming action almost everywhere except in the preaching of the Gospel. It was a sad period.

If it is true that the missionary movement has been blind to the ecological crisis, that is a grave charge. For myself, I can only say that it has been a constant theme of my speaking and writing that the world dominance of the idolatry of the free market will, if not reversed, both disintegrate human society and destroy the environment. I regret that the immense labor of the WCC under the banner of "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" has had such meager results, because it has attacked the symptoms and not the cause of the malady. The ideology of the free market rests upon a doctrine of human nature that is directly attacked by the biblical faith. Idolatry cannot be countered merely by moral protest against its effects. It has to be tackled at its source. That is why I believe that the first priority for the churches and for the World Council of Churches should be a radically missionary encounter with this ideology, which, under the name of "modernization," is destroying traditional cultures and threatening to destroy the world. "Cocktail-party dialogue" will not do here. We have to find ways of making known the fact that the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus is Lord also of the economic order. There is no room for religious pluralism here.

No doubt there are intergenerational factors in this discussion. Much depends on the period in which one was intellectually formed. The products of the 1960s who now provide leadership in most areas are easily recognizable. I have the strong impression that the next generation, now in their twenties and thirties, have turned away from this paradigm. There is considerable fear that the WCC may be trapped in a paradigm that is already losing its power. What I most welcome in Konrad Raiser's response is his welcome to real discussion, and his recognition that the WCC must be a place where conflicting views can meet in honest search for the integrity of our Christian witness. If I have written critically, it is not as one who stands outside but as one who

wants to be within the ecumenical family, where we can speak frankly to each other. I hope and pray that it may be so.

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.