

Herman Bavinck, Lesslie Newbigin, and Reformed Mission in the Global Workplace

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What possible relevance could the Reformed tradition have for the working lives of a computer programmer in Mumbai, an artist in Shanghai, a banker in Sao Paulo, or a marketing executive in Cairo? What sort of Reformed community could hold, shape, and equip these urbanites for faithful lives in today's increasingly complex vocations and growing global cities?

Today, for the first time in history, the majority of humanity lives and works in a city. By the year 2030, the world's cities will hold an astonishing five billion people. The terrific pace of global urbanization and professionalization is presenting missionaries with a radically new mission field unimagined by their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors.

I will argue that today's church planters need to be equipped with three vital elements if they hope to establish vibrant communities of faith in mission fields that are increasingly urban and professional. First, they need to develop a rich theological understanding of the modern workplace. Second, they need new ecclesiological models capable of connecting the working lives of urban professionals to the *missio Dei*. And third, they need new flesh and blood models of churches that are currently engaged in outreach to urban professionals. Toward that end, I will argue that, by creatively combining Herman Bavinck's robust theology of work, Lesslie Newbigin's vocational understanding of ecclesiology, and Redeemer Presbyterian Church's model of professional missions in New York City, today's urban church planters can creatively

imagine how to develop culturally engaged communities of faith within professional contexts.

My ancillary goal is to demonstrate that theological scholars both of Herman Bavinck's neo-Calvinism and those of Lesslie Newbigin's missional theology have traditionally ignored each other's important contributions to the detriment of both groups. A careful reading of Bavinck's trinitarian theology could provide the missional movement with a rich and historically grounded theology of cultural engagement. Likewise, a careful reading of Newbigin's missional ecclesiology could help neo-Calvinists to creatively imagine how the institutional church can inform and enrich the cultural vocations of the laity in the world—something they have left largely unexplored. That said, I will argue that both theological schools can benefit from a more praxis-oriented theology that investigates how their ideas actually take shape in local church contexts like Redeemer's.

Herman Bavinck's Theology of Culture and Vocation

Herman Bavinck's trinitarian theology of cultural engagement is marked, not surprisingly, by three significant aspects: a traditional neo-Calvinist passion for the exploration, development, and enjoyment of God's creation; a nuanced commitment to the imitation of Christ in daily life; and a generous understanding of the Holy Spirit's pervasive work of common grace in culture. In the following section I will briefly explore the contours of these three aspects and their relevance for the life and work of a Christian professional.

Bavinck's enduring commitment to the neo-Calvinist tradition's vision of culture and creation can be witnessed throughout his writings. God's creation is painted as a fertile garden bursting with potencies for humankind to both develop and enjoy. God is depicted as a skilled designer—a lover of color, beauty, complexity, and order who takes particular delight in the diverse ways his creatures explore and enjoy God's beloved garden. The pluriform

vocations of artist, scientist, farmer, and builder are each, according to Bavinck's scheme, intrinsically valuable to the development of creation and the ultimate glory of the creator.

On the basis of this rich theology of vocation, Bavinck argued, one's faith in God can never be separated from one's creational or cultural activity. Faith, he argued, "embraces the whole man in his thinking, feeling, and activity, in his whole life everywhere and at all times."¹ According to Bastian Kruithof, who wrote at length on Bavinck's theology of culture, Bavinck was convinced that Christians confess their faith "not only on Sunday, but also throughout the week in the family, the school, the church, at his work, in society and state, in science and art." Thus, Bavinck was convinced that, in one's cultural life, "religion is not something added on, *but life*, life that must be serving, praising, and glorifying of God."² In Bavinck's words, "culture and cultus, go together from the beginning, belong together, and constitute the great, holy, and glorious destiny of man."³

Bavinck therefore vigorously defended the work of the laity in creation and culture as central, and never ancillary, to the kingdom of God. He lamented the fact that, in the modern Reformed churches, the

ordinary man who honorably fulfills his daily calling before God hardly seems to count anymore; he does nothing, or so it is thought, for the kingdom of God. . . . In the view of many today, to be a real Christian requires something extra, something out of the ordinary, some supernatural deed. . . . And so it is that the power and the worth of Christian faith is not appraised according to what a man does in his common calling but in what he accomplishes above and beyond it.⁴

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 268.

2. Bastian Kruithof, "The Relation of Christianity and Culture in the Teaching of Herman Bavinck." (PhD Diss., University of Edinburgh, 1955), 297, 124 (emphasis added), respectively.

3. Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis* (Kampen: Kok, 1909), 9; cited in Kruithof, 122.

4. Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989), 62.

Bavinck's frustration with the theological devaluation of work arose from what he believed to be a deeply Calvinist conviction "that the husband as father of the family, the wife as mother of her children, the servant girl in the kitchen, and the laborer behind the plough, are as truly servants of God as the missionary and minister and Sabbath-school teacher."⁵

The more one explores Bavinck's robust theology of creation the more one can see how it could quickly begin to both inform and inspire the working lives of today's urban professional. Vocations in management, investment, design, production, imagination, and construction could be recognized as service and worship rendered to the Creator. For, according to Bavinck, God claims the whole of a person—"mind, heart, soul, body, and all his or her energies—for his service and his love."⁶ Spiritual apathy and indifference towards one's work would be off the table for anyone bathed in Bavinck's theology of creation.

Unlike his neo-Calvinist colleague Abraham Kuyper, whose theology of culture tended to lean heavily on the first and third persons of the Trinity, Bavinck's theo-cultural vision was purposefully trinitarian in its inception and articulation. Through Bavinck's careful exploration of how the life and teachings of Jesus should inform a Christian's cultural activity, he opened new vocational vistas for the neo-Calvinist tradition.

The first and arguably most important aspect of Bavinck's Christo-centric cultural ethic is the intimate and unbreakable link he forges between the divine work of creation and redemption in the person of Jesus Christ. Within this twofold work of Christ, Bavinck hopes to resolve the centuries long struggle in Christian thought between tradition's that emphasize creation (nature, law, and the Old Testament) and those that emphasize redemption (grace, love, and the New Testament). He rejects the claim that a choice or an artificial hierarchy between creation and redemption

5. Herman Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (1894), 21.

6. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 552.

need to be made.⁷ In the person of Jesus Christ, creation, law, and the Old Testament are not replaced or superseded but restored, renewed, and fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection.

According to Bavinck, Christ's work of redemption restores and redeems our creational activity in the world. Christ is not interested in canceling or rescuing his disciples from this cultural activity; rather, he wants to help them to walk faithfully within it. It is certainly "much easier," Bavinck writes, "to reject all culture, than it is to walk in all these areas as a Child of God and to imitate Christ."⁸ And yet "Christ came not to do away with the world and the various spheres of life but to restore and preserve them."⁹ Those who wish to truly follow the creator and redeemer Christ, Bavinck argues, must imitate his own participation in and restoration of the created order.

With Bavinck's emphasis on a Christlike participation in creation and redemption of culture, it is easy to see how the language of "imitation" would play a central role in his cultural ethic. From the beginning to the end of his career, Bavinck was

7. Bavinck captures this integrated understanding of Christ as creator, redeemer, and consummator succinctly when he argues that "the preaching of Jesus cannot be separated from what has followed after the cross. The gospel goes back in the past to creation, and even into eternity, and stretches forward to the farthest future. Christ, who was the Word created all things, and bore the cross as the Servant of the Lord, is the same who rose again and ascended into heaven, and will return as Judge of the quick and the dead." Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909*, Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 267. In another place he adds, "The Divine Being is one: there is but one Being that is God and that may be called God. In creation and redemption, in nature and grace, in church and world, in state and society, everywhere and always we are concerned with one, same, living and true God. The unity of the world, of mankind, of virtue, of justice, and of beauty depends upon the unity of God." Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 158.

8. John Bolt, "Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), 71, citing Herman Bavinck, "De Navolging Van Christus en het Moderne Leven," in *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 144.

9. "Common Grace," 64.

fascinated with the question of how a contemporary Christian could faithfully imitate Christ's life and work in the modern world.¹⁰

Bavinck's first article on the subject begins with a careful reading of a number historical and contemporary models of the *imitatio Christi*. In this analysis Bavinck demonstrates a careful appreciation of the "martyr," "monk," and "mystic" paradigms for imitation, but for two important reasons he ultimately concludes that they are each insufficient models for contemporary imitation. First, each of these models mistakenly focuses on a single, and rather narrow, aspect of Christ's life and makes it a ruling ethical norm for all cultural activity. Second, each model creates an unnecessary and destructive dualism or hierarchy between the true imitators of Christ (martyrs, monks, and mystics) and the ordinary laity who can never measure up. Imitation thus becomes the calling of the few and remains an irrelevant ideal to the rest.

Convinced that the call to imitation is given to all disciples, Bavinck moves on from these prohibitively narrow historical models and considers two modernist visions. He begins by exploring what he calls the "literalist vision." This paradigm is a rather flat-footed and wooden vision of imitation in which the modern disciple engages in a rigorous mirroring of Christ's first-century life. This vision, Bavinck argues, lacks the theological imagination and flexibility a modern disciple needs to respond effectively to a cultural context quite distinct from ancient Palestine. With that, Bavinck turns toward the other side of the modernist spectrum to what he calls the "rationalistic vision" of discipleship. According to this view, the concrete particularities of Christ's life and teachings are too removed and too radical to be of use in modern life. Thus modern disciples need to boil the life of Jesus down to a more palatable and rational core essence, spirit, or

10. My understanding of Bavinck's ethic of imitation is deeply indebted to the interpretive work of John Bolt; see "The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck" (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College (Toronto School of Theology), 1982) and "Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), 45-73 (hereafter cited in text).

set of principles. Once Christ's more scandalous rough edges have been removed, then, and only then, can he serve as an acceptable moral ideal for modern life and work (58–59).

Convinced that Christians in all times, places, and vocations are bound to the demands of imitation, Bavinck works to develop a vision of discipleship that takes the concrete life and teachings of Jesus seriously while still being able to imagine new and unforeseen acts of imitation in modern life and work. He begins his alternative vision by rooting it firmly not in the virtue, moral character, or willpower of the particular imitator but in the grace-filled activity of the imitated. According to Bavinck, modern disciples who see Jesus only as a moral example whom they must rigorously follow are quickly “overwhelmed,” “discouraged,” and feel “powerlessness to truly imitate him.” He therefore insists that “[o]nly when we know and experience him as Redeemer, as the one whose suffering covers our guilt and whose Spirit fulfills the law of God in us, only then do we dare to look at him and consider him our example” (60). For Bavinck, imitation must *begin with and be governed by* the gracious and mystical union Christ initiates with his disciples. It is only from one's initial standing in Christ's grace that a modern disciple can begin to take the first tentative steps of imitation in her life and work.

Bavinck's notion of imitation differs in an important aspect from that of his neo-Calvinist colleague Abraham Kuyper. While Kuyper tends to speak of Christ as a risen king who judges, transforms, and rules culture in glory and power, Bavinck's depiction of Christ is tempered with Christological suffering, submission, and sacrifice. For, in Bavinck's mind, the true imitator will follow Christ in *both* his kingship and his cross.

Regarding the practical question of how one goes about imitating Christ in modern life and work, Bolt argues that Bavinck's frequent use of terms like “concrete,” “illustrative,” and “clarification” aim to articulate “a mediating position between the Scylla of spiritualizing and the Charybdis of literalism” (65). Bavinck argues for what we might call a *concrete relativizing* of Christian witness for modern life and work. Against the rationalists,

Bavinck argues that modern disciples must wrestle with the concrete words and acts of Jesus. Against the literalists, he argues for the free responsibility of the modern imitator to both interpret the life of Christ and embody the mystical union they have with Him in their specific vocations and cultures. The modern imitator, according to Bolt, “does not have the freedom to accept or reject” Christ’s teachings, but she does “have *the freedom to apply* the moral virtues and principles” she espouses “in different ways depending upon the circumstances” (66).

Returning to our urban professionals, we can easily see how Bavinck puts their daily lives and work into intimate and immediate conversation with the lordship of Christ in four specific ways. First, the witness of Christ is understood as having a deep, pervasive, and irrefutable authority in their working lives. According to Bavinck,

Christ did not come just to restore the religio-ethical life of man and leave all the rest of life undisturbed, as if the rest of life had not been corrupted by sin and had no need of restoration. No, the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Spirit extend even as far as sin has corrupted. Everything that is sinful, guilty, unclean, and full of woe is, as such and for that very reason, the object of the evangel of grace that is to be preached to every creature. Therefore Christ has also a message for home and society, for art and science. Liberalism chose to limit its power and message to the heart and inner chamber, declaring that its kingdom was not of this world. But if the kingdom is not of, it is certainly in this world, and is intended for it. The word of God which comes to us in Christ is a word of liberation and restoration for the whole man, for his understanding and his will, for his body and his soul.¹¹

Second, Bavinck reminds today’s urban professionals that their daily acts of imitation in the workplace must emerge from Christ’s initial act of grace and not from their own enduring moral stamina. They must live and work out of that grace and joy and not from any manufactured willpower or self-righteousness. The grace they experience in mystical union with Christ must be the exclusive engine that drives and informs their life in the modern workplace. Third, their vocation will not always be marked by an inspiring

11. “Common Grace,” 61–62 (hereafter cited in text).

amount of kingship, creativity, and cultural transformation; rather, because of the powers of sin, boredom, opposition, oppression, and even failure will be an inevitable aspect of the imitation experience. As stated earlier, the urban professional who takes discipleship seriously will receive, in this dispensation, both a crown and a cross. Fourth, because disciples are given the freedom to interpret and embody the example of Christ in their unique vocations, they are not bound to a rigid set of rules that crack when their dynamic vocational circumstances shift. Instead, disciples are expected to imitate Christ in their own dynamic vocational contexts.

The third and final piece of Bavinck's theo-cultural vision is that of the Holy Spirit's cosmic work of *common grace* in the world. Bavinck uses this term to describe the pervasive, providential, and generous "working of the Spirit in all creation" (51) as the "author of all life, of every power and every virtue" (41). He argues that the Holy Spirit refuses to

leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation. (51)

He fills the hearts of men with nourishment and joy and does not leave himself without a witness among them. He pours out upon them numberless gifts and benefits. Families, races, and peoples he binds together with natural love and affection. He allows societies and states to spring up that the citizens might live in peace and security. Wealth and well-being he grants them that the arts and sciences can prosper. And by his revelation in nature and history he ties their hearts and consciences to the invisible, supra-sensible world and awakens in them a sense of worship and virtue. (60)

For these should be considered gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is true the Holy Spirit, as a spirit of sanctification, dwells in believers only, but as a spirit of life, of wisdom and of power He works also in those who do not believe. No Christian, therefore, should despise these gifts; on the contrary, he should honor art and science, music and philosophy and

various other products of the human mind as *praestantissima Spiritus dona*, and make the most of them for his own personal use.¹²

Bavinck's articulation of the pervasive work of the Holy Spirit in all creation, culture, and people provides the urban professional with a theological foundation from which she can allow the world to inform, enrich, and even bless her life and work. She can enter her city and her particular vocation with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit has gone out before making cooperation, compromise, and dialogue with non-Christian co-workers possible. She can be grateful for her city's cafés and parks, she can learn from non-Christian professors, and she can work diligently for a company knowing that, despite perhaps many appearances to the contrary, God's Spirit is some how active even there. "For," Bavinck reminds her, "Moses was reared in all the wisdom of Egypt, the children of Israel decorated the house of the Lord with the gold and silver of Egypt, Solomon used the services of Hiram to build the temple, Daniel was trained in the science of the Chaldeans, and the wise men from the East laid their gifts at the feet of the baby in Bethlehem."¹³ Such an understanding of God's generous common grace gives her a spirit of peace that cultural transformation is not ultimately up to her, it gives her a spirit of openness for those around her, and it gives her a spirit of hope in the promises of God to remain active in her workplace long after she is gone.

In sum, Bavinck's trinitarian theology provides modern professionals with a robust theological interpretation of their vocation in the global city as part of a larger *missio Dei* and its accompanying renewal of all things. His emphasis on creation affirms the eternal significance of their work. His nuanced vision of imitation binds their vocations to the concrete life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who guides their daily work and chastening any pretenses they might have of cultural triumphalism. And finally, his doctrine of common grace provides them with a pneumatological foundation from which they can live and work within their city

12. Herman Bavinck, "Calvin and Common Grace," *The Princeton Theological Review* 7, no. 3 (1909), 13.

13. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 64.

while remaining cognizant of God's active and providential hand in everything around them.

That said, Bavinck's theology of cultural engagement, like that of many neo-Calvinists, fails to answer a second question vital to the future of Reformed theology and mission in today's global city: how might the urban church in its preaching, worship, and communal life both inform and shape its members for faithful lives in the workplace and the broader cultural *missio Dei*? What, in other words, would a neo-Calvinist church committed to serving God in all vocations practically look like? How would it encourage, challenge, and equip its disciples for work in the new global city? Would it take place in the suburbs or in the city? What sort of songs would it sing? What would its preaching be like? These seem, to my mind, very natural questions that follow from Bavinck's theo-cultural vision, and yet when one examines the writings of neo-Calvinists like Bavinck, one finds shockingly little in the way of concrete ecclesial guidance.

This neo-Calvinist silence on the connection between one's liturgical and cultural life has historically been grounded in a firm separation between what neo-Calvinists call the church as "institute" (the formal institution of the church) and the church as "organism" (the people of God actively working in the world). The idea being that the institute should respect a division of labor between itself and the organism by not dogmatically dictating every facet of a Christian's public and vocational life. After all, it is said, a pastor cannot be expected to tell a congregation's artists how to paint, its surgeons how to cut, or its stockbrokers how to invest. The institute, it is said, should stick to its assigned task of worship and preaching while leaving cultural and vocational matters to the discerning freedom of the church as organism.

In the spirit of Bavinck it seems that, while a neo-Calvinist *distinction* between one's liturgical and vocational life between the church as "institute" and the church as "organism" is both wise and extremely helpful, any *separation* between these two is neither. While it is certainly true that pastors in the institute must humbly respect the complexity and diversity of the laity's work, the institute

must never surrender its vital connection to and responsibility for the theo-cultural imagination of the organism. In other words, the liturgical and communal life of a truly neo-Calvinist church institute should reflect, support, encourage, and challenge the organism's dynamic imagination of how the gospel it preaches should inform and renew every corner of one's vocational life. For if a church's preaching, worship, and communal life fail to solidify any connection between faith and work for its members, that stark separation will undermine any hope the laity have of connecting faith and work for themselves.

Thus, while Bavinck provides us with an undeniably rich theological understanding of work, he does not give us a vision for how the church can communally and liturgically pass this theo-cultural imagination on into the weekly lives of its members. The intellectualist assumption here seems to be that if Christians are simply *taught* that there is a connection to faith and work, at some point in their lives the work of the church will have been finished. For an answer as to how the church as an institute can proactively play a role not only in informing its members of the connection between faith and work but also in shaping and sustaining this vision on a weekly basis, we need to turn to Lesslie Newbigin's creative, imaginative, and no doubt controversial proposal for a vocationally-based missional church.

Lesslie Newbigin's Vocational Ecclesiology

A Reformed minister from Great Britain, Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) spent the first thirty years of his professional life serving as a missionary in southern India. Through his international writing, speaking, and leadership activities, Newbigin gained significant notoriety for his contributions to Christian understandings of inter-religious dialogue, cultural hermeneutics, ecumenics, and missional theology and practice.

Upon his eventual return to Great Britain, Newbigin became increasingly critical of the Western church's withdrawal from the public, cultural, and specifically vocational lives of the laity.

Newbigin's creative proposals for how the church could reengage these secular spheres, particularly the modern workplace, are the subject of the following section. It will become clear that while he would most certainly agree with Bavinck's assertion that the modern chasm between faith and work is a direct result of a stunted theology, Newbigin would want to add that it is the direct result of a stunted ecclesiology as well.

Newbigin's enduring conviction that the church was never meant to be a static institution but a dynamic cultural movement is shot through the entirety of his life and work. He never tired of quoting Emil Brunner's famous dictum: "The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning."¹⁴ In Newbigin's eyes, the western church had disastrously traded in its dynamic public calling of cultural transformation and mission for a passive one of cultural chaplaincy. The structures and practices of this domesticated church, Newbigin argued, betrayed a cultural impotence that made any pervasive engagement with modern society impossible.

A truly missional church, Newbigin writes, "will be a community where men and women are prepared for and sustained in the exercise of the priesthood in the world." "The Church gathers," he argues, "to renew its participation in Christ's priesthood . . . not within the walls of the Church but in the daily business of the world."¹⁵ The proper role of clergy is not didactic but most clearly illustrated in Christ's washing of his disciple's feet. Their ministerial calling is therefore to "help the members of the church to go out into their places in the world and there perform the healing, regenerating, teaching, saving, leavening ministries among mankind. Ministers are to be servants of the servants of God."¹⁶

14. Emil Brunner, *The Word in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 11.

15. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 229–30.

16. Lesslie Newbigin, "Ministry and Laity," *National Christian Council Review* 85 (1965): 481.

According to Newbigin, one of the most tragic consequences of the Western church's withdrawal from modern culture was its deafening silence on the professional lives of its members. For

how a Christian should act in his business, in politics, in professional life, the Churches have had almost nothing to say. Each man has been largely left to find his own way. If you ask for books on how a Christian should conduct a Sunday School you will find plenty. But if you ask for guidance to a Christian banker, or a Christian lawyer, or a Christian farmer as to 'how a servant of Jesus Christ understands and exercises these jobs', you will find almost nothing . . . she has left her members largely to fend for themselves.¹⁷

If the Western church had any hope of becoming the public and cultural movement it was called to be, Newbigin argued, it would need to radically re-imagine its approach to the cultural and vocational lives of its members.¹⁸ The traditional church, he argued, "must find ways of expressing solidarity with those who stand in these frontier situations."¹⁹ Out of this conviction he began to imagine and articulate the beginnings of a vocation-based ecclesiology.

To truly understand the foundations of his experimental ecclesiology, we must return to Newbigin's formative missionary sojourn in southern India. Carved in the heat of the long Indian summer, a steadfast commitment to the radical locality of the church became a central pillar of Newbigin's ecclesiology. The church must be local, he argued, in design, ownership, worship, structure, and leadership. This was "the simplest of missionary principles."²⁰ Newbigin stood firmly against European models of

17. Lesslie Newbigin, "The Christian Layman in the World and in the Church," *National Christian Council Review* 72 (1952): 187.

18. A more thorough exploration of Newbigin's argument can be found in Matthew Kaemingk, "Lesslie Newbigin's Missional Approach to the Modern Workplace," *Missiology* 39, no. 3 (2011).

19. Michael W. Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Boekencentrum Publishing House, 2000), 311.

20. Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 112.

mission that advocated the establishment of large, centralized, and distinctively western “mission stations” in which indigenous peoples were treated as passive recipients of a ministry and message not their own.

Inspired by this desire for radical locality, Newbigin traveled through hundreds of small Indian villages ordaining elders, establishing local churches, and granting scandalous amounts of local autonomy and responsibility. International missions officers monitoring his work back in England regularly questioned and outright challenged the freedom Newbigin granted the indigenous churches he had planted in these local villages. They argued that only thoroughly Western and seminary-trained clergy should be given such levels of ecclesial and sacramental control. In defense of his methods, Newbigin shot back that their ecclesiologies had fallen captive to the broken paradigms of Christendom that were neither biblical nor effective. The apostle Paul, he would remind his opponents,

never stayed in one place for more than a few months, or at most a couple of years . . . as soon as there was an established congregation of Christian believers, he chose from among them elders, laid his hands on them, entrusted to them the care of the church, and left. . . . What must be done if the gospel is to be truly communicated? . . . [T]here must be a congregation furnished with a Bible, the sacraments, and the apostolic ministry. . . . The young church is then free to learn, as it goes and grows, how to embody the gospel in its own culture.²¹

What possible relevance could Newbigin’s practice of rural church planting in India have for the development of a new urban ecclesiology that can connect with the working lives of urban professionals? Newbigin makes the connection for us.

I am sure that [my] Indian experiences are not irrelevant to the situation in western industrialised society. I have met, for example, [English Christians] working on the shop-floor in a big factory . . . who have come to a fresh experience of Christ and who are eager to share their faith. The question which immediately arises is whether they can develop a living Christian community with their [coworkers] conforming to the language, style and culture of their community, or whether they have to emigrate

21. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 146–47.

from their culture, attach themselves to one of the middle-class congregations in the neighborhood, and depend permanently for leadership upon men trained in the style of a typical English college or seminary.²²

Just as Newbigin entered the Indian villages establishing churches wherever he went, so also he advocated church planters to enter modern workplaces establishing new communities of faith as carefully and as quickly as possible.

Why is such a radical effort necessary? Newbigin argued that the sort of deep vocational discipleship that theologians like himself and Herman Bavinck desired simply could not be sustained by individuals working in isolation. It is not enough simply to preach a theology of work in a suburban church and expect urban professionals to faithfully sustain it for an entire career. The faithful imitation of Christ in the workplace depends, according to Newbigin, upon the *radical locality* of the Word, the Sacraments, and a community of faithful believers *where* they actually work.

Those who would argue that a suburban church can serve as a sufficient community for working disciples simply do not, in Newbigin's eyes, understand the new missionary challenge that modern life presents. According to Newbigin, the West has developed into "a highly complex organism of differentiated but overlapping communities in each of which men and women have to live their working lives, interact with others and make daily and hourly decisions on highly complex and difficult issues."²³ If modern societies are not uniform, Newbigin argues, but comprise a vast pluriformity of social spheres with their own languages, issues, and moral challenges how can a single church be truly local to all of these spheres at the same time? How can the leadership of a church hope to adequately equip disciples for moral spaces it neither inhabits nor understands? Because of the undeniable complexity of modern life and society, Newbigin argues that a myopic suburban ecclesiology

22. Lesslie Newbigin, *Sign of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 66.

23. *Sign*, 67.

can no more be the sole basis of a congregation. For secularized urban man, even more than for his predecessors, to live in the same place does not mean to inhabit the same world. . . . The Church must be where men are, speak the language they speak, inhabit the worlds they inhabit. This is the simplest of missionary principles. In obedience to it, Christians are reaching out in new forms of presence, trying to manifest the reality of the life of Christ in the many varied idioms of the worlds which men inhabit. There are 'cells' in factories and in offices... But these missionary experiments have, until recently, left untouched the position of the local congregation as the definitive form of the Church, the place where the word is preached, the sacraments dispensed, and godly discipline administered. These other activities have been seen rather as non-ecclesiastical or at best para-ecclesiastical activities which were the outworks of the Church rather than its main structure, the scouting parties rather than the main column.²⁴

In essence, Newbigin argues that if the Western church truly wants to engage and strengthen the vocational lives of its members, it needs to honor these vocationally-based communities of faith with the title of "Church." The mere establishment of a workplace prayer group or Christian association of flight attendants, lawyers, or teachers simply will not do. If the Western church truly wants to engage the modern workplace as a mission field, Newbigin argues, it needs to appoint local elders and give them control over the scriptures and sacraments like the village churches in India.

The limiting of the Word and Sacrament to the suburbs sends a powerful liturgical message, Newbigin argues, concerning the cultural power and relevance of the gospel. No trinitarian theology of culture, no matter how robust, could ever overcome the powerful symbolism of reserving the Lord Supper exclusively for residential communities of faith miles away from the workplace. The liturgical separation between the suburbs and the city, he argues, has solidified the theological separation between faith and work.

Newbigin never asserted that these workplace churches should compete with or replace residential churches as new form of "niche church" in which people only gather with "their own kind." Rather, he held that these new fellowships could be a valuable partner and

24. *Honest Religion*, 111–12.

force of renewal for suburban churches: vocational churches would become a “dynamic way of opening up the traditional local congregation for a much deeper involvement with the life of the world.”²⁵ Newbigin advocated for a system of multiple and overlapping memberships at home *and* at work that would renew and cross-fertilize the missions of both institutions with inspiring narratives of Christian mission and engagement in all areas of modern life. These diverse forms and locations of church would express the complex pluriformity of the *missio Dei*—not its separation.

Newbigin argued that these vocation-based congregations would also serve as a unique opportunity for ecumenical cooperation and dialogue.

Go to the great new industrial complex of Durgapur in India, where thousands of Indians are being thrown together from every part of the country into the melting-pot of a new kind of society. Can you really try to turn [these workers] into Anglicans, or Methodists or Canadian Baptists or Danish Lutherans? Wherever you come from, and through whatever tradition you learned Christ, you have only one thing to do there: to empty yourself for Christ’s sake in order humbly to learn what kind of a community can truly represent his intention for that industrial community. . . . It would, of course, be possible to erect a series of fishing stations around that pool and fish for proselytes; but that is not mission. That will not create in Durgapur a community which is the first-fruit for Christ of the whole, an earnest of his purpose and a sign of his victory. Already the missionary experience of the past two centuries has helped powerfully to bring home to the Churches the scandal of their division. It is even more certain that a serious attempt at missionary penetration of the structures of a secularized society will make our divisions look ridiculous.²⁶

Newbigin reminds those uncomfortable with or outright against his vocationally-based congregations that worship services have been safely held in hospitals, universities, and military units for centuries. If the gospel can be proclaimed and the sacraments administered properly in these social spheres, why not in the

25. *Sign*, 63.

26. *Honest Religion*, 118.

workplace?²⁷ He openly acknowledges that false steps will most certainly be made in these workplace communities just as they were routinely made in his churches in the Indian countryside. But that, he argues, is hardly an argument for why it should not be done.

Missionary work on the frontiers of the faith, whether it be in India or the modern workplace, calls for ecclesial creativity, openness, and imagination. Nevertheless, Newbigin reminds his fellow missionaries that they should not imagine themselves to be flitting about this brave new missionary world without a foundation. For,

[t]he more we stress the need that the Church should develop a new openness to the world, a new flexibility in its structures, . . . the more necessary it is to stress the centrality and finality of Jesus Christ. . . . With the kind of openness and flexibility which I have advocated, it may be difficult to say where the boundaries of the Church lie; this does not matter provided we are clear and make clear to others where the center lies.²⁸

While Newbigin's vision of the vocationally-based church never achieved a full and complete articulation, his efforts represent an important contribution to a conversation that needs to occur in the field of global urban missions. Those who simply refuse to buy into his radical proposals of ecclesial reform may indeed find convincing reasons to substantiate their concerns. That said, Newbigin's argument that the Western church can no longer ignore the working lives of the laity in its ministry stands as a profound challenge that demands an answer. Church planters working in the new global city simply must ask the question: how can the body of Christ challenge, encourage, equip, and be radically local to the working lives of its members?

Redeemer Presbyterian Church (NYC)

Unbeknownst to them, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City has creatively combined many of the elements of

27. *Sign*, 61.

28. *Sign*, 68.

Bavinck's theo-cultural vision and Newbigin's vocational ecclesiology in their visionary founding of the Center for Faith and Work. Established to serve as the "cultural renewal arm of the Redeemer movement" the Center's mission is to "equip, connect, and mobilize" the church's members "in their professional and industry spheres toward gospel-centered transformation for the common good."²⁹

In the service of that mission, the Center offers courses, public lectures, and retreats on a wide variety of faith and work topics; it connects young professionals with experienced Christian mentors in their fields; it mobilizes groups of Christian investors and entrepreneurs for common good initiatives within the city; and it organizes vocationally-based fellowship groups in finance, marketing, the arts, theatre, medicine, and more.

While they have yet to appoint vocational elders or hand over significant control of the sacraments, Redeemer's pastors refuse to dictate to these vocational groups the specifics of what Christian discipleship should look like in their specific realms of work. They see their role as one of theological support, encouragement, warning, and challenge. Here one can imagine a leader asking a host of difficult questions regarding how a one might follow Christ in a particular vocation all the while allowing the community to confer about how they might actually embody an answer in their particular workplace. Here a *distinction* between the theological calling of the pastor and the cultural calling of the laity is respected while an absolute *separation* is completely dissolved.

Participants in the activities of the center regularly speak of how fellowship with other Christians in their vocations has strengthened their own faith, informed their working life, and renewed their commitment to the Redeemer movement as a whole. The Center has come to serve not only as a space for education and fellowship but also as a launching pad for missions and evangelism in the workplace itself. Many new members at Redeemer report

29. See <http://www.faithandwork.org>.

finding their way to the church's doors through the various ministries of the Center.

Redeemer's Center represents a creative and visionary model for urban church planters around the world as they too begin the conversation of how they might engage the working lives of the people in their cities. Hoping to reach an urban populace that spends upwards of seventy hours a week at work, Redeemer's founder Tim Keller understood from the very beginning that he needed to find creative liturgical, educational, and institutional ways to minister to New York's working professionals.

In its abiding desire to seek the justice, peace, and common good of New York City, Redeemer recognizes, as Newbigin did before them, that "the major role of the Church in relation to these great issues of justice and peace will not be in its formal pronouncements but in its continually nourishing and sustaining men and women who will act responsibly as believers in the course of their secular duties as citizens."³⁰ For as Bavinck reminds us, "What we need in these momentous times is not in the first place something extraordinary but the faithful fulfilling of the various earthly vocations to which the Lord calls his people."³¹

30. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 139.

31. "Common Grace," 63