

REVIEWS

Light in the Gospel of John

The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel,
by Lesslie Newbigin. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982

This review examines Lesslie Newbigin's classic *The Light Has Come*, a full-length exposition of the Gospel of John. In *Light* Newbigin identifies four major themes which are traced throughout the Gospel: life, light and darkness, truth, and glory. His greatest emphasis is on the theme of light and darkness and their relationship to each other. Particular attention is given to the light of the witness of Jesus in the darkness of the world, both in biblical times and today. The general conclusion is that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Light sees the Gospel of John as hinging on the theme of light and darkness. It presents the entire structure of the Gospel in terms of this theme. John 1 through 12 shows the light being rejected by those claiming to see. Chapters thirteen through seventeen show us Jesus alone with those who have turned to the light. The ultimate triumph of the light over the darkness is revealed in the narrative of the Lord's crucifixion. Finally, in the last two chapters we see the multiplication of the light into many witnesses who continue His commission. An important element of the book is the spontaneous judgment brought upon those who turn away from the light to withdraw deeper into the darkness. In the first section this is portrayed as the

terrible paradox of human existence...in its most piercing reality. "Religion" in its purest and loftiest form is found to belong to the area of darkness. Not those who are blind, but those who confidently say "We see" are found to be in the realm of darkness. (7)

Newbigin's comments are insightful and incisive.

In developing the themes of life and truth, Newbigin notes that God's life is the light of the world and therefore the source of truth. He states, "The life of God given to men in Jesus—in his life, death, and resurrection and in the coming of the Spirit—is at the same time understanding of how things truly are. It is participation in the truth....for the life of God is also the light of truth" (3-4). According to Newbigin we receive this life through the gift of faith, for "the gift of life is linked to the perception of who Jesus is" (38). Jesus' gift of life to us is only accomplished

through His death and resurrection: "It is at the cost of life that he gives life. The 'abundant life' that he gives is life through death. He is the life only because he is the resurrection from the dead" (138).

Although the themes of life and truth are not fully developed in *Light*, great emphasis is placed on the final theme of glory. Newbigin even says, "To interpret the word 'glory' is to interpret the whole Gospel" (224). His deepest analysis of this is found in the exposition of the Lord's prayer in John 17:

"Glory" is plainly one of the fundamental words of the Bible. It expresses that which is—so to speak—constitutive of God's being and nature, and at the same time it denotes the honor which ought to be paid to God. But—and this is what the whole Gospel tells us—these two meanings are mutually bound together because the glory of God as it is revealed in Jesus is seen not in seeking honor but in giving honor. The word "God" does not mean a monad seeking honor for itself....The glory of God is a reciprocal relationship: it is something forever freely given.

The purpose of this manifestation in the midst of history ("on earth") of the eternal glory of God in heaven is—as we shall see—the communication of this glory to those who believe, making them partakers of the divine glory (vv. 22f.). It is "to bring many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10). (225-226)

The treatment of the entire Gospel of John in *Light* is generally deep and enlightened. Newbigin repeatedly emphasizes that anecdotes from the oral tradition concerning the life of Jesus have been arranged according to divinely inspired doctrine that we might believe and have life in the Son. Seeing this doctrinal thread throughout the Gospel also contributes to the recognition of the connection between John 14 and John 15. *Light* does not place the many abodes in the Father's house into a religious fantasy of heaven, but instead connects them to Christ as our way into the Father and to His house as the condition of mutual abiding portrayed by the vine in John 15. This uncommon view of the Father's house has much to commend it.

Such an understanding is undoubtedly possible because Newbigin recognizes the importance of the Spirit to the believers' life with and understanding of the Lord. The Lord is not merely the man Jesus who was on earth in Palestine two thousand years ago. The Gospel is not just a memorial to someone long gone. "The disciples of Jesus have no need of

such memorials. Their master does not belong to the past. They have with them the living Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and who is also the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit whose presence is the foretaste of the coming glory" (210). It is in this Spirit that we can know and understand the depths of this Gospel and the reality of the Lord.

One particular teaching in *Light* is, however, quite disconcerting. *Light* seems less than orthodox in his view of the Divine Trinity. In the discussion of John 5, it states, "The unity of Father and Son is not one of 'equality' but of love and obedience. Jesus is utterly dependent upon the Father, and precisely because this is so Jesus is entrusted with the fullness of the Father's power both to give life and to judge" (66). *Light* even seems to question the Nicene definition concerning the consubstantiality of the Triune God, asserting, "The total unity between Jesus and his Father is not to be understood as equality but only as love and obedience" (67). It seems that *Light's* view of the Trinity inclines too far to the side of the three, while neglecting the scriptural truth that God is indeed one.

In discussing the nature of the Triune God, *Light* frequently says that God is not a monad. This strong preconception means that the many profound passages in John concerning the essential oneness of the Triune God are not fully expounded in *Light*. The balance of John 1:1, "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God," which points to the truth that God is at the same time plural and singular, is not mentioned. "I and the Father are one" (10:30) is explained in terms of Jesus and the Father being one only in action. *Light* also ignores 14:15-20 which shows that the first Comforter, the Lord Jesus, eventually becomes the second Comforter, the Spirit, who is in us for our experience of Christ in resurrection. Nor is the crowning revelation concerning the oneness of the Triune God in John 17 developed.

A sacramental view is espoused throughout the book, particularly in the exposition of John 3, 6, and 15—17. Regeneration in John 3 is defined primarily in terms of the sacramental doctrine of baptism instead of as receiving the life of God through faith in Christ. John 6 is seen primarily as it relates to the Anglican doctrine of the Eucharist. The result is a limited interpretation which hinders the exposition from delving into the depths of this rich chapter. This view may account for the scanty development of the theme of life throughout the entire book despite the fact that life is identified as the first major theme. Indeed, the divine life actually is the light that has come (1:4), and is thus the source and foundation of the light.

The comparative lack of development of the theme of life in relation to the theme of light and darkness is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of *Light*. Minimal attention is given to the all-inclusive Christ as life coming to meet all human needs, the Christ who is introduced through the many signs in John 1—12. The principle of life and the goal of life revealed in John 2 are not even touched upon in *Light*. Christ as life to us (ch. 14), Christ as the Shepherd coming that we may have abundant life (ch. 10), and the Spirit becoming in us rivers of water of life (7:37-39) are all crucial points concerning the theme of life which are subordinated to the theme of light and darkness and are not given the attention they deserve. In conclusion, a more thorough development of the crucial theme of life and a more balanced presentation of the truth about the Divine Trinity would make this good study of the Gospel of John into a better exposition of that Gospel. For this, the reader would do well to consult the *Life-study of John* and the *Crystallization-study of the Gospel of John* by Witness Lee.

by Teresa Liu and Editors

The Spirit's Work to Enlighten Us

As indicated by the parable of the seeking woman [Luke 15:8-10], the Spirit's work is to enlighten us inwardly. As this seeking woman, the Spirit enlightens our inner being little by little in a fine careful way. The Spirit enlightens our mind, then our emotion and will, and then our conscience and our entire heart. It is in this way that the Spirit "finds" us. As the result of the Spirit's finding us through enlightening us, we wake up and come to ourselves and realize how foolish it is to stay where we are [Luke 15:17-18]. We do not wake ourselves up; on the contrary, we are awakened by the enlightening of the seeking Spirit. This seeking, enlightening, and finding of the Spirit take place...in our heart. This results in repentance, which is a change in our mind that produces a change in the direction of our life. The fact that the Spirit's finding us takes place within the "house" of our being reveals that we were lost in ourselves. We were lost in our mind, will, and emotion....Therefore, the Spirit finds us in ourselves. We can testify of this from our experience. When the Spirit enlightened our mind, emotion, will, conscience, and heart, then we began to repent. This repentance resulting from the enlightening of the Spirit is altogether an inward matter. No human being and no angel are able to do such a subjective work in us. This can be done only by the penetrating Spirit, for the Spirit is able to penetrate the depths of our being to enlighten us and expose us.

Witness Lee, *Life-study of Luke* (299)